THE RISE OF THE KICK-ASS GIRL: EXAMINING NEOLIBERAL, POST-FEMINIST INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary girlhood is marked by the purported end of gender inequality in our society. Rather than address the impact of gender bias and gender-based oppression on girls, post-feminist, neoliberal messaging instead positions girls as powerful agents of social and economic capital, encouraging an individualized approach to empowerment rooted in personal success and achievement over social change. Popular culture products coming out of and contributing to contemporary girl culture therefore champion empowered, "feminist" girl heroines whose gender never prevents them from kicking ass, but whose commitment to heteropatriarchy is evident in the regressive, traditional gender roles and exercises they participate in and reproduce despite the characteristically rebellious traits and narratives that earn them praise. This "kick-ass girl" heroine is especially prominent in the young adult dystopian series that dominated girl culture and popular culture of the early 2000s. Katniss Everdeen of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Tris Prior of the *Divergent* trilogy, and Lena Holloway of the *Delirium* trilogy embody the neoliberal, post-feminist figure of the kick-ass girl in that they are lauded as empowered, feminist role models for young girl readers even as they conform to heteropatriarchal roles concerning gender and sexuality and fail to make any meaningful social change to their societies despite their rebel statuses. And as representatives of rebel girls in popular culture, these kick-ass girls and the Girl Power messaging that shaped them impact the way contemporary society approaches girls' empowerment as well as how it views girl activists. The influence of such forces leads to girls' empowerment programs that reproduce neoliberal, post-feminist values of personal success and self-esteem, failing to acknowledge the systemic oppression that hinders many girls from achieving in a neoliberal social structure. This ultimately leads to a social construction of girl activists as

heroic, lone of contemporary society, isolating them from the potential support of collective movements for social change while heaping the responsibility of saving the world on their shoulders.

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Holding Out for a Hero(ine): Girlhood, Young Adult Literature, and Post-Feminist Ideologies

In a cramped, middle school classroom, I ask a group of mix-gender seventh graders what expectations society has for girls and women. What clothes are they supposed to wear? What jobs are they supposed to have? What sports can they play? As I transcribe the students' answers on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom—skirts in light colors, teachers and housewives, cheerleading—I can tell that a table of young girls is visibly upset. Girls can be doctors and chefs, too, they (rightly) argue. Girls are smart, they are good at math. "My mom likes beer!" one young girl exclaims. Gender socialization is always a difficult discussion to facilitate because young people sometimes don't understand that naming the stereotypes and oppressive social norms we're discussing is not an endorsement of them. And, for girls like the ones at this table, these stigmas are in direct opposition to the Girl Power rhetoric they've been exposed to all their lives. "Girls can do anything," they've always been told; by teachers, counselors, and family, by after-school programming and aspirational PSAs, and by the powerful, young role models in books and movies. No one mentions that oppressive social structures like sexism, racism, and heterosexism make "doing anything" difficult, dangerous, and sometimes impossible for many girls and women.

As the conversation in the classroom continues, though, it's clear these girls already know. Naming stereotypes had frustrated them but sharing experiences of social and institutional inequity infuriates them. The same table of girls who seem to believe in a post-sexist society of opportunity and equality for women are also vocal about unfairly biased dress codes and parents who set different rules and curfews for them than for their brothers. These girls speak passionately on their experiences with inequity and oppressive social

norms in their daily lives and, in the same breath, they insist that the glass ceiling doesn't exist. This disconnect between the endless possibility and success of young girls and the powerful, oppressive social forces working against them is a direct result of a contemporary girlhood and girl culture seeped in neoliberal, post-feminist empowerment rhetoric that promotes individual success and achievement while denying the social inequities that make such success impossible for all girls.

Popular media and cultural messaging of the twenty-first century position girls[1] as victors in the battle for gender equality; they outpace boys in school and outnumber them in college enrollment, serve as acknowledged arbiters and creators of popular culture, and, within a capitalist, neoliberal[2] society, represent, according to Angela McRobbie, "subject[s] worthy of investment" (57). Investment, that is, in cultural products that are both marketed to girls to capitalize on their buying power and that reproduce the same rhetoric of a victorious movement for gender equality and infinite possibility for the modern girl. The message that girls enter society already empowered, with their full rights and opportunities secured, has permeated media and popular culture created for girls, to talk about the experiences of girls, as well as the intersection of these cultural products with the socialization of real girls and young women known as girl culture. Girls' studies scholar Ellen Lipkin says it is imperative to explore the impact of this "Girls on Top" messaging on modern girlhood, no longer defined in part by the limitations of gender inequality or the unmet goals of popular feminism[3]:

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[1]Neoliberalism is defined by Lisa Duggan and summarized by Angela McRobbie as "...the implanting of market cultures across everyday life...and the encouragement of forms of consumer citizenship which are beneficial only to those who are already privileged," (McRobbie 29).

[2]Individuals between the ages of newborn and eighteen who identify as female.

[3] Understood as an easily digestible form of feminism that focuses on gender equality through positive, individual empowerment rhetoric rather than systemic social and structural change.

> At a time when many people think that we're 'beyond' gender restrictiveness—that the glass ceiling has been shattered and girls can do anything—it's important to look closely at how understandings of gender have been shaped, and whether they have shifted from traditional expectations into new definitions, or whether they are just slightly changed variations. (3)

If girl culture is, according to Catherine Driscoll, "wherever the modern ideas of gender and adolescence intersect with mass-produced popular culture that enables girls' sharing ideas about girlhood," then girlhood itself encapsulates the gendering experiences of girls and young women, often influenced by cultural and social shifts, including media representations of and messaging about girls and young women (95). The social aspect of this construction of young femininity, according to Anita Harris, has always been considered a significant site of control: "Growing up 'right' has always been a highly managed process for girls in order for particular forms of gender relations to be maintained" (15). Through the artifacts of girl culture, young women make meaning and develop an understanding of what girlhood should be and, as they mature, what it means to be a woman. Popular culture vehicles about, geared towards, and marketed to young girls serve the dual purpose of securing a substantial and lucrative demographic and counteracting what McRobbie calls the "moral panic" triggered by the rise of the figure of the girl with practices that are "both progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine" (57). Through these texts, girls learn that they can do anything without the need to challenge gender inequity in society, so long as they maintain standards of femininity.

One such powerful and influential cultural medium for messaging about girlhood and the role of girls in contemporary society—especially in the era of the multimedia marketing

franchise—is young adult (YA) literature. Children's and young adult literature scholar Michael Cart says YA literature is a creation of twentieth-century America and has always been a distinctly gendered production: historically, literature for boys is full of adventure, humor, and action, while texts for girls focus on emotions and domestic life (8). This binary still exists in YA literature today, Cart says, as the popular romance genre that dates back to the 1800s infiltrated YA fiction in the 1940s and, in the 1990s and early 2000s, developed into the creation of the "chick lit" subgenre, which in YA literature further developed into contemporary and paranormal romance genres, among others. The intersection of YA literature and girls, girlhood, and girl culture as lucrative products under capitalism manifests in the commercial popularity of YA literature in the early 2000s; according to Cart, in 2015 YA literature had been sustaining the industry for the past several years (109). And when the popularity of YA literature, specifically the YA chick lit series, was mined by marketers and merchandisers, girls and girl culture became valuable consumers and products on which to build franchises designed to be "spun off into a variety of economic opportunities," including books, films, and merchandise (114). This trend would morph into a full-on cultural phenomenon with the international success of the *Harry Potter* series, the *Twilight* saga (a text firmly rooted in and contributing to girl culture, according to Driscoll), and the *Hunger Games* trilogy.

Literature for women has historically always also been a tool of patriarchal gender socialization, meant to teach them how to be feminine. Early domestic novels of the nineteenth century taught readers to seek heterosexual male companionship, marriage, and family, and that "decent" women are self-sacrificing and self-denying (Nilsen 46). The romance genre injects further contemporary messages about girlhood into its pages, including

a focus on beauty, femininity, and body image, as well as addressing important issues among girls, such as virginity and sexuality. YA literature for girls concerns many of these same issues, gendering the quest for personal identity that typifies the YA novel itself. According to Lipkin, modern YA literature can serve as a reflection of contemporary teenhood, a mirror for young women and girls to see themselves through characters and the subjects approached, and a way of learning about the world around them (162). Like literature of the past, contemporary texts featuring girls as heroines and concerning girlhood send their audience of largely young girls social and cultural messages about how to engage in femininity and experience girlhood, and about the role of girls and women in society. But, in a society that insists young girls "now enjoy the result of what might seem like long-ago battles" in the form of greater equality with boys and men, more rights and authority over their bodies, and greater options in their academic, professional, and domestic lives, how have YA literature's cultural messages about girlhood's most prominent subjects—gender roles, sexuality, femininity—adapted?

This project seeks to explore the messaging, representation, and role models of contemporary girlhood found within the cultural products of YA literature. Specifically, it aims to interrogate how the personal empowerment narrative of neoliberal post-feminism stands in for a more authentic push for gender equity in YA girlhood and girl culture, masking the regressive messages about gender dynamics and roles inherent in this lens, in which feminism is irrelevant and gender equity achieved, and the goal of individual success and empowerment is championed over authentic social change. Despite the cultural rhetoric that girls are free to be whatever they choose without restriction, and that girls have equal power and opportunity as boys, these texts reflect heteropatriarchal norms and values that

restrict and repress girls and women, forcing them to seek individual empowerment through patriarchal structures and means, and yet positioning this oppression as normal and natural, not as an inequity to be challenged or an obstacle to be overcome. The following chapters analyze the messages inherent in some of the most popular and most celebratedly "feminist" YA fiction of the early-to-mid aughts, the period directly following the cultural phenomenon of girlhood that is The *Twilight* saga, to display how these overtly feminist texts with "girls rule" messaging support traditional and regressive understandings of gender and sexuality masked by a badass, neoliberal, "feminist" heroine.

Backlash: The *Twilight* Saga and Girl Culture

The *Twilight* saga represents, for the purposes of this project, a cultural and literary benchmark, as well as a catalyst for not specifically the writing of the texts approached in the following chapters, but the positive reception of the messages on girlhood they contain and of their "feminist" heroines as role models for young girls and girlhood. The story of sixteen-year-old Bella Swan, who moves to the small, gloomy town of Forks, Washington, and falls in love with century-old vampire Edward Cullen, dominated the cultural zeitgeist of the early 2000s. The first volume in the series, *Twilight*, sold 1.5 million copies in three years; the fourth and final tome, *Breaking Dawn*, sold 1.3 million in its first twenty-four hours alone. The subsequent film adaptations broke multiple records for open numbers with their highly anticipated midnight showings. Merchandise, midnight release parties, and fan websites fueled the phenomenon and birthed a new franchise that dominated girl culture of the decade and helped make girlhood marketable. While *Harry Potter* before it set the precedent for YA literature franchises of this nature, the *Twilight* saga is distinct in that it is decidedly "girl culture: popular culture *for* girls, *about* girls, and circulated *by* girls," (Driscoll 95). And its

success spawned a new focus on cultural products enmeshed in girl culture. However, its depiction of girlhood, the cultural messages it sends about sexuality and gender roles, and its teenage heroine were not well-received.

The impact of the *Twilight* saga is as much about the cultural criticism of the series as it is about the texts themselves. Almost immediately after establishing its place in pop culture, the series faced intense and well-deserved backlash for its portrayal of teen romance, its undercurrent of abstinence messaging, and the character of Bella as a figure of girlhood. Cultural critics, fans, and academics alike fiercely debated Bella's role and status in contemporary feminism, analyzing the *Twilight* saga from a modern feminist lens; and much of this analysis was damning for Bella and the popular series. One popular critique dubbed the *Twilight* saga "the franchise that ate feminism" (Cox). As a heroine, Bella was derided for her overall blandness as well as her inability to form a personal identity that does not revolve around Edward's patriarchal status as dominant male or to cultivate her own interests outside of him (Shacar 152; Platt 74). She conforms to strict patriarchal gender roles: she's clumsy, weak, and in constant need of protection by Edward (Miller 167); she cooks and cleans for her father, dreams of nothing beyond marrying Edward and being with him forever (Donnelly, 186); and she is willing to die rather than terminate a potentially deadly pregnancy, positioning her own personhood second to that of her unborn child, "a belief that is grounded in patriarchal, patrilineal culture" (Tenga 113). Throughout the series she is controlled by the men in her life—mainly Edward—and what decisions she is permitted to make on her own she does with Edward's happiness as her top priority. Even Bella's sexuality is closely monitored and controlled, a trope Christine Seifert dubbed "abstinence porn" in a seminal article for *Bitch Media*, echoing a popular criticism that the *Twilight* saga

relies on and promotes the tenants of abstinence culture. The scholar writes that the series romanticizes Edward's insistence that he and Bella remain chaste despite Bella's intense sexual desire for him, to the extent that Bella becomes as much an object of Edward's control as her virginity is, vulnerable and powerless. Classified as a romance series—and deemed responsible for making the romance genre the largest fiction category in 2007 (Cart)—the *Twilight* saga was charged with promoting the regressive and dated gender and sexual dynamics inherent in the earliest iterations of these tomes, as well as with positioning Bella as a powerless, objectified heroine. Shachar summarizes, "the *Twilight* novels ultimately...recycles traditional notions of love, masculinity and femininity for the contemporary age, rather than re-evaluating them and offering a more complex version of gender relations for modern readers" (148). As a role model and a representation of modern girlhood, Bella was found sorely lacking.

The Future Is Post-Feminist: The Rise of the Kick-Ass Girl

Amidst the cultural dissatisfaction with Bella as a feminist figure, a promising, new brand of female YA protagonist would emerge that for many would literally beat Bella and her regressive values to a pulp. In 2008, the same year as the publication of the *Twilight saga*'s final book, the first book in Suzanne Collins's dystopian young adult series *The Hunger Games* was released, and it quickly outpaced even *Harry Potter* and the *Twilight* saga to become the all-time bestselling book series in 2012. *The Hunger Games* trilogy, like the *Twilight* saga and *Harry Potter* before it, became a juggernaut in YA franchise history and a cultural phenomenon, and, along with the publication of Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy in 2011, re-ignited a trend in YA literature of dystopian fiction[4]. The trilogies also

[4] According to Michael Cart, a dystopian novel is one set in a future society, often one that developed after a post-apocalyptic event and that is "marked by nightmarish repression, ruin, corruption, squalor, darkness, or

gave rise to an archetype of a YA female protagonist[5] that presented a welcome contrast to poor Bella, and became the savior of girlhood and popular, "girls can do anything" feminism in the zeitgeist; I call her the Kick-Ass Girl. Collins's Katniss Everdeen, Roth's Tris Prior, and many more dystopian girl characters typify this new brand of heroine: they are capable, tough, able to run and fight and, in the case of Katniss, are more deadly with a bow and arrow than their male counterparts. For these characters, their love interests and triangles, while not unimportant, are not the central focus of the narrative or of the heroine's concerns. They are independent, making their own decisions often in direct opposition to the opinions of their romantic partners and authority figures, and they seemingly defy traditional gender dynamics in their relationships. *The Hunger Games*'s Katniss, being the first and arguably the most popular of these archetypes, was immediately and frequently positioned in opposition to Bella and championed as a welcome, feminist relief to the *Twilight* saga's much-derided heroine, a "golden girl for all those YA readers who like their female protagonists to do something more worthwhile than choose between two men" (Stark). Noah Berlatsky took the most direct avenue, positing in an article for *The Atlantic*, "if Bella fought Katniss, who would win?"; his answer came easily and directly: "Bella is going to get stomped" (Twilight vs. Hunger Games). Girl characters like Katniss—overtly strong, seemingly empowered, "feminist" teen heroines—quickly became champions of contemporary girlhood and lauded role models of gender equity in our society.

devolution…" (123). YA dystopias, however, are distinguishable from adult novels by their more hopeful conclusions and messaging (125).

[5] In their anthology on female protagonists in dystopian YA, Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz introduce these characters as, typically, average teenage girls and young women who have been reared in a dystopian society formed long before their birth. As heroines, the authors continue, they occupy liminal positions of power and vulnerability due to their ages and genders, and often use their own positions of liminality to push against the control of their dystopian societies.

Despite the feminist fanfare the kick-ass girl received, her surface rebellion masks the tenuous and regressive foundation on which her feminism stands. About female protagonists in dystopian YA, Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz note that "even as these young women actively resist and rebel...they also tend to accept that they cannot change every aspect of their societies' controlling frameworks, particularly as these relate to romance and sexuality" (4). In fact, these kick-ass heroines are just as rooted in traditional themes and reductive gender dynamics as the *Twilight* saga's Bella. As a so-called feminist figure, the kick-ass girl embodies neoliberal post-feminism, identified by Yvonne Taster and Diane Negra as "a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (1). Post-feminism, according to McRobbie, acknowledges feminism as a positive movement, and one that has been achieved, bringing equality and subsequently dying out (12). And inherent within it, she continues, is the treacherous understanding that "young women have now won the battle for equality...and this has replaced any need for...feminist critiques" in the future (57). In the dystopian YA trend, this post-feminist messaging surfaces as the kick-as girl is feminist, so the kick-ass girl does not need to *be* a feminist. Because Katniss and her ilk use weapons instead of (or as well as) make-up, are more likely to dress for battle than a ball, and are often more emotionally distant than their male counterparts—the spoils of a past literary and social feminist revolution—no one expects them to fight for gender equity or challenge traditional gender dynamics in their society. Instead, post-feminism champions a type of successful revolution that skews towards "liberal, equal opportunities feminism" and is concerned primarily with women's progress within an otherwise untouched social order (14). McRobbie identifies within post-feminism

the rise of female individualization, or the extent to which young girls are separated from the feminist battles fought to ensure the freedoms enjoyed by modern Western women and are called upon to create their own individual and internal paths for themselves outside of any set social structure, employing self-monitoring in order to achieve success (19). The kick-ass girl as a contemporary dystopian young adult heroine embodies this individualized journey. She is "seek[ing] to understand [her] place in the world, to claim [her identity], and to live [her life] on [her] own terms" (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 3). And within this realm of post-feminist individualization, the kick-ass girl thrives. Though rarely a member of an elite class in her dystopian society, the kick-ass girl embodies the same privileges of our social reality that post-feminism works to erase: she is white, straight, cisgender, and able-bodied. Though she fights against oppressive governments to ensure greater freedoms for her society, the kick-ass girl most often does so in a way that contributes to the erasure of, as McRobbie says, "social and sexual divides, and of the continuing prejudice and discrimination experienced by" individuals with intersecting oppressed and marginalized identities (19). McRobbie continues:

> Choice is...a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. (19)

The kick-ass girl is a celebrated figure of girlhood for her rebellious individualism, for forging her own path against the dominant social structure and winning the freedom to live by her own rules by defeating an oppressive, totalitarian government—not, it must be noted, by challenging the social systems that make it more difficult for her as a young girl, as well

as other individuals from marginalized identities, to achieve success under the same circumstances.[6] In fact, the kick-ass girl is uninterested in enacting real social change, and, after ensuring her personal choices and freedoms are expanded under a new government—usually freedoms that uphold the same conservative family values and gender dynamics decried in the *Twilight* saga—she considers her personal journey complete, and relinquishes the power she has gained as an agent of change in favor of quiet, post-feminist contentment or, in the case of Tris in the *Divergent* trilogy, death. The kick-ass girl's narrative embodies what McRobbie calls the "double entanglement" of post-feminism:

> This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life...with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations...It also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated… (12)

It is precisely the abandonment of the need for future feminist advancements, however, that "permits the subtle renewal of gender injustices, while vengeful patriarchal norms are also re-instated" (McRobbie 55). Similarly, the kick-ass girl represents an empowered young woman as she fights and claws her way to revolution, but she fails to fight for gender or social equity as a whole, allowing heteropatriarchy to thrive in whatever new sociality forms as a product of the kick-ass girl's revolution.

[6] In Chapters Two and Three, I will discuss specifically how queer characters who fight often more directly and fiercely than the kick-ass girl for gender equity within the social order will ultimately be unable to enjoy the same freedoms as the kick-ass girl under the new social system she works to build—if they survive long enough to see it.

This Is What a Feminist Looks Like: The Kick-Ass Girl in Feminist Theory

The kick-ass girl as a neoliberal, post-feminist figure represents the dismantling and assimilation of social and feminist theory as it morphed into popular feminism, a shift that began in the early 1990s. It was in this period of time, McRobbie says, that popular feminism gained a foothold and feminist issues like domestic violence, equal pay, and sexual harassment in the workplace became part of the conversations occurring in mass media; these developments, the scholar argues, created the concept of feminist success as the question arose of how to gauge the extent to which "the feminist curriculum [inside the academy] could also have some impact beyond the academy, indeed in the commercial world" (14). This mass-produced feminism—perfectly encapsulated in the girlpower movement of the '90s and the choice feminism ideology of the early 2000s to present day[7]—essentially displaced feminism as a political movement, championing individualized feminist "successes" rather than radical systemic change. When the notion of *grrlpower* was divorced from its origins in the radical feminist punk movement and assimilated into mainstream culture as *girlpower*, Harris says it became effectively "a discourse of choice and focus on the self" (16). Within the academy, McRobbie writes, 1990 marked a "moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory" that lead to an internal dismantling of feminism (13). Whereas second-wave feminist theory homogenized the subject of the "ordinary woman"—white, heterosexual, and relatively affluent—and assumed her to be the audience "who would be studied empathetically by feminists," this representation was challenged in the early 1990s

[7] Choice feminism, an iteration of popular feminism that argues any choice a woman makes is inherently feminist by virtue of her ability to make a decision independently and without hinderance, is, in fact, invoked by the *Twilight* saga author herself in defense of Bella as a feminist character. In a FAQ section of her official website, Meyer addresses charges that Bella is an anti-feminist heroine by reversing the accusation onto anyone who would question Bella's choices: "In my own *opinion* (key word), the foundation of feminism is this: being able to choose. The core of anti-feminism is, conversely, telling a woman she can't do something solely because she's a woman—taking any choice away from her specifically because of her gender."

by post-colonial feminists who interrogated the centering of Western women in feminist academic theory and by feminist theorists such as Jack Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* ushered in a "radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body" (McRobbie 13). This period also saw a shift of focus from centralized loci of power (law, patriarchy, the State) to "more dispersed sites, events and instances of power" rooted in the contemporary interest in Foucault. A "new feminist politics of the body," introduced again in part by Butler, also drew focus of feminist theory to the body and the idea of subjectivity, the process by which women are conceived of and produced as subjects (13). This feminist reflexivity in the academy led to a push for "more adequate approaches to identity [that] begin from the invaluable insight that gender forms only one axis of a complex, heterogeneous construction, constantly interpenetrating, in historically specific ways, with multiple other axes of identity" (Bordo 222).

The kick-ass girl is a product of the cultural assimilation of popular feminism and neoliberal post-feminist thought, and it is through this contemporary construction of an intersectional feminist and social theory that the kick-ass girl comes to be interrogated. In keeping with the influence of Foucault, the kick-ass girl is established not within larger, centralized institutions of power, but within smaller socialities and focused sites of power; most often, these sites are established within the genre of dystopian literature as small, insulated societies or governments, and within even these sites exist smaller loci through which the kick-ass girl interacts with and negotiates for power. Factions in the *Divergent* trilogy, sectors in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, and walled cities in the *Delirium* trilogy serve as contained sites dispersed throughout larger socialities in which the kick-ass girl operates under repressive power dynamics. And, as the kick-ass girl is an embodiment of

contemporary messages on girlhood, her analysis is rooted in feminist embodiment theory, specifically as it relates to gender, socialization, and power. How the kick-ass girl experiences, makes, and unmakes her own gender through social practices and exercises such as beauty regimes, clothing, and heterosexual social engagement—and how these processes relate to her access to power and her status within her sociality—are explored through Butler's theory of legibility and Bordo's feminist interpretation of Foucault's theory on the production of docile bodies and social discipline. My analysis weaves social discourse on the body with a feminist lens to explore how each kick-ass girl's sociality—*Hunger Games*' Panem to *Divergent*'s Chicago to *Delirium*'s Portland and the Wilds—enforces patriarchal values onto the bodies of young girls through social and political distribution of power. Queer theory on gender identity, presentation, and power comes into play through both Butler and Jack Halberstam's analysis of female masculinity as it relates to legibility and power. Engaging further with intersecting identities and loci of power, this analysis employs queer theorist Lee Edelman's concept of reproductive futurism to explore how heteropatriarchal values and identities are socially privileged, and how the kick-ass girl accesses and maintains her society's existing power structure through her embodiment of reproductive futurisms drive to build a more perfect society for its symbolic and symbolically innocent future children.

Utilizing this intersection of feminist and queer social theory, this project analyzes the kick-ass girl as she operates as a product and an agent of neoliberal post-feminism in three prominent YA dystopian series published between 2008 and 2013: Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy. All three series are New York Times bestsellers that helped usher in and sustain the YA dystopia

boom.[8] Each series is representative of YA dystopia as a genre, contributes to girl culture in its depiction of girlhood and its focus on subjects and messages tailored to young girls, and is driven by a quintessential kick-ass girl heroine: Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, Tris Prior in *Divergent*, and Lena Holloway in *Delirium*. Through my analysis of these texts, I intend to uncover the regressive and patriarchal themes inherent in each series and the extent to which the kick-ass girl successfully repackages many of the same objectionable themes from the *Twilight* saga for a feminist audience, essentially championing patriarchal and oppressive values through the guise of feminism as an already won, and therefore unnecessary, battle.

In Chapter One, I address the arguably most popular, most beloved, and most idolized of the kick-ass girls: Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. I examine how Katniss, who is lauded for her rejection of traditional norms of femininity and her desire to remain what Butler calls "illegible"—outside of the gendered social norms that would confer on her meaning and recognition in her society—in fact gains her eventual significant social power within her society from her participation in extended exercises in traditional femininity and heteronormative gender dynamics. When Katniss has the opportunity to use said power to enact real social change, she retreats from participation in society as a whole into a heteronormative fantasy, relinquishing her influence and failing to challenge the system of gender-based power dynamics still inherent in her sociality.

Chapter Two continues my discussion of gender and power in YA dystopian societies and the kick-ass girl's role in maintaining patriarchal oppression with Tris Prior of the

[8] *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* both inspired movie adaptations, though the *Divergent* films were not as successful as *The Hunger Games* blockbusters, and in 2013, Fox ordered a pilot based on *Delirium*, but later declined to pick it up.

Divergent trilogy. Here, I examine gender, power, and the feminized body through feminist embodiment theory to display the contradiction inherent in Tris's socialized "feminist" body. Though she is portrayed and championed as a skilled and successful soldier among both male and female opponents, Tris is still made to conform to her society's restrictive gender roles and dynamics. Gendered and heteronormative expectations, personal and social discipline, and the threat of gendered violence all work on Tris to ensure she appropriately genders herself and disciplines those around her to continue heteropatriarchal social norms. And, like Katniss before her, Tris not only fails to challenge the systems of power that produce her gendered society, but she also fights to maintain the gendered status quo that is responsible for the oppression and death of others around her.

In Chapter Three, I engage queer theory to show how protagonist Lena Holloway of the *Delirium* trilogy fights to, in fact, maintain the same gendered and heteronormative family values based in evangelical culture that she seems to eschew. While the *Twilight* saga is often criticized for its religious undertones and conservative values, supported in part by Meyer's Mormon faith, the *Delirium* trilogy seems to directly challenge evangelical themes like abstinence culture by mirroring many of its most common messages and rhetoric in the oppressive social order Lena is fighting to change. But Lena's rebel society actually reflects many of these same heteropatriarchal values, and Lena herself seeks a future social order that would privilege heteronormative ideals, again at the expense of many queer and non-conforming characters Lena purports to fight for.

My final chapter explores the kick-ass girl as girl activist and role model with real-world implications. As rebels in dystopian societies who fight against those in power for the assumed betterment of their worlds, kick-ass girls like Katniss, Tris, and Lena are read as girl

activists, and the Girl Power messages they embody can be found in contemporary girls empowerment programs that grew out of the greater focus on girls as subjects and the "self-esteem crisis" triggered by popular girls studies research and texts like Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia.* These programs, much like the messaging of the dystopian series I will analyze, often focus on girls' individual success and empowerment through building self-esteem and self-efficacy rather than encouraging young girls to challenge the inherent inequalities of their society. This leads to a social perspective of girl activists as unique, heroic, and much like the kick-ass girl, capable of saving the world all on their own. I bring in my own work facilitating psycho-educational groups for young people— often specifically for young girls— as example of a girls empowerment approach rooted in collective social change rather than neoliberal personal success.

What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Famous: Gender and Legibility in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

There is no doubt that Katniss Everdeen, heroine of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy, kicks some ass. Most dystopian heroines grow into or acquire their skills and strengths over time; for example, the *Divergent* trilogy's Tris goes through rigorous combat training, and the *Delirium* trilogy's Lena joins a group of insurgents who teach her survival and fighting techniques. But from the opening pages of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss asserts herself as a fierce, capable, and skilled girl; an identity that only solidifies as Katniss battles trained killers, cybergenetic beasts, and evil dictators alike. Plus, she's an ace with a bow and arrow. Born and raised in a working-class family in District Twelve of the country of Panem, where the outer districts struggle to survive under the oppressive rule of the wealthy Capitol and its leader, President Snow, Katniss becomes sole provider for her family after her father dies in a mining explosion. She learns to hunt, trap, and barter her goods to feed herself, her younger sister, Prim, and her grief-stricken mother. When she is sixteen, Katniss volunteers to compete in her sister's place in the Hunger Games, a brutal, nationally televised annual event held to punish the districts for a long-past, thwarted rebellion. Each district provides two Tributes—one boy and one girl between twelve and eighteen years old—to fight (and kill) for survival in an elaborate, unpredictable arena.

Katniss survives the Hunger Games and, in the process, inadvertently inspires a bloody revolt. She is later rescued from the Capitol's control and recruited to join the rebellion as its symbol of hope and strength, and eventually as a soldier, as well. It is this bold, subversive narrative and characterization—especially when placed contextually in the midst of the

Twilight saga's literary end and film debut—that made Katniss a critical kick-ass darling and "a heroine for the ages" (Lewit).

Popular culture analysts and critics cite the many aspects of Katniss's personality that subvert traditional gender norms of femininity as proof of her kick-ass status. Katniss possesses superb hunting and wilderness skills, for example, and she is deadly with a bow and arrow to both the animals she hunts for food and trade, as well as her enemies in the violent Hunger Games and the revolution that follows. Lewit calls her "noble, brave, resourceful, and a damn good sharpshooter" and *NPR*'s Linda Holmes gushes, "she carries a bow, she fights, she kills, she survives...and ... did we mention she kills?" Indeed, Katniss is a heroine who can shoot squirrels through the eye to preserve the meat on their bodies, sleeps in trees, shoots to kill without hesitation, and, by the end of the series, leads a rebel squad on a mission to assassinate the brutal, oppressive president of Panem. It would be difficult, in fact, to read Katniss any other way, as her characterization as a rebel of traditional femininity is all-encompassing, from the clothes she wears to her emotional range, and begins on the first page.

Rebel, Rebel: Katniss's Female Masculinity

The Hunger Games opens with Katniss's morning routine, which immediately highlights the ways in which she rejects the trappings of traditional femininity. Her chosen clothing on this morning—and almost every other day she is free to choose — is simple and functional: pants, hunting boots, a simple shirt and jacket, her long hair braided for utility and tucked beneath a cap (2). Many of the women in Katniss's community—her mother and sister included—own and frequently wear dresses. They work in traditionally feminine occupations, such as a healer and a laundress. Katniss may claim her need to support her

family as her reasoning for her hunting skills and practical attire, but the women of her community, by Katniss's own admission, are able to find work within domestic and traditionally feminine realms. Katniss's gender subversion, therefore, seems to be a personal choice or preference. Consider the symbolism then of her most treasured item of clothing: her father's worn, hand-me-down leather jacket. According to Jennifer Mitchell, Katniss not only takes on her father's clothing, but his role in the family, an inheritance that aligns her with a masculine gender identity:

> ...the earliest descriptions of Katniss reference her father and his legacy countless times, drawing herself into a male lineage. Using the lessons that her father taught her—and rejecting what she perceives as incompetence in her mother—Katniss is able to provide for and maintain her family. Even though Katniss uses the distinctly dire circumstances of District 12 as a means of explaining her predatory habits, Katniss's success in and enjoyment of the woods defy conventional associations between women and the hearth. (130)

Katniss is exasperated by the extended, head-to-toe beautification regime her prep team—a group of Capitol citizens who serve as professional stylists for the Hunger Games—forces upon her for public appearances when she becomes a competitor and later a Victor[9] of the Hunger Games. And she despises the elaborate makeup, hairstyles, and costumes Victors are frequently required to wear. Katniss never feels truly "like herself," she says multiple times throughout the series, until she has discarded and undone these symbolically feminine adornments and returns, as in the opening pages of *Catching Fire*, to the comfort of her

[9] Each year the child who outlives all other tributes in The Hunger Games is pronounced the Victor. Victors are rewarded with a fine home in their district and a generous monthly stipend. They are required to mentor future tributes from their district, as well as remain public personalities and, in some cases, commodities throughout the remainder of their lives.

father's jacket and masculine role as hunter and provider—even though her family's circumstances have risen significantly after her victory in The Hunger Games, and they no longer rely on Katniss's skills to escape starvation.

Katniss's emotional distance and short temper are also often noted as refreshingly subversive traits in the teen heroine. She is described gleefully as "ruthless" and "impulsive," an "emotionally unavailable" girl who would "rather act than talk," (Lewit) (Holmes). Katniss is a girl who admits on the first page of *The Hunger Games* to trying to drown a stray kitten her sister brought home (1). She drives an arrow through the neck of the assailant who kills her young ally Rue in *The Hunger Games* and through the chest of a privileged, but non-violent citizen whose apartment she and her squad break into during a mission for the rebellion in *Mockingjay.* But Katniss also cares deeply for her family, her community, and the innocent bystanders-turned-casualties of the war her rebellion sparks. For all her subversive qualities, she is still proscribed traditionally feminine qualities; scholars such as Mitchell point to Katniss's maternal instinct towards her sister and Rue, as well as her willingness to care for the injured and vulnerable as examples.

When critics and scholars cite Katniss's emotional barriers, they often more specifically speak of her romantic and sexual disinterest. In an infamous think piece on Katniss as a kick-ass YA heroine, Noah Berlatsky of *The Atlantic* notes that one of Katniss's most definingly "progressive" characteristics—especially in comparison to the *Twilight* saga's Bella—is her apparent lack of interest in boys or sex. Berlatsky describes her as "the ideal second-wave feminist daughter; smart, fierce, independent, and sexually restrained." It is a misogynistic, but not untrue description. Throughout the series Katniss repeatedly states that she neither wants children nor marriage. And when she is engaged in romantic or

physical moments throughout the series, she seems to feel very little sexual desire. Not with Peeta Mellark, her male counterpart in the Games: "It's the first time I've ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, but all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever" (*The Hunger Games* 260-1).

Or with Gale Hawthorne, her oldest friend and "the only person with whom [she] can be [her]self" (*The Hunger Games* 6): "I tried to decide how I felt about the kiss, if I had liked it or resented it…" (*Catching Fire* 27). At her most engaged, Katniss describes sexual sensation as a welcome reminder that she is alive and a chance to clear her mind, something to "lose [her]self" in (*Mockingjay* 198). It is true Katniss does not spend much time thinking or talking about her romantic entanglement with these two characters. In *Mockingjay*, Katniss agrees to play role of the Mockingjay, the symbol of the growing rebel movement, only if Gale is by her side. When the leaders of the rebellion quickly begin to strategize how best to market their relationship given her very public—and, on Katniss's end, coerced—engagement to Peeta, she is offended, saying "the very notion that I'm devoting any thought to who I want presented as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning" (48). Even those closest to her, to Katniss's dismay, acknowledge her emotional distance from the situation, as when Katniss overhears Gale predict how she will resolve the love triangle that has formed between himself, Katniss, and Peeta:

> A chill runs through me. Am I really that cold and calculating? Gale didn't say, 'Katniss will pick whoever it will break her heart to give up, 'or even 'whoever she can't live without.' Those would have implied I was motivated by a kind of passion. But my best friend predicts I will choose the person who I think I 'can't survive

> without.' There's not the least indication that love, or desire, or even compatibility will sway me. (*Mockingjay* 338)

Following on the heels of the *Twilight* saga's Bella Swan, a heroine who is described by cultural critics in terms such as "a modern-day princess" and "one long, quivering bowstring of frustrated lust," Katniss's disinterest in romance and her rebellion against the traditionally feminine trappings of gender performance seem to have earned her rightful seat as a "heroine for the ages" (Rosenberg) (Miller) (Lewit).

Legibility Through Heteropatriarchy

That Katniss represents a departure in YA literature—the first of many—from the traditional, objectified femininity of Bella is undeniable, but the truly radical nature of her gender subversion is questionable. Though Katniss may outwardly reject the trappings of traditional femininity and the heterosexual romantic entanglements previous YA heroines lean into, throughout the series her power within a broader social context draws directly from her however begrudging participation in these exact mechanisms. Using Judith Butler's theory of legibility, it becomes clear that Katniss's social power and influence—her value as a human within Panem—are drawn from her adherence to cultural norms of femininity and her role in a socially influential, heteropatriarchal, romantic pairing. To gain any legibility in her society, Katniss must abandon the traits of female masculinity she embodies in the early pages of *The Hunger Games* and conform to heteropatriarchal norms of femininity. What's more, when at last Katniss has the opportunity to transform the social norms of her society, she abandons the social capital she has gained and continues to live by the norms of traditional femininity assigned to her. Ultimately, while Katniss may on the surface reject traditional heteropatriarchal norms and embrace female masculinity, she quickly must

conform to these same dreaded standards, and ultimately fails to truly subvert or transform her sociality.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler maps the relationship between gender, desire, power, and recognition. Butler builds from the Hegelian tradition that argues desire should be read as a desire for recognition, and through this recognition we are constituted as viable social beings (2). Butler, however, complicates this theory by arguing that the terms we use to recognize a being as human are socially constructed and subject to change. In this way, those same terms can legitimate one individual as human while simultaneously delegitimizing another as less-than-human. Gender, Butler reiterates from previous works, is "a practice of improvisation within a scene of restraint" (1): it is something individuals do, in part unconsciously and unwillingly, in conjunction with and for a sometimes imaginary other (1). And, given that gender is animated by desire, Butler concludes that gender, too, seeks recognition (2) and, furthermore, "figures as a precondition for the production and maintenance of legible humanity" (11). In this way, gender norms become a lexicon by which humanity is legitimated in a sociality. Applying this theory to how Katniss "does" gender within her society reveals the extent to which Katniss assimilates to traditional gendered, heteropatriarchal norms in order to gain legibility and maintain her humanity.

When *The Hunger Games* begins, Katniss is living outside of the gender norms of legibility, shielded from public recognition and the regulations of the social hub of Panem, The Capitol, by geographical distance and circumstance. There is evidence to suggest that Katniss's lack of social recognition is a conscious choice, one arguably entangled with her rebellion of traditional norms of femininity and embracing of female masculinity. Butler calls this state illegibility (3). Katniss has no desire to be recognized by those social norms that

would bring her recognition—those associated with traditional femininity and heteropatriarchy—therefore her "sense of survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred" (3). Katniss's illegibility as it functions outside of gendered norms of socialization can be read through her rejection of traditional femininity, as discussed above, as well as her avoidance of herself as an object of heteropatriarchal desire, which would force a connection between herself and others she might come to care for more than herself, according to Butler:

> The particular sociality that belongs to bodily life, to sexual life, and to becoming gendered (which is always, to a certain extent, becoming gendered *for others*) establishes a field of ethical enmeshment with others and a sense of disorientation for the first-person, that is, the perspective of the ego. (26)

Katniss has no interest in ever becoming a wife or mother, as these roles would confer on her legibility, a connection to others, and a set of norms to be adhered to within her society. Among these, Katniss notes grimly, would be her gendered duty as a mother to one day watch her children compete in the Hunger Games and her husband work a potentially deadly job in the mines that are her district's main source of employment. In her own words, Katniss explains that she would "never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children" (*The Hunger Games* 373). Katniss seeks to avoid these painful connections to gendered social legibility by operating outside of the gendered and heteropatriarchal norms of legibility that her society dictates.

Even when Katniss is removed from her microcosm of District Twelve and introduced publicly into society as a contender in the 74th Hunger Games, she rejects legibility. Katniss's mentor Haymitch Abernathy and handler Effie Trinket attempt to train

her in the social norms she must conform to in order to gain legibility—Effie in traditionally feminine norms such as walking in high heels and sitting in a fancy dress, and Haymitch in (arguably still gendered) social charm. However, this training is unsuccessful, in part because Katniss resists it. Though Katniss seems to genuinely try to absorb the lessons of Effie's etiquette training and Haymitch's charm boot camp, she also clearly rejects the principles of these social norms, dramatically abandoning Effie's learned mannerisms the moment Katniss is free of her company and growing more and more furious with her complicity in the oppression of these norms and her society as Haymitch attempts to assimilate her. Haymitch describes Katniss as having "'as much charm as a dead slug'" and eventually advises her, "'Just answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them'" (117) (118). According to Butler's theory of legibility, Katniss's refusal to assimilate both protects her from rejection and simultaneously hinders her ability to be recognized: "Indeed, the capacity to develop a critical relation to these norms presupposes a distance from them, an ability to suspend or defer the need for them, even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live" (3). Katniss is still operating in Butler's realm of illegibility, distancing herself from recognition through her rebellion from the social norms of traditional femininity that would legitimize her.

However, just as Katniss seeks to remain illegible by eschewing heteropatriarchal connection, she can be made legible by it. Katniss's ability to remain illegible ends with one pivotal expression of heteropatriarchal desire. Following Peeta's admission on live television that he is in love with her, Katniss is thrust into legibility within her society, and her heteropatriarchal narrative truly begins. In his interview prior to the beginning of the Hunger Games, Peeta attempts with wild success to gain legibility for himself and Katniss by playing

to a traditional narrative of desire: the heteropatriarchal love story. Peeta admits coyly that he has a crush on a girl back home, but, when prompted, explains that this love is doomed to fail because the object of his affection is his competitor, Katniss Everdeen. Initially, Katniss is furious with Peeta, insisting that his desire will make her look weak. But Haymitch swiftly and vehemently contradicts her, claiming Peeta gave her "what [she] could never achieve on [her] own" (*The Hunger Games* 135):

> [Peeta] made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve! (135)

Katniss herself is quick to comprehend the significance of Peeta's actions and the recognition it affords her: "...Peeta has made me an object of love. Not just his. To hear him tell I have many admirers. And if the audience really thinks we're in love...Haymitch is right, they eat that stuff up" (136). After this realization, Katniss agrees to participate in this faux narrative in order to maintain her legibility and, concurrently, her humanity. According to Mitchell, this pivotal moment is also highly gendered, reinforcing her femininity and legibility in one fell swoop:

> The revelation of Peeta's crush does far more to identify Katniss's gender than even the beautiful dresses that [Capitol stylist] Cinna designs...Peeta's public acknowledgment of Katniss's girlhood bolsters Cinna's presentation of Katniss as identifiably female—and Peeta's own presentation of himself as identifiably male. (133)

Peeta's declaration identifies both himself and Katniss as gendered, legible subjects in their society, and, in addition, links them in a heteropatriarchal romance that further cements their legibility within traditional social norms.

As Butler notes, the social norms that define legibility also have the power to dehumanize those that live outside of them (Butler 2–3). The scholar goes on to say that to live outside of "sheltering norms" in a sociality that desires to kill or kills those who don't conform is to "court death" (32). This brutal reality is most noticeable in *The Hunger Games* when Katniss and Peeta are in the thick of the Hunger Games themselves. Tributes are forced to fight, scavenge, and—inevitably—kill for the weapons, food, and supplies they need to survive in the arena. However, rich sponsors from the Capitol as well as the districts themselves are allowed to purchase gifts for tributes that are negotiated through mentors and delivered via parachutes into the arena. The higher a tribute's recognition, the more likely they are to receive gifts. Katniss and Peeta eventually team up in the arena, but Peeta is already badly wounded and needs medicine. Katniss tends to him as best she can, and in the process Katniss "impulsively" kisses Peeta (*The Hunger Games* 260). Directly after the kiss, Katniss steps outside the cave they have taken refuge in just as a gift floats down into the arena. She rushes to it, hoping it contains the medicine she needs to heal Peeta, but finds only a pot of broth. According to Katniss, this gift is actually a pointed message to her to engage further within the norms of a traditional heteropatriarchal narrative:

> Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. "You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!"

> And he's right. If I want to keep Peeta alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance. (261)

Contrastingly, following an intense, intimate argument Katniss ends with a declaration of affection, the pair are gifted a feast that saves them from starvation (302). Katniss is "rewarded" with basic human necessities—food and access to healthcare—when she plays the part of Peeta's devoted, desperate-in-love paramour. The message is, in fact, crystal clear: Katniss and Peeta's lives—the sanctity of their humanity—only carry value in so much as they are conforming to the norms of the heteropatriarchal love story their audience—their society—is hungry for. To resist these norms or attempt to live outside of them (as platonic teammates/friends) would be to invite death.

The contingency of Katniss's humanity—and, by extension, her life—on her continued assimilation to heteropatriarchal social norms transcends the boundaries of the deadly arena and the Hunger Games. At the conclusion of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta survive and threaten to commit suicide, leaving The Capitol without a champion. They are hastily named co-victors and allowed to return home. Katniss has returned to her state of illegibility: living with her mother and sister, hunting and trading, and maintaining a tense, but polite relationship with Peeta, who was angry and hurt to learn Katniss's desire for him during the Hunger Games was born of social recognition and not true affection. However, Katniss soon grasps the true impact of what Butler posits: to receive recognition from a body with social power is to publicly live within the social boundaries of that institution indefinitely:

> To be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of legitimation offered there, and to find that one's public and recognizable sense of personhood is fundamentally dependent on the lexicon of that legitimation. (105)

Katniss knows she and Peeta will have, as Haymitch puts it, "a lot of warming up to do" in preparation for their Victor's Tour of the country, which will once again thrust Katniss into recognition and assimilation to the social norms expected of a "pair of lovebirds" (15). However, she is initially unaware of the level of commitment to she and Peeta's faux heteropatriarchal narrative that is expected of her. Following a threatening visit with President Snow, during which the dictator threatens to kill Gale if Katniss does not fully recommit to her romance with Peeta on the tour, Katniss begs her mentor to help her "get through this trip" (*Catching Fire 43*). But, as Haymitch explains to Katniss, to remain legible and—by extension—socially viable, Katniss must operate within the social norms of legibility and heteropatriarchy for the rest of her life. Katniss realizes she will "never, ever be able to do anything but live happily ever after with [Peeta]" (44):

> The full impact of what he's saying hits me. I will never have a life with Gale, even if I want to. I will never be allowed to live alone. I will have to be forever in love with Peeta. The Capitol will insist on it...there's only one future, if I want to keep those I love alive and stay alive myself. I'll have to marry Peeta. (*Catching Fire* 44)

Katniss quickly sees that, though illegibility affords most in her district the "right to marry who we want or not marry at all"—in other words, to opt out of traditional heteropatriarchal norms or to work within them to suite their own desires—Katniss's social value and legibility deny her that freedom (*Catching Fire* 45). To maintain her humanity and value within the vicious social sphere of the Capitol, Katniss is forced to surrender her freedom to escape into

illegibility and commit to her heteropatriarchal love story with Peeta indefinitely. She soon plans a public marriage proposal and participates in a bridal-themed photo shoot that is broadcast throughout Panem in an elaborate display of her conformity to heteropatriarchal tradition and in a resigned attempt to meet the social norms of heteropatriarchal love.

Even in *Mockingjay*, when Katniss is rescued from the Capitol by the rebellion and comes to live in its headquarters, an underground colony in the previously thought demolished District Thirteen, she finds she is expected to maintain her public image and continue to live within the confines of traditional femininity and heteropatriarchy. Katniss begrudgingly agrees to take on the mantle of Mockingjay, the symbol of the revolution. And though she is initially eager to receive her training and engage in combat, Katniss soon learns that the rebels, according to Amy L. Montz, "need only her image…" to access Katniss's legibility and social power, meaning her role as Mockingjay requires her to operate within the same traditionally feminine social norms as during her time in The Capitol: "They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances—as if *that* doesn't sound horribly familiar—and all I have to do is play my part" (*Mockingjay* 10–11).

Additionally, this means Katniss is confined to a minimal exposure to danger or power. She is airlifted into designated low-risk zones, travels with a "squad of bodyguards," and, though she defies the orders, is decidedly not cleared for combat (76). Instead, she is styled and dropped into recent battle zones and desolated districts—including her own—to shoot promotional videos for the revolution, called "propos." She is also required to maintain the heteropatriarchal fantasy romance she began with Peeta during the Games—even though Peeta is still in the hands of President Snow. During a strategy session, rebel and former

Capitol citizen Plutarch Heavensbee argues that Katniss—and, by extension, the rebellion—might lose social legibility (i.e., humanity and influence) if she abandons her public affection for her kidnapped fiancé: "I think we should continue the current romance. A quick defection from Peeta could cause the audience to lose sympathy for her," says Plutarch. "Especially since they think she's pregnant with his child" (39). Katniss is shocked that rebel leaders are concerned with the optics of her romantic life and offended that they think she is, as well: "The very notion that I'm devoting any thought to who I want presented as my love, given our current circumstances, is demeaning" (*Mockingjay* 40).

But throughout her time as Mockingjay, Katniss finds her actions and role as rebel symbol must be filtered through the same heteropatriarchal lens through which she initially gained legibility. For example, the rebellion later circulates the rumor that Katniss has miscarried to explain her lack of progress in her pregnancy and, according to June Pulliam, "further representing her as a tragic and sympathetic victim of the [Capitol]" (181n11). This also allows her to avoid public scrutiny as an expectant mother when the propos air, which seem to show her in live-action battle scenarios. These rhetorical gymnastics and carefully constructed scenes ensure that, in her role as Mockingjay, Katniss's heteropatriarchal image as devoted wife to Peeta and loving, heartbroken mother to a lost, unborn child is integrated into her new persona, as it is key to her social legibility and, therefore, her inherent value to the revolution.

Power, Agency, and Legibility

Conformity to gendered and heteropatriarchal social norms grants Katniss legibility and humanity in her sociality; it also affords her a limited amount of social influence, so long as she continues to operate within the bounds of these norms. According to Pulliam, who

reads Katniss and the other female tributes' traditionally feminine physical transformation and behavioral coaching as a "[transformation] into one-dimensional characters who do not threaten the status quo" (176), Katniss's adherence to the confines of traditional femininity makes her "extremely powerful":

> ...not only is she someone with whom the audience is more comfortable because her behavior conforms to existing gender norms, but she also shows viewers the potential for resistance within her restrictive gender role, subtly implying that they too can rebel even within the confines of their own restrictive roles as citizens of the Capitol. (179)

Most notably, Katniss and her fellow Victors use the effect they have on the citizens of The Capitol to protest their return to the arena and The Games in *Catching Fire*, subtly questioning the legality of the situation, highlighting the cruelty of those in charge, and, in Katniss's case, playing on the emotions of the crowd:

> By the time I'm introduced, the audience is an absolute wreck. People have been weeping and collapsing and *even calling for change*. The sight of me in my white silk bridal gown practically causes a riot. No more me, no more star-crossed lovers living happily ever after, no more wedding. (251) (emphasis mine)

And, in a move as calculated and significant as his initial proclamation, Peeta announces publicly (and falsely) that Katniss is pregnant, fulfilling the traditional heteropatriarchal narrative and, in Katniss's words, "[dropping] a bomb that wipes out the efforts of every tribute who came before him" (256). By playing to heteropatriarchal norms of marriage and procreation, Katniss and Peeta inspire "even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there" to acknowledge "how horrific the whole thing is" (256).

However, by Butler's definition of power in relation to gendered social norms of legibility, true power eludes Katniss.

Though she utilizes her legibility and social value to influence certain situations and decisions throughout the series, Katniss has no control over the boundaries of legibility in her sociality that, according to Butler, translates to real social power. The scholar posits that true power is reserved for those who regulate the norms by which recognition is conferred:

> But if the schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that "undo" the person by conferring recognition, or "undo" the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not. (2)

Katniss is not dictating the gendered norms of recognition in her sociality; this power lies with the elite citizens of The Capitol, who are Katniss's target audience: "Within the power relations represented in *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol serves as the central point of power and population management. Its policies organize the bounds of subjectivity accessible to the citizens of Panem" (Risko 81).

And within Katniss's social microcosm, the Capitol's interests and concerns are represented by its denizens of culture: Katniss and Peeta's handler, Effie, and Katniss's prep team, who are directly responsible for the success of Katniss's legibility. Effie and the prep team serve as arbiters of the heteropatriarchal norms to which she must assimilate to maintain legibility. However, though they embody these norms and reinforce them through Katniss, they themselves are also confined by them. As Butler notes, the gender norms of a given society

are “from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself)” (1). Not even President Snow can dictate the social norms that develop in the Capitol, though he frequently manipulates and feeds off them to maintain social power. Conversely, Effie, Katniss’s prep team, and the citizens of the Capitol are both producers and gatekeepers of these norms, as well as captives to “the capricious fashion trends of the Capitol” (*Catching Fire* 35). However, through their machinations Katniss gains access to legibility. In this way, they serve as both producers and wielders of power in Panem’s sociality, a position supported by the fact that, rather than kill Katniss’s beauty team following their capture, the rebellion imprisons them and, later, uses them to construct Katniss’s image as Mockingjay. Their knowledge and ability to work within the gendered social norms of Panem’s society affords them a certain legibility within the rebel sociality of District Thirteen, though they are expected to live within the rebellion’s far more austere social expectations.

Effie, as discussed previously, acts as Katniss and Peeta’s “guide to [The Capitol]” and “dwell[s] on their table manners” and other (gendered) mannerisms Katniss in particular must conform to (Frankel 50). Primarily, Katniss’s prep team is concerned with meeting the physical norms of traditional femininity as understood by The Capitol’s society. Under their attentions, Katniss undergoes grooming practices that adhere to traditional beauty standards for women: waxing and tweezing of all body hair, manicuring, hair treatments, skin treatments, and make-up application. This regimen assures that Katniss is recognizable as a valued social entity to the eyes of The Capitol, from which culture, style, and the norms of recognition originate. Her prep team’s response to Katniss after her first makeover even employs the language of Butler’s theory: “The three step back and admire their work.

‘Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!’ says Flavius, and they all laugh (*Hunger Games* 62). Here, Katniss’s prep team gleefully acknowledges that their beautification techniques have aligned her with the traditional gender norms of their society and produced what The Capitol would consider a legible human.

They often also stand in as representatives of the sociality dictating these norms, as their responses to Katniss’s appearance and her love story with Peeta represent the society’s perspective as a whole. For example, when in *Catching Fire* Katniss and Peeta are forced back into the area to participate in the Quarter Quell in honor of the Games 75th anniversary, Effie and the prep crew reflect the despair of The Capitol audience upon, not the loss of human life, but the tragedy of the star-crossed lovers. At the sight of Katniss and Peeta in bed together the morning before the Quell, a member of the team breaks down sobbing (246). Effie, too, reflects the investment the Capitol audience has in Katniss and Peeta’s heteropatriarchal love story. At a dinner following his private training session in front of the Gamemakers who develop and monitor the Games, Peeta tells the table that he painted a picture to display his skills. Effie, looking “a little misty” asks him if he painted Katniss: “To show he’s going to do everything he can to defend [her]. That’s what everyone in the Capitol’s expecting…” (240). Even outside of the Capitol—perhaps especially outside of it—these characters provide feedback on Katniss’s public image and state of legibility. For example, when a frustrated rebel strategy team realizes Katniss cannot be coached into performing for the camera in her first propos, Haymitch asks the group too recall moments when Katniss moved them in some way. A member of her former beauty team—recently tortured and neglected by these same leaders—almost unconsciously offers a memory of Katniss acting selflessly out of love for Peeta, reinforcing their heteropatriarchal relationship

as well as traditional feminine values like self-sacrifice (*Mockingjay* 75). Effie and Katniss's prep team stand in for the nebulous Capitol audience that produces and enacts the social norms of their society, and through their machinations Katniss gains legibility and insight into the social climate of The Capitol.

Through the machinations of Effie and her beauty team, Katniss gains legibility, as well as the ability to influence those in power—her Capitol audience. And while she does utilize this power to incite suspicion and rebellion, Katniss maintains little agency over her public image and legibility. According to Amy L. Montz, who explores Katniss's agency through the series' use of spectacle, fashion, and femininity, the heroine initially displays agency through her trust in stylist Cinna and her "willing participation in her stylized staging" in preparation for her first Games (144). Even this, however, is a choice born of necessity and self-preservation, as Montz notes: "Feminine agency is often a survival instinct" (144). It should also be noted that, though Katniss allows Cinna to create a feminized, legible version of herself to increase her chances for survival in the Games, the moment she truly becomes recognizable as a viable and valuable social being—the moment of Peeta's confession of love, described in detail previously—occurs without Katniss's consent or even her knowledge. Though she quickly agrees the strategy is advantageous to her survival and again, willingly participates in it, she is denied true agency in the situation. In fact, it could be argued that her willing participation is, at this point, necessary to her survival, as her image and legibility if she denied fan favorite Peeta her affection would surely suffer, and she would be without the support and fickle attention of her Capitol audience, who could save her life through generous and well-timed gifts or neglect her to literal death.

Katniss may enjoy a small level of agency in her path to legibility, but once she gains social status and influence, a battle for the social power of her image and legibility is enacted *through* her, while Katniss exhibits little real freedom or control. Katniss laments her situation in *Mockingjay*: "Another force to contend with. Another power player who has decided to use me as a piece in her games..." (59). There is President Snow, who forces Katniss to commit fully—and permanently—to her heteropatriarchal love story with Peeta to draw attention away from the rebellion stirring within Panem. Upon penalty of her own death and the demise of her family and friends, Katniss promises President Snow in *Catching Fire* to "convince everyone in the districts that I wasn't defying the Capitol, that I was crazy with love" (29). Montz notes that, even in the public enactment of her heteropatriarchal courtship with Peeta—imperative to her survival—Katniss has little agency in the image of herself or in the development of the narrative:

> This persona is dependent on her connection to Peeta, yet even her wedding dress is chosen by the adoring Capitol, without her input. Her stylization as the Tribute Bride is done by outside forces, including those voting in the Capitol and the ever-present Cinna. (144)

Though Katniss masterminds her own proposal, it is only after she realizes she has no choice. Katniss describes herself as having "giv[en] everything over to [President Snow]," during the Victory Tour in which she promises to marry Peeta, and, as Montz displays, little about the public image of herself as bride nor the particulars of the spectacle of her wedding are under her control (*Catching Fire* 74).

Though Peeta's contribution to his and Katniss's heteropatriarchal romance seems like a clever rebellion to President Snow's oppression—Katniss's own narration shows that

she sees him as an ingenious manipulator of the society's emotions and expectations—Peeta exploits the gendered and heteropatriarchal expectations that grant legibility in defiance of the Capitol and, furthermore, consistently includes Katniss in his manipulation without her consent or knowledge, robbing her of the authority to dictate her own public image and putting her in danger. Peeta's grand announcement of his love for Katniss is orchestrated by himself and Haymitch without informing or consulting Katniss, though it effectively begins the public and personal romantic narrative that arguably spawns all future events. Katniss allows Peeta to do most of the public speaking on the couple's behalf, but this is an internal understanding rather than an external conversation that leads to a consensus. And though Katniss develops the proposal—and verbally plans and agrees on it with both Haymitch and Peeta—Peeta again surprises Katniss and publicly furthers their star-crossed lovers story in *Catching Fire* by announcing that they are already married and expecting a baby. These instances were done perhaps with Katniss's retroactive consent, but never by prior agreement or discussion. And, most significantly, these acts are not efforts to ensure his own survival. Peeta admits in *Hunger Games* that he has "never been a contender in these Games anyway" (141); and in *Catching Fire* when Peeta announces their marriage and Katniss's pregnancy, the pair are about to enter the Games again with little hope or expectation of survival. Rather, Peeta exploits Katniss's gendered and heteropatriarchal image to protect her and, in the second example, as a subtle rebellion against the Capitol, as discussed previously. Though his motives may be noble—which highlights the regressive gender dynamics they actually display—Peeta fails to include Katniss as an equal or even active participant in his machinations, and so turns her into a passive object to be exploited for her own wellbeing.

Despite being rescued by rebels and taken to District Thirteen —again, without her knowledge or consent—to take part in the uprising against her oppressor in *Mockingjay*, Katniss finds that District Thirteen and its rebel leader, President Coin, employ many of the same tactics of control to access her legibility and social influence, as, according to Montz, they "need only [Katniss's] image" to catalyze their growing rebellion. And though Katniss is able to negotiate certain demands and freedoms for herself in exchange for her cooperation as Mockingjay, her agency is severely restricted by President Coin's shocking public announcement of the consequences of her failure to deliver:

> '...It follows that any deviance from [Katniss's] mission, in either motive or deed, will be viewed as a break in this agreement...and the fate of the four victors determined by the law of District Thirteen. As would [Katniss's] own.' (*Mockingjay* 58)

Katniss translates this veiled threat as such: "In other words, I step out of line and we're all dead" (58). Katniss's ability to freely choose and negotiate the terms of her role and public image as Mockingjay clearly ends with this proclamation, leaving her with little agency over her own actions. Katniss does freely choose to become the Mockingjay, the District's glorious symbol of rebellion and hope. But, again, Montz notes, her image is designed for her by Cinna—posthumously—and by her former prep team:

> …as Katniss embodies someone else's definition of the Mockingjay, she shifts from ownership of the persona to a more passive recipient of the designation...it strips her agency and usurps her place within the rebellion. She remains its symbol rather than its leader; she is sent to incite the crowds and rally them to the cause rather than to fight for the cause itself…as the face of the hoped-for rebellion, she is entirely too valuable to come to harm. (145)

Katniss has little control over both the image of herself as Mockingjay as well as her lack of agency in her literal role in the rebellion. Katniss trains, rebuilds her strength after another grueling Games, and fully expects her role as Mockingjay to include combat. But she soon learns, as Montz notes, that her image as Mockingjay is too valuable to risk her life, and she has little say in the matter. Katniss longs to participate in the action of the rebellion in her role as Mockingjay, but she is forbidden by those who control her image and seek to maintain it, and the social influence they gain through it—and, by extension, Katniss herself.

Happy in Heteropatriarchy: Katniss and Peeta

Given the significance Katniss and her highly coveted legibility play in the inciting and catalyzing of the rebellion, it seems, as Katherine R. Broad notes, "a cop-out conclusion" to find Katniss back home in District Twelve, committed to a quiet life of peace and healing with Peeta and, to many readers' surprise, their two children in *Mockingjay*'s series-ending epilogue. Broad and many other pop culture critics are troubled by both this domestic future and Katniss's seeming passivity in the decisions that led her to it. Broad states that Katniss, rather than choosing Peeta as her lover, merely ends up with him because he returned, unlike Gale, to District Twelve with her (124). And many feminist cultural analysts point in outrage to the fact that Katniss seems coerced into having children by her partner. Katniss says it took Peeta "five, ten, fifteen years" to convince her to have children, and her decision ultimately seems influenced by guilt, saying: "Peeta wanted them so badly" (389). In fact, Katniss appeared on a 2014 listicle on *The Toast* titled, "Fictional Characters Whose Lives Would Have Been Vastly Improved by an Abortion." Her entry succinctly reads, "Peeta had really wanted children, but that was too fucking bad." According to Broad, this conventional, heteropatriarchal ending displays the inefficiency of Katniss as kick-ass girl:

> The series' conclusion in an epic heroine defaulting to a safe, stable, and highly insular heterosexual reproductive union—a union so much like the social and sexual status quo of our own world—raises questions about just what has been transformed by Katniss's harrowing fight. (125)

This domestic resolution does, in fact, display an assimilation to the same gender norms of legibility Katniss is oppressed by throughout the series, and it is her failure to transform or challenge the gendered, heteropatriarchal structure of her society that negates her image as gender rebel and secure her status as neoliberal kick-ass girl.

Butler argues that the ability to define the reality of a sociality requires a combination of knowledge of the limits of what is currently knowable, and power: "Having or bearing "truth" and "reality" is an enormously powerful prerogative within the social world, one way that power dissimulates as ontology," (27). And to disrupt a social reality requires a familiarity with illegibility:

> To intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim. I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification. (27–8)

Katniss possesses the necessary knowledge and power to transform the Capitol's rigid gender norms following the rebellion's successful revolution, after which Katniss displays her propensity for disrupting and redefining social norms when she assassinates the power-

hungry President Coin, who wishes to reinstate the Games using the children of the Capitol. Katniss is familiar both with living an unreal or illegible existence—prefers it, actually, as noted throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy—as well as the parameters of social reality from her time as a Tribute and Victor in the Games, as well as her role as Mockingjay. And though her legibility is momentarily threatened when she kills Coin, she is eventually cleared of the charges and sent home because, in her own words: "The truth is, no one quite knows what to do with me now that the war's over…" (*Mockingjay* 378). She clearly has not lost her legibility, however, as Plutarch, now secretary of communications, tries to recruit her to appear in a new, televised singing program (379). Plutarch, a former Capitol citizen, is clearly assimilating this new government with many of the previous norms of legibility—televised national events, like Katniss's trial; and competition shows as entertainment, with highly stylized (and, no doubt, gendered) contestants, if his promise to "send the crew to [Katniss's] house" still refers, as it likely does, to her prep team.

And yet, with her knowledge of the norms of her sociality and the power of her legibility as a valued social actor, Katniss allows herself to be sent home to District Twelve and even assimilates to these gendered norms, in the case of her children to the direct contradiction of her previous wishes. She has little influence on her new, developing society and displays almost no interest in its progress, as Broad notes: "If the upshot of overthrowing a dystopian regime is being able to settle down and have kids, then whatever happens in the rest of the country will not involve Katniss (125)." According to the scholar, the purpose of rebellion in the *Hunger Games* trilogy is itself reimagined by this epilogue, and its true goal is to "keep [Katniss] an appropriately gendered, reproductive, and ultimately docile subject," a far cry from her empowered beginnings as hunter, provider, and kick-ass girl (125). But in

light of the swift, continuing, and unending gendered assimilation process Katniss is forced to undergo to gain legibility and humanity in her heteropatriarchal sociality, it is perhaps more surprising that an alternative ending was ever in the cards.

Katniss as kick-ass girl plays into the same gendered, heteropatriarchal norms that she otherwise would reject for herself in order to gain social influence and personal safety within an oppressive and dangerous society. The intersection of gender conformity and violence is only indirectly linked in the *Hunger Games* trilogy through implied negligence and withheld resources that would lead to Katniss's death unless she participates in gendered, heteropatriarchal narratives. In other YA dystopian series, however, physical and sexual violence—or the threat of—is a powerful social tool used to feminize girls and women and to punish those who fail to meet the expectations of heteropatriarchal society. In dystopian narratives of rebellion and resistance, in which kick-ass girls often display physical prowess and engage in traditionally masculine activities, the seeming equal opportunity violence of these narratives actually serves to ascribe gender and vulnerability onto women, and to inflict pain and/or death onto those who cannot or refuse to conform to heteropatriarchal social norms.

Feminism Is Hitting Girls Back: Gender, Violence, and Docile Bodies in the *Divergent* Trilogy

While for Katniss, gender in her sociality is a clearly defined construct with established norms, and traditional femininity becomes a tool she uses to gain power within the system, Tris Prior of the *Divergent* trilogy lives in a purportedly gender-neutral society, where her girlhood neither frees nor "protects" her from its social expectations. Like Katniss, gender does not excuse Tris from physical, often violent, social norms and traditions; however, on the surface, Tris does not seem to be held to the gendered expectations of femininity that Katniss is in order to achieve legibility. Both men and women[10] are held to the same often emotionally and physically brutal standards to achieve social status and success. But Tris's society is, despite its egalitarian use of violence against bodies,[11] systemically and socially heteropatriarchal, and gender is crucial to Tris's socialization, as well as to her feminized transformation into what Michel Foucault terms a "docile body": one "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" to suit the needs of a system of control (*Discipline* 136). Using Foucault's theories of embodiment, discipline, and systems of power as well as feminist embodiment theory that interprets Foucault's work through a gendered lens, I mean to analyze how Tris (and other women within this society) are forced to navigate a precarious balance between the production of their bodies as a tool of a highly militarized system and the feminization of their bodies and selves within a heteropatriarchal society.

[10] Within this and most other YA dystopian series of this period, gender is a strict binary in which non-binary, genderqueer, and trans folks do not seem to exist, even among those rebelling against heteropatriarchal norms.
[11] This violence itself is, in fact, gendered, as will be addressed in my analysis of sexual violence in the *Divergent* trilogy.

Sixteen-year-old Tris lives in a dystopian version of Chicago; her highly insular society is divided into five distinctive social groups known as factions whose members display what is considered inherent inclination for a specific social value, determined via an aptitude test at sixteen years-old. During Tris's test, however, she learns that she is Divergent, meaning she displays aptitude for multiple qualities; she also learns that the Divergent are reviled and hunted, and that she must hide her divergence in order to survive. Tris chooses to join the Dauntless faction, known for their bravery and employed as military/police force within the city; throughout her ruthless initiation into Dauntless, Tris becomes a skilled fighter, makes friends, and falls in love with her instructor. And when civil unrest leads to multiple coups and the revelation that their society's entire existence is a generations-long social experiment, Tris and her friends fight for a more equitable future for their city and their society.

Throughout the trilogy, Tris grows into a strong fighter and a cunning strategist within her faction and the various movements she participates in. It is this transformation, this coming into her power and her identity despite the obstacles in her path, which led many to laud Tris as an empowered feminist heroine. Many also argue that Tris represents a kick-ass heroine because she achieves success regardless of the stereotypes and limitations of her gender. According to Miranda A. Green-Barteet, Tris achieves empowerment through her rebellious acts, becoming a "self-governing [subject] who [is] capable of directing the outcome of [her] own [life] rather than remaining [a] passive [object] able to be controlled by [her society]" (34). The scholar argues that Tris as a YA heroine "redefine[s] what it means to be a young woman" because the absence of traditional gender stereotypes in dystopian fiction such as the *Divergent* trilogy allows her "to be [a] strong, active young [woman] who

willingly challenge[s] authority and even confront[s] injustice when [she] feel[s] compelled to do so" (35). Indeed, several popular reviews of Tris as a character applaud her success within a male-dominated environment/skill set while simultaneously arguing that traditional gender socialization does not exist within Tris's society. For example, Allie Funk wrote of Tris for *Bustle*:

> [Divergent] doesn't judge based on gender; instead, Tris is thrust into the same death-defying challenges as her male counterparts...I believe it's laudable that Tris overcomes her challenges without being given any special treatment. She may be smaller than many of her peers in dauntless [sic], but she proves her strength all the same; instead of being a damsel in distress, Tris, when put into potentially deadly situations, overcomes them entirely of her own volition.

The fact that Tris can—and does—both take and dish out punches, dodge gunfire, and other violent or dangerous feats of physical prowess is, for many, the basis of her status as a feminist figure. Especially, returning to Green-Barteet's and other critics' focus, given the transformation Tris undergoes to achieve this kick-ass status; much emphasis is placed on Tris's initial characterization as meek, humble, and weak when we meet her in her original faction, Abnegation, known for selflessness and tasked with caring for the society's under-resourced population, The Factionless.

As a citizen of her faction and her city, Tris is expected to mold herself into a strong, aggressive, and fearless cog of the system. It is Tris's success in this area that lends her the status of feminist, kick-ass heroine. But as a feminized body, she also must conform to the normalizing disciplines of her gender and navigate the often conflicting expectations of her heteropatriarchal socialization and militaristic disciplinary system. Tris is constantly at the

mercy of these contradictions, imposed through internal and social disciplining of her body and its behaviors; the threat of sexual violence is a disturbing, gendered tactic through which Tris in particular is feminized, rendering claims of her society's egalitarianism highly questionable. Ultimately, despite the size of Tris's muscles or the bravery of her feats, she fails to truly challenge or resist this system that socially oppresses feminized bodies in any type of meaningful way, instead choosing to invest in and protect its status quo within any version of her society.

A Gendered Interpretation of Embodiment Theory

To understand how this double bind works upon the bodies of women in the *Divergent* trilogy, it is necessary to understand how embodiment, power, and gender relate to one another within Western society. There has always been, according to Shildrick and Price, a philosophical and cultural divide between the body and the mind in which "the body seems to have been regarded always with suspicion as the site of unruly passions and appetites that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge" (2). And women, in particular, have been culturally associated with the body itself, and with the female body specifically; as Shildrick and Price note, "women just are their bodies in a way that men are not" (3). As the body has always been approached with trepidation, social and cultural control has been employed to homogenize the actions and experiences of the body; this effort to maintain control has established expectations that are sometimes, but not always, supported by laws and edicts. In this way, the body became an object of power, and in *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault explores through his analysis of the body of the soldier how power is enacted on the body through disciplinary methods to render it docile; in his own words, discipline "turns [the body] into a relation of strict subjection" (138). And though his work does not focus

explicitly on the gendered body as a subject, it has, according to Shildrick and Price, served as "a fertile ground for feminist understandings that make clear the links between the everyday body as it is lived, and the regime of disciplinary and regulatory practices that shape its form and behaviour" (8). Susan Bordo, one such feminist theorist to take on this work, notes that women have "historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies" to cultural manipulation, and that feminist theory on the body identifies it not only as a mechanism of power, but as a political site, recognizing the structuring of the body as a main source of the struggle for power (143). Bordo argues that "the social manipulation of the female body [has] emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the past hundred years," (143).

'Dauntless Through and Through:' The Factions as Disciplinary Institutions

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines the conditions that create what he calls the "disciplinary institutions" that produce docile bodies: an enclosed environment, a ranking system in which bodies are not fixed, but are "distribute[d]...and...circulate[d]...in a network of relations," and social control over the bodies' activities through structured time and focused exercise (Foucault 146). The *Divergent* trilogy's Chicago itself functions as a disciplinary site, with structural, functional spaces (e.g. faction compounds, school, social gathering spaces) within the enclosed walls of the city, a distribution system that circulates bodies within itself through time and repetition (factions), and repetitive activities that build a sense of purpose and structure into the bodies within (factions work individually towards the sustainability of the city, coming together at structured intervals such as the Choosing Ceremony, at which eligible youth declare their faction of choice). And each faction functions as another smaller institution within this larger network, the two institutions

working in tandem to create malleable bodies to direct and control. For the purposes of my argument, I will focus primarily on the disciplinary institution that transforms Tris into a docile body: the Dauntless faction.

Each faction operates within its own geographical area within the walls of the city, creating functional sites that, according to Foucault, "code a space that architecture generally left at the disposal of several different uses" (143). And within that zone each faction has what they call a compound; a building or, in the case of the Dauntless, an underground facility built beneath the remnants of a building that serves as the faction's central base of operations. Within this space are designated training areas, shops, a cafeteria, dorms, and other necessities of communal, enclosed living. Previous to joining Dauntless, Tris notes that no one is even sure what part of the city the faction occupies, but that "it's like they just [pop] out of a hole in the ground or something" (*Divergent* 52). Dauntless, therefore, is isolated and enclosed, as Foucault suggests, and their space is highly regimented for specific purposes, down to the individual rooms, some of which are only used a few times a year. And within these spaces, gender is a consideration; for example, though the dorms initiates sleep in are not single gender, the bathrooms they use are, establishing separate spaces for gendered individuals to perform certain acts. This separation becomes significant in a discussion of sexual violence as a tactic of feminization and oppression, as Tris is outside of her gender-appropriate space during a period in which she is attacked: she is forced to change in her co-ed dorm room rather than the girls' bathroom area.

Dauntless society also engages in a ruthless form of social ranking that, as Foucault notes, is meant "to compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed; to follow the successive stages of the production process" (*Discipline* 145). This

system is most obvious in the Dauntless training process that Tris undergoes, but also in other facets of the social institution. For example, Tris notices early on that there are no elderly members of Dauntless, and learns that once members reach a certain age, they are deemed useless and are forced to leave. And during her training and initiation, Tris and her fellow initiates are consistently observed, compared, and ranked according to their developing skills; these rankings are posted multiple times throughout the training period and, at the end of initiation, determine the value and future of each initiate within the faction. Dauntless leader Eric describes the system's purpose thus:

> "Your ranking serves two purposes," he says. "The first is that it determines the order in which you will select a job after initiation. There are only a few *desirable* positions available...The second purpose...is that only the top ten initiates are made members [of Dauntless]." (*Divergent* 71)

Through this ranking system and other methods of monitoring and categorizing bodies within its walls, the Dauntless "work force [is] analysed in individual units," as Foucault says a disciplinary institution must (*Discipline* 145). And though this ranking system is not overtly gendered—initiates are not ranked separately by gender, but rather as one, mixed group—systemically and socially Dauntless is a heteropatriarchal society, and those values impact the ranking process of individual, gendered bodies. Tris, for example, earns higher and higher rankings as the training process continues, displaying her developing strength and skill, often to the detriment of male initiates. And when these successes are observed, male initiates are reprimanded for being intimated by the power of a "short, skinny girl" and, in the case of one initiate, Peter, who attempts to intimidate Tris in anger, "bull[ying] a little girl" (*Divergent* 298, 268). Even if Dauntless does not explicitly consider gender in its ranking,

clearly patriarchal gender norms permeate the society and affect the social standing of individuals within the system who fail to meet gendered, heteropatriarchal ideals, such as male domination and physical superiority over women.

Foucault says that disciplinary institutions regulate the activities of the bodies within them, functioning as "machinery for adding up and capitalizing time" as well as through exercise, defined as a "technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated" (157, 161). Speaking of the function of this procedure, Foucault continues:

> By bending towards a terminal state, exercise makes possible a perpetual characterization of the individual either in relation to this term, in relation to other individuals, or in relation to a type of itinerary. It thus assures, in the form of continuity and constraint, a growth, an observation, a qualification. (161)

And within Dauntless, we find this regulation of time and of activities that build docility in its citizens through relation of these activities to a sense of functionality and community within the faction. As an initiate, Tris's schedule is highly regimented; she and her fellow initiates train from eight o'clock to six o'clock every day, with a scheduled lunch break, and while they are assured "time off" after training and after each stage of the initiation process, they are also unable to leave the faction's compound without the accompaniment of an initiated member of the faction, meaning their choice of activities is limited (*Divergent* 70). Training involves repetitive activities such as learning to throw a knife or fire a gun, but also varying from day to day, and with unpredictable action such as practice fights worked into the schedule. Even in their free time, the Dauntless engage in team-and-community-building activities that are passed on as traditions, such as zip lining from skyscrapers and playing

Capture the Flag at a dilapidated Navy Pier. When Tris zip lines with a group of Dauntless-born initiates, she is complimented for her calm, and fellow initiate Uriah notes, "She's Dauntless through and through" (220). These actions might seem spontaneous, but the repetition of them through generations as well as their functionality in connecting individuals to one another and to their faction shows that they are, in fact, forms of exercise, as Foucault has defined it, and strategic activities in the building of docile bodies. Identifying and analyzing the gendered exercises that produce feminized bodies within the Dauntless society will require a broader exploration of contemporary Western gender norms and tools of feminization.

Docile and Dangerous: Gender and Discipline in the *Divergent* Trilogy

Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* employs Foucault's work on the body as a site of social power to identify within contemporary Western society the same system of discipline used to produce feminized docile bodies that uphold patriarchy:

> Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, "improvement." (166)

Exercises such as diet, wardrobe, and makeup keep women on a closed loop of self-modification, occupying their time and restricting their movements in a way that, according to Bordo, renders them docile and subjected to social control. Some of these same normalizing expectations and exercises are at work with the disciplinary society Tris operates

in, and throughout the series Tris engages in these and other feminizing activities to conform to the expectations of her heteropatriarchal disciplinary system. Tris engages in this system with fluctuating degrees of consciousness and success, but always she seeks to conform to it rather than challenging it, whether on an individual or systemic level.

On the surface, it might not seem like Dauntless as a disciplinary system is overtly invested in maintaining strict gender roles and norms. Citizens' style of dress and hair is dictated by faction, and within Dauntless men and women alike play with body modifications as a form of personal expression, primarily tattoos. Some analysis says that gendered expectations of beauty and the social pressure to conform that accompany them in our contemporary Western society are altogether absent; Green-Bareet, for example, argues that Tris considers her physical appearance "of little importance," a "far cry from the typical teenage girl" (43). And, in fact, Tris is not well-versed or practiced in traditional Western beauty disciplines. Tris grew up in the Abnegation faction, where looking in the mirror is considered an act of vanity and haircuts are annual acts of maintenance. Makeup is also outside of the realm of Tris's understanding; when Tris's best friend Christina pulls out her makeup bag, Tris identifies "different-sized tubes and containers that I recognize as makeup, but wouldn't know what to do with" (*Insurgent* 426). Unlike Katniss, whose resistance to traditional femininity is both a conscious decision and an unusual one even within the resilient sociality of her under-resourced district, Tris's lack of knowledge or interest in gendered norms and disciplines is attributed to her faction culture rather than her personal choice or rebellion.

Despite her lack of familiarity—or, perhaps, because of it—Tris's behaviors, her activities, and even her first-person narration display her commitment to the feminization of

her body into a subject of heteropatriarchal control. From the opening pages of the *Divergent* trilogy, Tris is hyper focused on her perceived lack of beauty, in particular her body's failure to conform to feminizing beauty ideals. She describes other female characters as beautiful, pretty, "striking without trying to be," and often laments her own, less traditionally appealing, features (*Insurgent* 169). Tris describes herself disparagingly: "I am not pretty—my eyes are too big and my nose is too long," and declares herself "not desirable" in the eyes of men (*Divergent* 87, 402). She also expresses envy of girls like fellow Dauntless initiates Lynn and Christina, whom Tris considers beautiful and describe in physically complimentary terms. By focusing on her perceived failure to conform to feminizing beauty ideals of contemporary Western culture—small features, "natural" beauty, attractive to the male gender—Tris is already participating in that normalizing process; Bordo argues that through engaging in feminizing disciplines, women "continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough," and so, even when Tris engages in these activities, she continues to perceive herself as unsuccessful, ensuring that she will continue to invest in her own feminization (166).

According to Foucault, disciplinary societies employ systems of punishment and reward to correct errant behavior and encourage positive and productive actions. And through what he calls "infra-penalties"—small-scale punishments enacted by fellow members of a disciplinary society for the purpose of "making the slightest departures from corrective behavior subject to punishment"—Tris is subtly encouraged to continue to invest in her disciplinary society's subjugating practices of feminization (*Discipline* 178). For Tris, the infra-penalties enacted against her take the form of verbal aggressions and social humiliation, often by friends meant to be engaging in "friendly" teasing. Lynn, for example,

jokes to Tris's brother Caleb, saying" 'I guess we know who got the good genes,'" in Tris's presence (*Insurgent* 212). And when Tris is commanded by her trainer to stand still while knives are thrown at her head, rival Dauntless initiate Peter quips: "'There goes your pretty face...Oh, wait. You don't have one" (*Divergent* 162). These jabs serve to, according to Foucault, correct errant behavior on the part of individual bodies within a disciplinary society. And so, because Tris is established as a young woman who is not well-versed in feminizing disciplines of self-beautification, she is reminded of her incorrect behavior in such a way that encourages her to correct it, to engage in those normalizing disciplinary activities that her society requires of her. And so, she does. Though Tris does not submit to drastic, extended makeovers to the extent that a character like Katniss does, she does engage in feminizing exercises of beautification once she enters Dauntless society. In the first instance, Christina separates herself and Tris from their male friends and insists that Tris let her pick out new clothes, calling the ones Tris is wearing "ugly and gigantic" (*Divergent* 86). Christina also takes Tris's hair out of its conservative braid and applies eyeliner for her. And despite Tris's insistence that Christina won't "be able to make me pretty," the impact of the transformation is significant (86):

> My eyes were blue before, but a dull, grayish blue—the eyeliner makes them piercing. With my hair framing my face, my features look softer and fuller. I am not pretty...but I can see that Christina is right. My face is noticeable…
>
> "See?" she says. "You're...striking."
>
> Under the circumstances, it's the best compliment she could have given me. (87)

By engaging in the feminizing disciplines of beauty expected of Tris as a feminine body within a heteropatriarchal disciplinary system—fashion, makeup—Tris submits to the

regulation and perpetual self-improvement of her society and is also rewarded for her "good behavior" in the same way (and more) that she was disciplined for her lack: verbal approval. And Tris absorbs these messages, seeking to replicate them through further exercises—wearing dresses, leaving her hair down—in the same cycle of endless activity and self-deprecation that Bordo says turns feminine bodies into docile ones. As Tris gazes upon herself after her makeover, she notes a sense of empowerment: "This is someone whose eyes claim mine and don't release me; this is Tris," at the same time as she recognizes that she must "find new habits, new thoughts, new rules" to maintain her hold on this feeling (*Divergent* 87). And she does, allowing Christina to again enact disciplines of traditional femininity onto her:

> Christina also persuaded me to purchase a shirt that exposes my shoulders and collarbone, and to line my eyes with black pencil again. I don't bother objecting to her makeover attempts anymore. Especially since I find myself enjoying them. (246)

Tris does experience feelings of power and control over herself and her identity though these feminizing activities, and, according to Bordo, this is neither unexpected nor indicative of a disruption of the disciplinary institution's mechanisms:

> Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful or "in control," far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of ones' social position, is always suspect as itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different. (27)

Much like Katniss, Tris enjoys a certain amount of social legibility through these feminizing practices; she receives positive feedback and an increased presence in her sociality that she enjoys. But, though Tris experiences feelings of empowerment through her continuing (but

never terminal) success in the production of her own feminized body, this does not mean she has achieved meaningful power within the system.

The issue of diet as a feminizing discipline is a more complicated one to explore because, on the surface, Tris does not engage in dieting practices; she enjoys her faction's rich, "fatty" foods like burgers and chocolate cake; however, a discussion of diet is directly associated with the weight and size of the female body. Bordo tracks the evolution of the idealized female body throughout Western culture, identifying our contemporary ideals of female beauty as thin and youthful, quoting Kim Chernin's description of "an 'image of a woman in which she is not yet a woman'" (163). Bordo identifies thinness in particular as "a contemporary ideal of specifically *female* attractiveness" (205). At first, this might seem contradictory to Tris's experience; after all, Tris's small stature and youthful body are a source of great preoccupation on her part, and subject to much surveillance and policing within her heteropatriarchal society. Again, both Tris and other characters make note of her body's lack of curves and fullness, of maturity. A fellow Dauntless initiate and rival of Tris's mocks her form in *Divergent*, saying, "'she's practically a child'" (169), and her body is described with adjectives like "short," "skinny," and "small." Tris describes herself as "still built like a child" (*Divergent* 324), "small and flat-chested" (*Allegiant* 415). And yet, despite these infra-penalties and Tris's surveillance of her own body, Tris's thinness is valued for its feminization of her body, and Tris is, in fact, rewarded for her conformity in the form of success within her faction and male attention; Sara K. Day explains that, though Tris and other female YA characters may view their small size and youthful appearance as detrimental, it is, in fact, a product of Western cultural beauty standards that is supported

through their romantic successes that "reinforces complicated expectations of the female body":

> Although these heroines frequently regard their size as unattractive, such representations of adolescent women—especially those who are demonstrably attractive to the young men in their stories—reinforce messages about body image, particularly the ongoing insistence upon thinness as a requirement of beauty. (89)

Looking at how thinness operates on the other women of the Dauntless disciplinary system helps illuminate Tris's feminization and contextualize her normalization. We are reminded of Foucault's ranking system and Bordo's never-ending cycle of improvement. Most of the women in Tris's society are small and thin, though not to the extent that Tris is. Tris's body is, therefore, not as successful in the feminization process as women like Christina, who is "willowy," or Lynn, whose body "bends and curves like it's supposed to" (*Insurgent* 172). Tris puts herself below young women like Christina and Lynn whose bodies, according to Bordo, are "psychic resonances with maternal power" through their curves and mature figures—as does her society, as the casual verbal asides about her figure and youth attest (208). But there are also Dauntless women whose bodies are even less in line with feminizing ideals of size and thinness than Tris's, and who experience harsher discipline from the heteropatriarchal society as a result. Take Dauntless initiate Molly, for example, whom Tris's friend Christina calls "The Tank." Christina describes her as the "slightly more feminine-looking minion" of rival initiate Peter, and Tris's description of her aligns with this image: "Molly is tall like Christina, but that's where the similarities end. She has broad shoulders, bronze skin, and a bulbous nose" (*Divergent* 92). Molly's larger stature and lack of beauty represent a failure to feminize her body that leaves her open to censure, and after she also

fails to conform to the expectations of her role as a Dauntless initiate, losing a fight to Tris, someone smaller and lower ranked than she, Molly is eventually ranked last and cast out of the faction.

Even when Tris's body begins to develop as a result of her rigorous training, she recognizes that the muscles that help her succeed in her militaristic disciplinary faction could also put her body outside of the bounds of feminization and, as such, open her up to discipline and ridicule, as it does for Molly, whose size should have arguably afforded her more status in such a society, not less. As such, rather than celebrate the changes her body undergoes as a result of the non-gendered disciplinary activities she engages in, Tris is ambivalent:

> I step to the side so I stand in front of the mirror. I see muscles that I couldn't see before in my arms, legs, and stomach. I pinch my side, where a layer of fat used to hint at curves to come. Nothing. Dauntless initiation has stolen whatever softness my body had. Is that good, or bad? (*Divergent* 168)

Tris is concerned with the loss—the *theft*—of her possible future curves that would elevate her femininity to the level of the women she admires, Lynn and Christina. According to Day, this double bind of producing a body both of use within an action-based disciplinary society and meeting the feminizing ideals of gender within that society often place the young women within YA dystopias in a precarious position:

The adolescent woman's body, I would argue, represents a more implicit pairing of docility and danger, both in contemporary Western culture and in dystopian novels, in that the adolescent woman is expected to conform to specific physical requirements that

ultimately position her as a threat that may be monitored, controlled, or exploited by the social system in which she lives. (77)

So, Tris, who's developing body should situate her safely within the bounds of a "tightly managed body" that represents an ideal form of feminine attractiveness is instead open to discipline because of its potential to veer out of the realm of feminine docility and become a threat to the success of specifically masculine bodies within the institution and, therefore, the heteropatriarchal society itself (211). In order to punish this transgression and re-establish patriarchal rule, the men in Tris's society consistently degrade her by calling her a "little girl" when she threatens their power—by receiving a high rank during initiation, attempting to strategize modes of attack or information retrieval during times of civil conflict, and otherwise encroaching on male authority. This condescending nickname draws attention back to her both her size and youth as well as her femininity. The infra-penalty resituates power back in the hands of the men wielding it and again serves to correct Tris's errant behavior in leaning away from the pursuit of feminization and into the realm of patriarchal power.

Boy Creates Girl: Feminization Through Heterosexuality

Tris, like Katniss before her, is also feminized by her romantic relationships with the opposite sex. Day notes above that attracting heterosexual male desire legitimizes the feminized bodies of YA heroines and the disciplines enacted on these bodies in the eyes of adolescent readers, and this analysis is supported by feminist and queer embodiment theory. According to Bordo, the process of feminization in a disciplinary society is also a process of homogenization, erasing difference in female bodies and the cultural practices enacted on and around these bodies. And in a heteropatriarchal society, this erasure takes the form of what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality, "a beachhead of male dominance"

(633). The implication that "heterosexuality is presumed as a 'sexual preference' of 'most women,' either implicitly or explicitly" in a patriarchal disciplinary society becomes the expectation that women desire and form romantic and sexual relationships with men, making queer desire invisible or even punishable (633). These messages are particularly significant in the development of young women within contemporary society, according to Aapola, Gonick, and Harris: "Discourses of compulsory heterosexuality are part of a network of power relations governing women's lives, and they have traditionally been crucial for girls and young women positioning themselves as 'properly' female and mature" (147). Compulsory heterosexuality as a discipline of feminization is reflected within the *Divergent* trilogy's society, where heterosexual pairings are the norm, if not the explicit rule,[12] and engaging in them feminizes female bodies and erases difference between those bodies while highlighting the power differential between men and women. Take, for example, the scene in which Christina shares with Tris news about her love life:

> "Can you be a girl for a few seconds?"
>
> "I'm always a girl." I frown.
>
> "You know what I mean. Like a silly, annoying girl."
>
> I twirl my hair around my finger. "'Kay."
>
> She grins so wide I can see her back row of teeth. "Will kissed me."
>
> "What?" I demand. "When? How? What happened?"

[12] Even outside of Chicago, heterosexuality is an expected social norm of the government. Tris's city is, in fact, an experiment by a post-apocalyptic government to produce more genetically pure individuals who, this government believes, are the key to the creation of a more successful society. According to Amar, a genetically pure, queer man Tris meets who escaped Dauntless and Chicago, he is still not free to live openly with his partner. "The Bureau is obsessed with procreation—with passing on genes. And George and I are both [genetically pure], so any entanglement that can't produce a stronger genetic code...It's not encouraged, that's all" (*Allegiant* 356). Here, a biological imperative is connected to the "bad behavior" of queer desire, but the expectation of heterosexual relationships is just as prominent, erasing so much as the possibility of other opportunities for reproduction that do not punish queer identities and partnerships.

"You *can* be a girl!" (*Divergent* 369)

Christina's direct correlation of an interest in heterosexual romance to girlhood and femininity speaks to an established social and cultural norm within the institution, an expectation that is projected onto the women in this society as well as used to promote feminizing exercises and conformity to gender ideals. As the conversation continues, Christina also highlights the extent to which heterosexual pairings serve to feminize bodies that are, within Dauntless specifically, produced as gender-neutral soldiers:

> "How long have you known you liked him?"
>
> "I don't know. I guess I didn't. But then little things...how he put his arm around me at the funeral, how he opens doors for me like I'm a girl instead of someone who could beat the crap out of him." (369)

Heterosexual couplings and romantic interactions within this system are established here as activities where clear, heteropatriarchal gender roles are re-established and women specifically are feminized in order to neutralize their perceived threat to heteropatriarchy within the institution.

Tris's own experiences of male attention as well as her heterosexual desire act as both a feminizing activity and a reward for the disciplines of beautification she takes up. For example, after she submits to a second makeover from Christina, Tris and her group of friends run into their trainer and Tris's developing love interest, Four.[13] He calls out for her, which according to Tris draws attention to them both: "I don't blame [my friends] for staring. There are four of us, and Four is only talking to me" (*Divergent* 248). Four tells Tris that she

[13] "Four" is a badge of honor as well as a nickname referring to the number of individual fears Four has. Each Dauntless initiate is placed in a simulation that identifies their deepest fears; Four has the lowest number of any Dauntless citizen. As they grow closer, Tris learns that Four's real name is Tobias.

"looks different," noticing her tattoo that is exposed by her new clothes and lamenting that decorum prevents him from inviting her, an initiate, to join he and his friends (248). What follows next is an intimate, charged moment:

> [Four] puts his lips next to my ear and says, "You look good, Tris."
>
> His words surprise me, and my heart leaps. (249)

Here, a desirable, slightly older man with status—Tris's trainer, no less—singles her out, not for her success at training, but for the disciplines through which she feminizes her body, deemed successful through Four's clear sexual interest. Tris is implicitly held up, praised publicly by Four's attention and privately by his compliments. She internalizes this praise, which serves also to reinforce the behaviors she engaged in that garnered the compliments and returns Four's interest, displaying her own investment in heterosexual desire.

Compulsory heterosexuality also becomes another exercise by which Tris and other young women within the system can enact "a perpetual characterization" of themselves as feminine docile bodies "in relation to other individuals," as Foucault says; in this case, in relation to men (*Discipline* 161). This exercise within our contemporary culture can be identified as heterosexual play—flirting—which reinforces traditional feminizing, patriarchal gender roles. In Tris's case, this exercise establishes her, as above, as a valued object of heterosexual desire as well as reinforcing normalizing disciplines of femininity. In particular, the gendered play that Tris engages in with Four and with Al, a fellow initiate who harbors unrequited romantic interest in Tris, feminizes her by emphasizing her small stature and her subordinate role as a woman in a heterosexual relationship. Take, for example, her interaction with Al directly following Tris's intimate exchange with Four:

> Then Al rushes at me like a rolling boulder and throws me over his shoulder. I

shriek, my face hot.

"Come on, little girl," he says. "I'm taking you to dinner."

I rest my elbows on Al's back and wave at Four as he carries me away.

"I thought I would rescue you," Al says as we walk away. He sets me down.

"What was *that* about?"

He is trying to sound lighthearted, but he asks the question almost sadly. He still cares too much about me. (*Divergent* 249-250)

Through this exercise masquerading as a lighthearted moment between friends, Tris's small size and lack of bulk are emphasized through Al's ability to pick her up easily, his use of "little girl" as a pet name reinforcing that this trait is desirable and correct for women in this society and for the female object of heterosexual desire. This moment also establishes Tris as an object in need of protection; more specifically, despite her strength and ability, Tris is situated in the role of damsel in distress to Al's heroic protector as well as positioned as a sexualized object Al seeks possession of. And Tris leans into this play, allowing herself to be literally carried away from her conversation with another person and, later, stopping her friend Will from repeating Four's compliment to Tris in front of Al, not wanting to "make him feel worse" (250). As Bordo notes, women are often eager participants in "cultural practices which objectify and sexualise" themselves and others as well as support and maintain the same dynamics of power that lead to their own subjection ("Feminism" 252). Tris plays into her own objectification here, submitting to Al's feelings of entitlement to her body and to her affections as part of the feminization of her body through heteropatriarchal desire. She also holds others to heteropatriarchal roles and norms, confessing when she first begins to suspect Al's attachment to her that his emotional weakness—displayed through his

loud, nightly crying—makes him an unsuitable sexual partner: "I could not be attracted to anyone that fragile" (*Divergent* 114–5). Tris not only submits to the normalization of a traditionally feminine role in her heterosexual relationships, she also holds potential male partners to social expectations of masculinity.[14]

Tris's relationship with Four is often lauded for its equitable nature, but their interactions and play also display the effects of feminization and subjugation on the female body within a heteropatriarchal disciplinary society. Four, too, has a habit of emphasizing Tris's smallness and his own physical strength by carrying her in his arms. At times, this play is overtly sexual, as in the lead up to their implied first sexual experience together:

> I look at [Four], too, but everything I see makes me feel worse...A moment ago I was convinced that we were perfectly matched, and maybe we still are—but only with our clothes on...With a quirk of his eyebrows, he bends and wraps an arm around my legs, throwing me over his shoulder. A laugh bursts from my mouth, half joy and half nerves, and he carries me across the room, dropping me unceremoniously on the couch.
>
> He lies down next to me, and I run my fingers over the flames wrapping around his rib cage. He is strong, lithe, and certain.
>
> And he is mine. (*Allegiant* 416)

Both Tris and Four emphasize their physical difference in the encounter: Four through his ease lifting and moving Tris's body, Tris through her internalized thoughts and external

[14] There are numerous examples throughout the *Divergent* trilogy of norms dictating traditional masculinity being enforced within Dauntless's disciplinary society. The glorification of Four's size and muscles as well as the use of highly-charged, gendered insults such as "sissy" and, disturbingly, "pansycake" display the extent to which men even in a patriarchal disciplinary society are subject to "practices and institutions which they (as individuals) did not create, do not control and may feel tyrannised by" (Bordo "Feminism" 252).

touch, and both through their heterosexual desire. And this instance is not the first or only example of Four exercising his physical dominance to objectify Tris and draw attention to her feminized body. When Tris is drugged with a calming serum in *Insurgent* that, because of her size, has stronger effects than intended, Four notices her strange behavior and takes her to the leader of the faction that administered the serum, Amity. But Tris, loopy and unfocused due to the serum, does not immediately come with him, and in exasperation Four/Tobias takes matters into his own hands, literally:

> "Come *on*. Oh, for God's sake. I'll just carry you."
>
> He swings me into his arms, one arm under my knees and the other around my back. I wrap my arms around his neck and plant a kiss on his cheek. Then I discover that the air feels nice on my feet when I kick them, so I move my feet up and down as he walks us toward the building where Johanna works…
>
> Tobias sets me down too heavily. The impact is jarring and hurts my shoulder a little…
>
> "What did you do to her?" Tobias says, terse. "What in God's name did you do?" (*Insurgent* 62)

In this instance, Four establishes himself, like Al did before him, as Tris's protector and Tris as his object; the situation is impacted by the fact that Tris has been drugged, but even in this Four reacts as her owner rather than a concerned partner. He essentially manhandles her, presenting her as a broken or defective thing to Amity official Johanna, and the conversation they ultimately have concerns politics, not Tris's immediate welfare. And though Tris being under the influence of a serum colors her behaviors in this interaction, the image of her being carried in the arms of her savior, clutching at him and kicking her feet, only accentuates the

size and age difference between them, positioning Tris as the weak, small, feminized object to be protected and rescued when harm has been done.

Tris's heterosexual desire for Four also brings about internalized acceptance of her own femininity and, through this, contributes to her own normalization. Throughout the series, Tris and Four become increasingly intimate, both physically and emotionally, though Tris is afraid of this intimacy. In *Allegiant,* it is heavily implied that Tris and Four have sex, and in the scene leading up to the act, Tris exemplifies a common trope in heteropatriarchal YA fiction: a self-conscious and self-deprecating young woman whose beauty is validated through the desire of her male love interest:

> His hands clutch at my shirt and I am removing it and then I remember, I remember that I am small and flat-chested and sickly pale, and I pull back.
>
> He looks at me, not like he's waiting for an explanation, but like I am the only thing in the room worth looking at. I look at him, too, but everything I see makes me feel worse—he is so handsome...He smiles, a small, shy smile. Then he puts his hands on my waist and draws me toward him. He bends down and kisses between his fingers and whispers, 'beautiful' against my stomach.
>
> And I believe him. (*Allegiant* 415)

Tris still sees herself as lacking, as failing to meet up to the "minimum threshold...an average to be respected" in terms of her beauty and her conformity to the expectations of her society (Foucault 183). However, Four shows desire and acceptance of her body, and he assigns her arguably the most coveted ranking of femininity: Tris has spent the whole of the series arguing that she will never be "pretty," but Four declares her "beautiful." And when he does

so, Tris finally accepts this knowledge and through it moves forward to a new level in her heterosexual relationship.

I don't wish to deny Tris her agency, nor dismiss the validity of her sexual desire, which according to Bordo is culturally linked to the wild, messy, dangerous feminine body that must be stifled through discipline and control. As Bordo notes, the nature of power dynamics within a gendered, systemic disciplinary culture are complex, and women working within the system may find empowerment in other areas through the normalization process of becoming a docile body or come to gain a certain amount of power through succeeding within the system. Day argues, for example, that Tris's growing comfort with her own desire and experiences with physical intimacy empower her and fuel her growing willingness to challenge authority and rebel against perceived wrongs in her society. However, because Tris's and other kick-ass girls' sexual awakenings are contextualized by and often reinforce expectations of heteropatriarchy, femininity, and the female body, Day notes, they "frequently find themselves implicitly undercut by incomplete reconsiderations of existing standards for appearance and behaviors" (89). Similarly, though Tris's sexuality and the empowerment she feels from her relationship are valid and important, they nevertheless represent her conformity to the social disciplines of femininity, beauty, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Sexual Violence as Discipline on the Feminized Body

Despite being an extremely violent and aggressive society, Dauntless employs largely non-corporeal means of discipline and control of gender ideals, which is in line with Foucault's theory on disciplinary societies. According to the theorist, disciplinary power is supported not through violence and corporeal punishment, but "by its own mechanism":

"Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics...without recourse, in principle at least, to excess, force or violence" (*Discipline* 177). Through self-observation and correction, in other words, power is enacted and distributed, bodies subjected and made useful without the need for excessive violence. The exercises and disciplines explored above support this system of discipline. However, Bordo notes that "not all female submission is best understood in terms of such a model," acknowledging that violence and oppression of women is baked into our heteropatriarchal culture. More specifically, she argues that gendered power dynamics often incorporate physical violence or the threat of as a method of feminine submission (27). And, in fact, throughout the *Divergent* trilogy there are several instances of overt physical—specifically, sexual—violence or threat of violence to female bodies that seem out of line with Foucault's analysis and any argument that Tris's society is a gender neutral one. To understand how and why sexual violence exists within a disciplinary society, we must examine how the highly gendered experience of sexual violence works to feminize bodies within that society, and more specifically, how Tris's body is disciplined through these means.

Ann J. Cahill argues "the socially produced feminine body is precisely that of a pre-victim," or one who's own body leaves her vulnerable to specifically sexual danger, and so must be under constant internal surveillance:

> In acquiring the bodily habits which render the subject "feminine," habits which are inculcated at a young age and then constantly re-defined and maintained, the woman learns to accept her body as dangerous, willful, fragile, and hostile. It constantly

> poses the possibility of threat, and only persistent vigilance can limit the risk at which it places the woman. (56)

Cahill identifies sexual assault as an essential element to the creation of the feminine body; its sustained threat encourages women to create their own "safe zones" and identify public and male-dominated areas as off-limits, to establish limits to their own production, and to otherwise police their feminine bodies, which they view as inherently vulnerable. This understanding of women's bodies as dangerous, Cahill says, can be entirely unconscious: "They may only sense that something very bad, and very hurtful, will befall them should their surveillance falter, and, correspondingly, that all sorts of social opportunities will be open to them should their project of femininity be successful" (57). And, in a statement that supports Bordo, Cahill argues that sexual assault is "fundamental to the discourse which defines women as inferior and socially expendable" (58).

This analysis of sexual threat as crucial to the normalization of the feminine body within a disciplinary system is supported in the *Divergent* trilogy by several jarring instances of sexual threat or violation Tris experiences that serve to enforce feminine norms and limitations by rendering her body specifically vulnerable and violable.

Within the first fifty pages of *Divergent*, Tris has an encounter with a factionless man laden with sexual threat. Walking home through an area she is meant to avoid for its poor infrastructure and, presumably, because it is where the castaway factionless reside, Tris is approached by a man who asks her for food. When she holds out the snack she is carrying, however, the man takes hold of her instead:

> His hand closes around my wrist. He smiles at me. He had a gap between his front teeth.

"My, don't you have pretty eyes," he says. "It's a shame the rest of you is so plain."

My heart pounds. I tug my hand back, but his grip tightens. I smell something acrid and unpleasant on his breath.

"You look a little young to be walking around by yourself, dear," he says. (*Divergent* 26)

The man ultimately releases Tris, encouraging her to "choose wisely" on Choosing Day; it is not insignificant that this is the first time Tris is referred to as a "little girl." There are elements of the standard disciplines of feminization at play in this encounter: the man's comment about Tris's lack of beauty, his use of a patronizing label to highlight her diminutive status as a girl. However, his use of sexual menace adds another, complex layer of socialization to the encounter—trapping and commenting on a feminine body sexualizes the inherent threat, as any individual with a feminized body will attest. Tris is out of bounds, as Cahill would say, outside of the parameters of her safe zone in more ways than one, having just discovered that she is, in fact, Divergent. She is also, at sixteen, transitioning from adolescence into womanhood, and her actions must protect the inherent vulnerability of her feminized body; Cahill notes that the construction of the woman as pre-victim is also a construction of a *guilty* pre-victim, as our patriarchal society conditions women to feel responsible for the inherent danger of their own body and see sexual assault as a personal failure rather than an unprovoked attack. Ostensibly, this scene highlights the importance of Tris's choice of faction, of finding a safe space to successfully hide her divergence and gain protection from the rejection of being cast out of society and living factionless. But within the construction of a gendered disciplinary structure, it also serves to feminize Tris's body,

setting limits and limitations on it and highlighting its vulnerability within this system in a way that Tris will struggle with throughout the series as she is further produced as a gendered docile body within her faction.

Tris is sexually violated twice more in *Divergent*, and both instances serve to remind Tris of her subservient position of vulnerability as a feminized body within this heteropatriarchal system. The first assault happens in the co-ed dorm room where Tris is returning from a shower, wrapped in her towel. As she is collecting her clothes from a drawer, rival initiate Peter sneaks up behind her, preventing her escape, as the factionless man did, this time by blocking her path. He makes a disparaging comment about her body, intimidating her through non-verbal cues:

> His eyes travel down my body, not in the greedy way that a man looks at a woman, but cruelly, scrutinizing every flaw. I hear my heartbeat in my ears as the others inch closer, forming a pack behind Peter.
>
> This will be bad.
>
> I have to get out of here. (*Divergent* 169)

Though Peter is not expressing explicit sexual desire, his gaze is still a sexual violation because it represents the, as Cahill calls it, "systemic (i.e., consistent, although not necessarily conscious), sexualized control of women" (45). Cahill argues that rape should be defined not as an act performed by a man, but as a feminized and feminizing experience.[15] Peter attempts to intimidate some initiates throughout the series and does explicit violence to others; but, because these other initiates are men, his tactics do not include commenting on,

[15]Cahill acknowledges that men are also victims of rape, but she argues that these cases only serve to support her definition of rape, as male survivors often experience shame due to the "implicit womanizing" of rape, which positions the victim as sexually viable and submissive; a "'social woman,'" (45).

leering at, nor violating their naked bodies. In only using this method of threat with Tris, Peter is sexualizing the encounter by using specific tactics that put himself as a man and Tris as a woman in opposition, and furthermore establishes Tris as the vulnerable, feminized party. And as this particular encounter continues, Peter's sexualizing tactics escalate. Peter's friends Drew and Molly join in, again negatively commenting on Tris's body. When Tris attempts to escape, Peter strikes, pulling Tris's towel off and exposing her naked body to the room:

> Laughter erupts, and I run as fast as I can toward the door, holding the dress against my body to hide it. I sprint down the hallway and into the bathroom and lean against the door, breathing hard. I close my eyes.
>
> It doesn't matter. I don't care.
>
> A sob bursts from my mouth, and I slap my hand over my lips to contain it. It doesn't matter what they saw. I shake my head like the motion is supposed to make it true. (*Divergent* 169).

In the second instance, Tris is ambushed late at night by three male initiates who attempt to scare or maybe even kill her by suspending her over the railing that surrounds a large, deep cavern in the center of the compound. When Tris is being forcibly bent on her back over the railing, one of the men again violates her body in a sexually menacing way:

> A heavy hand gropes along my chest. "You sure you're sixteen, Stiff? Doesn't feel like you're more than twelve."
>
> The other boys laugh.
>
> Bile rises in my throat and I swallow the bitter taste.

"Wait, I think I found something!" His hand squeezes me. I bite my tongue to keep from screaming. More laughter." (279)

In both these examples, Tris is reminded of her own inherent vulnerability through sexualized humiliation that, in and of itself, serves as a feminizing act. Demoralizing comments made about her body contribute to a gendered system of discipline and mirror those discussed in previous sections—Tris is taunted for being "skinny" and "practically a child" in the first instance, and her lack of physical development is highlighted in the second—but the encounters move beyond infra-penalties when the vulnerability of Tris's feminized body is brought into play: "'She could be hiding something under that towel. Why don't we look and see?'" (169) in the first example, and the addition of groping Tris's body when she is already in a position of physical threat in the second. Within her heteropatriarchal disciplinary system, Tris is in constant danger not only as a docile body under surveillance and in competition with others, but as a feminized body who must combat her inherent vulnerability through protective discipline—hence, perhaps, why Dauntless dorms are mixed gender, but bathrooms are single; women, as Cahill argues, are socialized to view their natural bodies as viable and to assume responsibility for their protection, meaning Tris might have been blamed for the first attack because she allowed herself to be without clothes in a co-ed environment and, in the second, for being "out" alone late at night (a sentiment many female-identified sexual assault survivors must contend with in our society). It is significant that Tris does not tell her friends about the first attack, and leaves out the sexualized elements of the next to all but her love interest, Four; her socialization within this system no doubt led her to understand that, as the victim of these womanizing, sexual violations, she would not be received with the same support and sympathy as when she is

physically beaten or verbally taunted. Again, her experience of these violations is an inherently feminized and feminizing one that by design positions her as social female and submissive within the disciplinary society. It is a position she ultimately chooses to work within to find success and safety, despite her rebel status.

Consciousness and Resistance

What is a YA dystopian series without a political rebellion? True to form, the *Divergent* trilogy contains several rebel factions and groups who wage civil wars and hostile takeovers, as well as daring acts of heroism. Tris vacillates between fighting against these groups when she perceives their motivations to be less than pure and actively participating in them when she values what is at stake. But, when it comes to the social structure of Dauntless and the faction system itself, Tris displays little desire to change or break down this system, leaving intact the heteropatriarchal disciplinary institution it represents. When it comes to resistance, Foucault discusses the topic in *The History of Sexuality*, arguing that resistance is always present in systems of power, power cannot exist without it, in fact, and "this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). Foucault says that while many types of resistances exist within systems of power, they generally constitute fleeting instances that might reorganize, regroup, or mark change on an individual level rather than "great radical ruptures" (96). For Bordo, feminist criticism of cultural systems of power should identify resistance within individual recognition of this system: "[Feminist cultural criticism's] goal is edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning" (30). It is then up to individuals to "put that understanding to further use" as they see fit within their own lives (30) and "*work* to keep [their] daily practices in the service

of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization" (184). By Foucault's logic, there ought to be pockets of resistance to the disciplinary system present in the *Divergent* trilogy; and, as it relates to the cultural systems of power at work that support heteropatriarchy within the society, Bordo's arguments instruct us to look for those who are aware of the gendered power dynamics inherent in society and who, in their own ways, resist this domination. However, despite her position as heroine of the series and a kick-ass girl, Tris embodies no form of resistance or even acknowledgement of the systems of power at work on her and her fellow gendered citizens.

Though Tris fights for a better future for her faction and city, she does not rebel against the disciplinary systems within them. In fact, though the series ends with the abandonment of the disciplinary structure known as the faction system, Tris never explicitly fights to bring this end about. Despite being Divergent and, therefore, considered a dangerous anomaly of the faction structure, she fights *against* the rise of the Factionless, a mobilized group of citizens who live outside of mainstream society—but who still operate within the system, if as oppressed individuals who have been assigned the lowest possible ranking—and gain power at the end of *Insurgent*. When the Factionless gain power and attempt to abolish faction loyalty, Tris is resistant to the new order, noting in *Allegiant* that "[she knows she] should try to stop putting people in factions when [she sees] them, but it's an old habit, hard to break" (16). She eventually works with a newly formed organization who is fighting to restore the faction system. Later, she prevents the national government from distributing a serum that would wipe all memory of the faction system, deemed a failed experiment, from the minds of the citizens of Chicago. She fights, in other words, for a new distribution of power, for new groups or new methods within the current system, but she fails to instigate, as

Foucault says, “massive binary divisions” that break down the existing social structure (*History* 96).

And within the faction system, Tris never truly challenges the gendered culture of power that regulates her society. Tris is accused multiple times of playing up cultural expectations in order to gain power, much like Katniss is forced to do to maintain her influence over her society, but also of playing against it. In *Divergent,* Tris’s nemesis charges her with playing weak and helpless among her fellow initiates—of leaning into, specifically, the gendered stereotypes of a “little girl”—in order to manipulate them into complacency and earn herself a higher rank. And at least one of her friends buys into this interpretation, asking Tris, “‘Is he right?...Are you...acting weak so we pity you? And then acting tough to psyche us out?’” (268). And in *Insurgent,* Lynn insists that Tris is just like herself, playing against her own femininity in order to be taken seriously (173). These contradictory accusations would seem to acknowledge a consciousness on Tris’s part of the gendered power dynamics at work within her society, except that Tris never actively participates in this manipulation; she is the ultimate docile body, normalizing her appearance and behaviors as best she can to succeed, as displayed above. Unlike Katniss, who’s choice to conform and play into heteropatriarchal gender norms is conscious, if not freely made, Tris makes no attempt to gain power through her participation in social gender norms. And, like Katniss before her, Tris also fails to challenge these norms or those who created them and turned her into a gendered, docile body.

When Tris fails to be taken seriously or to be considered valuable within her society, her anger is directed inward at her own lack of conformity to expectations of both strength and feminized beauty, not at the system that holds her to these impossible standards. What’s

more, she encourages others to conform to the process of normalization, insisting to Lynn that "'You don't always have to smack people in the face with how strong you are'" (173). So, while Tris might acknowledge the gendered dynamics of power that function within her faction system and her society, she ultimately works within them to conform and gain status, to turn herself into a docile body of use and value within the institution, rather than challenge these expectations or even consciously use them to her own advantage. Any manipulation of characters' expectations surrounding Tris based on gendered stereotypes serves to highlight the existence of the system of power and the contradictory nature of its demands on women specifically rather than Tris's conscious navigation of the society.

There is, in fact, only one character who consciously and deliberately attempts to challenge the gender dynamics of power at play in Dauntless specifically, who refuses to conform to societal expectations: Dauntless member Lynn. Lynn, as Tris describes her, is a beautiful girl, endowed naturally with the Eurocentric beauty ideals her heteropatriarchal society values: "[Lynn's] eyes fix on mine. I never noticed before how strange they are, a golden brown...I also notice her delicate nose, her full lips—she is striking without trying to be" (*Insurgent* 169).

However, Lynn actively works against the feminizing elements of her natural beauty by shaving her head. When Tris questions Lynn about her choice, her explanation highlights her motives and the precarious position of female bodies within Dauntless's disciplinary society:

> "Why did you shave your head?"
>
> "Initiation," [Lynn] says. "I love Dauntless, but Dauntless guys don't see Dauntless girls as a threat during initiation. I got sick of it. So I figured, if I don't look so much like a girl, maybe they won't look at me that way." (*Insurgent* 173)

Here, Lynn makes clear the contradictions of her body's position within her society: in order to be considered valuable, to achieve a high rank in her society and excel at the exercises of her faction, Lynn rejects the expectations of her gender that would neutralize her as a threat to male dominance in her patriarchal world. And her resistance goes beyond a rejection of beauty norms in an attempt to elevate her status as a soldier. She also refuses to engage in other feminizing exercises many Dauntless women happily engage in to normalize themselves as gendered docile bodies within the disciplinary system: Lynn seems to reject feminine clothing items such as dresses, criticizing her sister for packing multiple when Dauntless fled their compound following the Erudite-led uprising. And she expresses disgust rather than interest in heterosexual desire, as when her good friends Uriah and Marlene are attempting to hide their new romance during a group dinner: "Lynn scowls at him. 'I'm going to hurl anyway, with you two making eyes at each other all the time...why don't you just make out with her and get it over with,'" (*Insurgent* 285). Though she has a teasing sense of humor with friends, Lynn does not engage in heterosexual play, either, and later criticizes Uriah for doing so during tumultuous times; Tris attempts to offer a teasing infra-penalty to encourage Lynn to conform, saying, "'maybe you can learn from him,'" but Lynn deflects, throwing Tris's own serious nature back at her (170). The reason for Lynn's resistance to heterosexual normalization is revealed at the moment of her death in *Insurgent*, when she admits to Uriah that her feelings for his girlfriend and her best friend are more than platonic:

> "Uri, listen. I loved her too. I did."...
>
> "Yeah, we all loved Marlene," he says.
>
> "No, that's not what I mean." She shakes her head. She closes her eyes.
>
> Still, it takes a few minutes before her hand goes limp in mine. (513)

Lynn hides her queer desire for her friend Marlene because within her heteropatriarchal society, her resistance to feminizing social norms and her connection to what Jack Halberstam calls female masculinity is "at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire" (28). Though Lynn recognizes the inherent danger in openly presenting not only her resistance to feminization, but also her queer desire to her heteropatriarchal society, her resistance is no less significant; she actively pushes back against gendered normalization as a whole, refusing to be molded into a feminized, docile body. Lynn not only displays consciousness of the gendered expectations of her society and the limitations they create to her and other women's success, but she also actively modifies her body to be disruptive of traditional social norms, rejecting the feminizing activities and exercises of her heteropatriarchal disciplinary society. Resistance, as Foucault describes it, "[furrows] across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds," and so Lynn has been remade by her resistance to society expectations and is unable to be normalized and used by them (*History* 96). It is, of course, necessary from a narrative standpoint to acknowledge that Lynn is one of only three queer, gender non-conforming characters in the *Divergent* trilogy, that she is not openly queer until moments before her death, and that she does, in fact, die, in what is arguably the ultimate punishment for her transgressions and resistance. These facts are bleak, but ultimately support Foucault's argument that most resistances that occur within disciplinary societies are small and localized, serving to shift and remake entities rather than rupture the entire system.

On the surface, YA dystopian series like the *Divergent* trilogy are gender equalizers: young men and women alike train, fight, lead, and rebel together in a seemingly egalitarian

society absent the gendered power dynamics of contemporary Western society. But despite her physical prowess and muscles, despite her aggressive and direct demeanor, Tris undergoes and willingly partakes in a process of feminization that turns her into a gendered docile body utilized to uphold her own submission within her heteropatriarchal disciplinary society. By engaging in feminizing disciplines of self-improvement and compulsory heterosexuality, Tris, like Katniss, enjoys a certain amount of success within her society: she is highly ranked in training, becomes an unofficial leader of Dauntless—she takes herself out of the official running and her boyfriend, Four, is elected instead—and, ultimately, she dies a hero in her own plan to save her city from being, essentially, decommissioned. However, her limited power comes specifically because she plays by the rules of heteropatriarchy, submitting to feminization and never truly challenging her oppressive society's norms. Ultimately, Tris dies protecting the heteropatriarchal disciplinary society that controlled her body and its behaviors, made her culpable for her own vulnerability within it, and encouraged her to conform rather than disrupt the systems of power that subjected her to a constant loop of self-improvement and inevitable failure.

As significant a role as the past plays in YA dystopian series, the primary concern of these narratives is the future—the future of the kick-ass girl, the other central characters, and the future of their societies. While ostensibly the kick-ass girl is rebelling against an oppressive social order and fighting for a more equitable future, the realities of the neoliberal post-feminism she embodies prohibit all but the most privileged individuals within the society from benefiting in any new, brighter future the kick-ass girl might build in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, heteropatriarchy. Katniss and Tris as neoliberal kick-ass girls prioritize their own personal safety and security in any future social

order, failing to make real social change that would have freed themselves and others from the oppressive expectations of heteropatriarchy. Other iterations of the kick-ass girl, however, actively envision and fight for a future, "better" society, but the limited and heteropatriarchal scope of that vision ensures that any social order she seeks to create ultimately serves heteropatriarchy to the continuing vulnerability of the characters who truly resist oppressive norms and fight for real social change.

Family Values and Reproductive Futurism in the *Delirium* Trilogy

The *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies share a commitment to background heteronormativity: the kick-ass heroines of these series' engage in heterosexual relationships that serve to connect them to traditional norms of girlhood and display their adherence to heteropatriarchy, but these romances are not the central focus of the narrative, an oft-cited detail in feminist praise for these texts. Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy, however, makes heteropatriarchy it's literal battle cry, and kick-ass girl Lena Halloway is its fiercest warrior. Ostensibly a dystopian series about romantic choice and freedom, the *Delirium* trilogy actually serves to promote the same conservative values and politics of heteropatriarchy through evangelical purity culture that it seems to critique. And Lena, while on the surface an empowered, young heroine rebelling against an oppressive society, in actuality supports and seeks to reaffirm the heteropatriarchal values she is supposedly resisting.

The *Delirium* trilogy is set in a futuristic United States in which love has been classified as a disease (*amor deliria nervosa*) against which all citizens are inoculated in a procedure known as The Cure at the age of eighteen. In a society where affection and emotion are suspect, and marriage and procreation are regulated, kick-ass girl Lena falls in love with Alex Sheathes, an Uncured—someone who lives within the society, but has not undergone the government-mandated Cure—and plans to escape with him into the Wilds, the territory outside of the strict social order of verified cities, where individuals are free to love and live how they choose, and where a resistance movement to the government-run social order is brewing. A series of events leaves Lena in the Wilds without Alex, and she eventually joins the resistance, falls in love (again), and, in true YA fashion, must choose between two love interests while fighting to overthrow an oppressive social order. And the

society Lena escapes and ultimately helps to topple is firmly grounded in the conservative values and politics of evangelical purity culture and politics that define many a girlhood through state-and-federally-sponsored abstinence education.

Virgin Nation, Sara Moslener's historical analysis of the politics of Evangelical purity culture's effect on the politics of the United States, argues that "modern-day purity campaigns, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, are opportunities for Christian evangelicals to assume a primary role in securing a strong and superior nation-state" that ultimately "[upholds] the white, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear, Christian family as the foundation of American national strength" (1) (2). Through her discussion of the formation of the modern evangelical movement, we can compare the strategy and values of this group with those of the social and political order of the *Delirium* trilogy to highlight the many similarities. Moslener posits that the evangelical movement throughout time has played on fears of apocalypticism, national instability, and cultural decline in order to assert their vision of a social structure rooted in family values and purity. So, too, did the administration of the ruling quasi-religious government formed before the events of the *Delirium* trilogy. According to one Lena's textbooks, the establishment of the current social and political order stemmed from the civilizational unrest of the period:

> *Many historians have argued that pre-cure society was itself a reflection of the disease, characterized by fracture, chaos, and instability…Almost half of all marriages ended in dissolution…Incidence of drug use skyrocketed, as did alcohol-related deaths* (*Delirium* 183).

After love was ruled a disease by political leaders and the scientific community, the New Religion rose to power, preaching "*the Holy Trinity of God, Science, and Order*," and once

the Cure was developed, the country's borders closed and any Uncureds living outside of the verified cities eradicated, according to historical propaganda. In order to ensure the security and stability of the nation, a social order was established that, as a mirror image of evangelical family values and purity culture, believes "the ideal American family [is] the locus of national life—as the family goes, so goes the nation" (Moslener 84). This social order practices the same tenants of evangelical family values to support its society and, as such, its national future, as displayed in the social order's sacred text, *The Safety, Health, and Happiness Handbook (The Book of Shhh*), quoted throughout *Delirium* in chapter prologues:

> We must be constantly on guard against the Disease;
>
> The health of our nation, our people, our families,
>
> and our minds depends on constant vigilance. (5)

These values include an emphasis on family stability as "an indicator of religious piety" (Moslener 96), traditional gender roles that hold women responsible for "the cultivation and maintenance of civilization and social order" (99), and, of course, sexual purity established through strict, gendered social restraints and value-laden sex education.

Just as evangelical family values purport that a strong, traditional marriage constitutes the backbone of a stable family, and that "family life that provided emotional, spiritual, and economic stability...would produce self-sufficient, law-abiding citizens," the established social order of the *Delirium* trilogy emphasizes marriage and family as a social imperative and a moral standing: "Marriage is Order and Stability, the mark of a Healthy society," reads *The Book of Shhh* (Moslener 94; *Delirium* 11). Within this society, heterosexual marriages are arranged for citizens based on economic, social, and intellectual compatibility. Parenting, according to Lena's society, is a "duty" and a "responsibility" (*Delirium* 7). The parenting

section of *The Book of Shhh* outlines "all the things that a mother is supposed to do," Lena says, which seems to consist of basic safety and child care activities (114). And families—which traditionally equates to parents—are tasked with instilling these same beliefs and principles in their children, thus ensuring the continuation of the society's customs and values and establishing the family as a contributor to the morality and strength of the social order. When Willow Marks, a classmate of Lena's, is caught unchaperoned with a boy by regulators—police/military figures tasked with maintaining rules and regulations—the blame for her behavior is placed on those who reared her: "The regulators are blaming Mr. and Mrs. Marks—and the whole extended family—for not instilling in her a proper education" (*Delirium* 92). As in evangelical purity culture, the moral health of the family—and the effectiveness of parents as displayed through the actions of their children—mirrors that of the society as a whole (Moslener 85). And if a child—and, by extension, an entire family—exhibits poor moral standards, the family is shamed and often pushed out for the safety of the social order. Willow Marks's parents, for example, lose their jobs; Lena's cousin, whose husband is a suspected sympathizer, loses her social standing and must move back in with her mother; and even Lena, the daughter of an infected individual, is teased and ostracized for her tainted lineage. After Lena falls in love and flees to the Wilds, she learns that the shame her escape brought on the extended family with whom she grew up—her aunt and uncle, and her young cousins—forced them to move to an undesirable suburb of the city because their presence, as a neighbor puts it, was "spoiling the neighborhood" (*Requiem* 68).

The role of gendered individuals within these families is also highly structured and traditional, in line with the family values of evangelical culture that argue "marriage depend[s] on the proper ordering of the sexes" (Moslener 97). The emphasis on the duties

specifically of mothers in *The Book of Shh*, for example, displays the patriarchal reliance on women as purveyors of "a harmonious home life" favored by evangelical social guidelines (97). Though Lena explains within the text that many women do in fact attend college and work full-time, most of the featured female adult characters within Lena's verified city seem to be housewives. Lena's aunt Carol, for example, prepares meals, organizes the linen closet, and is the primary caregiver for Lena and her two young cousins, while her uncle supports the family financially through the corner store he runs. Meanwhile, the most powerful political figures within this society are men: Thomas Fineman, founder of the highly influential advocacy group *Deliria*-Free America in *Pandemonium*, for example, and Fred Hargrove, the mayor of Portland, Maine, in *Requiem*; and these men, as evangelical family values dictate, "achieve self-esteem through respect...and professional achievement" (Moslener 97). Fineman, for example, allows one of his sons to die and forces the other to undergo a potentially-fatal operation in order to not lose face or taint the work of the DFA; and Hargrove conspires with Invalids—those who refuse to be cured—in an attack that kills his father in order to prove his own political views and establish himself as mayor.

Both social orders also support a perspective of women as objects assigned value through their relationships with men. According to Moslener, evangelical family values purport that "girls [become] women by learning how to develop and maintain a romantic partnership that [captures] and [holds] the attention of a man," a perspective mirrored throughout the *Delirium* trilogy through the gender dynamics of relationships as well as internalized values (98). In *Requiem*, for example, Lena's best friend Hana Tate is set to marry Fred Hargrove, and the pressures and expectations of wifehood are relentless. At her fiancé's inauguration party, Hana overhears guests talking about her disparagingly,

suggesting that her evaluation scores by which she was matched with him were fabricated, saying: “Hargrove could have done better” (*Requiem* 92). When Hana feigns a headache and asks to go home during dinner with her parents, her fiancé, and his mother, Fred asks if she is all right, and when she assures him she is, he jokes, “Good...I was worried I’d gotten a defective one” (*Requiem* 33). Her inability or unwillingness to engage in a family dinner, “a well-choreographed dance,” has him worried she would not be able to perform her obligations (29). And Lena, a product of the culture, if also an eventual rebel of it, manifests her own internalization of these values through her low self-esteem, specifically regarding her physical appearance and her ability to be attractive to a potential pair—the person chosen as an individual’s marriage partner. Lena frequently bemoans her physical plainness next to Hana’s beauty, and other characters affirm both Lena’s opinion of her own attractiveness and, through their comments, the value of female beauty for the purpose of male satisfaction. In *Delirium*, for example, Lena’s aunt prepares her to meet her pair by fixing her hair, announcing when she’s done, “‘That’s as good as it’s going to get’” (311). The effort doesn’t seem to be sufficient to her pair, however, who Lena overhears telling her aunt and his mother, “‘She’s not as pretty as in the pictures’” (314). But when Lena’s love interest, Alex, calls her beautiful for the first time—and specifically because this judgment comes from a man—she is able to see herself this way, too: “That night...I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and don’t see an in-between girl. For the first time...I believe what Alex said. I am beautiful” (261). Clearly, this society values its women primarily for their contributions as domestic partners and objects of male gratification, a belief that is also inherent to evangelical purity culture.

Adolescence, Girlhood, and Purity Culture in the *Delirium* Trilogy

The modern evangelical movement is responsible for the popularity and politicizing of the purity movement in the United States, according to Moslener, who argues that evangelicals both believe in a "causal relationship between sexual immorality and national instability" and engage in tropes connecting these issues to "personal morality and citizenship" (100). Pre-marital sex and homosexuality in particular lead to the "demise of the institution of marriage" and family values, which in turn weakens the nation-state (101). As such, evangelical family values promote sex education that is highly regulated and value-based, offering adolescents "moral guidance in their sexual lives, for their own safety" (101). These curriculums are founded in the heteropatriarchal norms detailed above, assigning responsibility primarily on girls to guide and protect themselves and their male partners from dangerous sexual desire, and placing judgement on those girls and their families for any perceived lack of control or failure to abide by the morals of evangelical purity culture. Girlhood, then, is connected morally to the stability and future of society through successful adherence to traditionally gendered sexual norms.[16]

The dominant social order of the *Delirium* trilogy reflects these same principles, engaging in highly regulated and gendered sex education and placing value on social (and, therefore, sexual) purity, as this society believes "that love and desire enjoy a symbiotic relationship, meaning that one cannot exist without the other" (*Delirium* 264). From the opening pages of *Delirium*, Lena reflects her society's connection between purity and personal morality, noting that being uncured and therefore vulnerable to desire (*deliria*) "makes me feel dirty" (2). In a nod to contemporary abstinence education—a political

[16] In Chapter 5, I expand on the significance of young girls' individual successes to a neoliberal and postfeminist society.

extension of purity culture—*deliria* is approached in much the same way as these programs treat undesirable outcomes of sex such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections: through exaggeration and misinformation based in personal responsibility. "These programs aren't just spreading medical and scientific misinformation, either—they're also sending social and values-based messages," Jessica Valenti notes in *The Purity Myth*, which explores the U.S. cultural obsession with virginity (105). Take Lena's comments in *Pandemonium* about her fear-based society: "Looks, glances, touches, hugs—all of it carried the risk of contamination" (17). In another connection to abstinence-only education curriculums, which according to Valenti will blame everything "from herpes to suicide" on premarital sex (186), Lena describes seeing a chilling image of a young woman's body after she jumped off the roof of a building rather than submit to The Cure; Lena says the broadcasted image was meant "to remind us of the dangers of the *deliria*" (*Delirium* 3). To ensure that youth and adolescents receive responsible sex education that protects them from the danger encapsulated by *amor deliria nervosa*, uncured children and young adults are subjected to strict regulations. For example, the society segregates by gender all activities youth participate in, both at school and in the community. At Lena's evaluation in the opening scene of *Delirium*, young men and women use separate entrances into the government building where the evaluation is performed, and the entrances themselves are fifty feet apart (16). At seventeen-years-old, Lena has never spoken to a boy for longer than five minutes, except relatives and an employee of her uncle's (*Delirium* 11). Even when meeting her future husband, Lena is chaperoned by her aunt and her pair's mother (306). Sex itself, according to Lena, is taught as an "expectation of husband and wife," but little else about it is discussed (293). Much like evangelical purity culture and its contemporary political tool, abstinence-

only education, few details about sex are ever discussed in the *Delirium* trilogy except through social education that is highly regulated, value-laden, and supports the heterosexual family unit.

If the dominant social order supports and affirms the heteronormative values and privileges of evangelical purity culture, it stands to reason that the culture and society of the resistance movement Lena is taken in by and eventually joins as an active member would be built on the antithesis of these norms and values. And, on the surface, it is. Almost immediately after Lena escapes Portland into the Wilds and is taken in by a group of homesteaders, she is unsettled by the drastic change in culture, specifically the easy commingling of women and men. However, she reminds herself, "that's the whole point, after all: freedom to choose, freedom to be around one another, freedom to look and touch and love one another" (*Pandemonium* 16). And, in fact, there is freedom from the restrictive structure of the ruling social order in the Wilds: couples of all genders sleep in the same tents—and some are alluded to having sexual relationships; men and women contribute equally to physical and domestic labor; and the resistance movement alive within the Wilds actively fights against the Cure and the restrictive, value-laden system that labels love a disease. But, as in the *Divergent* trilogy's society, gender neutrality proves to be a myth supported by equal access to violence and the strength and skill of the kick-ass girl prototype. Throughout the *Delirium* trilogy, heteronormative values are privileged not only directly through the previously discussed link to evangelical purity culture and the dominant social order of verified cities, but also symbolically within the resistance and the culture established in the Wilds through what queer theorist Lee Edelman calls reproductive futurism. Within the structure of both the dominant social order and the rebel group Lena joins, called the

Resistance, reliance on the politics of reproductive futurism—the drive to create a more perfect social order by privileging a better future for the hypothetical children of this society—ensures that the family values and heteronormative social structures inherent in evangelical purity culture will continue to thrive in any future society created by either political group. Lena herself engages in the politics of reproductive futurism throughout the trilogy and to the last; she may be a rebel, but the social tenants she champions are identical to those she is fighting against. In fact, the only character who rejects the politics of reproductive futurism and engages in what Edelman calls a queer resistance is Hana, who despite remaining in a verified city, undergoing the Cure, and conforming to the expectations of the dominant social order, breaks free from the bonds of reproductive futurism through her resistance to the creation of a more perfect society and her embrace of Edelman's queer death drive.

No Child Left Behind: Reproductive Futurism and the *Delirium* Trilogy

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman argues that all politics are defined by the terms of reproductive futurism: that is, that the search for a better social order is always "conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child" (3). According to Edelman, reproductive futurism hinges on "futurity's unquestioned value," which is emblemized by the figure of the Child (4). And in instilling the Child as the significance of the search for a more desirable social order, reproductive futurism both supports "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" and negates the possibility of operating outside of the conservative social order (2):

> How could one take the *other* "side," when taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side *of*, by virtue of taking a side *within*, a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends? (Edelman 3)

Furthermore, the author says, it is the image of the Child rather than the lived experience of any real children that "serves to regulate political discourse" (11). The Child is imbued with the full rights of citizens within the future improved social order, though in protection of these rights, the freedoms of real, present citizens is often restricted: "For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due" (11).

In the *Delirium* trilogy, reproductive futurism drives the actions of both Lena and the Resistance, despite their narrative positioning as freedom fighters battling a repressive, conservative evangelical social order. And within the narrative, the characters of Grace and Blue serve as the emblematic Child on whose behalf various characters—including Lena—champion for a "better" social order, often at the expense of others' freedoms and humanity who are also impacted by the same repressive family values that Lena, on the surface, is fighting against.

The first victim of the *Delirium* trilogy's conservative, value-laden social order that we meet—and the one that, as Edelman says, comes to symbolize the significance of Lena and the resistance's fight for a new social order—is Grace, Lena's six-year-old relative. Grace and her sister, like Lena, live with their grandmother (Lena's aunt) because their parents are dead, their family destroyed when their father was suspected of sympathizing with Invalids. Grace is introduced as a pitiful figure; even Lena, who grew up in much the

same circumstances as Grace, "feel[s] sorry for her" (*Delirium* 7). Grace doesn't speak, communicating only through her "big, gray eyes" (6), and she can't seem to do much for herself: *Delirium* opens, for example, with Lena peeling, then separating the pieces of an orange for Grace, who Lena finds crouched on her bed attempting to bite into the fruit like an apple (5). Because she doesn't speak, Lena explains, Grace's grandmother thinks she is "as dumb as a rock" and the family as a whole—save for Lena—seems dismissive of her (*Delirium* 7). Yet Lena loves Grace, and throughout the series positions Grace as her version of Edelman's Symbolic "universalized subject," the Child, who "embod[ies] for us the telos of the social order and come[s] to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (Edelman 11). We see this as Lena continually justifies her beliefs in a certain social order based on how it will benefit Grace and often despite the fact that other individuals have been or will be harmed by these same social systems.

In *Delirium*, for example, when Lena still entrusts the Cure and her current social order to free Grace from her suffering, she appears neutral or even antagonistic towards her cousin, Grace's late mother Marcia, and Grace's older sister Jenny, despite the fact that both have suffered under the same value system Lena puts her faith in. In fact, Marcia's story largely serves narratively to contextualize Grace's trauma. Marcia, she says, "never wanted children in the first place," but Lena dismisses this sentiment as a "downside of the procedure" rather than acknowledge that Marcia was forced into heteronormative reproduction by social mandates mirroring gendered, evangelical family values (*Delirium* 7). Marica lived the quintessential life of a woman in her social order (as dictated by evangelical gender roles): she had two children and a well-respected husband for whom she "cooked every meal from scratch," lived in an "enormous house" and "taught piano lessons in her

spare time, to keep busy" (7). But when her husband is suspected of sympathizing with the Invalids and disappears, Marcia is forced to move her family into her mother's house, endures social ostracization, and, in accordance with social order, is *indicted in her husband's place*. Only a day after she received this news, Lena says, Marcia—who, according to contextual clues was in her early to mid-thirties—died of a heart attack in the street (*Delirium* 8). Marcia's story seems to be an exemplary tragic tale of oppressive heteropatriarchy under a conservative social order, and yet, filtered through the lens of reproductive futurism, it comes to support the same system that controlled, traumatized, and killed her because of the story's impact on Grace as the figure of The Child.

Despite the trauma Marcia must have endured throughout her life, Lena focuses on how the situation impacts Grace, even while admitting that she "[would] be surprised if [Grace] has any memories of her parents at all," (8). For example, though her family thinks Grace is unintelligent because she doesn't speak, Lena knows the tragic truth: that Grace sobs and calls for her late mother in the middle of the night, "all the rest of her words...crowded out by that single, looming one, a word still echoing in the dark corners of her memory. *Mommy*" (41). And because the pain and trauma of losing a beloved parent (that she probably doesn't remember) will be erased once Grace turns eighteen and can undergo her inoculation against *amor deliria nervosa,* Lena positions her as the poster child of the importance of the Cure:

> I wish, for Grace, the cure could come sooner. I comfort myself by thinking that someday she will have the procedure too. Someday she will be saved, and the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon to our babies.

Someday we will all be saved. (*Delirium* 41)

Lena is advocating here for the Cure because she believes Grace deserves the right to a life free from pain, uncertainty, and disorder, which only the Cure and the maintenance of the current social order can provide. However, as Edelman argues, Grace as the figure of The Child is "entitled to claim full rights to [her] future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights 'real' citizens are allowed," (11). In this case, in order for Grace to maintain her right to the Cure, her own mother—and other women like her suffering under the demands of the evangelical family values—must continue propping up these same principles, facing social scrutiny, and living with the real fear of imprisonment or death under the same social order that protects Grace's hypothetical idyllic future.

This sympathy and hope Lena feels on Grace's behalf does not extend to Grace's ten-year-old sister Jenny, it is important to note. Despite the fact that Jenny shares Grace's traumatic family history—and probably retains more memories of it—and that her grandmother makes dismissive comments like, "'Don't be stupid,'" to her, as well (*Delirium* 11), Lena does not like Jenny and, in the same breath, describes Jenny as having "the same pinched look as her mother did" (10). Jenny, it seems, is more than "the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children" (Edelman 11). Unlike Grace, Jenny has a voice and a history that has been informed by lived experiences in their society and that affects her actions; she is not the idealized image of The Child whose future guarantees and is guaranteed by the maintenance of the social order. She sticks her tongue out at Lena when her older cousin is helping her study, and, in a scene that serves to both characterize the callous nature of this social order and condemn Jenny for mirroring it, Jenny pushes a younger girl to the ground during a makeshift game of soccer in the street,

making the girl cry (*Delirium* 191). At this point in the narrative, Lena is beginning to question her established social order, and her politics shift; she is beginning to believe the most desirable future is one that establishes a new social system. However, this shift in her beliefs only serves to further condemn Jenny as a supporter of a less perfect society and position Grace as the hopeful future for a better social order. When Lena is caught and trapped in her home, deemed a danger to herself because of the *deliria,* Jenny is viewed as complicit in Lena's capture, hesitating to enter her room for fear of being infected and even attempting to extract information out of her "like a little snake forking its tongue in my ear" (404). These scenes simultaneously seems to condemn a society where a child is injured and "no one comes out of any of the houses, even as the girl's voice crescendos to a high-pitched scream" while refusing to empathize with Jenny as the product of this society, which has ridiculed and destroyed her family and taught her that to show emotion or (political) sympathy could be a deadly mistake (191). Though Jenny is, at ten years-old, still a literal child who grew up absorbing the tenants of a repressive, value-laden society and has witnessed first-hand the consequences of resistance—as Lena herself did—she does not serve as Edelman's symbolic Child, and therefore Lena has no interest in protecting her or her rights as an individual affected by the future of their social order.

Once Lena has left Portland to join the homesteaders outside the physical and metaphorical walls of the verified social order, she is further radicalized and, though Grace still serves as an emblem for the better society Lena is now actively fighting for, Lena identifies a new version of the Child whose future depends on the creation of a better social order. Lena meets Blue in the opening chapters of the second book in the *Delirium* trilogy,

Pandemonium. Her description is the epitome of Edelman's Child as displayed by one of his own examples—the waif in *Le Misérables*:

> A girl, probably six or seven, has been standing in the doorway, watching me. She's thin and very tan, wearing dirty jean shorts and a cotton sweater about fourteen sizes too big for her—so big it is slipping of her shoulders, showing shoulder blades as peaked as bird wings. Her hair is dirty blond, falling almost all the way to her waist, and she isn't wearing any shoes. (*Pandemonium* 17)

Lena does not like Blue at first, but not because, like Jenny, she has an individuality or a history; instead, it is because she reminds Lena of Grace, a connection that solidifies Blue's temporary status as Edelman's symbolic Child while Grace is out of sight, if not out of (Lena's) mind: "Her smallness, her shyness, the thinness of her bones: When I'm with Blue, I can't help but think of Grace," (88). Lena avoids Blue for this reason, and so, like Grace, Blue never develops an individuality beyond her status as the Child of the homestead. Also, like Grace, Blue has a tragic backstory that, as Edelman posits, positions her as "the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" and, in this case, affirms the actions of Lena and the Resistance, as well as the necessity of a new social order (3). Blue was found as a baby by Raven, the unofficial leader of Lena's homestead, when she was still living within the walls of a verified community. Blue was abandoned as an infant at a construction site at the edge of the city, and when Raven found her "...she was blue. Her skin, her nails, her lips, her fingers. Her fingers were so small" (*Pandemonium* 226). Raven performed CPR to revive her and "called her Blue so [she] would always remember that moment, and so [Raven] would never regret" (226). Finding Blue is the impetus Raven needs to leave an abusive home and escape into the

Wilds. The evil of the established social order is exemplified by the fate Blue would have suffered had Raven not discovered her and stolen her away:

> "I knew she must be illegal—some unmatched girl, some unmatched boy. A *deliria* baby. You know what they say. *Deliria* babies are contaminated. They grow up twisted, crippled, crazy. She would probably be taken and killed. She wouldn't even be buried. They'd be worried about the spread of disease. She'd be burned, and packed up with the waste." (227)

For Raven, who tells this story, and for Lena, who hears and empathizes with it, Blue represents all the *deliria* babies who will be murdered—who will not have a future—without a change to the social order. Simultaneously, Blue's story, as Edelman says, *authenticates* that social order simply by virtue of giving Blue a future that she and the other rescued *deliria* babies may experience "undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters" (Edleman 21). It does not matter then that Blue does not survive *Pandemonium*, that she is taking her final breaths even as Raven tells her story. Her death only further emblemizes her as the future Child that the Resistance's political intervention must save. Blue was the impetus for Raven to escape and join the Resistance—not her own abuse and poverty—and Lena, too, begins her work as a spy for the Resistance shortly after Blue dies and their homestead community connects with a Resistance stronghold.

As with Grace, as with any Symbolic Child imbued with the promise of futurity, Blue's emblematic freedom often comes at the expense of more realized characters' own freedoms. This is most apparent when we compare the treatment of Blue's body upon her death with that of another homesteader's, Miyako. Both die in the winter, Miyako before Blue. When Miyako dies, the group attempts to bury her body, but after half an hour of

digging, they've "only made the barest indentation in the earth" (*Pandemonium* 121). Raven declares that they will burn her body; when Lena argues that Miyako "deserves a burial" Raven responds, "'It's waste of our energy...We don't have any to spare,'" (121–2). The rest of the cremation is described as such:

> Raven douses the body with more gasoline and finally gets it lit. The air is filled right away with a choking smoke, the smell of burning hair; the noise is terrible too, a crackling that makes you think of meat falling away from bones. Raven can't even speak the whole eulogy before she starts to gag. (123*)*

The disposal of Miyako's body is efficient and, to Lena, primitive: "this is what we have become in the Wilds: We starve, we die, we wrap our friends in old and tattered sheets, we burn them in the open" (122). The dead are not afforded the right to a civilized burial because the fight to create a new social order—formed in resistance of the established social authority—does not permit them to waste precious resources. This moment is also significant because it harkens back to Raven's story about Blue; in verified communities under the current social order *deliria* babies like Blue are burned, not buried, and Lena detests that the homesteader community is forced to dehumanize their citizens in this way. For Lena, the moment is infuriating, but also galvanizing: "I know it's not Raven's fault—it's Them, the zombies, my former people—but the anger refuses to dissolve. It burns a hole in my throat," (*Pandemonium* 122). Even in her anger Lena knows the blame for Miyako's death and her inhumane funeral rests with the current social order, and it reaffirms her allegiance to creating a new and better society. When Blue dies that same winter, however, the conservation of resources is barely a thought. Blue falls sick and passes away, like Miyako, and the group "takes hours to break through the frozen ground and make a hole big enough to

accommodate her" (238). They keep the jacket she's wearing, Lena says, but Raven intervenes, leaving her own clothing with Blue in the grave:

> At the last second, as we're about to cover her with dirt, Raven pushes forward, suddenly hysterical. "She'll be cold," she says. "She'll freeze like that." Nobody wants to stop her. She strips off her sweater and slides into the makeshift grave, taking Blue in her arms and wrapping her in it. (238)

Blue, as the embodiment of futurity, is afforded the right to consume resources, even in death, and is given a proper, civilized burial—as the "figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal" (Edelman 11). Though real citizens such as Miyako are not privy to a civilized death as imagined under a future, better social order—*because of* the need and struggle for an improved society—Blue as the figure of that future has access to those rights even in death. Miyako's lack of rights to a proper burial, in fact, is portrayed as essential to continue the work of creating a social order that will allow all children of that future—emblemized by Blue—to enjoy this same right.

Family Values: Heteronormativity and Reproductive Futurism

Blue's death in *Pandemonium* and the shifting narrative format of *Requiem* reestablishes Grace as the Symbolic Child, whose appearances throughout the final book serve to support Lena and the Resistance's political narrative of revolution. Grace as Child in *Delirium* was an emblem of the safety provided by the current social structure; the trajectory of Grace's life since the events of *Delirium* now support Lena's resistance and the creation of a better social order. The final book jumps between the perspectives of Lena, who is fully emersed in the Resistance and actively participating in plans to establish a new social order, and Hana, who still lives within the confines of Lena's old verified community (Portland,

Maine) and is preparing to marry the mayor's son, her state-sanctioned match. Hana and Lena's narration present unique perspectives on Grace as the emblematic Child: to Hana, Grace displays the consequences of the established social order that still controls Portland, and to Lena, Grace is symbolic of the stakes inherent in resistance and revolution.

For Hana, Grace is a catalyst for her growing discomfort with the current and future state of the sanctioned social order. After a chance run-in with Lena's cousin Jenny on the street, Hana goes looking for Lena's family and discovers Grace in a run-down neighborhood populated by citizens who have been tainted in the eyes of the social order—families with members who have been infected or are sympathizers (like Lena's extended family) as well as people whose minds were warped by the mandated Cure. As in *Delirium* Grace is introduced in a pitiful tableau: "The road turns a corner, and I see a girl squatting in the middle of the street, in a large patch of sunshine, her stringy dark hair hanging like a curtain in front of her face. She is all bones. Her kneecaps are like two spiky sails" (*Requiem* 72). In this scene, the child that is revealed to be Grace— "I watched her grow from an infant," Hana recalls—is also clutching a "filthy doll," singing an ominous nursery rhyme about *amor deliria nervosa*, and aggressively acting out performing the Cure on her doll (72). This imagery is not subtle. Grace is portrayed as malnourished and unkempt, abandoned by society and, apparently, by the family who put stock in it, as she plays alone in the middle of the street. Her song alludes to the tragedy that befell her family and led to their ostracization:

> *Mama, Mama, put me to bed*
>
> *I won't make it home, I'm already half-dead*
>
> *I met an Invalid, and fell for his art*
>
> *He showed me his smile, and went straight for my heart.* (*Requiem* 72)

She also plays at a violent imitation of the procedure that is meant to save her from this fate: "'Safety, Health, and Happiness spells *Shh*,' she singsongs...jabbing at the doll's flexible neck, making its head shudder in response" (73). This eerie description is meant to highlight the irony that this innocent, vulnerable young child is denied the "safety, health, and happiness" promised by her social order due to circumstances not of her own making while also highlighting the inherent brutality of the Cure itself. The image implies that Grace's future safety—and the safety of other children like her vulnerable to her current state—rests on dismantling a social order that dooms these figural Children to equally tragic fates—undergoing the violent Cure or falling out of favor and therefore losing the protections and safety of the social order.

Grace is in direct contrast in this scene with the figure of Willow Marks, a character from *Delirium* who served as a cautionary tale among the community when she was found alone with a boy; she was pulled from school and forced to undergo the Cure six months earlier than scheduled—and medically suggested. She reappears here after Grace has run away from Hana. Despite the fact that Willow has suffered a similar fate as Grace—ostracization and abandonment—and experienced those horrors still only a threat to Grace as the figural Child—a non-consensual and medically questionable procedure probably enforced through physical violence and restraint, and cognitive damage as a result—she is not afforded the same empathy as Grace is given. Instead, Willow is depicted as a dangerous figure who watches Hanna without her knowledge, stalking her like prey. Hanna describes approaching Grace "as though I'm approaching a wild animal," but it is Willow she treats without humanity (73). Willow also looks worse for the wear, with "long and hopelessly tangled" hair and "cuticles [that] are gnawed to shreds" (74-75). When she takes Hana's face

in her hands, Hana describes "the feel of her nails on my skin" reminding her "of small, sharp-clawed rodents" (75). Hana's response to her is not shock or pity, however, but revulsion and fear: "My stomach surges. I need to get out of here...to my horror, I find that I am almost crying. My throat is spasming; fear makes it hard to breathe" (*Requiem* 75). Willow is depicted as a frightening figure partially because she is not endowed with the promise of futurity, as Grace is—she is an adult and seemingly has suffered damage to cognitive functions like memory—but also because she is fully realized enough to feel angry. The Child as an emblem of an idealized collective future does not possess individual thought or action, and mainly exists to mirror the politics of futurity itself; Willow, however, has opinions and emotions regarding her own personal fate and those of other realized individuals like her, and displaying them denies her the right to empathy *even though she empathizes with others*. When she first sees Hana, Willow insists "We have a right to be here, you know" and later responds to Hana's procedural scar, which indicates that she has undergone the Cure, by looking "defeated," lamenting, "'Hana Tate...they got you, too,'" (74–75). She displays frustration that another "smart and defiant" young woman—like she and Hana both once were—succumbed to the Cure and resents the politics that continue to condemn those who have fallen in the eyes of society (75). This emotion and defiance of her situation, though, condemns her to be dehumanized and feared in the name of championing a better future for the innocent and docile Child embodied by Grace even as she herself seems to protect and defend Grace.

Hana initially goes to visit Lena's family only to assure herself that "everyone is okay" after almost running into Jenny in her family's car (61). But once she sees Grace as she exists above, she begins to question the established order she has put her faith in. Though

she sees Grace and the conditions she lives in as "a bad dream" in contrast to "what the future looks like: happy pairs, bright lights and pretty music, tasteful draped linens and pleasant conversation," she acknowledges that her society is putting certain people—exemplified by Grace—at risk (89). She begins bringing food and supplies to Grace for her family, compelled to correct what she sees as her society's omission of justice—here exemplified by her politician fiancé's views: "I think of what Fred said: *They must learn that freedom will not keep them warm.* So disobedience will kill them slowly" (*Requiem* 127).

For Lena, Grace is the driving force for her continued participation in the rebellion and the eventual attack on Portland that serves as the climax of the book. Though Lena spends the bulk of *Requiem* separated from Grace, she continuously experiences ominous dreams that both allude to Grace's imminent danger and spur Lena to continue on with the Resistance. First, Lena dreams that Grace is trapped under the floorboards of their old room in Portland and the house is on fire. Lena hears her screaming, attempts to save her, "but her hand [keeps] slipping from [Lena's] grasp" (*Requiem* 19). In another Grace and Lena are in the sick room of Lena's old homestead, the roof blown open and bats filing the sky. Though Grace is speaking to her, repeating her name, Lena can't hear her over the sound of the animals' wings (142). In the last, Lena dreams of the Story of Solomon, putting herself in the position of the broken baby and positioning Grace as "a girl with long, tangled hair...bent over the shattered doll, piecing it back together painstakingly, humming to herself" in a mirror image of Hana's first sight of Grace in *Requiem* (283). In each of these dreams, Lena strives to protect Grace from, it seems, various situations Lena has endured as a result of the current social order. First, it is being stifled and choked by the restrictions and limitations of life under evangelical family values; next it is the uncertainty of life in the Wilds, where

illness and the threat of attack are real, dark specters perpetually on the horizon. And in Lena's final dream she fears the conflicted, ruined version of herself that she must present to Grace, and that she rather than Grace will be the person in need of care in their reestablished relationship. Throughout *Requiem,* Lena is navigating her role in the Resistance, often unsure of her place in it. These dreams come just before major resistance events—a tactical decision and rescue, a mission to blow up a dam, and a coordinated attack on a verified city—in which Lena takes part as a leader. Dreaming of Grace and reminding herself of her mission—to create a future through the resistance in which Grace as figural Child is protected and free from danger—encourages her to take action and accept her role in the movement.

However, at some point Lena's loyalty to Grace as figural Child comes to overpower her loyalty to the Resistance and puts other characters within that group at risk. When Lena learns the Resistance is planning an attack in Portland, she makes a plan to find Grace. She is part of a team that breaches the wall between Portland and the Wilds, making way for Resistance forces to enter the city. And even though she seems to support the mission of the Resistance even in the midst of pain and death—"We wanted the freedom to love. We wanted the freedom to choose. Now we have to fight for it," (*Requiem* 303)—she abandons the group as soon as she breaks through the fighting, saying, "The resistance may have a mission in Portland, but I have a mission of my own" (303). That mission, we quickly learn, is to find and rescue Grace. Though in the course of breaking through the wall Lena witnesses the death of her close friend and mentor and loses track of people she has grown close to—her mother, her second love interest Julian, other friends from the Resistance—she does not stay to fight with them, to protect them and work to prevent their possible deaths. Instead, she breaks away from the fighting to seek out Grace, in whom she sees the promise

of futurity that she must protect at the expense of the people and the battle that are actively fighting for it.

No moment encapsulates the *Delirium* series' dedication to reproductive futurism in a more grandiose fashion than *Requiem*'s final scene. Lena has rescued Grace from the rundown, abandoned shell of a neighborhood the current social order has relegated her to—and which Grace has accidentally burned down—and together they find a throng of mostly Resistance members taking down the border wall that separates the city from the Wilds in the wake of their tactical victory. Lena immediately happens upon Alex, her love interest throughout *Delirium* whom she thought dead before he reappears at the beginning of *Requiem*, scarred and angry that Lena has moved on with Julian Fineman, whom she meets in *Pandemonium*. Lena spends much of *Requiem* navigating her feelings for both men and trying to resolve the tension between the three of them. This love triangle is resolved in this final scene using Grace as the figural Child to solidify Lena's choice and her commitment to reproductive futurism as a process which preserves "the absolute privilege of heteronormativity" (Edelman 2). Once Lena is reunited with Alex, whom she has recently learned is still in love with her, she introduces him to Grace and, in the next breath, admits she has lost Julian—effectively abandoned him—in the chaos (*Requiem* 338). They go on to confess their love for one another and reunite, but the moment Lena introduces Alex to Grace she is making her decision known. Grace as the emblematic Child represents the promise of a better future under a new social order, and Lena has already promised to dedicate herself to that future embodied in Grace:

I take [Grace's] chin with one hand.

> ‘Listen, Grace. I want to tell you how sorry I am. I’m sorry for leaving you behind. I’ll never leave you again, okay?’
>
> Her eyes travel my face. She nods.
>
> ‘I’m going to keep you safe now.’ I push the words out past the thickness in my throat. ‘Do you believe me?’
>
> She nods again. I pull her to me, squeezing. She feels so thin, so fragile. But I know that she is strong. She always has been. She will be ready for whatever comes next. (*Requiem* 337)

In introducing Grace to Alex, as the symbol of the future Lena has sworn herself to—while also, ironically, planning to escape the rest of the physical revolution that will build that better future social order (338)—she is associating Alex with and including him in that future, which is distinctly heteronormative, falling back on the gendered roles of Evangelical family values against which she has spent the past two books fighting. Lena has adopted Grace as her own and plans to care for her as a mother; and as Lena’s chosen partner, it is understood that Alex will assume to role of Grace’s father, reestablishing a social order based on evangelical family values that privilege heterosexuality and a “traditional” family unit. Lena does, in fact, have the opportunity to introduce Julian, as a close friend and someone she cares deeply for, moments later, when they pass him in the fray. But what would be the purpose? Her family unit has been established and Grace’s future—and the future embodied in Grace—secured by her reunion with Alex and her commitment to care for and never abandon Grace—though, again, she both acknowledges the work left to be completed toward building that better social order at the same time as she shirks in order to care for Grace as the symbolic Child, who, as Edelman’s reproductive futurism posits, compels her to “accede

in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address" (11). In other words, Grace's safety as image of a more perfect future society is privileged over the dangerous work of building that better social order, which Lena does not (or is not allowed to) see as tenuous.

Many readers were disappointed with the *Delirium* trilogy's conclusion. The series abandons one of YA dystopian literature's most popular tropes—the epilogue—and ends with a symbolic, nebulous final image of Lena, Grace, and many of the series' recurring characters breaking down Portland's border wall in an emblematic tableau of destroying the old social order to build a better world:

> I asked Grace to trust me. We will have to trust too—that the world won't end, that tomorrow will come, and that truth will come too…'Let's go,' I say to Grace, and let her lead me into the surge of people, keeping a tight hold on her hand the whole time. We push into the shouting, joyful throng, and fight our way toward the wall. Grace scrabbles up a pile of broken-down wood and shards of shattered concrete, and I follow clumsily until I am balanced next to her. She is shouting—louder than I have ever heard her, a babble-language of joy and freedom—and I find that I join in with her as together we begin to tear at chunks of concrete with our fingernails, watching the border dissolve, watching a new world emerge beyond it. (*Requiem* 342)

But, coupled with Lena's reunion with Alex and her plans for herself and Grace discussed above, this conclusion is transparent in its vision of the future as embodied in Grace and secured through the lens of reproductive futurism. For, despite the lack of details surrounding the new social order set to emerge after the events of *Requiem*, the adherence to reproductive futurism displayed on both sides of this political struggle—the establish social order and the

resistance—and the sanctity of the Symbolic Child ensures that any future will adhere to conservative, heteronormative family values that privilege the safety and security of the child and the traditional family unit.

Grace, with her newfound freedoms and her status as emblem of a bright future, will continue to be privileged and held as the recipient of all future freedoms established through any political system that relies on reproductive futurism to create a new social order, for "taking any side at all necessarily constrains one to take the side *of*, by virtue of taking a side *within*, a political order that returns to the child as the image of the future it intends" (3). So by continuing to center Grace as the Symbolic recipient of any future world, as Lena and the narrative of *Requiem*'s final scene does, the cycle is made to continue: Grace's safety and freedom will be privileged in any future social order through the systemic denial of the freedoms of other citizens, most likely those who were most active in the Resistance that guaranteed Grace her bright future. We think of Julian, who lost his potential romantic female partner; or Hunter and Bram, a same-sex couple who are part of Lena's homestead group as well as the Resistance; or Pippa, an older woman who serves as a key leader and recruiter in the Resistance. Lena witnesses these characters tearing through the border wall before she and Grace jump in beside them; they began this resistance, presumably to save their own futures, but they will be least privileged and most vulnerable under whatever social order is built as long as reproductive futurism holds sway; for, as Edelman highlights, the existence and continued significance of the Child "impregnat[es] heterosexuality, as it were, with the future of signification by conferring upon it the cultural burden of signifying futurity" (13). In other words, those citizens not able or willing to actively engage in procreative, heterosexual sex will have no place in, possibly even come to be viewed in

opposition to, any social order established by the principles of reproductive futurism; even those who fought hardest for it (13). This ensures that any future social order will recycle similar conservative family values that privilege heteronormativity through a continued value in The Child as emblematic of a brighter future: "The Child...marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 21). Any new world established post-resistance, in other words, will mirror the conservative, heteronormative family values Lena seems to spend the majority of the trilogy fighting to change.

Queer Resistance and Hana Tate

The *Delirium* trilogy is not without queer characters and those outside the margins of reproductive futurism, particularly when applying Edelman's definition of the queer as "all so stigmatized for failing to comply with heteronormative mandates" (17). But these few queer characters—of which Hunter and Bram are the only who embody queer sexuality—work in the service of reproductive futurism. Each of these characters are part of the Resistance, and as such are complicit in the reproductive futurism through which it operates. Hunter, for example, questions Lena directly when she is hesitant to warm up to Blue, who she avoids because the girl reminds Lena so much of Grace; he takes no interest in her relationships to others in the group, though (*Pandemonium* 89). And though the homestead's embracing of Hunter and Bram's relationship seems to be emblematic of its difference from the mainstream social order, their acceptance is achieved by, as Edelman says, "shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else" (27)—in this case, the Cured "zombies" that live in verified cities and fail to protect (C)hildren like Grace and Blue. Lena describes her path to accepting Hunter as an Unnatural as such:

> It was hard to shake all the lessons I learned on the other side, in Portland, warnings drilled into me by everyone I admired and trusted...Then I found out that Hunter was an Unnatural, a thing I'd always been taught to revile.
>
> Now Hunter is Hunter, and a friend, and nothing more. (*Pandemonium* 90)

Lena puts Hunter in direct opposition to the authorities of a verified city; she must "revile" one or the other. This position has been established by the homesteaders and the resistance; by othering Cured individuals and those still living under the social order—even if they might also be suffering for it—they make space for queer individuals within their society. However, Edelman argues, working within the boundaries of reproductive futurism in order to gain rights and freedoms within an established social order should not be the role of the queer; the role of the queer, he says, is to work in defiance of and, through this defiance, create a system not reliant on reproductive futurism:

> ...by assuming the 'truth' of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well, we might undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification...which can only return us, by way of the Child, to the politics of reproduction. (27)

The only figure in all of the *Delirium* trilogy who embodies this defiance, who escapes the confines of a heteronormative social order, is Hana Tate.

As a queer figure, Hana questions the structure of the country's social order directly and long before Lena begins to have her doubts. More significantly, she does so without the impetus of heterosexual love or desire, unlike Lena. According to Sara K. Day, Lena falls

into a common dystopian romance trope of developing rebellious politics only as the result of a (hetero)sexual awakening, reaffirming heteronormativity:

> The sexual awakenings and resultant social resistance embodied by these female protagonists, then, reinforces contemporary cultural expectations...rather than offering a potential divergence from such gendered limitations. (90)

And, according to Christine Seifert, Lena and characters like her end their rebellious streak as soon as they have earned the freedom to live in heterosexual bliss with their chosen partner, an outcome we see in the *Delirium* trilogy (60). Lena's only wish at the end of the first book of the series is to escape into the Wilds and live free with Alex; she identifies herself as a "sympathizer," but wants no ties with the Resistance; "That's all I want. Just you and me. Always," she tells Alex when she agrees to escape (*Delirium* 380). Hana, however, scoffs at the interview process by which young people are matched with potential marriage partners and the limited choice it presents, listens to unregulated music and visits secret, uncensored websites, and attends unsanctioned parties on her own, driven by her curiosity and skepticism. Both Lena and Hana are shown in *Requiem* to not like children, but Lena allows one Symbolic exception, whereas Hana, beyond offering Grace and her family food in *Requiem*, never pledges herself to any emblematic Child. Even within a social order ruled by reproductive futurism and the tenants of conservative family values, Hana pushes against these mandates before Lena and regardless of any symbolic better future, operating, as Edelman argues queerness does, "outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism" (3).

Through her boundary-breaking acts in *Delirium*, Hana embodies an excess that Edelman identifies as jouissance, "a movement beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the

distinctions of pleasure and pain, a violence passage beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law" and associates with queerness (25). In *Delirium*, we see Hana embody this principle and, by extension, queerness through her participation specifically in the underground music and party culture. Early on, Hana confesses to Lena that she has been exploring unauthorized websites and listening to unapproved music she describes as "like nothing you've ever heard, music that almost takes your head off...that makes you want to scream and jump up and down and break stuff and cry" (*Delirium* 104). Hana is interacting with material and in spaces outside of the social order and the bounds of futurity, and that transgresses the boundaries of pleasure that her social order has instituted—there is a Library of Authorized Music and Movies (LAMM) that Hana, Lena says, "used to spend hours surfing" (102). Now, however, she actively seeks to cross those boundaries imposed by her social order—and the values instilled by the Cure—into the realm of jouissance and queerness: "'Maybe it will. Get better, I mean, once we're cured. But until then...This is our last chance, Lena. Our last chance to do anything. Our last chance to choose'" (108). And though there are revolutionary sentiments on the websites she frequents, she engages most with the material that has no purpose or grounding in either the current social order or the nascent resistance. She is seeking no future identity or purpose, as Lena does; she seeks, if anything, to halt her own future as an adult, a wife, and eventually a mother. This unmaking, Edelman says, is achieved through a queer jouissance:

> Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a

> jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed. (24–5)

Hana does not engage in this material to form an identity as a rebel, but rather her own subjectivity—particularly as it is understood by Lena—crumbles the more she engages with it: When Hana confesses that she has been visiting these sites and listening to unauthorized music—and experiencing jouissance through it—Lena can no longer recognize her as herself, as she exists within the knowable social order, and realizes "Hana has been morphing into a stranger" (106). We see Hana embodying jouissance through her description of the music—beyond experiencing pleasure, Hana feels physical and emotional pain from it—as well as her embrace of the possible danger associated with the material with which she's engaging. Again, it is Lena who is pointing out the inherent danger in Hana's plan to attend a secret, unregulated event, which Hana actively leans into:

> "Fine."
>
> Hana raises her arms and brings them slapping down against her thighs. The noise is so loud it makes [Lena] jump.
>
> "Fine. So it's a bad idea. So it's risky. You know what? *I don't care*." (109)

Hana engages with a jouissance that associates her with queerness long before Lena even considers working within reproductive futurism to create her ideal future that, in actuality, remakes the conservative family values of the past. And in *Requiem*, Hana's role as a queer figure expands as she embraces Edelman's association of queer with the negativity of the death drive.

Edelman extends his analysis of the figure of the queer and queerness as it relates to reproductive futurism by connecting it to Lacan's death drive, arguing that queerness negates

the realization of futurity and any social structure or order itself (Edelman 4). It is without future, hope, or form, and so embodies, Edelman says the death drive, defined as "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). He goes on to suggest that the queer as a figure embrace this negativity, valuable because it presents a "challenge to value as defined by the social" and represents a "radical challenge to the very value of the social itself" (6):

> ...we [queers] can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within. (22)

Hana displays this negativity, this opposition to a hopeful future and the value of a social order, in the true chaos and ambiguity of the conclusion of her narrative, in opposition to Lena's hopeful one anchored in reproductive futurism, and her embracing of an unknowable fate outside of any kind of social order. Though Hana briefly ventures into the realm of reproductive futurism in *Requiem* when she discovers and helps Grace, her story's end displays a stark defiance of any and all social order, lacking the hopeful shine of futurism. After the Resistance has broken through Portland's walls and into the city—interrupting Hana's wedding to her abusive fiancé, the ultra-conservative mayor—Hana discovers and, it initially appears, captures Lena. She brings Lena back to her husband's house, but allows her to escape, telling her where she can find Grace.[17] In return, Lena warns Hana that the resistance has planted a bomb at her husband's house that will detonate soon. Hana

[17] She does this as an afterthought: "Just as [Lena is] placing a hand on a door handle, she calls to [Lena] in a whisper. 'I almost forgot...Grace is in the Highlands'" (*Requiem* 324). She seems to do this as penance, to rid herself of the guilt she carries with her throughout *Requiem* for being the person who turned Lena in to the Regulators when she planned to escape with Alex in *Delirium*. She is not particularly concerned about Grace or the future of her social order embodied in Grace as the figural Child, and so her actions cannot be seen as serving reproductive futurism.

convinces her husband to stay in the house, ensuring he will die in the bombing—effectively taking out a top figure in the dominant social order of the city—and leaves. But rather than join Lena and the Resistance, Hana shuns both sides of this political struggle, expressing a lack of interest in her own future and the future of the political order:

> What will happen to me?
>
> I don't know. Maybe I will come across someone who recognizes me. Maybe I will be brought back to my parents. Maybe, if the world doesn't end, if Fred is now dead, I will be paired with someone else.
>
> Or maybe I will keep walking until I reach the end of the world.
>
> Maybe. But for now...There is the slapping of my shoes, and the trees that seem to nod and tell me, *You're okay. Everything will be okay.*
>
> Maybe, after all, they are right. (*Requiem* 334–5)

Hana again is rejecting any kind of social order as well as her own subjectification within that system. The death drive, Edelman says, "can only insist...refuses identity or the absolute privilege of any goal" (22). Hana embodies this excess in her unwillingness to define herself within any future social system. She neither seeks out her identity as a daughter or wife, nor sets her sights on joining the resistance. She rejects both her current role in the conservative family values of her crumbling social order—abandoning her husband to his death—and refuses to contribute to the reproductive futurism of the resistance—Hana, unlike Lena, has no heteronormative partner or family unit waiting for her on the other side of the wall or in the resistance. In fact, she takes no active steps towards any real conclusion to her story—a fact that upset many readers. She has no goal and no ambition—maybe she will walk to the end of the street or maybe to "the end of the world" (*Requiem 335*). She actively rejects

extinction when she escapes her husband's doomed house, but for no particular reason or purpose:

> I think about going upstairs, into what would have been my room. I could lie down and close my eyes; I'm almost tired enough to sleep.
>
> But instead I ease the back door open, cross the porch, and go down into the garden...I will not stay to watch it burn. (327)

Here, Hana embodies Edelman's description of the death drive as "a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds" (22). She continues forward, continues to move "one foot, and then another foot," but she needs no destination (*Requiem* 335). She, in fact, is freed by her lack of a plan or end point.

Both in terms of the trajectory of her life and her immediate actions at the end of the *Delirium* trilogy—arguably, throughout the entire series—Hana is the only character who defies and rejects the desire for an identity and a future within a social order driven by reproductive futurity. Despite the fact that Lena is the heroine of the *Delirium* trilogy, positioned as the kick-ass girl who defies a restrictive, conservative social order that mirrors repressive evangelical purity culture and help build a revolution, her continued reliance on heteronormative family values and her connection to reproductive futurism insures that her rebellion is a hollow one, and one that will ultimately build a new social order doomed to mirror its past in its upholding of those same values through reproductive futurism. Only Hana truly comes to embody queer possibility, stepping outside of the constraints of any social order and the reproductive futurism that drives it to achieve even the possibility of a radical restructuring of the *Delirium* trilogy's political and social system. Lena waxes poetic about destroying boundaries in the final lines of *Requiem*: "Take down the walls...You do not

know what will happen if you take down the walls...don't know whether it will bring freedom or ruin, resolution or chaos," but only Hana embodies the radical queer possibility of these words (342).

Kick-ass girls like Lena, Katniss, and Tris represent an empty image of empowered girls fighting for social change. Though their strength, skill, intelligence, and courageous actions in the face of inequity and oppression position them as positive role models for young girls and powerful inspiration for future girl activists who want to make the world a better place, their actions support the same oppressive, heteropatriarchal structures they seem to reject, and their focus on individual success and safety renders the brighter future they are fighting for inaccessible to those with less social privilege or legibility. This depiction of young, feminist heroines who value individual strength and resilience within oppressive social systems over radical, systemic change is informed by and contributes to a neoliberal co-opting of girl activists and the power of youth (especially young girl's) social capital. And this rhetoric has a real, lasting impact on the way we as a society seek to empower and support girls, as well as how we view the power and responsibilities of girl activists.

Who Runs the World?: Empowerment, Girl Activism, and the Figure of the Kick-Ass Girl

This project looked at how the kick-ass girl, a popular archetype of a contemporary, girl heroine in dystopian young adult series, engages in girl culture and narratives of girlhood to mold and guide young girls into neoliberal citizens who gain empowerment through individual success within a heteropatriarchal social order. As a product of neoliberal post-feminism, the kick-ass girl represents "the image of the successful and assertive girl in control of her own destiny" that is crucial to the construction of contemporary girlhood and femininity by the social order (Harris 20). Throughout this project, I analyze how the kick-ass girl protagonists of three respective YA dystopian book series with considerable contemporary cultural capital invest in traditional, heteropatriarchal norms concerning gender, sexuality, agency, and power within the social order while masquerading as empowered, feminist figures fighting for social change. As a neoliberal, post-feminist figure, the kick-ass girl also takes into account the achievements and advancements enjoyed by contemporary girls in society in order to discourage a need for further feminist social change, and this message in particular affects the way we teach girls in our society to find empowerment and engage in social change and activism work.

The construction of the post-feminist kick-ass girl in these texts helps to construct and reflect a neoliberal archetype of a girl activist, both informing and informed by a praxis of empowerment messaging and programming for young girls that focuses on individual, apolitical achievements such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resiliency. These approaches, much like the supposedly feminist practices of the kick-ass girl, fail to acknowledge or take into account social forces acting against the success of girls and girl activists, including

racism, sexism, and misogyny, nor do they empower young girls to incite social change in a way that challenges the social order or addresses these inequities. I use my own experience facilitating psycho-educational groups focused on youth (and young girl) empowerment through open discussion of the root causes of inequity and an emphasis on inciting social change to complicate empowerment programming and explore its benefits and limitations in supporting young girls as activists and social change makers.

About Ophelia: Girl Culture and the Self-Esteem Crisis

My introduction positions girls as important subjects and products of contemporary marketing strategies that create and package culturally informed models of girls, girlhood, and femininity to both sell and sell to. This interest in girls and young women as figures worthy of consideration extends beyond marketing and into other social, cultural, and political categories. According to Anita Harris, girls in contemporary society are positioned as "a vanguard of new subjectivity," that, along with the social construction of girlhood, serves as an example of how success can be achieved in a society marked by transition (1). McRobbie, too, identifies girls as "metaphor[s] for social change" and "subjects of excellence" (15).[18] And both scholars agree that the origins of the girl as ideal subject stems from the feminist advancements of gender equity and women's status in the Western world throughout the twentieth century. These advancements, recognized as the goals achieved by feminism, coincided with the restructuring of the economy on a global level that is reliant on the labor of young women and the rise of neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility and

[18] Both authors specify that the subject of young, female excellence is marked by social privileges such as favorable socioeconomic conditions and race that are made invisible by the public construction of the girl as image of success. Girls who suffer under less favorable economic or social conditions are, according to Harris, branded as "at risk" and "failures" due to poor or insufficient efforts or choices made on individual, familial, and/or community levels (8).

choice. Young girls thus became subjects "used to signal progress and modernity," buoyed by the social, economic, and educational privileges afforded them by feminism, young girls were encouraged by rhetoric celebrating their power and their freedom—"girls can do anything"—to make their own choices and take responsibility for their own success. These corresponding factors, Harris says, made young girls "doubly constructed as ideal flexible subjects; they are imagined as benefiting from feminist achievements and ideology, as well as from new conditions that favor their success by allowing them to put these into practice" (8). With the expectation heavy on girls' shoulders to succeed in embodying this pinnacle of modern subjectivity defined by personal responsibility and post-feminist achievement—and faced with the threat of failure embodied by what Harris calls the "at-risk girl" who is associated with violence, sexual risk, early motherhood, and individual irresponsibility—came a challenge that turned into a social crisis: girls' lack of self-esteem. This panic was sparked in popular society by Mary Pipher's bestselling, seminal text *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Pipher argues that the cultural pressure girls' experience during adolescence causes them to lose their sense of personal identity and self-worth, to the detriment of their mental health and personal success. According to Harris, the book's findings helped birth an entire self-esteem industry[19] geared towards building resiliency, optimism, and self-efficacy in young girls, its call-to-arms taken up by counselors, teachers, parents, and young girls themselves, who are made responsible for their own self-esteem as well as for monitoring and encouraging the self-worth of other girls. Countless books and media, resource lists, programs and curriculums, even non-profit organizations currently exist with the sole purpose of improving young girls' self-esteem and empowering

[19] This industry includes the empowerment programming and curricula I will discuss later in this chapter.

them to lead successful adult lives. As this focus bled into popular culture, the self-esteem panic morphed into a call for strong, empowered role models for young girls, figures who both embodied the success of the modern girl and who found empowerment through existing social structures, paving the way for narratives of Girl Power and the kick-ass girl.

Strong as a Girl: Girl Power, Girl Activism, and the Kick-Ass Girl

The emphasis on girls as markers for success trickled into popular culture messaging through, as previously discussed, Girl Power rhetoric and role models. According to Harris, "the image of the successful and assertive girl in control of her own destiny has become central to the entertainment industries" (20). However, as previous chapters display, the Girl Power packaged and promoted by pop culture and embodied by these figures is inherently post-feminist and neoliberal, echoing the ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility outlined above, and operating as though gender equality has been achieved and girls need only work to succeed within the current social order, free of gender-based inequality and other social imbalances of power and privilege. Strong female characters have become both models and inspiration for young girls to self-surveil and self-regulate their own success, to, as Harris says, "perpetually observe and remake [themselves]" (32). And because they embody the promise of modern subjectivity and success, girls are often positioned as warriors for social, civic, and even political order, and girls empowerment as an investment in youth citizenship. Out of this intersection of Girl Power, girls' empowerment, citizenship, and pop culture is born the figure of the girl activist, who uses her power and her strength to take on civic responsibilities and engagement.

No figure in popular culture embodies the spirit of girlhood and the girl activist as described quite like the kick-ass girl of YA dystopian series. Several scholars have made the

connection between these girl protagonists and the empowered girl citizen/activist, including Sonya Sawyer Fritz, who describes them as ones who "resist the forces of their broken and corrupt societies to create their own identities, shape their own destinies, and transform the worlds in which they live" (Fritz 17). The kick-ass girl's narrative of empowerment and rebellion does, in many ways, mirror the messages of contemporary girlhood, Girl Power, and empowerment described above. Katniss is introduced as strong, capable, and independent; Lena and Tris both experience a moment of rebellion—for Lena, deciding to escape the oppressive society she lives in, and for Tris, choosing a different faction than that of her family—and grow to embody these qualities after extensive training. For Tris and Lena, these acts are pivotal to gaining empowerment and "becom[ing] self-governing subjects who are capable of directing the outcome of their own lives" (Green-Barteet, 334). All three become confident, empowered girls as their skills and capabilities grow, and they seek out and demand greater responsibility in their socialities, taking on bigger challenges that showcase their physical and intellectual prowesses as the series progress. And Katniss, Tris, and Lena all display an investment in improving the social orders of their respective worlds. Katniss fights to end the oppressive rule of the Capitol and its leader, President Snow. According to Fritz, Katniss further proves her status as independent thinker, rebel, and activist when she later assassinates President Coin, the leader of the rebellion of which Katniss is made an unwilling symbol. Lena joins the resistance movement that is working to take down the current social order that has made love into a feared disease. And Tris joins several rebel groups throughout the *Divergent* series as she comes to question the motives and validity of the dominant order's campaign. Fritz says YA dystopian texts featuring kick-ass girls engages in contemporary discourses of girlhood and empowerment by "render[ing]

the gendered period of female adolescence as a condition of their protagonists' heroic political activism and highlight this developmental stage as a particularly important time of empowerment and socio-political awareness," (18). However, both contemporary girls' empowerment rhetoric and fictional narratives of girl activism reflect the neoliberal and post-feminist Girl Power discourse from which they are founded.

The contemporary self-esteem and empowerment crusade reflected in and, to the extent that they produce strong, empowered role models of Girl Power, taken up by YA dystopian novels featuring girl protagonists is a product of a culture driven by individual responsibility and personal success. This movement, therefore, is rooted not in social justice or systemic change, but in individual transformation and quick fixes to problems situated as personal failures. According to Jessica Taft, a scholar of youth activism and girlhood, this brand of empowerment makes little impact on girls or the society they occupy:

> Individual empowerment makes no references to social and political rights, to economic justice, to equality, or to changing the overall contexts and conditions of girls' lives, but only discusses girls' individual strength and resilience. (*Rebel Girls*, 30)

Contemporary girls empowerment discourse fails to center social change in part because it often does not address systemic oppression and inequality. According to Taft, the legacy of Girl Power's skewed ideologies is reflected in empowerment projects that effectively "describe the world as a meritocracy void of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism" ("Girl Power Politics" 73). Not only does this put the onus of success entirely on individual girls rather than on the inequitable systems they are forced to operate within, but the result of this discourse is a depoliticized girls empowerment movement that is

"focused on incorporating girls into the social order as it stands, rather than empowering them to make any meaningful changes to it," (*Rebel Girls* 23–24).

This, too, is reflected in the kick-ass girl's narrative and YA dystopian fiction featuring girl protagonists as a whole. Though Katniss, Tris, and Lena all engage in rebellious activities and contribute to rebellions that eventually drastically change the social order of their worlds, it is their personal empowerment and successes that are the focuses and celebration of the respective series. This is reflected in the lack of detail each series devotes to the new societies built as a result of the respective revolutions, especially in comparison to the focus on the kick-ass girl's personal circumstances. At the conclusion of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss is married and lives in peace with her family in her home district, and she does not play any role in the new sociality; what little we know about it, in fact, indicates that many of its same harmful beauty and legibility norms that are enacted on her throughout the series remain intact. Katniss's independence and physical skill won her safety and security, and so she seems to consider her work complete.

The *Divergent* series' epilogue provides the most detail about the society formed after multiple revolutions, but in this final chapter Tris is dead, having sacrificed herself in place of her brother on a mission to reset the memories of the oppressive Bureau members. She has no input in the society that forms as a result of her actions, and her heroic efforts are remembered only among her friends and family, her memory employed not to inspire them to continue fighting for social equity, but to encourage them to seek personal success and growth. The end of the *Delirium* trilogy contains the least detail of all: Lena has found her cousin, her only remaining family, and reconnected with her original love interest, and

amidst the rubble of a fallen, oppressive sociality, she vows only to use her newfound strength and resiliency to care for her young relative.

The previous chapters expounded on the ways these purportedly strong, independent, progressive figures upheld rather than challenged the social inequities of their societies, and when positioned as role models of engaged, young, girl activists, it is clear how the rhetoric of neoliberal Girl Power and post-feminism allow narratives of individual success and personal (and privileged) empowerment to stand in for true activism that is rooted in social change. The following section examines how this rhetoric impacts real-world girls' empowerment programming, incorporating my own experiences implementing social change lessons into such a curriculum in order to promote not just personal empowerment, but social activism in young people, in particular young girls.

Be the Change: Empowerment Programming in the Era of Self-Esteem

Through my work as a community educator for a nonprofit outside of Houston, Texas, I witness how the girls' empowerment and self-esteem industry is thriving. National organizations like Girls Inc. and Girl Scouts of America, as well as local organizations like Girls Empowerment Network and The Women's Resource, are deeply rooted in these same neoliberal and post-feminist principles of self-esteem, empowerment, and personal success. One such nonprofit, Girls Empowerment Network, was founded by a group of mothers in Austin, Texas. as a direct response to the self-esteem crisis' originating text, *Reviving Ophelia,* with the mission to, according to the organization's website, "address an increasing trend among middle school aged girls—a systematic decline and sometimes permanent loss of self-esteem" ("Mission"). Within the missions, histories, and impact statements of these organizations is language emphasizing independent success over community well-being and

individual empowerment over social change. Girls Inc. programming, for example, "equips girls to lead fulfilling and productive lives" ("What We Do"). The Women's Resource offers a four-year financial empowerment program for high-school girls called Rise! that aims to "[give] the women of tomorrow the skills and confidence they need to succeed." And Girls Empowerment Network employs a self-efficacy curriculum that helps girls "discover they are powerful." Elaborating on how participants might use their newfound power, the website says:

> Whether she is shooting for an A (sic), overcoming a bully, becoming the first in her family to go to college, breaking up with an abusive partner, or just trying to take care of herself when she feels like no one else will—when a girl experiences our self-efficacy curriculum, she realizes she can do it and she becomes powerful. ("Mission")

In this way, Girls Empowerment Network actively works to set itself apart from self-esteem programming, arguing that self-efficacy is a higher indicator of future academic and career success; in making this claim, however, it still aligns itself with the individual success and personal achievement goals of self-esteem curricula. These missions and goals reflect a neoliberal approach to empowerment that, according to Taft, "is limited to building girls' individual strengths, psychological well-being, and personal efficacy" (*Rebel Girls* 29). They teach young girls how to survive in an oppressive society rather than empowering them to challenge it.

These programs are not always blind to the social inequities young girls face, particularly in their most contemporary forms. Taft says self-esteem and empowerment programming often, in fact, "takes on a variety of racialized and located forms" that acknowledges the need for unique programming for different girls and communities (*Rebel*

Girls 29). This is reflected in the mission and intended impact of both national and local organizations with such programming. For example, The Women's Resource references racial and gender-based disparities in financial stability and literacy on its webpage for the Rise! program, and Girls Inc.'s site proclaims that, in addition to its empowerment programming, the organization "tackle[s] the systemic barriers that affect the conditions in which girls are growing up" through a focus on policy and advocacy ("What We Do"). However, according to Taft, the different between empowerment and activism is "a focus on changing girls, rather than changing the social world":

> Individual empowerment makes no references to social or political rights, to economic justice, to equality, or to changing the overall context and conditions of girls' lives, but only discusses girls' individual strength and resilience. (*Rebel Girl* 30)

So, too, does self-esteem and girls empowerment programming—and its utilization by social workers, school systems, and non-profits as a one-size-fits-all solution to the myriad issues and challenges facing young girls in contemporary society—turn young girls' problems back on themselves, attributing them to a personal failure, most often lack of self-esteem; any participant in these programs or any girl who fails to solve her own issues through individual strength, self-esteem, and resilience, is viewed as, in Taft's words, "just not empowered enough" (*Rebel Girls*, 30). And girls within the programs are encouraged to support one another's self-esteem and empowerment journeys rather than to band together to change the conditions of their communities and socialities. In my own work facilitating educational presentations and empowerment programming in local schools, my colleagues and I are routinely asked to speak to young people—particularly young girls—on self-esteem despite

the topic's absence on my organization's posted list of educational presentations we offer for youth. I have seen a lack of self-esteem diagnosed like the common cold for issues as varied as sexual harassment, dating violence, "risky" behavior such as sexual activity, and truancy among young girls who are recent immigrants to the United States. The psychoeducational peer groups we facilitate with local youth are designed to be coeducational and geared towards youth who are already "leaders," who might use the knowledge and skills learned in our sessions to educate and recruit peers and friends into social change work. In practice, the youth assigned to my groups by social workers, counselors, and advocates are primarily young, "at-risk" girls identified by these adults as in need of empowerment to encourage their personal successes and build strength to overcome their individual challenges. However, in practice we strive to offer programming that acknowledges systemic, social oppression and inequity and that encourages the mostly young girls participating in our programming to challenge social norms and create a more inclusive and safe society—not only for themselves, but for all individuals within it.

Beyond Self-Esteem: Empowerment Praxis Rooted in Social Change

For the past six years I've worked for The Bridge Over Troubled Waters, a crisis center serving survivors of domestic and sexual violence in Southeast Harris County. Part of the Bridge's mission is to prevent gender-based violence; we engage in this work through a public health concept called primary prevention, which involves implementing intervention strategies before a detrimental health impact occurs, in this case before gender-based harm is done. In practice, this looks like social change work that aims to eliminate the root causes of violence in our society, including all forms of social oppression and inequity as well as the widely held beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that blame victims, and excuse and dismiss

gender-based violence. The psychoeducational groups mentioned above engage in this work through a curriculum designed to promote open discussion of these social issues as they impact the lives of young people[20] and empower participants to challenge the values and beliefs that support violence.

The education piece of the curriculum begins with a discussion of the qualities of a healthy relationship; in this session, the topic of self-esteem is given a certain amount of focus. However, we discuss self-esteem not as a marker of individual achievement that signifies a person's ability or worthiness to have a successful relationship,[21] a rhetoric which is both extremely popular and neoliberal in its approach of self-esteem as an individual challenge to be won. What is more, our focus on self-esteem ends after session three of the seven-to-nine-session curriculum. The bulk of the programming centers on identifying social inequities that lead to violence and how we can begin to challenge them. We explore how gender roles are established and maintained in our society, and often how they intersect with other forms of oppression—most notably racism, homophobia, and transphobia—to justify and excuse violence. We later spend a session analyzing media representations of gender and end by discussing how young people can challenge these inequities and prevent violence in their communities. Our discussion of gender roles and social inequity almost always sparks the most engaging conversation among the (primarily) young girls who have cycled through my groups over the years. Through this discussion, they are able to finally name and acknowledge the various and varying social factors that impact their daily lives and that,

[20] Participant ages range from 12-to 18 years-old, which most groups consisting of youth within one to two years of each other.

[21] The contemporary catchphrase "If you can't love yourself, how are you going to love somebody else?" is often cited by the young girls in my groups when I ask them why they think self-esteem is important in a relationship. As part of this discussion, I aim to convey that a healthy relationship is not a prize bestowed on those who have successfully "achieved" high self-esteem, but rather than a safe relationship is one in which each individual's inherent value is respected, never diminished.

often, have already led to these girls experiencing sexual harassment and abuse. In focusing not on how these young girls' lack of personal strength and self-esteem contributed to their "failure" to be empowered enough to protect themselves,[22] but on the social factors that left them vulnerable to such violence, the girls often feel validated in their experiences and how those instances affected them. These discussions also lead participants to question some of the many social and political inequities in our society that justify and maintain the harmful beliefs and behaviors that impact them and inform their experiences. School dress codes are often part of the conversation, as well as institutional racism and racial profiling, and the slut-shaming, victim-blaming ideologies baked into abstinence culture's institutions and policies under which they are forced to operate. Our final sessions introduce the concept of social change and resistance on both individual and societal levels. We discuss ways we as individuals can support victims of violence and oppression and challenge the beliefs and behaviors that support it on an interpersonal level, as well as how individuals and movements push for greater equity in our society through resistance and activism. The young girls see examples and models of social change work—often models who resemble them or individuals from their communities—and are encouraged to consider how they as individuals can contribute to this movement in whatever way they feel most comfortable and empowered. Through this curriculum, participants unlearn the harmful, neoliberal individualism of Girl Power empowerment messaging that has encouraged them to focus on

[22] Many young girls in my groups have experienced this form of victim-blaming dressed up as empowerment rhetoric. Often, lack of self-esteem and self-respect is used as an excuse by those in power within the girls' sociality for the choices they make that the authority figure disapproves of; and often those individual choices are used to place the blame for violence or violation the girls experience on them, their choices labeled as failures.

their personal successes and resilience in spite of social inequity and oppression, and to work within a such a system without challenging—or even acknowledging—its inequities.

This programming, in both theory and practice, is far from perfect. It is, for starters, sanctioned through the social order, both in that my work is funded by federal and state grants and in that we are invited to bring these groups to young girls through the school system, mainly by counselors, student group advisors, and school social workers. We strive to create youth-centered programming within these constraints; however, the groups are inherently not youth-led. That our conversations often question or challenge these institutions and empower participants to work towards social change does not negate that we are still working with and within an established social institution, and that our conversations often must come with the caveat that not all information shared is confidential[23] and that not every form of resistance is safe for our participants,[24] and their safety is ultimately first priority. And while our sessions introduce activism and girls as activists in a general sense, there is rarely enough time in this two-month-long program to devote to skill-building or organizing. We hope that participants feel empowered by the programming to seek out and create opportunities to engage in social change, but the goal of the curriculum is not to foster or mentor youth activists, but rather to plant seeds through education and discussion that leave young girls feeling empowered to engage in social action. As Taft notes, there is value in empowerment programming that refuses to "[ignore] girls and the very real challenges that they face in their lives" (*Rebel Girls* 30). Though we are another version of a girls

[23] All adults in the state of Texas are mandatory reporters for child abuse and neglect.

[24] It would be irresponsible for me to encourage young girls to violate school policy or stage a disruptive protest that could result in disciplinary action against them. And while in our group setting we do not adhere to school regulations regarding appropriate language, behavior and dress, I often remind my participants as they leave that those regulations still exist outside of our space to give them the opportunity to shift back into a more guarded mindset.

empowerment program, I believe the curriculum's emphasis on acknowledging and discussing the inequitable social factors that work against young girls, its version of empowerment that focuses on challenging the social order, and its rejection of individualistic, self-esteem and Girl Power messaging represents a more radical version. Taft argues that neoliberal empowerment programs that focus on self-improvement and self-esteem encourage girls to "see their problems as personal troubles, rather than as issues of public concern," which results in girls being less likely to engage in social change work because they don't consider the issues they face to be publicly relevant (*Rebel Girls* 30). But in connecting the individual experiences of our participants to broader social issues and forms of oppression, we are, I believe, encouraging our young girl participants to shift from a neoliberal empowerment mindset to a focus on social change that opens the possibility for investment in social action and activism in their futures.

Fight Like a Girl: The Future of Girls and Girl Activists

In the more than ten years since the self-esteem crisis became a cultural battle cry and Katniss, Lena, and Tris grew into icons of Girl Power, the expectations placed on empowered girls has only grown; mounting attention and concern over social issues and global crises has put pressure on young girls to not only achieve personal success but save the world. At the same time, as young girls represent social progress through neoliberal, post-feminist empowerment and success, they are also tasked with solving social problems on a local and global scale that threaten to impede a brighter future. In "Hopeful, Harmless, and Heroic: Figuring the Girl Activist as Global Savior," Taft analyzes the social impact of the rise of girl activists in the past decade, arguing that their increased legibility both assigns responsibility for "saving the world" by solving social issues to individual, resilient girl activists rather than

to governments or through collective action and structural change, as well as creates space for more critical and radical versions of girls' activism. According to Taft, "the meaning of girl power has been discursively expanded beyond girls' responsibility for self and family to include responsibility for whole communities, nations, and even the entire world," ("Hopeful" 5). With this contemporary celebrity of girl activists, Taft continues, comes rhetoric that attempts to figure the girl activist in a palatable, neoliberal context that at times diminishes her power and her role within a larger collective of activist activity.

This perspective on girl activists is both reflected in and informed by the kick-ass girls of the YA dystopian series. Katniss, Tris, and Lena all put their individual skills, strength, and resiliency to work fighting to save their worlds and solve the social problems within them. While they often join or work within collective groups or movements, these fictional girl activists ultimately fight their final battles alone, often because these collectives are revealed to be corrupt or out of line with the morals of the kick-ass girl, as is the case with both Katniss and Lena. Taft says fictional narratives like the YA dystopian series discussed here "[allow] for the figuration of the girl activist as *the* solution to social problems" ("Hopeful" 11). This focus on the girl activist as exceptional, as the sole individual with the skills, courage, and grit to solve the problems of the world is also reflected in the figuration of the kick-ass girl. Katniss's skills in archery, Lena's endurance as a runner, and Tris's exceptional success in her faction's training program single them out even among their fellow friends and revolutionaries, and Tris ultimately dies by taking on a deadly mission already assigned to her brother because she feels she is more equipped to possibly survive. These depictions, as Taft says, serve to disconnect Katniss, Tris, and Lena from the rebel movements they serve and ultimately hold them up as singular activists and

saviors in a rhetorical move that pushes them soundly into a Girl Power narrative of individual success and empowered girlhood. This move also conveniently relieves larger institutions of power from responsibility while erasing the collective power of social movements, according to Taft:

> Having moved through a rhetorical chain from girls can do anything to girls can save the world, we seem now to now have arrived at girls *must* save the world. The responsibility for social change thus shifts away from governments and other powerful actors, as well as away from broader public engagement and political activism. ("Hopeful" 11)

In the rhetoric of society, kick-ass girls of YA dystopia are situated as the foremothers and models of contemporary, celebrity girl activists, Taft says. The scholar references a 2018 opinion piece in *The Cut* comparing gun control activist X González[25] to Katniss Everdeen and a viral tweet arguing that reading YA dystopias is preparation for the empowered girl activists who would rise up to incite social change (11). When real-life girl activists are raised onto the same platform as the fictional kick-ass girls who are framed as their inspiration, Taft says the social impact of girl activism as a collective is diminished: "When individual girl activists are presented as lone heroes or exceptional figures, activism is made to seem like something distant and unusual, rather than something thousands of girls around the world are practicing and have been practicing for decades" ("Hopeful" 12). Similarly, when empowerment programming teaches young girls only to monitor and hold each another accountable for achieving individual success through group incentives such as pizza parties and field trips, they fail to foster any real connection or sense of collective empowerment. A

[25] In 2021, Gonzalez announced that they do not identify as a girl and began using they/them pronouns as well as their new personal name.

group of girls working towards the same individualized achievement does not make a community.

For most girls' empowerment organizations and programs, the empowered girl is the end, not the beginning. When girls know they can do anything—whether it is stand up to a bully, get into college, or change the world—they are sent out alone and disconnected to achieve success, armed only with their own self-esteem, grit, and resilience. And more and more frequently, they are tasked with putting these tools to work to solve social issues, ranging from sexual harassment and abuse to climate change to gun violence. But without a foundational knowledge of how their personal experiences connect to broader social issues and oppression, and without a feeling of connection to social change movements or knowledge of existing collectives engaged in the same work, girls are less likely to want to take on these challenges and are often disconnected from those who would support them, including other girls. Images and role models of empowered young women challenging the status quo and changing the world—whether they be real or fictional—are only as inspiring as they are instructional, and when the rhetoric around these models is one of neoliberal, personal success that exists within a post-feminist, cultural vacuum, would-be girl activists are ultimately learning to uphold the existing social structures that benefit only the most privileged among them. Girl activists are absolutely finding community, challenging the heteropatriarchal social order, and changing the world; but they are doing so *in spite of* the hollow figures and social programs meant to inspire and empower them.

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