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Final Project Part 1

Young adult literature, YA, is one of the most popular and talked about genres in publishing today. As its popularity grows, so to must readers and critics scrutinize the messages and cultural norms YA propagates. One problematic area of YA that needs attention and correction is the heteronormativity found in much of genre. Antero Garcia notes that LGBTQI identities are largely underrepresented in YA literature, averaging only 5 novels a year that contain queer representations (“Gender and Sexuality and YA,” 90). Additionally, heterosexual microaggressions can be found in many YA novels that cumulatively attack queer readers’ sense of self-worth (“Gender and Sexuality and YA,” 88). Problematic, as well, is the ways in which strong young female protagonists like Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* and Tris Prior of *Divergent*, both YA series have been adapted to major movie franchises, reinforce heteronormativity and feminine gender roles. These dystopian heroines, slated as revolutionary figures within their novels’ worlds, reinforce traditional aspects of femininity like caregiving, self-sacrifice, and the politics of their male love interests (Kathrine R Broad “‘The Dandelion in Spring’” and Sara K Day “Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies”). These factors create a literary landscape that teaches its readers that queer behaviors and identities are marginal, abhorrent, and have no place in future, better world.

Broad, Kathrine R. “‘The Dandelion in the Spring’ Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collin’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy.” *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults*, edited by Balaka Basu, Kathrine R Broad, and Carrie Huntz, Routledge, 2013, 117-30.

In this essay, Broad does a close reading of Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* arguing that her main motivations for rebellion come from a desire for a heterosexual, nuclear family. Broad contends that instead of being a revolutionary feminist character, Katniss continues conservative feminine gender norms of caretaking, heterosexuality, and reproduction.

Day, Sara K. “Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels.” *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*, edited by Sara K Day, Miranda A Green-Barteet, and Amy L Montz, Routledge, 2014, 75-92.

In this essay, Day analyzes the connections between the sexual awakenings of the female protagonists in contemporary dystopian YA novels and their connections to the

characters' social and political rebellions. She argues that these characters have internalized their societies' expectations to control and regulate their bodies and sexual desires, but as they question and challenge those social expectations they also challenge on other forms of social control. The characters' sexual awakenings and rebellion, however, reaffirm heteronormativity by only featuring straight romances that often give agency through love or ideas provided by their male partners.

Garcia, Antero. "Gender and Sexuality and YA." *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres*. Sense Publishers, 2013, 77-93.

Garcia contends, in this chapter that despite recent female YA characters being smart and physically strong, they are also often contained within traditional ideas of femininity including being white, beautiful, subservient, and heterosexual. He explains that YA tend to reinforce gender norms and heterosexuality through "microaggressions" that cumulatively present sexism and heterosexism as normal.

Marshall, Megan. "What Mainstream Centers Cannot Hold: Growing Critical Literacy with Dystopian Fiction." *Teaching Towards Democracy with Postmodern and Popular Culture Texts*. edited by Patricia Paugh, Tricia Kress and Robert Lake, Sense Publishers, 2014, 135-50.

Marshall asserts that YA dystopian novels should be used in English and language arts curricula as supplemental texts to teach students how to read critically how stories address ideas of ethnicity, gender, and class. Opposed to the traditional literary canon that can alienate teen readers, YA dystopian novels can offer relatability and therefore deeper engagement with the text that can be used to teach students to question themes and social issues to become critical readers.

To address the problem of heteronormativity YA literature, I propose creating a website that would promote YA literature with positive LGBTQI representations and provide resources for English and language arts teacher to use YA novels in their classrooms to teach critical reading skills and to teach about social issues. The website would contain a database of lesson plans that comply with national Common Core standards that would focus on issues of heteronormativity and gender in YA novels, and if successful later include other important issues such as race, technology, and environmental degradation. Additionally, the website would highlight new queer YA novels and provide their own lesson plans and teaching materials. By working with publishers, the site would offer small grants to buy classroom sets of queer YA novels for teachers that want to integrate the novels into their curricula. If successful, this plan would generate more enthusiasm and support for queer YA novels, which would encourage

publishers to release more books with positive LGBTQI representations, and teach teens to be aware of and deconstruct heteronormativity in the media they consume.

One of the biggest hurdles in successfully implementing this plan is the potential for retaliation against teachers that used the curricula the website provided. Thus, the website would also include talking points and other resources for teachers to use to explain the importance of teaching LGBTQI inclusive materials. The site would also include federal and state regulations that provide legal backing to teach the material, such as Title IX, which requires schools to prevent gender based discrimination and violence, and in North Carolina Teaching Standard II, which requires teachers to include diverse viewpoints and counter stereotypes of marginalized groups in their lessons. The site would also work with larger organizations like Teaching Tolerance or PFLAG to provide a legal defense fund for teachers that were fired or faced a hostile work environment as a result of teaching the site's lesson plans. Obviously, the hope would be for no retaliation to happen at all, but by having robust resources for teachers to counter potential negative effects they would be more confident and more willing to teach the material provided by the site.