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## Ideology in Popular Late Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Children's and Young Adult Literature and Film

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IDEOLOGY IN POPULAR LATE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND FILM

IDEOLOGY IN POPULAR LATE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND FILM

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in English

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## **ABSTRACT**

Texts created for the consumption of children and young adults are not simple texts made for the sole purpose of entertaining young audiences. In fact, these texts are complicated, multi-faceted texts that function both in the creation and performance of childhood. Children's and young adult literature and film disseminated mainstream ideology about young people's place in society and attempt to enculturate young readers and viewers in regards to race, gender, age, and social class. However, by helping young people interact critically with these texts, critical thinking skills as well as a passion for reading can be fostered. In addition, by supporting young people's creative potential, more texts can be produced for children by children instead of all texts being created by adults.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.  
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*Iris G. Shepard*

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*Ideology in Popular Late Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Children's and Young Adult  
Literature and Film*

Introduction

Throughout my Master's and doctoral classes and research, I became increasingly interested in children's and young adult literature and film, especially in the ideology encoded in these texts. My scholarly interests were certainly driven by my personal life. As a single mother with two young boys, I spend a lot of time watching and reading contemporary texts with them. My concerns as a parent about how the ideology encoded in the books and films influenced how my children perceived themselves and the world around them spurred me to look critically at the texts they were interested in. I have never felt that I needed to censor texts that I allowed my children to view and read, but, instead, I've tried to help them look critically at the texts they consume. I have tried to foster creative meaning making and critical thinking. My dissertation is the result of several years of reading, watching, and analyzing texts. Since the field of children's and young adult literature and film is so big, I've tried to focus my dissertation on contemporary, popular texts. Also, because I am especially interested in the ideologies encoded in recent texts created for children, my dissertation has focused primarily on widely popular texts, texts that reach a broad audience of readers and viewers. The most conservative ideas about gender, race, and class seem to manifest in highly marketed and extremely popular texts. Popular texts affect a wide audience and, thus, the ideas championed by the texts are disseminated widely and continue to reify the dominant ideologies.

Throughout my research and also through my experiences as a parent, I have become increasingly aware of ageism, the marginalization of children, both in the images of children in the texts and in the imagined child whom the texts are geared towards. Ageism as it relates to children is an under-investigated social phenomenon that is highly observable in children's literature and film as well as in American culture at large, especially in interactions between authority figures—such as parents and teachers—and children. Penelope Leach in *Children First* states: “Children are the largest minority group in society and the minority that is most subject to discrimination and least recognized as being so” (172). Children are marginalized by the generic—often nostalgic—essentializing concepts of “the child” that are produced and circulated by texts directed at both children and adult audiences, in their actual lived experiences, control of their reading choices, and also by their exclusion from text production. Children hold a unique position as a marginalized group because unlike other marginalized populations like racial minorities and women, children literally grow out of their marginalized status into adulthood. Perhaps this explains why ageism as it applies to children has gone mostly overlooked, but the experience of having been marginalized continues to adversely affect people long after they have left childhood behind.

The marginalization of children in their lived experiences is receiving more critical recognition. Lawrence Grossberg states: “American society seems to be attacking, or abandoning, its kids” (78). Alice Miller in *For Your Own Good* (1983) and Joseph Zornado in *Inventing the Child* (2001) also explore the marginalization that children experience. Miller, a psychologist, felt compelled to “sensitize the general public to the suffering of early childhood” (xv). Miller investigates and condemns mainstream parenting as a “poisonous pedagogy.” Miller asserts that the mainstream parenting pedagogy fills the needs of parents, not of children. She

states: “All advice that pertains to raising children betrays more or less clearly the numerous, variously clothed needs of the adult” (97). She continues: “Abused children—victims of poisonous pedagogy—are forced to suppress their feelings, tend to idolize their oppressors, and in turn abuse other people” (201). According to Miller, child abuse is much more widespread than we want to acknowledge. Miller asserts that adults need to look critically at the parenting practices they were subjected to as children. Only by evaluating their own childhoods will adults be free to make more humane choices with their children.

Joseph Zornado’s *Inventing the Child* draws heavily from Miller’s work. Zornado writes: “The lived relationship between an adult and child is the story of hierarchy, buried rage, domination, subjugation, and violence...The adults’ physical and emotional domination of the child characterized the childhood experience of Western culture” (xiii- xiv). Zornado investigates American history through a lens of the prominent parenting practices. He states, “Adults invent history not so much from what really happened to them as children as from what they wished would have happened...The vast majority of children’s stories invite the child to identify with the adults’ idea of what a child should be” (vxiii, xv). He continues: “Contemporary culture tells itself a story about the child in order to defend its treatment of the child” (10). Childhood is often not the blissful, carefree period of life that adults mis-remember it as.

Children are an easy population to marginalize. Every avenue of power in our culture is denied to children. Children have no political rights. Because children’s access to money comes directly from their adult caregivers, their powers of consumption are limited. Even executing the simple task of buying a snack or going to watch a movie necessitates the involvement and complicity of an adult. Children’s days are heavily regulated by adults. Rarely are they consulted about where they want to go to school; neither do they have any choice about their teachers,

classmates, subjects of study, and, in many cases, what they read. Additionally, except in cases of extreme abuse, children have no access to an outside authority to appeal to if their living situation is untenable. Children aren't usually taught how to communicate their grievances to adults, but even if children do have the ability to articulate their needs, adults are often not responsive. Unfortunately, adults frequently abuse the authority they have over children through neglect and domination. Zornado states: "The adults' physical and emotional domination of the child characterize the childhood experience of Western culture" (xiv). The child is at the mercy of his or her caregivers and the institution of the family.

Kate Millet describes the role of the family in perpetuating the marginalization of children: "Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient" (33). Children still tend to be ruled through the family with little or no relation to the state except in cases of extreme abuse. The violence that children suffer rarely attracts the attention of DHS or other children protection services. Miller states: "The former practices of physically maiming, exploiting, and abusing children seems to have been gradually replaced in modern times by a form of mental cruelty that is masked by the honorific term *child-rearing*" (4). The violence children suffer is the effect of detachment style parenting, a parenting style characterized by emotional distance and a lack of physical closeness between the child and parents. Adults, American culture asserts, are responsible for breaking children's will early in life. Numerous methods are used to manipulate children into correct behavior including lying, withdrawing love, humiliating, and scaring the child (Miller 59). Many adults suffered from abusive child rearing practices as children, but upon reaching adulthood, they frequently choose to assign different meanings to these painful experiences and perpetuate the abuse onto their own children. Through detachment parenting,

adults are able to pass on the humiliation they experienced as children, and create a nostalgic, idealized view of their own childhood (97). Detachment parenting is the prevalent parenting style of America.

This study investigates popular works of children's and young adult literature and film with a particular focus on ageism, classism, racism, and gender issues both inside the works and in the cultural context. The problem of ageism is compounded when found in conjunction with other forms of marginalization and discrimination, and so this study investigates issues of race, class, and gender inside popular works for younger audiences. I investigate the changing image of the child as developed by several popular texts as well as the image of the implied child reader or viewer that the texts are directed towards. Jacqueline Rose states, "There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction,' other than the one which it needs to believe is there for its own purposes" (10). Many of the texts currently marketed for children serve the needs of adults rather than the needs of children. This study builds on the work of a number of critics who offer important insight into the field of children's literature by investigating the developments of the genre of children's film and literature. Several historicizing discussions of children's literature inform my dissertation including Julia Mickenburg's *Learning from the Left*, Beverly Clark's *Kiddie Lit*, Gail Murray's *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood*, Alison Lurie's *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature*, *Children's Literature* by Seth Lerer, Ian Wojcik-Andrews' *Children's Film, Images of Children in American Films* by Kathy Jackson, Wendy Rountree's *Just Us Girls*, Perry Nodelman's *Words about Pictures* and *The Hidden Adult*, Nicholas Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland*, Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, and Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*.

Our culture often expresses contradictory views about children and childhood, perspectives that affect both the texts themselves and their accessibility to young readers. On one side are the “essentialist” and nostalgic notions of children found in children’s literature and film that overemphasize children’s innocence and vulnerability. Rose states that children’s literature, with its roots in the mid- to late-eighteenth century which were steeped in the philosophy of Locke and Rousseau, never grew out of essentialized ideas about childhood. Rose continues: “Children’s fiction has never completely severed its links with a philosophy which sets up the child as a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality, and the state” (8). Essentialist notions of children in literature and film serve to erase children’s agency by perpetuating what adults want children and childhood to represent. Gail Murray states: “Children’s literature tells us more about the image of the ideal child that society would like to create than they do about the real child” (xv). Additionally, adults portrayal of childhood is often saturated with postmodern nostalgia because adults often have romanticized, nostalgic views about childhood. Keith Booker in *Postmodern Hollywood: What’s New in Film and Why it Makes us Feel so Strange* distinguishes between traditional nostalgia and postmodern nostalgia. Traditional nostalgia has a basis in authentic experiences, and it makes an effort to recover a usable past (51). Postmodern nostalgia, on the other hand, has no basis in historical truth or authentic experiences; it makes no effort to recover a usable past. Instead, postmodern nostalgia is a longing for a simulacrum of the past, the identical for which never existed. Instead of representing children’s authentic experiences, postmodern nostalgic children’s texts focus on capturing an image of childhood or the feel of childhood. Postmodern nostalgia obscures adults’ ability to perceive and represent childhood in ways that illustrate children’s lived experiences. Often nostalgic texts glorify childhood as a blissful, carefree time.

On the other hand, childhood is often portrayed negatively. The adjectives “childish” and “juvenile” are used to describe something that is unsophisticated or immature. Beverly Clark in *Kiddie Lit* calls this tendency the “discourse of infantilization” which uses “metaphors of immaturity to devalue something” (4). Additionally, anxieties about childhood and adolescence are being reflected in texts directed towards young readers, for example, in works of dystopian young adult literature which portray fragmented future worlds. The demeaning language surrounding childhood combined with anxieties about childhood often results in texts that may overly emphasize negative aspects of childhood.

In addition to being marginalized in their lived experiences and by the texts created by adults for children’s consumption, children are also marginalized by their exclusion from the arena of text production. Adults create texts for children to consume. Children are not usually involved in the production of texts for their own consumption. What are the implications when children’s entire text selection is constructed by adults? There are several possible outcomes. One, of course, is that texts may continue to replicate stereotypes about children and childhood and perpetuate the dominant ideology. Additionally, by entertaining children, texts may help them escape from the difficulties surrounding childhood, thus pacifying them until they reach adulthood. Janet Wasko states that children’s films allow viewers to “escape from an everyday reality that is not always pleasurable or fun, and may well pose challenging dilemmas” (224). Helping children escape their lived reality might not be the best adults can do for children.

Nowhere else is there such a large group that has such limited access to the production and distribution of texts. Undoubtedly some texts written by adults for children portray a realistic child character and take an honest look at childhood in America, but other texts seem primarily motivated by adults’ desires. More insidious are the ways many popular texts didactically try to



shape children's view of right and wrong and enforce the cultures' dominant ideology onto them. Thus, in exploring the image of the child in children's literature and film we can begin to understand American assumptions about childhood and how those assumptions are disseminated through popular culture texts.

My dissertation focuses on texts that are currently being read or viewed by children and the assumptions adults make about children that influence the creating and marketing of these texts. Children's literature and film target a diverse audience between the ages of three and eighteen. Some critics focus on the distinctions between texts written, for example, for preschoolers and elementary aged children. My work, however, is heavily influenced by Perry Nodelman's assertion in *The Hidden Adult* that texts created for children, whether for preschoolers, early readers or teenagers, are all shaped by the underlying authors' and directors' assumption that children are "different from and even opposite to adults." Children's literature, "assumes, inscribes, and reinforces assumptions about childhood that make their implied child reader different from their adult author" (63). Texts for children teach children how to be children and how to enter adulthood. Ian Wojcik-Andrews in *Children's Film* asserts that texts for children are "works of art that entertain but also sites of ideology that indoctrinate young viewers into traditional class and gender roles" (123). Being produced by adults for an audience of children is one of the most basic genre conventions of children's literature and film. Since the texts are produced by adults for the consumption of children, the texts often reflect adult concerns about or perceptions of childhood. Gail Murray states: "Millions of adults...will mentor children through what they write, say and do and thus continue to perpetuate the cultural values that matter to them...Children and childhood have become the pawns in an ideological war between those who advocate for individual responsibility for families and social problems and

those who would give governments and institutions broad powers over what happens to children” (212).

Childhood in America is an externally created phenomenon that developed out of a particular period in American history. The current American concept of childhood started taking shape in the early twentieth century. Nicholas Sammond in *Babes in Tomorrowland* asserts that the idea of the generic child, which still shapes many of the texts created for the consumption of children, “began from a specific location of class and race and proceeded outward” (7). Twentieth century child rearing manuals helped further develop this idea of the child. The “generic child” came to be seen as “the normal child:” white, male, and middle class (9). The ideology that influences contemporary American authors and filmmakers about children and childhood stems from this generic understanding of white, male, middle class children that developed out of the 1950s. Sammond asserts that the concept of the child continues to be limiting, but “that truth may be easily swept aside in the intense effect that the figure of the child inspires” (384). Texts created by adults for the consumption of children are directed at the concept of “the child” not actual children. These early conceptions of the child focused both on the innocence of childhood and the need for children to develop adult-like qualities, anxieties about childhood. The earliest feature-length animated children’s film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), reflects these ideas about childhood. In doing so, it established numerous conventions for future animated films. *Snow White*, discussed in more detail in Chapter One, is just one example of a text produced by adults for children which reflects ageism through nostalgia, didacticism, and essentialized ideas about children and childhood.

The didacticism in children’s literature and film has become more subtle but no less harmful over the last three decades. A highly popular series right now which directly instructs

kids how to perform childhood is Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. The series is told in comic strips with simple, cartoon-like illustrations. These illustrations are combined with bubbles to communicate the characters' words or thoughts. Sandwiched in between these illustrations and dialogue bubbles are paragraphs of text in a font that replicates a middle school student's handwriting. In *Words about Pictures* Perry Nodelman explores reasons why children's texts came to be illustrated: "The fact that illustrations inevitably arouse interest causes them to be understood as a means of manipulating children into paying attention to books and consequently the words in them" (3). There are five books in the series: *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Roderick Rules*, *The Last Straw*, *Dog Days*, and *Do-It-Yourself*. Between 2007 and 2009, the first book of the series was listed for sixty-one weeks on the children's page of *The New York Times*' bestseller list; the sequel *Roderick Rules* was listed for twenty-two weeks. A filmic adaptation was released in March 2010 by Twentieth Century Fox. Kinney states that his series was originally intended for an adult audience, but his publishers encouraged him to reconsider it as a children's series; it's listed now for nine to twelve year-olds. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series targets "reluctant" readers. It has sold over 11 million copies.

The protagonist Greg Heffley is, "stuck in middle school with a bunch of morons" (2). The stories center on his experiences being one of the least popular kids at school, the middle child at home, and the difficulties he has making (and keeping) friends. The text at first may seem a refreshingly honest look at the challenges of being a kid. The back cover of the first book in the series states: "Being a kid can really stink. No one knows this better than Greg Heffley, who finds himself thrust into middle school, where undersized weaklings share the hallways with kids who are taller, meaner, and already shaving." Upon closer examination, however, the books appear to be an adult's exposition on how not to be a kid and the consequences of being the

“wrong” kind of kid. Greg is not portrayed as an attractive character with whom readers or viewers want to identify. The texts frame him as pathetic, and his own narration of events is so unreliable that it is easy to accept the negative way he is framed. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is didactic by defining how not to be a student, friend, brother, or son. Through the use of humorous, negative examples, the texts may actually cause readers to not want to identify with the protagonist child. Children are depicted as malevolent. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is just one example of didacticism in contemporary children’s books.

Children’s literature has historically been understood as having a didactic purpose. Contemporary texts for children, however, refine their didactic edge, becoming, “sneaky about [their] didactic agenda. It manipulates its readers into being educated by not being obviously educational, by giving children what they need by appearing to give them what they want” (Nodelman 158). For example, Jon Agee’s picture book *The Retired Kid* seems to initially take an honest, refreshing look at some difficulties inherent in being a child, especially the lack of choices that children have. The book begins: “It’s hard work being a kid. First of all, there’s school. Then there’s soccer practice, violin class, voice lessons, walking Sparky, babysitting your little sister, not to mention eating your vegetables.” The narrator decides to retire from being a kid and go to Florida. He goes to Happy Sunset Retirement Community. Unfortunately, Agee falls into ageist depictions of the elderly people living in the retirement community that exacerbate the ageist descriptions of the child protagonist. At first the boy has fun playing cards, golfing and relaxing in the pool. However, he soon becomes bored “having to listen to Tex go on about his hip replacement, looking at hundreds of snapshots of Myrtle’s grandchildren...” He decides to return home and discovers that some things about being a kid are great. By the end of the book he exclaims: “It’s hard work being a kid but guess what? I LOVE MY JOB!” Agee’s

portrayal of childhood seems to unequivocally assert that childhood has pleasant and unpleasant aspects, but we should, like the protagonist, focus on the positive aspects because there are worse things; in this case getting old is the thing to avoid. Both *The Wimpy Kid Series* and *The Retired Kid* are didactic in tone. While the didacticism has become more muted, many texts written by adults for children share this characteristic.

Another aspect that many texts written for children frequently share is the use of anthropomorphism, giving human characteristics to non-human objects. In the case of several picture books, the use of anthropomorphism helps disguise the didacticism of the text. Hannah Shaw's *Sneaky Weasel* (2009) uses the character Weasel to communicate to children the basic values of generosity and kindness. It begins, "Weasel was a sneak. He was a bully and a cheat—a nasty measly Weasel." Weasel decides to have a party, but no one in his town, Rabbit, Shrew, or Porcupine, wants to come because of the way he's treated them: making fun of them, messing up their projects, playing practical jokes. He makes reparations, apologizes and throws another party, and all of his friends come. The weasel character illustrates both the consequences of anti-social behaviors and the ability characters have to truly make amends. This, of course, isn't a bad lesson for anyone to learn, but so much of children's literature seems to need to justify itself as being beneficial for children because it includes the portrayal of positive values that adults feel kids need to learn. While many educators and parents might disagree, I think thinly veiled morality training in all texts is offensive. As an adult reader, if I want to learn how to do something or how to be a better person, I'll turn to a genre other than fiction that clearly distinguishes itself as somehow instructional in nature. Perhaps children's texts should focus more on what children want to learn as opposed to what adults want children to learn.

Margaret and H.A. Rey's *Curious George* series also has a highly didactic tone. In each book of the original series, published between 1941-1966, and in the additional books produced by Scholastic through the 1990s, Curious George, a monkey who is captured in the African jungle and then brought to the city, gets in trouble for being too curious. In the first book of the original series, *Curious George* (1941), George gets captured and then taken to the zoo because of his interest in a yellow hat. In each subsequent book, George's interest in paint, kites, zoo animals, a creek, writing a letter, and jigsaw puzzles, to name a few, result in him being hospitalized, taken to jail, chased by an angry farmer, and punished. Children readers are asked to identify with George. He is the only consistent character throughout the series besides "the man with the yellow hat," but the man with the yellow hat only shows up to rescue George. The repeating thematic device of George following his curiosity, getting in trouble, and then having to be rescued perpetuates several adult assumptions about children and serves as a cautionary tale to the child readers. Daniel Greenstone in "Frightened George: How the Pediatric-Educational Complex Ruined the Curious George Series" asserts that the Curious George series reflects the changing American view of childhood during the 1940s and 1950s. Greenstone asserts that the first two books in the series, *Curious George* and *Curious George Takes a Job* (1947), "portray a protagonist who eagerly, and almost entirely without apprehension, confronts some of the most profound childhood fears imaginable, including physical danger, illness, abandonment and exploitation by adults. This portrayal was neither an accident nor a mistake; in fact the early George's attitude toward the challenges put in front of him was an accurate reflection of the less anxious view of childhood that was common in pre-war America" (221). Greenstone continues by describing the gradual change in the subsequent books in the series in which the adults become more sympathetic, the dangers less severe, and George himself more timid and

frightened. Greenstone sees the shift in the series as a direct result of the changes in the understanding of childhood from a Victorian understanding of children as resilient and tough to the American 1950s version of childhood that saw children as fragile and in need of protection. Additionally the series responded to developments in childhood education, most notably the importance of teaching phonics. Thus, in the fifth book of the series, *Curious George Flies a Kite* (1958), a much simpler vocabulary is employed. The sixth book of the series, *Curious George Learns the Alphabet* (1966), focuses on teaching young George and children how to read. Greenstone states: “This shift, of course, mirrors the transformation in American middle-class childrearing practices during the twentieth century” (228). While I do not completely agree with Greenstone’s assessment of the series, I find his study notable because of how clearly he outlines the parallels between the historical concept of the child and childhood and texts that are created at that time. The previously discussed texts—*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *A Retired Kid*, *Sneaky Weasel*, and *Curious George*—illustrate the didacticism found in children’s literature today.

In addition to being didactic and teaching mainstream ideology, children’s and young adult literature has subversive potential. Several critics investigate the subversive potential of children’s literature. Julia Mickenburg asserts in *Learning from the Left* that children’s literature “provides an ongoing glimpse into ongoing efforts to challenge the most oppressive elements of the status quo” (280). She continues: “Left wingers had been at the forefront of efforts—beginning in the 40s—to make children’s books more realistic, racially diverse, and conducive to critical thinking” (281). Mickenburg asserts that children’s literature remains a free venue for expression despite ongoing attempts to ban books. By producing children’s literature, leftist authors wished to influence how children learn to think. Leftist nature books emphasized

observation, questioning, and experimentation. They avoided anthropomorphism. Writers of science books for children believed in the democratic empowerment of children (200). Leftist authors also challenged the master narratives of American history by writing historical biographies and retelling American myths and legends in an attempt to “reframe the master narratives” and recover forgotten narratives (232). While leftist authors have provided a contrasting voice to the dominant ideology of consumer capitalism, the effects of their efforts have been minimal. First, there have been fewer leftist authors in the past three decades as the U.S.’s distrust of socialism and communism has intensified. Also, with the centralization of book publication and distribution, books with platforms that deviate widely from mainstream ideology aren’t being published. Perhaps publishing houses are worried about disseminating materials with messages that contradict the dominant ideology, but more likely their motivation revolves around profit. They want to market texts that appeal to a wide audience. Niche, leftist books that challenge the dominant ideology of American culture aren’t best sellers.

Alison Lurie also investigates the subversive potential of children’s literature in *Don’t Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children’s Literature* which begins, “There exists in our world an unusual, partly savage tribe, ancient and widely distributed...I refer, of course, to children” (ix). Lurie defines subversion as, “daydreaming, disobedience, answering back, running away from home, and concealing one’s private thoughts and feelings from unsympathetic grown-ups...making fun of adult institutions such as school and family” (x). She asserts that some adult authors haven’t forgotten what it’s like to be a child, making them able to create texts that honestly depict childhood. Unfortunately, her assertions that children’s literature is subversive seem hastily constructed and limited. What Lurie defines as subversion appears instead to be strategies for surviving an oppressive situation, not ways to truly create an



environment more accepting of children as equal human beings. These “subversive” strategies, instead of effecting real change, can serve to maintain the marginalized status of children because they allow children to cope with less than optimal situations until they are adults and are afforded more social power. Children’s literature, Lurie states, “portrays an ideal world of perfectible beings, free of the necessity for survival and reproduction: not only a pastoral but a paradisaal universe” (xv). If Lurie is correct in asserting that this is what children’s literature does, then children’s literature is failing its young audience by creating a picture of childhood that doesn’t match up with the lived experiences of actual children. Very few children find themselves living in a “paradisaal universe,” but much of children’s literature and film continues to portray childhood as a blissful, innocent time. Truly subversive children’s literature would attempt to provide children insight into how to navigate and, hopefully, change their marginalized status. In my research, I have found that young adult literature, especially texts written by marginalized groups as well as dystopias, tend to be more subversive than texts aimed at younger and wider audiences, texts such as animated children’s films.

Murray’s *American Children’s Literature and the Construction of Childhood* gives an overview of American children’s literature from 1690-1990, arguing that children’s literature has become increasingly progressive since colonial times. Murray asserts that consumerism, gender stereotyping, and racism have been transcended in contemporary children’s literature because the authors allow their protagonists more freedom. Murray describes the 1950s-1990s as the “Child Liberation” period. JD Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* is the “prototype of the problem novels that dominated juvenile writing in the 1960s and 1970s” (175). The “Child Liberation” period allowed for more realism in children’s literature. Murray asserts that the inclusion of realism, “Posited a new construction of childhood: children are neither innocent nor sinful. They should

not be protected from reality, because they can develop the ego strength to overcome alienation and pain. Experiencing life is the best preparation for adulthood. As in colonial times, modern times have blurred the distinction between childhood and adulthood” (194). Murray’s analysis of children’s culture extends only to the early 1990s. I argue that a conservative backlash has occurred throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century that places a renewed emphasis on fantasy and seeks to exclude children from several highly influential children’s texts including, most notably, children’s animated film. Young Adult literature, however, especially dystopias like the *Hunger Game* series, may have subversive potential and encourage young readers to critically investigate mainstream ideology.

Through an analysis of Disney films, my dissertation will briefly examine the concept of the American child that began to solidify in the 1940s and 1950s, but my primary interest is exploring the most recent developments in the image of the child and childhood in America. Chapter One discusses how the image of the child is being removed from animated children’s films. Pixar’s films utilize primarily anthropomorphized, adult protagonists voiced by adult actors and expressing adult concerns. Since the Classic Disney films which included some children protagonists up through the New Disney films which feature young adult protagonists, many of marriageable age, and into Pixar films, the age of the protagonists has been increasing. Now, the anthropomorphized characters of Pixar films are adults. Both the mis-representation of children in children’s literature and film and the exclusion of children from children’s literature and film are problems worthy of more exploration. Disney has dominated the animated children’s film industry for over seventy years, and by examining films from the Classic Disney era such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella* through the New Disney period films such as *The Lion King* and *The Little Mermaid*, the dramatic shift in the image of the child is evident. Pixar’s

innovative films reveal a significant shift in the concept of the child, and while Dreamworks may be providing a resistant voice to the Disney and Pixar's dominance over the children's film industry, their reliance on fantasy may compromise their more progressive politics.

In the second chapter I explore the popular genre of young adult fantasy, focusing on the development of the genre since the 1960s and the works of Susan Cooper and Lloyd Alexander. The chapter also explores contemporary fantasy texts including *The Magic Tree House Series*, *Savvy*, the *Percy Jackson*, and the *Twilight* series. The widely popular *Harry Potter* series receives the most in-depth analysis. The genre of fantasy is especially important in exploring the marginalization of children in society because the genre allows children more seeming agency than they possess in their real lived experiences. However, the images of the self-actualized child with the ability to make choices and positively effect change in their broader communities are frequently negated by the fantastical settings of the film. Additionally, several protagonists of fantasy books like Mibs from *Savvy*, Percy from *Percy Jackson*, and Harry from the *Harry Potter* series have special abilities or in-born qualities that separate them from the reading or viewing children who can never have special powers or be demi-gods. The child audience can never have the kind of agency afforded to the protagonists of fantasy texts because, simply put, real children are just human. Finally, many works of young adult fantasy simply serve to reinscribe the dominant ideology of the surrounding culture by, for example, casting the female characters and multi-racial characters simply in supporting roles. Fantasy is a genre with the potential to achieve a strong element of the subversive, but in most cases, it fails to reach that potential.

One of America's most blatant untruths is that social class doesn't really exist in the U.S. anymore; like smallpox and polio, social class has been eradicated. In the third chapter of my

dissertation “Working-Class Children: Disappearing from Contemporary Children’s Film” I explore how contemporary films and several cartoon series have consistently sought to erase class issues from the screen, thus continuing to reinforce an unrealistic view of childhood in the United States. Even in films ostensibly about class such as *Stand by Me* and *The Newsies* the depiction of working class children only serves to reinforce the culture’s dominant views about the struggles of the working class, namely, that those struggles are a relic of the past.

Chapter Four focuses on the depictions of children by several canonized American authors which are frequently included in the secondary curriculum, including the work of William Faulkner and Henry James. This chapter argues that young adult literature, especially dystopias and texts written by marginalized authors, deserve a place in the canon in middle and high school where they can then be more accessible to young readers and hopefully receive more critical attention. Standing in opposition to the mainstream portrayals of childhood and young adulthood are marginalized authors who articulate the struggles of childhood and attempt to offer their readers tools to navigate and thrive in a repressive environment. For example Jacqueline Woodson’s young adult novels honestly explore controversial topics. *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* portrays the inter-racial friendship of the protagonists Marie and Lena and shows the parents harboring racist and classist attitudes more than the children. Dystopias such as M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* and Suzanne Collin’s *Hunger Games* ask readers to critically investigate current ideologies.

Chapter Five “Working towards a New Model of Literacy while Promoting Children’s Agency” provides an overview of two basic strategies that concerned educators, parents, and community members can use to confront the expression of ageism in children’s literature and film. The first technique is encouraging children through arts-integration, transmediation, and literary theory to engage more deeply, creatively, and critically with texts. By actively

constructing meaning through the use of several different types of literacy, children are less likely to passively receive and accept the ideology and ageism contained in adult texts.

The second method of combating ageism is involving children more in the process of writing, revising, illustrating, producing, publishing, and distributing texts for other children to read. Through the investigation of three community literacy projects—The Fayetteville Public Library, 826 National, Tree House Books, and Razorback Writers—which focus on publishing and distributing the work of young writers, I provide an overview of four community literacy projects. The main focus of the chapter is Razorback Writers, the community literacy project where I served as the Activities Director and site coordinator for two years, from 2010-2012. The primary goals of Razorback Writers are to provide the support and opportunities that children need in order to begin seeing themselves as authors that create, revise, publish, and distribute their own texts. These literacy projects are efforts made by educators to increase children's interest in text production.

As people become more aware of the marginalization that children are experiencing both in their lived experiences and as a result of the texts created for their consumption, I hope that scholars, educators, parents, writers, publishers, producers, and concerned community members will unite to help create better living conditions for children in the United States and worldwide. One simple way to begin addressing the marginalization of children is to give them a voice. As children and young adults gain confidence in their creativity and obtain more opportunities to distribute their work, I predict that we will see highly entertaining, creative, and diverse texts being produced by young authors. As more and more young authors emerge, the face of childhood in America will begin to change because instead of having essentialized, nostalgic, or

didactic texts, the voices of these new young authors will reflect their actual experience of childhood and their imagining of the world.

## Chapter One:

### Representations of Children in Animated Children's Films

When examining how ageism is present in the image of the child pervading American culture, it is imperative to begin with the portrayal of children in children's animated films. No

other body of texts has had such a significant shaping effect on the image of childhood than feature-length animated films. Ian Wojick-Andrews states, “Children’s cinema and film indeed offers a metacommentary on film and society” (20). Children’s films reveal fascinating information about our society. Though children’s films may initially seem to be light or trivial popular cultural texts, they are in actuality complex, layered texts that continue to shape our definition of childhood in America.

### **Classic Disney**

Begun in the 1920s by brothers Walt and Roy Disney, the Disney Company became known for its quality animation and innovative use of sound and color. By the 1930s Disney’s Mickey Mouse was known globally. Through an aggressive marketing campaign, Disney secured its place as the major producer of children’s film, but, at the same time, it has maintained its reputation as producing safe, wholesome entertainment. The Disney Corporation now dominates the entertainment business, including but not limited to children’s programming. In addition to its media entertainment, Disney has created a “self-contained universe which presents consistently recognizable virtues through recurring characters and familiar, repetitive themes” (Wasko 2-3). Throughout its eighty years in children’s film production, Disney has become an icon of American culture and a disseminator of middle class family values. Because of the extent of Disney’s influence, Disney’s conceptualization of childhood has helped shape America’s definition of childhood since the 1930s.

*Snow White*, produced in 1937 by Disney, was the first feature length animated film. Janet Wasko asserts: “The Disney version presents an Americanized Snow White and might be said to have fully established the Classic Disney formula...Childlike behavior is featured, as cute

characters abound, including Snow White herself, the animals, and dwarves” (131). For the children who make up the conceptualized audience of Disney’s animated films, Disney propounds two main ideologies: children are innocent and, at the same time, innocent children should adopt “adult” behavior and values such as hard work, individuality, optimism, and traditional gender roles and thus find their place in society.

*Snow White* marks the beginning of Disney’s “classic” period, the period of film production when Walt Disney was alive and heavily involved in the production of the animated films. This period includes *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *The Sword and the Stone* (1963), and *The Jungle Book* (1967). Wasko asserts that Classic Disney, instead of being open-ended and imaginative as the Disney corporation asserts, is “neatly tied into a conservative vision of the world and linked directly with consumer culture” (224). Walt Disney has been criticized for his lack of vision and for his white, male, middle class point-of-view that influenced the themes of the classic Disney films. Wasko states: “Classic Disney developed a specific type of story with a predictable plot featuring a collection of formulaic characters. In addition, the themes emphasized in Disney productions came to represent specific values and a fairly well-defined ideology” (112). Through its animated films, Disney both defines childhood and prepares children to perform adulthood.

*Snow White* established numerous conventions for future animated films including stereotypical gender roles in which the female character is passive and dependent on the male character. Henry Giroux states: “Disney’s negative stereotypes about women and girls gain force through the way in which similar messages are consistently circulated and reproduced, to varying



degrees, in many of Disney's animated films" (100). Snow White, for instance, cleans the dwarves' house, cooks for them, and nurtures them by insisting that they take baths and wear clean clothes. She practices the role of the domestic housewife in preparation for her life as a wife and mother. Snow White is a civilizing, domestic force who brings harmony and cleanliness to the dwarves' home, and, viewers can only assume, to her future husband's home as well. The dwarves, though not in any way the epitome of masculinity in the film (that role is saved for Prince Charming), assume a traditionally masculine role. They go off to work every morning. Their messy house and dis-sheveled appearance illustrate that they need a woman to "keep them in line." These are the traditional feminine and masculine stereotypes both inside Disney animated films and in the broader American culture.

*Snow White* also introduces another convention into children's film by establishing a certain level of acceptable violence in children's film. In *Snow White* not only does it seem for a moment that the hunter kills Snow White, but also her wicked step-mother is struck by lightning and plunges from the mountain top to her death. Including violence has become a well established convention of children's film. Richard Schickel in *The Disney Version* asserts that the violent scenes may be "recalled with a kind of delicious shudder" (221), indicating that violence may be part of the pleasure in children's film. However, the inclusion of violence, while fairly innocuous in *Snow White*, has become a staple in children's film. Filmic violence may be one of the factors in the marginalization children.

Another convention of children's animated film begun by *Snow White* is that the nuances of the texts are typically expunged, and high contrast dualities are created. Wasko states: "Classic Disney is very emphatic in its depiction of good triumphing over evil" (132). Characters, for example, are either good or evil; there is little ambiguity in the Disney character

personality, and the good characters are always victorious. Classic Disney films openly indoctrinate children about good and bad/ right and wrong. These films are more openly didactic than the later New Disney films of the eighties and nineties, Pixar, or DreamWorks' films. *Pinocchio*, for example, urges children to take the straight and narrow path, listen to their parents, and get an education, and it illustrates what can happen to children who misbehave. The world is shown as dangerous and full of temptation; children are encouraged by this film to be obedient to their parents and stay close to home.

Another convention that begins with *Snow White*, a convention that carries through to Pixar's *Up*, is the denigration of non-nuclear families. In addition to constructing childhood, Disney's animated films work to construct the ideal family: heterosexual biological father and mother raising two or more children under one, middle-class roof. Disney's animated films have functioned, along with other societal factors, in demonizing single parent homes and non-nuclear families. In *Caught in the Crossfire*, Grossberg states that the denigration of single parent homes intensified in the 1980s and 1990s when "a politicized and conservative agenda emphasized the dangers of single parenting" (37). Even though thirty-eight percent of children in America live in single parent or blended family (with only one biological parent and a step-parent) homes, children's animated films continue to de-value these families. Grossberg continues: "The nuclear family has taken on the aura of the normatively appropriate form of the moral and American family" (212-213). According to Disney, step-parents, an icon of the non-traditional family, are evil and intent on harming their step-children. Characters like Pinocchio and Bambi, raised outside of the typical family unit, are more susceptible to the dangers of the outside world.

Animated Disney films also popularized the use of anthropomorphism. Beginning with *Snow White*, animals are given human characteristics. For example, the forest animals help Snow

White with her house cleaning. Animals are given human-like characteristics, such as the ability to talk, wear clothes, and walk upright, to illustrate and exaggerate human traits. The animal protagonists in Disney are frequently anthropomorphized children. In *Cinderella* the animals help Cinderella with her house work, too, and assist her in getting ready for the ball. The use of anthropomorphism is intensified by giving the animals names and, initially, a limited ability to talk. *Bambi* is Disney's first feature-length animated film with all animal protagonists. The only human character is the ominous hunter. In *Bambi* the animals personify children, and the protagonists Bambi, Thumper, and Flower struggle through the challenges of growing up. *Dumbo* focuses on the birth and early childhood of a little elephant with oversized ears. He remains a child through the course of the film. Instead of focusing on his coming of age, Dumbo's change is internal. He learns to believe in himself and overcome his difference by learning to fly. Viewing children are asked to interpret Dumbo's struggles metaphorically and apply the lessons Dumbo learned to their own lives.

In *The Jungle Book*, the last of the Classic Disney films, the emphasis is on getting Mowgli, one of the last human child protagonists in animated children's films, back to his village where he belongs. All the other characters are animals. The jungle is full of threats, and Mowgli's very childhood innocence puts him in peril. Much like Pinocchio, Mowgli is adventurous and curious, and he gets into a lot of trouble because of his childhood instincts. The film itself is a civilizing process, showing the act of leaving childish things behind in order to enter adolescence and, ultimately, the adult world. In New Disney, the human protagonists (for example, Belle and Ariel) are older, in their late teens or early twenties; both *The Little Mermaid* and *The Beauty and the Beast* end in the protagonists' marriage. Between Classic Disney and New Disney the protagonists age significantly, and the focus of many of the films, most notably

in the “princess films” directed at young female viewers, shifts from a broader theme of discovering their place in the world to discovering their place in the world through marriage.

Even though the Classic Disney films were first released seventy to eighty years ago, they still are relevant to contemporary generations of children. Many parents and grandparents who viewed the films as children continue to share these films with their children and grandchildren. However, the main reason Classic Disney films are still a part of the current generation’s childhood is because of Disney’s marketing. Classic Disney films are constantly being re-released with new improved animation or high resolution definition. Each development of filmic technology provides Disney the opportunity to re-release its classic films; the most recent example would be Blue Ray releases. Additionally, the classic Disney characters play a pivotal role at the theme parks, thus keeping them alive in children’s experiences. The continued presence of these films complicates the American definition of children. As this chapter will explore, Pixar films seem to be re-defining childhood, but the continued presence of older animated films continues to replicate the ideology of white, middle class, innocent children embodying adult behaviors.

### **New Disney**

Throughout the seventies and early eighties, animated films were less popular than live action children’s film, and Disney was in financial trouble (Schweizer 3). The “New Disney” period of the eighties and nineties signaled the renewed popularity of animated films and an aggressive marketing campaign under the direction of Michael Eisner. Giroux states: “Eisner took the failing Walt Disney company in 1983 and produced record revenues for the company

partly by waging aggressive advertising and licensing campaigns for merchandising children's culture" (33). The result of this marketing campaign was the New Disney films.

Wojcik-Andrews states that the children's films of the 1990s ignore the pressing social problems facing children. He asserts that there is a growing gulf between the cinematic depictions of children and children's lived experiences (108, 111). New Disney films of the late 1980s and 1990s reflect this change by offering children viewers several fantastical coming of age stories. The most popular "New Disney" films include *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Pocahontas* (1995). These films assume, like most texts produced for children, that "children can, indeed must, change and become adults" (Nodelman 31). In "New Disney" films the protagonists grow up through the course of the film and become either powerful adult leaders (in the case of Aladdin and Simba) or marry powerful adult leaders (in the case of Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine.) The sacrifices the protagonists make to find their places are, in several instances, extreme. In *The Little Mermaid*, for example, Ariel gives up her culture and undergoes an extreme physical alteration from mermaid to human to secure her place as Eric's wife. Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* submits to a life of imprisonment, but magically finds true love in the rough character of her jailer. *The Lion King* begins when Simba is a cub, but most of the narrative occurs when he is in late adolescence and early adulthood. The main thrust of the action occurs when he assumes his full power as an adult and claims his rightful place as king, but to reclaim his place as king, he has to face traumatic childhood memories and fight his uncle for the throne.

Like the Classic Disney films, the New Disney films continue to replicate gender stereotypes. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, for example, transitions from being a daydreaming, disobedient mermaid daughter in her father's kingdom under the sea to being the wife of a

powerful human prince by the end of the film. Some critics, including Pinski, assert that *The Little Mermaid* positively changes the way women are portrayed in animated children's films. He asserts, "Ariel acts rather than being acted upon" (142). What Pinski's analysis of Ariel's position lacks is a more thorough discussion of Ariel's individual position as a dependent subject. Throughout most of the film, Ariel fills the subject position as Triton's daughter. As the king, Triton demonstrates his complete power over Ariel when he destroys her collection of human artifacts with a blast from his trident. Every action that Ariel undertakes on her own results in complete disaster. The most notable incident is when Ariel trades her voice to the sea witch Ursula for human legs which results in her father being captured and held hostage by Ursula. The repeated disasters may show young viewers that children's independent action without the sanctioning of their parents results in negative outcomes.

Maybe Pinski sees Ariel's interest in Eric as a successful, independent action that she instigates. But securing a good husband is not a new position for women; it is simply the only other respectable subject position besides daughter that women in Disney are allowed to occupy. At the end of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is transferred from her father's responsibility into her husband's care. She never deviates far from a dependent position throughout the film. Women that deviate from the position of either daughter or wife are consistently portrayed as villains throughout Disney's history: think Cruella Deville from *101 Dalmations*, Ursula the Sea Witch from *The Little Mermaid*, and Ymza from *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000). Pinski states that Disney films continue to perpetuate "antagonism towards older women characters, in particular, ugly/ and or overweight villains who use younger men" (193). Women who transgress their social positions are severely chastised by Disney films by being portrayed as ugly, frightening,

and evil. This repeated negative portrayal of the women who are disobedient or unmarried serves as a warning to girls and teenagers.

New Disney films also continue to replicate the incorrect re-telling of history. While Disney may be trying to acknowledge other cultures through films like *Pocahontas*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan* in a response to criticism about its seemingly racist moments in films like *Dumbo* and *The Jungle Book*, Disney continues to narrate history from a white, mainstream, centrist position. In *Pocahontas* the focus of the narrative, like *The Little Mermaid*, is a love story between two unlikely people: Pocahontas, an Indian princess, and John Smith, a European colonist. Because the film highlights that love can overcome anything, it distorts the historical account of what really happened between John Smith and the Native Americans. *Pocahontas* admits that there are a few greedy, corrupt people in the world like Governor Ratcliffe, but the film asserts that in general people are all good natured and caring. This over-simplification cloaks the glaring problem of imperialism. In addition to promoting colonialism, *Pocahontas* also takes away the individuality of the female character. Like Ariel, Pocahontas' care, the film implies, will simply be shifted from her father to her future husband, John Smith. But again, this distorts the historical account. In the film, Pocahontas is in love with John Smith, but in the real historical account she was a young girl when she saved John Smith's life. Later, she was captured by the British colonists and then married to John Rolfe, a Virginia tobacco farmer. She returned to England with him and died a few years later when she was just in her early twenties.

Another problem in the depiction of Pocahontas—seen in *Mulan* and *Aladdin* as well—is that the multi-cultural characters are Westernized and “whitened.” Even though *Pocahontas* is the first Disney movie based on an historical account, it does not try to accurately re-tell the historical narrative. Neither *Aladdin* nor *Mulan* try to correctly depict a non-Western culture;

instead, all three films rely on and replicate stereotypes American viewers have about other cultures. By simultaneously claiming to depict multiculturalism while in actuality replicating a US-centric view of childhood and the world, these films provide a very limited and inaccurate perspective which further demarks animated children's film as a white, middle-class space.

Disney's two most recent "princess films," both based on traditional fairy tales, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (2011) do seem to be, in certain aspects, more progressive than the earlier animated "New Disney" films. Most notably, *The Princess and the Frog*, set in New Orleans, features Disney's first African-American princess, and *Tangled's* heroine Rapunzel is more feisty and intelligent than previous Disney heroines; however, in both films, the potentially subversive aspects are over-shadowed by the dominant mainstream, conservative ideology in the films.

*The Princess and the Frog* introduces Disney's first black princess to the world; but just how progressive is its depiction of a black character? In their article "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the 'White Man's Indian,' and the Marketing of Dreams" Egerton and Jackson state that in *Pocahontas*, "Race is a dramatic or stylistic device, but the more profound consequences of institutional racism are never allowed even momentarily to invade the audience's comfort zone" (n.p.). Over twenty years later, the same can be said about *The Princess and the Frog*. Even though Tiana, a black service worker, can, through the course of the film overcome her working class roots and fulfill her dream of owning a thriving jazz club, the narrative hides all institutionalized racism behind the Disney formula that dreams come true.

Tiana's story is an Americanized re-telling of the Grimm's fairy tale "The Frog Prince," but in Disney's version Tiana herself is turned into a frog after she kisses Prince Naveen in his frog-shape. When the Prince wonders what went wrong, Tiana admits that even though she was



wearing a tiara and a fancy ball gown (borrowed from her mother's employer's daughter, the belle Charlotte), she isn't a real princess; she explains that she was just dressed up for Mardi Gras. Finally, after Tiana and Naveen are married in their frog forms, Tiana becomes a real princess, and the wedding kiss turns them both back into their human forms.

Instead of being a king, Tiana's father, who dies just a few minutes into the film, is just a hard-working physical laborer with dreams of one day owning a restaurant. He dies before he obtains his dream, and Tiana devotes her life to fulfilling it. Tiana is only a little girl for the opening ten minutes. For the rest of the movie, she is an industrious eighteen-year-old, working two jobs to save up money for the restaurant. Opening the restaurant is the most important thing in Tiana's life until she falls in love with Prince Naveen when they are both frogs traveling through the Louisiana bayous. One potentially positive development in *The Princess and the Frog*, compared with the endings of New Disney films like *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*, is that at the end of the film, Tiana doesn't give up her dreams when she marries. For Pocahontas and Ariel, getting married means giving up their dreams and also their families, friends, and cultures. After they are married, Prince Naveen works alongside Tiana renovating the old warehouse for the upscale jazz club Tiana's Place, and once the restaurant is open, they work together in the restaurant: cooking, waiting tables, and playing music. Tiana achieves her dream and learns the joys of love throughout the film while Prince Naveen learns the benefits of hard work. It's a warm, fuzzy film.

Ultimately, however, I think *Princess and the Frog* flops as a children's animated film. Besides the traditional 2D animation and the extended musical pieces, *Princess and the Frog* doesn't seem like a kids' movie. The story is centered on an eighteen-year-old, and this young adult has typical young adult concerns about starting a successful career and falling in love. Why

is Disney targeting an audience of young girls between the ages of four and twelve with this film? *The Princess and the Frog* is another instance of an animated children's film trying to push children, girls especially, into adulthood at an earlier age through falling in love and getting married.

Additionally, even though *The Princess and the Frog* is ostensibly multi-cultural, the film perpetrates some of Disney's same old mainstream ideologies about race and class. Instead of having Prince Naveen be from a real country, Disney saves the time required for researching other cultures and just makes up a country, sparing themselves the criticism that followed *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *Aladdin* that they westernize all other cultures. Naveen, while slightly "other" with his tanned complexion and Brazilian accent, isn't tied to a specific place. In failing to create a male protagonist from an actual non-U.S. country, Disney forfeits an important opportunity to help introduce American viewers to the rest of the world that we glibly know so very little about. And in turning their first black princess into a frog for over half the movie, Disney fails its young viewers. Brandon Fibbs states: "Disney predominantly ignores rather than addresses the racial elements of [this] story. This disregard is easy when your [central] black character spends 75 percent of the movie being green" (qtd in Lester, 302).

Another problem is the setting of the film. Set in New Orleans in the 1920s during the Jazz Age, the film features an evil, voodoo black man, a jazz playing alligator, and ignorant poor white Cajuns, perpetuating several stereotypes about both African-Americans and poor whites in the South. In addition, Hurricane Katrina caused one of the worst domestic emergencies in recent American history; hardest hit was the black Ninth Ward. Setting *The Frog and the Princess*, which features the first African-American princess, in a city so recently devastated by a natural disaster and ignored by the U.S. government seems insensitive at the very least. Even though *The*

*Princess and the Frog* does depict the first black princess, ultimately this film doesn't subvert mainstream ideology as much as it might have. Hopefully Disney will be willing to create another multi-cultural film that does try to disrupt dominant cultural stereotypes a little more thoroughly.

*Tangled*, Disney's fiftieth animated film, seems to be trying to do something new. The princess Rapunzel is independent and intelligent. She was stolen at birth by the evil woman Gothel who for many centuries had been using the rejuvenating powers of a magical, golden flower to perpetually restore her own youth. When the queen of the kingdom fell sick during the last term of her pregnancy, the king's soldiers searched throughout the land for the magic flower, and they found it. The queen was healed, and when she gave birth to a baby girl whose long, golden hair had the same magical properties, Gothel stole the baby Rapunzel and raised her in a tower in a secluded valley. Gothel was confident that no one would take away her golden girl. Like other recent Disney films, Rapunzel is only a child for the first few minutes of the film. The main narrative begins when Rapunzel is about to turn eighteen. She wants to travel to the capital city to see the paper lanterns that are lit every year, and when Gothel says she can't ever leave the tower, Rapunzel tricks Gothel and escapes. She is determined to see the mysterious lights that always appear on her birthday. Accompanying her on the journey is the bandit Flynn Rider, whose real name, we find out later in the narrative, is Eugene Fitzherbert.

Eugene is the character who is really a deviation from the typical princes of Disney princess movies. For one thing, he plays a much larger part in the film than the princes of earlier Disney princess movies; in fact, he narrates the film. In addition, he isn't a prince, but an outlaw who first appears stealing the lost princess' tiara from the castle. When he is being chased by the king's soldiers, he discovers Rapunzel's castle. The expansion of Flynn/ Eugene's role was a

deliberate move on Disney's part. After *The Princess and the Frog* didn't gross as much as Disney executives wanted, they heavily revised *Tangled* in hopes that it would appeal to both girls and boys. According to Dawn Chmielewski and Claudia Eller, "Disney hopes the introduction of the slightly bad-boy character will help it tap the broadest possible audience for *Tangled*, emulating the success of its corporate sibling, Pixar. Pixar's movies have been huge hits because they appeal to girls, boys and adults (n.p)." The desire to appeal to both boys and girls, however, leads to the marginalization of Rapunzel. The whole film, besides the last two minutes, is narrated by Flynn/ Eugene, and Rapunzel's dynamic character is over-shadowed by Flynn's antics.

After eighty years and fifty animated, feature-length films, it's hard to hold out hope that Disney will begin producing films that more accurately reflect the life experiences of children. Hopefully, however, there will be shifts in how Disney portrays gender, race, and class, and as the United States begins to embrace diversity and multi-culturalism, it is possible that Disney won't be too far behind in shedding the conservative ideology.

## **Pixar**

For several years during the "New Disney" period, Disney was the most successful producer of children's animated films. Pixar provided a challenge to Disney's position as the lead producer of children's entertainment from its release of *Toy Story* in 1995 until 2006 when Disney bought Pixar. Beginning in 1995 with *Toy Story*, Pixar produced the first completely computer generated animated film. Several critics speculated that the use of computer generated graphics instead of hand-drawn illustrations meant the end of animated children's film, but Pixar's technological inventiveness partly explains their films' huge success. Booker states, "*Toy Story* (like all Pixar films) is all about the animation and about the ability of Pixar's animators to

produce impressive, convincing computer generated visuals that are full of warmth and humor” (122). Many Pixar films textually emphasize technology over magic. In Pixar films, animals can talk, but their linguistic abilities are not attributed to magical intervention. In Pixar’s *Up*, the dogs’ ability to talk is the result of an innovative collar that translates their barking into several different languages, a technological, instead of a magical, justification for talking animals.

There are several other differences between Disney and Pixar films. In many Pixar films, the protagonists are adults from the onset of the film. The imperative to become an adult is conveyed in Pixar films by representing adult anthropomorphized characters; in Pixar films there is a tendency to expunge the child characters which may be a symptom of the larger social tendency to marginalize children. The replacement of child protagonists by adult anthropomorphized animals and objects causes Pixar’s films to forfeit the opportunity to offer constructive narratives about children navigating the precarious terrain of childhood.

Pixar films build on the tradition of American children’s film which has been dominated by Disney for over seventy years. Pixar, a highly successful animated film subsidiary of Disney, has produced and distributed thirteen highly popular and entertaining animated films from 1995 through 2012. Even though Pixar is now owned by Disney, there seems to be a conscious attempt to distinguish Pixar films from the animated films of Disney proper. In 2006 when Disney purchased Pixar, Pixar retained its brand identity. Each Pixar film is a major cinematic event, and upon release Pixar’s films have become instant children’s classics. The most significant distinction between Pixar and many Disney films is that the protagonists in Pixar films are typically older than the main characters of the majority of Disney films. Pixar has dramatically reduced the number of children in their films. Russell, the boy in *Up*, is Pixar’s most fully developed child character in all Pixar’s films as of this writing, but he serves primarily as a

sidekick to the film's protagonist Carl who is sixty or seventy years old. Additionally, Pixar films feature very few anthropomorphized children; the main characters of Pixar films are anthropomorphized adults. The tremendous financial success of the Pixar films undoubtedly indicates that depictions of children—whether human or anthropomorphized animals or objects—are not a necessary component of successful children's films.

In Pixar films, child protagonists are replaced with primarily adult anthropomorphized characters including toys, ants, fish, cars, rats, and robots. Between the ages of three and nine, the target age for Pixar films, children's experiences involve primarily their roles in their family and school and their relationship with their peer group. Though the anthropomorphized protagonists of Pixar's films experience situations that the young viewing audiences may be able to identify with, the solutions the protagonists develop are not transferable into the viewing child's life experience. Wasko in *Understanding Disney* states that children's films allow viewers to "escape from an everyday reality that is not always pleasurable or fun, and may well pose challenging dilemmas" (224). Pixar films contain very few depictions of child protagonists navigating the world that the child viewers inhabit. Giroux, in *The Mouse that Roared*, states:

It is within the drama of animated storytelling that children are often positioned pedagogically to learn what subject positions are open to them and what positions are not. Hence, the struggle over children's culture should be considered as part of the struggle over the related discourses of citizenship, national identity, and democracy itself. (10)

Through Pixar films, children may be learning that the best thing for them to do is to grow up as quickly as possible.

In Pixar's films, unlikely animals and machines including rats, fish, and cars are anthropomorphized to replace the children in children's films. In *Cars* (2006) and *Cars 2* (2011),

for example, the town of Radiator City is populated with adult cars instead of people—cars that sell and buy tires, cars that manufacture and drink organic fuel, even cars that care about the preservation of the town, located on historic Route 66. Each car in the film serves as a stereotyped small town character. In a moment directly referencing films nostalgic for the 1950s such as *American Graffiti* and *Grease*, references directed towards adult viewers, the cars are shown cruising down the main strip and hanging out at the diner, but there are no humans anywhere. When traffic is diverted from Radiator City by the construction of the new interstate, the cars living in Radiator City have no revenue. The plot revolves around Lightning McQueen, a racecar who is textually drawn as masculine, and who accidentally finds himself in Radiator City after he gets lost on his way to the Piston Cup. McQueen ostensibly learns to value community above individuality and helps get Radiator City back on the map. In *Cars 2* the scope of the film widens, and Lightning McQueen races internationally. Instead of fighting to save the small town of Radiator City, Lightning McQueen and his sidekick Mater undertake a mission to save the world. In these films, there are no characters that can be understood as literal or metaphorical representations of children.

The lack of child protagonists in children's films may indicate a shift in American's construct of childhood. Pixar films, like all texts produced by adults for children in English, are influenced by America's understanding of "the child." Nicholas Sammond, in *Babes in Tomorrowland*, asserts that our American definition of "the child" emerged from a specific location of class and race. The ideology that influences American viewers and filmmakers about children and childhood stems from a generic understanding of white, male, middle class children that developed out of the 1950s and was heavily influenced by Classic Disney films. Sammond asserts that the concept of the child continues to be limiting, but "that truth may be easily swept

aside in the intense affect that the figure of the child inspires” (384). Childhood in America is an externally created phenomenon that developed out of a particular period in American history. Texts created by adults for the consumption of children are directed at the concept of “the child” not actual children. Many of Pixar’s films reflect a change in the idea of the imagined viewer. Children viewing Pixar’s films may be expected to identify with the adult protagonists. In *The Hidden Adult*, Perry Nodelman asserts, “Children’s literature is what adults want children to want...One of its defining characteristics may well be its imagining of a fictional child as its reader—a fictional child who it proposes as a model for the actual children who read it” (160-161). Since the “Classic” Disney films of the 1940s and 1950s there has been an aging of the protagonists in children’s films while the age of the children viewing the film has remained the same. One possible explanation for the older protagonists is the producers of animated films’ desire to appeal simultaneously to children and adults. Instead of asking adults to cultivate an interest in “kid stuff,” recent animated films are hoping to age young viewers’ tastes.

In certain ways, Pixar films continue to replicate filmic conventions found in Disney’s animated films. Like Disney, Pixar films rely on conventional gender stereotyping. Pixar has moved away from the passive princess motif of earlier Disney films in an attempt to offer more inclusively gendered films with more complex female characters and characters that also appeal to boys, but just how much progress has Pixar made? The characters of Pixar films, whether they are toys, fish, ants, rats or robots, remain highly gendered in stereotypical ways that conform to the norms of a patriarchal society. Emma Cornell asserts, “In order to be economically successful, cinema must concern itself with the subjectivity of the spectator, who, in a patriarchal culture is constructed as male...the conservatism of the cinema is based on its economic dependence on a male dominated culture” (35) A possible effect of the encoding of the imagined



viewer as male may be the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in many Pixar films. Little Bo Peep and Mrs. Potato Head stay at home in *Toy Story 2* (1999) when Buzz heads up a rescue search party for Woody. Bo Peep gives Buzz a kiss on the cheek to give to Woody; Mrs. Potato Head helps Mr. Potato Head pack, but neither female character is actually involved in the expedition. Jesse, Woody's female counterpart in the Round-up Gang, desires to impress and please Woody by showing him fetishized images of himself, images that include episodes of a TV show starring Woody, a lunch pail sporting his face, and various other consumer products that portray his image. Her life happiness depends on Woody's decision. If he leaves her, she will return to storage, her greatest fear. She is animated only by his presence. Dory in *Finding Nemo* accompanies Marlin, Nemo's father, on his ocean quest to find his lost son. She is loyal and nurturing, but she suffers from short term memory loss. Much of the humor in the film results from Dory's disability. The only other female character in the film besides Nemo's mother, who is dispatched minutes after the film begins, is the blue fish in the aquarium who talks to her reflection. The female characters in *Finding Nemo* (2003) behave stupidly and provide comic relief. Mike's girlfriend Celia in *Monsters Inc.* (2001) is possessive and abusive. In *A Bug's Life* (1998) the anthill is governed by a matriarchy, but the Princess is dominated and bullied by male grasshoppers and ultimately rescued by a male ant. The female characters of Pixar's films are "marginalized within the very narratives they dominate" (Wojcik-Andrews 173). The most surprising instances of gendering occur in *Cars*, *Cars 2*, and *WALL-E* (2008) because the protagonists are machines. The "girl cars" in *Cars* and *Cars 2* are given distinctive qualities that accent their femininity, such as long, thick eyelashes and luscious lips. *Cars* and *Cars 2* adhere to stereotypical notions of gender. The girl cars seem most interested in nurturing

and serving while the “boy cars” are out enjoying tests of physical prowess. The girl cars own hotels and work at restaurants while the boy cars are out racing.

In a limited way, Pixar’s *WALL-E* seems to take steps away from gender stereotyping. WALL-E is unmistakably gendered male, and Eve is gendered female though not in such stereotypical ways. WALL-E, gendered male, is shown pining for Eve, a robot who is gendered female. He engages in romantic fantasies in ways reminiscent of Disney’s Snow White, Ariel, and Pocahontas: pining, sighing, and daydreaming. Eve seems more powerful than WALL-E; her arm is a powerful gun, and she frequently goes on shooting sprees. She seems primarily focused on her mission, while WALL-E devotes his energy to building a home. Even though the robots’ behavior does not immediately identify WALL-E as male and Eve as female, young viewers easily recognized WALL-E and Eve as gendered characters. I asked my sons William (age eleven) and Robin (age seven) how they knew that WALL-E was a boy and Eve a girl. William said, “I could tell by their voices. Also, Eve was prettier. And cleaner.” Robin added, “I could tell by her shape that Eve was a girl. It looked like she was wearing a dress.” Though Pixar might be making some attempts to question dominant gender stereotyping, there are some problems with this reading because the characters do remain gendered, and film does not consistently depict Eve as self-determining. At one point, Eve is shut down, becoming totally unresponsive to external stimuli. While she is shut down, WALL-E wraps her in a string of Christmas lights and carries her to a sunset viewing vantage point. As the sun is setting, WALL-E forces his hand into Eve’s impassive hand, acting out one of his favorite romantic fantasies after watching *I Love Lucy*. By this point in the film, Eve was fully anthropomorphized into a self-determining female character. Having WALL-E act out his romantic fantasies with her while she was unable to participate or resist undermines the earlier reversals of gender stereotypes.

Excluding the first twelve minutes of *Up*, which consists of sequences of nostalgic flashbacks about Carl, the crusty sixty-something protagonist, and his dead wife Ellie, who always dreamed of traveling to South America but was never able to, there are no female characters. Throughout the film Carl talks to Ellie; she is a haunting female presence, embodied by Carl's house. In order to affect positive changes in his life, Carl has to let his attachment to that feminine presence go. Russell's mother is shown only once, in the audience at Russell's graduation ceremony to senior wilderness scout.

In addition to the exclusion of female protagonists throughout the film, *Up* is problematic as a children's film because the child Russell serves as a sidekick for Carl who, throughout the course of the film, adopts "childlike" qualities such as enthusiasm and renewed vitality. *Up* was advertised as being about Russell's experiences, but the film primarily focuses on nostalgic images of Carl's childhood in the 1950s and his renewed love of life as an adult. Carl is Pixar's oldest protagonist to date. *Up* asks viewing children to adopt concerns about change, aging, and death more commonly associated with the elderly.

Pixar's decision to move away from child protagonists is motivated by numerous factors. Profit motivation behind Pixar's filmmaking partially explains anthropomorphism in the Pixar films. Cute clown fish, snuggly robot dolls, and plush Lightning McQueen pillows become an avenue for children to continue enjoying the film after the movie is over, and "Pixar is in the business of making money off of the fantasies of children" (Booker 149). The most dramatic example of creating a movie of marketable characters is *Toy Story*; the protagonists are all toys. Creating a film about the adventures and exploits of these toys conditions a young viewing audience to desire replicas of these toys, creating a "dramatization of the fascination with manufactured objects that Marx referred to as the 'commodity fetish'" (Booker 124-125).

Interestingly, the toys in the *Toy Story* films are all adults. Their owners, the children, exist on the margins of the story. Having such a diverse array of protagonists and the worlds they inhabit from an anthill in *Bug's Life* to the racetrack in *Cars* and the toy chest of *Toy Story* creates the opportunity to manufacture and market a wide array of products and make the release of a Pixar film an event felt in a wider arena than just the movie theaters. The protagonists in many Pixar films model consumption. Many characters are actually humanized through the acquisition of consumer goods. *Ratatouille's* Remy, a rat that is actively and viciously discriminated against by humans throughout the duration of the film, is fascinated by cookbooks, televised cooking shows, recipes, and restaurants. He becomes more endearing throughout the film as he watches TV shows and acquires cookbooks. WALL-E's home is a museum of human artifacts. He takes a lunch pail to work everyday, and as he is compacting garbage, he keeps certain objects—lighters and Christmas lights, rubber duckies, and spare eyeballs. WALL-E is humanized by his acquisition of human artifacts. His association with things the audience will recognize instills in him a type of human-ness. These marginalized characters display their desire for acceptance into the dominant culture despite the abuse and neglect some of these characters experience. Giroux's description of the Disney corporation extends, in this case, to Pixar:

Disney uses its much-touted commitment to wholesome entertainment to market toys, clothes, and gadgets to children...Disney's view of children as consumers has little to do with innocence and a great deal to do with corporate greed and the realization that behind the vocabulary of family fun and wholesome entertainment is the opportunity for teaching children that critical thinking and civic action in society are far less important than the role of passive consumer. (158)

The act of acquiring consumer goods humanizes Pixar's characters, but equating humanness with consumption is a highly problematic quality of children's films. Repeatedly children are shown the image of a marginalized character gaining a supportive community through the act of fetishizing consumer goods. When viewed in conjunction with Pixar's extensive co-marketing, attaching acceptance with consumption is a dangerous message to convey to viewing audiences, regardless of their age.

Children's literature and film is created by adults for consumption, ostensibly, by children, but Pixar is aware that children's films need to appeal to two distinctive audiences: children and their parents. Children's ability to view movies and interact with popular cultural texts requires the involvement of the parents. Few children have the money or the transportation at their disposal to view a movie without parental involvement. Entertaining a dual audience has become an increasingly essential quality of children's film. If Pixar's films were situated firmly in the realm of childhood, there may be fewer opportunities to appeal to adult audiences. Some of the ways that Pixar tries to balance the need to appeal to these very distinct audiences is by including animated characters for the children that express concerns that the parents can identify with.

Pixar builds on Disney's long tradition of animating characters with appealing cuteness by extending the cuteness beyond young bunnies, bluebirds, and fawns. Pixar takes some of the most unlikely adult anthropomorphized characters and makes them endearing; in *WALL-E*, for example, even an adult robot looks cute and cuddly. When Pixar films do include anthropomorphized children, the most notable examples being Nemo, a young clown fish from *Finding Nemo* and Dot, a girl ant from *A Bug's Life*, the adult characters, Nemo's father Marlin and Dot's friend Flick, are still at the center of the story. There is a didactic quality in the

interactions between adult and children characters. The children characters are developed in accordance with traditional views about childhood. For example, Flik in *A Bug's Life* gives young Dot a lecture about how even small creatures can achieve great things. Using the metaphor of a seed growing into a mighty tree, he attempts to explain Dot's potential to affect change. The seed to tree metaphor, however, illustrates that children are widely valued not for their current state as children but for their potential greatness as adults, the very message that Pixar's exclusion of child characters is sending to viewers. *Up*'s Russell, the main child character of Pixar films, is shown having to outgrow childishness. Instead of having a mentor who directly lectures him on how to be an adult, his observation of Carl, Pixar's oldest main character, give him a negative example of how to act. The ideal human, *Up* asserts, isn't a child or an elderly adult, but rather a conglomerate of the two. Russell outgrows his childishness, and Carl outgrows his age. Carl loses stereotypical props of old age by walking upright without a walker, and the film stops referring to his "prune" smell and denture cream.

Pixar films explore the relationship between the individual and his or her community, presenting characters that are somehow different from society either because of their longings or because of a physical disability. Pixar films frequently lack a child character for the children viewers to identify with, but children respond to and identify with characters that are small and marginalized throughout the film, even though the predominant protagonists are usually adult characters voiced by adult actors. Booker writes, "American children's film sanctions acceptance of the Other and celebrates the potential achievements of the lowly and the different" (171). For example, Remy in *Ratatouille* longs to create delicious food, but his predilection for cooking is seen as a threat by his family. He leads a double life throughout much of the film, feeling torn between his ties to his family and his passion for cooking. This dichotomy is reconciled when,

towards the end of the film, his entire rat clan rallies in support of him and creates, under his direction, a fantastic meal. The toys in *Toy Story* exist in marginalized spaces such as dusty bedroom shelves and toy chests. They can only assume their true nature when no humans are around, yet all of their heroic actions are performed on behalf of their owner Andy. Jesse, the cowgirl from Woody's Round Up gang in *Toy Story 2*, illustrates the plight of toys that are abandoned by their owners. Jesse's owner "outgrew" her interest in playing cowgirls and became interested in lip gloss and boys. Jesse was forgotten under the bed for several years and finally donated to a secondhand store. Despite Jesse's negative experience with her first owner, she and Woody decide that their natural role as toys is to be constantly available to their owners as long as they are wanted, even though they will eventually experience neglect and rejection as their owners grow up. *Finding Nemo* provides another example of difference. Nemo has a disabled fin because of the barracuda attack that resulted in the death of his mother and siblings. Despite his disability, he longs to be regarded as normal, especially by his overprotective father. He risks his life twice to prove that he is overcoming his disability. The main focus of the film, however, is Marlin's search for his son. Pixar films prove successful because children and adults are able to identify with the struggles of the protagonists, be they cutened, primarily adult rats, ants or fish. These films emphasize the individuality of the characters as they strive to find an accepting community for themselves. Even though viewers can identify with the struggles of the protagonists, the solutions that the protagonists employ in creating an accepting community are not available for the audience. Through the use of anthropomorphism, rather than a child protagonist, Pixar's exploration of difference resonates with the audience without affecting any real change. While Pixar's films do delve into some serious topics, the films presentation of

topics such as ostracization from a peer group and disability provide only a surface treatment of social realities that children experience.

Pixar films do portray marginalized characters being accepted into the dominant culture, a longing which is a key component of children's film. Richard Dyer states: "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into... Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is could be imagined and may be realized" (20). These films extend to children the promise that they, too, will become powerful, celebrated members of their society. These stories may pacify children as they grow towards adulthood, because becoming an adult is the only method children have for entering the majority. This promise of successful integration into the dominant society must resonate with children's desire to be older and have more freedom. When children are given stories where the marginalized character succeeds in becoming integrated into the dominant culture, what do children learn about their own marginalized status?

Upon closer viewing, however, it becomes apparent that several of Pixar's films offer only conditional acceptance into the dominant culture. Initially *The Incredibles* (2004) seems to focus on the difficult childhood of Violet and Dash, but the family struggles, sibling rivalry, and school problems, real world problems that viewing children may experience, are minimized and deemphasized by the family's actual identity as superheroes. Ash and Violet are having these problems because they are superheroes trying to fit in to human society by hiding their superpowers. As superheroes with the ability to run really fast and make protective shields around themselves and their loved ones, they are separated from the viewing audience, and the strategies they use to find their place in society, like rescuing their dad and destroying



Syndrome's huge machines that are threatening their parents and life on Earth, are not accessible to viewers. Dash and Violet are successful because they are not really human children.

In *The Incredibles* superheroes have been banned from society and are forced to relocate and live undercover. After the Incredible family saves the world, they successfully integrate into a previously hostile society. Their acceptance into the dominant society, however, seems conditional. After demonstrating their usefulness, they are re-admitted. Still they are forced to modify, though not totally suppress, their superpowers. Dash makes the track team, but his parents tell him not to run his fastest at the meet; he has to come in second.

After Remy and his family prove themselves as cooks in *Ratatouille*, a new bistro opens where rats are actually welcomed. The rats and humans, however, have separate dining areas, so while rats are not being actively persecuted in this one safe location, they are not completely integrated into human society: rats are separate but equal. Though Pixar's films seem, upon initial viewing, to portray the acceptance of "the other," some of these films, most notably *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*, offer their protagonists only a conditional integration into the dominant culture.

Jackson interprets the way children are depicted in films as the cultural shorthand for how American feels about its future since children are so strongly associated with the future. In her study of the history of American cinema, she observed that after WWII, America's confidence in its golden future was shaken, and the images of children became darker and more ambivalent. The family horror film, including *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Omen*, and *The Exorcist*, emerged from this ambivalence and darkening vision. Jackson states: "Traditionally, children have been the symbol of innocence and confidence in a hopeful future...evil children became a filmic representation of much larger social and political problems" (149). Three Pixar films employ the

“demon child” trope. *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Finding Nemo* have demon or monster children, antagonists who attempt to harm or destroy the protagonists. The inclusion of the “demon child” is fascinating since there are so few representations of any children in this body of films. Having a child figure as the main antagonist is a major deviation from Disney’s films. In both Classic and New Disney films, which feature numerous representations of children, the antagonists are typically adults, most frequently wicked stepmothers, witches, and greedy men. Though there are some negative children characters, the step-sisters in *Cinderella* for example, the negative children are always portrayed as the opposite of the good child protagonist. In *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, however, demon children figure as the primary antagonists without the inclusion of a strong positive representation of a child protagonist. Pixar’s participation in the demon child narrative and their simultaneous avoidance of positive representations of children may highlight the changing view of children in America and their increasing marginalization. Leach in *Children First* asserts: “Children are the largest minority group in society and the most subject to discrimination” (12). Pixar’s films illustrate one type of discrimination experienced by children as children are unable to participate in the creation of these film texts that they consume. Zornado in *Inventing the Child* asks, “Whose interests are served when one group determines what another group will read” (or watch)? (42). The “demon child narrative” is a narrative told by the dominant culture (in this case, adults) about the oppressed minority (children) to an audience of children. Pixar films, texts for children’s consumption, portray primarily negative representations of children.

Sid, Andy’s next door neighbor in *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*, is Pixar’s first depiction of the child-as-demon. Sid strikes fear into all the toys’ hearts because he dismembers toys and reassembles them in bizarre forms, drowns them in mud, burns them, and attaches them to

fireworks. Compared to Andy's well-lit room full of happy, normal toys, Sid's room is dark, messy, and filled with toys that have been re-assembled. Woody and Buzz are terrified of Sid and also, at first, the strange toys he makes from bits of dismembered toys. His room reeks of torture and sadism. He *enjoys* abusing toys. Andy's character as the positive child is not as fully developed as Sid's character. Andy is only in a few scenes of the movie. He is mainly depicted leaving his room, having just finished playing with his toys. By excluding the more positive child from the narrative in favor of the demon child, Pixar may be expressing anxieties our culture has about children. When considering the subject position of the viewing children, it seems irresponsible and misguided to omit positive depictions of children in favor of the demon children.

The dentist's niece in *Finding Nemo* strongly resembles Sid. Both children are unattractive. They have braces, wide, cruel smiles, and seem completely absorbed in pursuing pleasure that directly results in pain and death for the film's anthropomorphized characters. The dentist's niece has killed several fish, and Nemo, at one point in the film, looks like he'll be her next victim. Zornado asserts that the "vast majority of children's stories invite children to identify with the adults' idea of what a child should be" (xv), and in Pixar's case, this identification involves children seeing themselves not as the scary child antagonist but instead as the adult protagonist.

*Monsters Inc.* provides a thoughtful revision of both the "child as demon" tradition and presents a constructive image of reconciliation between groups whose previous interactions have been based on fear and exploitation. *Monsters Inc.* wittily references this tradition of the "child as demon" (or monster) by creating a world of monsters who are afraid of human children. Their fear results in the "othering" of human children, allowing the monsters to exploit children's fears

and nightmares to power their city. Boo (a human child) and Sully (the monster known as the best scarer) are able to overcome their mutual fear and develop a loving relationship. Their friendship directly results in the restructuring of the monsters' energy source, so that children's laughter instead of their screams power the monster city. One criticism of *Monsters Inc.* is, however, that it simplifies the process of reconciliation between two groups. Can viewers really believe that one friendship between a child and monster will cause such dramatic systemic changes? My objection, however, could be easily dismissed by asserting that children's films are created for children, so of course the messages need to be simplified. As an educator and a parent, I find these types of arguments that undermine the capabilities of children limiting. When creating texts for children, as I discuss in Chapter 5, children should be more involved in the text-creating process. Then, perhaps, some of the problems with the current canon of animated children's films could be addressed.

### **Dreamworks**

While there are several other companies besides Disney and Pixar that produce and distribute animated children's films, including Sony Animated Pictures which produced *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009), Blue Sky Studios, owned by Twentieth Century Fox, which is best known for its *Ice Age* series (2002-2012), the Weinstein company which produced *Hoodwinked* (2005) and *Hoodwinked Too* (2011), and Warner Brothers, which released *Yogi Bear* in 2010, these companies either do not specialize in animated children's films, or they do not have a canon of animated children's films that allow for an analysis of their themes and established conventions. In addition to Disney and Pixar, the other main producer of animated children's films that has an established canon is Dreamworks. Booker describes Dreamworks as

the antithesis of Disney and Pixar in *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Message in Children's Films*. Disney films focus on characters that are predetermined or somehow destined to assume a certain position in life. In the nurture vs. nature argument, Disney comes down on the side of nature. This emphasis of nature over nurture is seen in Disney's very first feature length film *Snow White* up through Disney's most recent release *Tron: Legacy* (2010). In *Snow White*, despite the attempt on her life and the backwoods refuge with the dwarves and animals in the middle of the forest, Snow White still gets the prince because, the film insists, she was destined to become a queen; it was in her nature. Dreamworks, on the other hand, has repeatedly challenged some of the dominant ideologies of Disney including the nature over nurture issue. Like Pixar films, Dreamworks releases only computer generated films, but several of their films present less mainstream themes than those explored by Disney and Pixar. *Shrek* (2001), *Shrek 2* (2004), *Shrek 3* (2007) and *Shrek Forever After* (2010) offer re-tellings of fairy tales that had been appropriated by Disney. For example, Dreamworks challenges several of Disney and Pixar's conventions including their depiction of gender roles, the inclusion of child protagonists, and the emphasis on finding one's destined place in life.

Several of Disney's princesses including Snow White and Cinderella show up in the *Shrek* series, but these princesses are not simply the familiar, docile princess that Disney portrayed. While they can sit around drinking tea at a baby shower for Princess Fiona, they can also lead a jail break in *Shrek 3* and take on Prince Charming's soldiers, becoming, ultimately, more self-actualized. The most interesting inversion of gender stereotype, however, is through the character of Princess Fiona. Fiona is not a dainty, lovely, fair-skinned, docile princess but rather a green, empowered ogress. When she was a child, Fiona was put under a curse that while a lovely princess during the day, at night she turns into an ogress. In the first *Shrek* movie, when

Fiona and Shrek get married, she decides to permanently stay an ogress. Fiona's decision not to re-assume the stereotypical princess's beauty, the ideal so widely disseminated by Disney, offers a mild criticism of today's beauty standards. In *Twilight Zones, the Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.*, Susan Bordo asserts that assimilation into and acceptance by mainstream society is typically measured a success, and for women beauty often facilitates their assimilation. She states that many women who have had breast augmentation assert that they are "doing it for themselves," but cultural and societal norms play a large role in many women's adherence to specific beauty standards. By creating a character like Fiona who is comfortable in her own (green) skin, Dreamworks may be metaphorically offering new, more individualized subject positions to viewers. Fiona is more independent and self-actualized than other heroines of animated children's film. In *Shrek Forever After*, when Shrek's wish that he was never born upsets all the character's experiences, Fiona is the leader of an ogre rebellion that takes on the evil regime led by Rumpelstiltskin. She is a better fighter and leader than Shrek.

Additionally, in the third and fourth films, Shrek is shown as a nurturing parent, thus subverting stereotypical male gender roles. He changes the triplets' diapers and feeds them and plays with them; he seems almost as involved in their care as Fiona is. However, in *Shrek Forever After*, he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his roles as husband and father, and he longs for his carefree, bachelor days. Rumpelstiltskin tricks him into signing a document that creates a world where Shrek was never born. Shrek is released from the responsibilities that he had felt frustrated by, but he really misses his family. He spends the rest of the film trying to get back to his wife and children. Another example of non-mainstream gender roles in the *Shrek* series is the unlikely partnership between the female dragon and the male donkey which seems to subvert traditional gender roles. The dragon mother is the most powerful partner in the

relationship, and she and donkey share the responsibilities of nurturing their dragon-donkey babies. While the *Shrek* series may be subverting gender traditions of Disney and Pixar films, like several of the Pixar films, there are very few children characters in the series. *Shrek*, with its adult inside jokes and its focus on adult protagonists, seems more like an animated adult film than an animated children's film. Not only are children excluded from being in the film, they are also marginalized as viewers since much of the film is directed towards adults.

Dreamworks' *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) does something unique for a recent animated children's film; it depicts a human child protagonist navigating an adult world. Hiccup, the young protagonist, is different from everyone else in his Viking village. His difference extends beyond his small stature and his amazing articulateness and ultimately contradicts the very essence of being a Viking in his village: he doesn't want to fight dragons. At the beginning of the movie, misadventure shadows Hiccup. Everything he does earns him the disapproval of his family, his peers, and his whole village. But he does something no one else in his village has ever done: he be-friends a dragon, a Night Fury names Toothless. As boy and dragon become friends, Hiccup realizes that everything his village believes about dragons is wrong. He attempts to show his village that dragons are only fierce in self-defense. His village resists his knowledge, and he is cast out of his tribe and disowned by his father, the leader of the tribe. But Hiccup holds to his own truth, and ultimately is able to illustrate that there can be peace between humans and dragons. *How to Train Your Dragon* affords children a lot of agency. Hiccup and his young friends are able to completely re-envision life in their village and help to create a world where humans and dragons peacefully co-exist. While this film does recognize some of the struggles inherent in being a child in the face of adult opposition, the fantastic setting in a Viking village in the middle of the sea may reduce the relate-ability of the film.

In addition to challenging the traditional gender roles in animated children's films and including a child protagonist, Dreamworks films question the common ideology in Disney films that all characters have a place that they are destined to occupy. *Megamind* (2010) may be Dreamworks' most subversive film. The first ten minutes of *Megamind* offer a pretty direct critique of the role that wealth, privilege, and social class play in shaping the character of an individual. *Megamind*, the film seems to say, would have turned out differently if he had had the same social advantages as his arch rival Metroman. Both *Megamind* and *Metroman*, babies from different planets, were placed in escape pods by their parents. *Metroman* landed in the front yard of a mansion, and he grew up surrounded by luxury and ease. *Megamind's* escape pod landed in the exercising yard of a prison, and he grew up ostracized by his classmates. He ultimately resorted to a life of crime because that was all he knew and all that people expected of him. The film directly contradicts one of the main messages of Disney's children's films. In *Megamind*, Dreamworks weighs in about the importance of nurture in shaping a character's life. If *Megamind* had received the same privileged conditions as *Metro Man*, the film argues, he wouldn't have had to devote himself to a life of crime.

*Kung-Fu Panda* (2008) and *Kung-Fu Panda 2* (2011) are about Po (voiced by Jack Black), a panda who becomes the dragon warrior and fights alongside of the Furious Five to save old China twice (so far). In the first film, the Furious Five don't want to accept that Po, the overweight, bumbling panda, is the Dragon Warrior that they have been so eagerly awaiting. But with his determination and good humor, he wins them over, and he is able to defeat the snow leopard Tai Lung, a corrupt Kung Fu warrior, and restore peace to the kingdom.

In *Kung-Fu Panda 2* a wicked peacock threatens to defeat kung-fu and thus jeopardizes the peace of China. The second film feels like an extended fight sequence, but the fight scenes



show some unique qualities for American children's films. Po and the Furious Five all work together. They seem completely aware of each member's strengths and weaknesses, and they execute elaborate fight moves and plays that allowed them to overtake huge numbers of opponents. In most of the fight scenes, the focus isn't on one individualistic hero but rather on the team working together for the collective good.

*Kung-Fu panda* does a better job representing non-Western cultures than New Disney's films. In fact, according to the *New York Times* article "*Kung-Fu Panda Gets Cuddly*," several years of research went into the movies: "Creating an authentic-feeling ancient world fell to production designer Raymond Zibach and art director Tang Heng. Between the two of them, they spent eight years researching Chinese painting, sculpture, architecture - and kung fu movies" (n.p.). Unlike Pixar films which either explore American settings or create fantastic, alternative settings or Disney, which makes up countries or just whitens other cultures, Dreamworks actually invested time in researching Chinese culture.

In *Kung-Fu Panda 2* Po learns that the evil peacock Shen, who had been exiled from Gongmen City, returned and over-threw the kung-fu governor, defeating him with a cannon. Po and the Five go to try to free the city, but Po has flashbacks from his childhood, causing him to lose focus and make mistakes in the fight routines he and his band of warriors, the Five, have practiced. As a result, he and the Five are captured. Po learns that Shen led genocide against the pandas of China years before when a soothsayer predicted that a black and white warrior would defeat him. Po's parents were among those slain. Po lived because his mother hid him in a radish basket that was later discovered by Po's adopted father, the goose Ping. Throughout *Kung-Fu Panda 2*, Po learns how to find inner peace, and he has to confront and then accept what happened to his parents and his village.

*Kung-Fu Panda 2* is a unique children's film in several ways. It may be the only animated children's film to take on the subject of genocide, and it does so pretty candidly without glossing over the horror of ethnic cleansing. *Kung-Fu Panda 2* is also one of the few animated children's films that portrays meditation and the discipline required by several Eastern religions. Additionally, Dreamworks continues questioning traditional gender stereotypes. Tigress, voiced by Angelina Jolie, is the fiercest of the five kung-fu warriors. In the end it is Po who saves the day. He is able to deflect cannon balls as a result of his having found inner peace. He is an individual hero, but his heroism comes from mastering his mind instead of simple brute strength. The ending of *Kung-Fu Panda 2* is pretty open-ended; the last few minutes show an idyllic panda community and a father bear that exclaims, "My son is alive!"

It seems that Dreamworks has found a way to draw large crowds while offering films that are a little more progressive than those of Disney and Pixar. With their intention to release five films a year, Dreamworks may offer a direct challenge to the animated films of Disney and its subsidiary Pixar.

## **Conclusion**

When I was watching *Toy Story* with William and Robin, they argued about who got to "be" Buzz Lightyear, an adult space ranger toy. They were not able to identify with the children characters in the film, Sid or Andy. The film encouraged them to identify with an adult toy. Zornado states, "The child is already faced with an adult reification of the world presented as 'neutral' and 'obvious'... If we want to understand the way in which a culture envisions itself, we might look no further than the stories adults tell and retell their children" (3). Pixar seems to be telling children that being a child is something to grow out of as quickly as possible. Even the

earliest animated Disney movies emphasized the importance of adult-like qualities, but Pixar films give children adult protagonists to relate to. Pixar's films have very few representations of children characters, but these films do investigate the experience of being outside the dominant social group. Children are encouraged to identify with the marginalized characters of Pixar's films. A major shortcoming of Pixar's films, however, is that the solutions employed by the anthropomorphized characters are not viable solutions for the young viewing audience. These films illustrate the experience of marginalization, a theme that resonates with children, without offering strategies for children to use when coping with being outside the dominant culture. For example, young viewers cannot organize to preserve a historic town like the adult anthropomorphized characters do in *Cars* or save the world through their superpowers as in *The Incredibles*. Dreamworks, though not nearly as popular as Disney and Pixar, may be offering slightly subversive messages to young viewers. In *How to Train Your Dragon*, there's a child protagonist, something quite rare in recent animated films. Also, *Shrek* may be challenging rigid gender roles by showing Fiona's decision to remain an ogress and in depicting Shrek caring for and nurturing his children. As our culture begins to develop awareness about the ideologies commonly instilled in contemporary children's films, ideologies that instruct children how to perform both childhood and adulthood, hopefully more texts will be created that adequately reflect the position of children in our society and the strategies they can use to navigate the adult dominated world.



## Chapter Two: Fantasy in Children's and Young Adult Literature and Film

Dreamworks' *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) differs significantly from other major animated films released in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the inclusion of a child protagonist. Hiccup, the young protagonist, ushers in a new era for his village. He single-handedly resolves the age old animosity between humans and dragons. He is afforded a fairly high level of agency for a child protagonist in an animated film. The setting—a Viking village on an island plagued by dragons—firmly situates this film in the genre of fantasy. Children's fantasy films typically include more children protagonists than other film genres, but the images of the self-actualized child with the ability to make choices and positively affect change in his or her broader community are frequently negated by the fantastical settings of the film. Children viewing *How to Train Your Dragon* may be inspired by the dynamic child protagonist, but the actions Hiccup takes to save himself and his village are not available to the viewing audience. Children's fantasy may initially appear to give more agency to young protagonists than other genres, but as a genre, fantasy has problems that limit its subversive potential. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss several children's and young adult fantasy texts, but because of *Harry Potter's* widespread popularity, I will conduct an in-depth analysis of the books and films of this influential series.

Historically, fantasy has been aimed at a primarily male, white audience, set in fairly homogenous periods of history such as the Middle Ages in Europe, and focused on primarily middle class concerns. Jack Zipes states that fantasy depicts a world that “embodies order, comfort, and clarity...chaos is ultimately dispelled and virtue rewarded” (552). Because of this tendency towards conformity, fantasy frequently forfeits opportunities to genuinely investigate the precarious and open-ended experience of being a child.

Frequently in fantasy novels and fantasy films, much like in Disney's animated fairy tales, the nuances of the texts are expunged, and high contrast dualities are created. Characters are either good or evil; there is little ambiguity in the characters' personalities. While the young characters in fantasy texts may appear to be more powerful and have more agency than afforded children characters in other types of texts, the conventions of the genre itself and the inaccessibility of the setting often negate the apparent agency of child characters in fantasy novels and films. Additionally, the dramatic triumph of good over evil at the conclusion of many fantasy texts so thoroughly resolves the main conflicts of the story that the protagonist's struggles in the middle of the text are often forgotten. No matter how subversive certain elements of the plot may appear, fantasy texts tend towards contained endings that reinscribe the status-quo, thus reinforcing the dominant ideology and cementing children's position on the lowest rung of the hierarchy.

Why is a genre like fantasy that has so much subversive potential so insistent on mainstream ideology? An obvious cause of the mainstream endings is addressed throughout my dissertation: materialism. Simply put, books and films are commodities. They promote the dominant ideology, and since writers and directors are developing their texts from within the dominant narrative, their stories are laced with mainstream ideology. Additionally, producers and distributors want to make a profit, so texts that stray too far from the dominant aren't seen as profitable and thus aren't supported as frequently as less challenging texts.

We cannot blame everything on the materialism of the commodity, however, because this takes agency away from people, leaving them without any responsibility for what they consume. Another possible reason for conventional endings that erase the children and the elderly and focus on the young couple might be that, like Plato's myth of separation, we are looking for the

other half from which we are separated at birth, and given the impossibility of that we realize it nonetheless in substitutes: commodities, fetishized objects, and films with romantic endings, all of which promise the safety and satisfaction of completion. Of course, desire is fleeting and so the promises offered by the commodity and by the quest are never really satisfied. The tendency toward the middle is thus the tendency of the mind and the body to search for an elusive unity, a unity that like the books and movies puts in place what it takes away.

The movement from margin to center and back again is really the movement of all human existence throughout history. The colonial power only has a fleeting hold on the oppressed, and revolution is usually around the corner. The oppressed are always poised to revolt and become the rulers of tomorrow. As a result, everyone else instinctively moves toward a centrist position both on a global and local scale. Children and young adult books and films reflect all of that. For example, American, centrist films give way to the foreign and independent films which in turn become successful and thus commercially profitable and well known, i.e., safe and predictable. Capitalism produces margins, in the same way that the hero or heroine is always excommunicated, but then reveals to audiences the return of that hero or heroine to the center. Audiences tire easily with heroes and heroines who occupy the middle ground for long periods of time and thus demand something different and exotic and, well, marginalized. As a genre, fantasy has the potential to challenge the status quo because as readers and viewers of fantasy we expect the conventions of reality to be turned on their heads. However, fantasy doesn't frequently reach its subversive potential for two main reasons. First, fantasy as a genre has developed fairly strict conventions. Second, the endings of individual texts or series typically tend back to middle, centrist positions.

Fantasy as a genre has several heavily practiced conventions. The popularity and wide distribution of J.J.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis's work throughout the twentieth century firmly enforced several conventions of the genre that contemporary fantasy writers continue to replicate. The success of these two highly conservative writers surely influenced the conservatism of this genre. Farah Mendlesohn in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* states that the works of Tolkien and Lewis established two types of fantasy: immersive fantasy and portal fantasy. She writes:

The classic fantasy quest...was set into its 'final' form by J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) codified much of how the fantasy quest deals with landscape, with character ...and with reader positioning. More or less contemporaneous with *The Lord of the Rings* was the publication of the first book in the Narnia series, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), a classic portal fantasy. ...The novels presume a thinned world, one in which wrongness already exists...and a conciliatory healing or restoration. (30)

The texts discussed in this chapter fall into the categories of either portal or quest fantasies. Mendlesohn defines portal fantasies as texts in which "the character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal to an unknown place. ...The classic portal tale is more common in children's fantasy than in that ostensibly written for adults" (1). Immersive fantasies, on the other hand, are "set in a world so that it functions on all levels like a complete world" (59). The texts treated in this chapter seem unable to get away from the conventions of the genre established by Tolkien and Lewis which results in the continued replication of marginalizing elements that developed out of the genre itself.



Of special significance to my dissertation are the ways that fantasy, though ostensibly allowing the characters in the text and readers alike a reprieve from societal norms, serves to reinforce the dominant ideology. While fantasy texts aren't as insistent as Pixar's animated films are that the child protagonists leave childhood behind and enter the adult world, the representative texts discussed in this chapter do limit and undermine the experiences of child characters and, by extension, the child reader and viewer.

The works of Susan Cooper and Lloyd Alexander further solidified fantasy's genre conventions. Cooper's *The Dark is Rising Chronicles*, a five-book series published between 1965 and 1977, centers on an apocalyptic clash between good and evil. The protagonist is Will Stanton, the last of the Old Ones, immortals dedicated to protecting the world from the domination of evil, the Dark. In this series, three children (Simon, Jane and Barney) help Will and the other Old Ones defeat the Dark. The children travel back to the Middle Ages, to the time of King Arthur and his knights. They succeed in saving the world several times, but in the conclusion of the last book of the series, *Silver on the Tree*, after permanently defeating the Dark, the children's memories are erased, so they cannot remember their heroism. In the final pages of the last book, the wizard Merriman says, "So the last magic will be this—all that you know of the Old Ones, and of this great task that has been accomplished, will retreat into the hidden places of your minds, and you will never again know any hint of it except in dreams" (260). Throughout the series, the children protagonists made great strides in their personal lives and showed bravery and maturity in saving the world, but their freedom and heroism are undermined and circumscribed by the erasure of their memories. The erasure of the protagonists' memories at the end of the book put the reading children in a precarious position. The elation of reading about self-actualized children with the ability to affect positive changes in their world is

undermined by the conservative ending of the story. In the end, the best children readers can hope to gain from this series is a diverting tale of high adventure. During the 2011 Children's Literature Association conference in Roanoke, Virginia, Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman, co-authors of *The Fall of Kings*, stated that the genre of fantasy gives children hope and coping mechanisms until they reach adulthood. Fantasy may serve to pacify children as they grow towards adulthood (becoming an adult is the only method children have to overcome their marginalized status), but it fails both to articulate the struggles of childhood and to effect any real change in the lived conditions of children.

Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* is a five book series published between 1964 and 1968. The fifth book of the series *The High King* (1968) received a Newberry Medal for excellence in American children's literature. The series describes the numerous adventures of the young boy Taran who must defeat a dark king, rescue a princess and magic pig, and, ultimately, save the whole kingdom. Needless to say, Taran matures throughout the series. The books focus on his development from a humble assistant pig keeper into the High King of the once magical realm of Prydain. Similar to *The Lord of the Rings* series, by the conclusion of the novel, the magical characters have to choose between leaving the kingdom or staying without their magical powers. Princess Eilonwy chooses to stay with Taran, and the two main characters, now adults, are married at the end of the series. Using this familiar convention, Alexander neatly ties up the magical world for his readers. Endings that reinscribe normalcy by slowly erasing the magical elements are one convention of the genre that limits the subversive potential of the texts.

Recent fantasy texts for young readers retain a heavily didactic quality. Mary Pope Osborn's forty-six book *Magic Tree House Series* is a highly popular fantasy series that targets younger readers. In this portal quest fantasy series, each book begins the same way. Jack and his

sister Annie enter a magic tree house in the woods behind their house in Frog Creek, Pennsylvania. When they climb into the tree house, they find that either the magical librarian Morgan Le Fey or Merlin from Camelot have left them a book that serves as a portal into a different world. As the titles *Mummies in the Morning*, *Dinosaurs before Dark*, and *Night of the Ninjas* suggest, the settings of the books in this series are often historical. The historical, educational element of these novels makes them popular with educators and parents. Many of the books have supplementary study guides or an epilogue with facts about the historical period and characters. For example, in *Monday with a Mad Genius* Jack and Annie visit Leonardo da Vinci. Throughout the course of the novel, they help him develop confidence in his inventiveness. After Jack and Annie return home (as they do at the end of every book), the last chapter provides a brief historical account of Leonardo's life and career. Like other portal quest fantasies, the *Magic Tree House Series* supports "the assumption that 'the past' is unarguable, that it just *is*, and that knowledge is to be discovered rather than generated" (Mendlesohn 16). Without any emphasis on meaning making and interpretation, the characters Jack and Annie discover history and present it for the reading children to absorb. For example, throughout the adventures, Jack is constantly reading about the settings in which they are immersed, providing readers snippets of historical facts about the different locales.

While the settings of each book in *The Magic Treehouse Series* differ, the premise remains the same. Jack and Annie are called to a different world to help someone by solving a mystery. At the end of every book, they return home to find that no time has passed in their absence. They continue with their mundane lives at home and school until they are beckoned once again to the woods by the tug of the magical tree house. Like Cooper's series, *The Magic Tree House* books focus on white, middle class children who are not affected in any substantial

way by their fantastic adventures. Thus, these texts are clearly portal fantasies in which, as Mendlesohn states, “The fantastic is on the other side and does not leak” (1). This series does not address any of the real life problems that modern American children may be experiencing. I am not trying to suggest that all texts need to have a purpose beyond simple entertainment, but I do think the genre of fantasy in particular is problematic since the fantastic elements seem to serve as an excuse for a lack of engagement with pressing social issues, for example, sexism, racism, or ageism. Like many animated films, children’s fantasy novels seem to suggest that if we ignore current social realities, that they will go away. While the settings and adventures in fantasy can be understood as metaphorically representing aspects of reality, the cumulative lack of acknowledgement from both animated films and fantasy texts of current struggles facing young people seems socially irresponsible.

Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympian* series, aimed at slightly older children, digs further back in time for its historical setting. These books shift the focus of the fantasy novel from Western Europe in the Middle Ages back to ancient Greece, another perceived “white” space. It’s worth noting that the typical settings of fantasy texts in the Western world, including both Europe and Greece, allow the stories to continue replicating exclusionary settings and ideology that bolster the dominant ideology of late consumer capitalism.

Percy Jackson’s childhood and early adolescence, much like Harry Potter’s, are difficult. He doesn’t fit in at school. Having been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, Jackson is less than a model student, and his behavior gets him expelled from private school after private school. Reading children can perhaps identify with his struggles, with his inability to fit in. At a field trip the last week of sixth grade, things take a turn for the worse for Percy. While visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art to “look at ancient Greek and Roman stuff” (15), Percy is attacked

by his teacher Mrs. Dodd who transforms from a teacher into “a shriveled hag with bat wings and claws and a mouth full of fangs” (17). From here, his life gets worse. He and his mother take a two day vacation together to a cabin on the sea where Percy was conceived. They are attacked by a Minotaur. His mother is captured, and Percy barely makes it to Camp Half-Blood where he finds out about his parentage. Like Harry Potter, he is magical. He is a half-god, the son of Poseidon, the father he never met, and it is his job to save the Olympians. Each book in the series chronicles Percy’s mythic quest to save the world from destruction. Percy, as Poseidon’s son, has amazingly destructive powers. The distant, inaccessible setting and the character’s status as half-god limit reading and viewing children’s ability to model Percy’s agency, but perhaps that is a positive thing in this case. One of the main messages of this series is that it’s perfectly acceptable to use violence and power to achieve your goals. Notably, this book targets young boys between the ages of eight and thirteen.

Ingrid Law’s *Savvy* (2008) and sequel *Scrumble* (2010), fantasy books targeting girl readers, describe the adventures of the Beaumonts, a family in which the grandfather, mother and five children are endowed with special abilities, or “savvies.” Grandpa explains what a savvy is to his granddaughter Mibs, the protagonist of *Savvy*: “A savvy’s not a sickness or a disease, Mibs. It’s not magic or sorcery either. Your savvy’s in your blood. It’s an inheritance, like your brown eyes or your Granma’s long toes or her talent for dancing to polka music” (25). *Savvy* opens the day before Mibs’ thirteenth birthday, the day the Beaumont children first discover their savvy. Mibs’ older brothers Rocket (who has electrical powers) and Fish (who can cause hurricanes) have caused so much damage as they discover and learn to control their powers (or, in the language of the text, “scrumble their savvies”) that the Beaumont family has had to move into rural Kansas to protect other people from electrical outbursts and violent storms. The day

before her birthday, Mibs' father is injured in a car accident, and her mother and older brother Rocket go to the hospital in Salinas, over ninety miles away, while Fish, Mibs, and their two younger siblings stay with Grandpa.

Mibs incorrectly infers that her savvy is to wake people up, so she feels compelled to visit the hospital to see her father who is in a coma. With Fish, their younger brother Samson, and the preacher's two kids, sixteen year old Bobbie and fourteen year old Will, Mibs stows away in a Bible salesman's pink bus in an attempt to hitch a ride to the hospital.

Things don't go as planned. The pink van actually heads north away from Salinas, and Mibs starts hearing voices that she realizes are coming from tattoos and ink drawings on the other characters' skin. Mibs can hear the tattoos talking. The tattoos on the Bible salesman's Lester Swan's arm, the names of his mother and girlfriend, argue about Lester's ineptness. Bobbie's tattoo, a small angel with a devil's tail, whispers to Mibs about Bobbie's insecurities. Mibs fights against her growing realization that her savvy isn't the ability to wake people up, but rather the ability to talk with and listen to people's tattoos. She feels like she has let her father down by not having the gift of waking people up. In the end, however, her savvy allows her to communicate with her father's mermaid tattoo and helps rouse him from his coma. In the final pages of *Savvy*, Mibs and Will develop a romantic relationship, and Mibs learns how to scumble her savvy.

Law's books are light, fun, and entertaining. Through metaphor, *Savvy* and its sequel *Scumble* metaphorically treat the challenges of being a teenager. As Ellen Kushner and Delia Sherman stated at the 2011 Children's Literature Association Conference, "Fantasy allows us to explore our deepest concerns in metaphor." While treating the subject of youth angst and the importance of finding our special place in life is certainly helpful, *Savvy* unfortunately seems to

replicate stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes, about teenagers. Mibs' two brothers have dangerous, hard to control impulses. On several occasions, Fish loses control and smashes window, destroys property, and causes widespread flooding. Teenage boys, the text suggests, can't control themselves and their impulses. Mibs, on the other hand, after just a few days learns how to work with her special abilities. Her quieter power helps her connect with people in a close, nurturing way. Additionally, Mibs' mother has the ability to be successful at almost everything she does, a talent she uses making perfect pie crusts and perfectly iced cakes. Before her death, Mibs' grandmother had the ability to catch song melodies in jars for people to enjoy later, but while Mibs' grandmother was capturing songs, her grandfather was making earthquakes. The male characters have earth-changing powers, but the female characters have smaller, quieter powers that are used around the home to nurture the other characters.

Another potentially problematic characteristic of Law's books, a flaw shared by the protagonist Hermione from *Harry Potter*, Bella Swan in *The Twilight Series*, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and several other fantasy/fairy tale texts produced for young readers and viewers, is that the romantic attachment at the end of the book is the only part of the novel that young readers can truly model their actions on. Magical powers are unavailable to young readers, but forming a romantic attachment is something the readers can strive to imitate. While *Savvy* in particular seems to advocate that young women accept themselves and appreciate their uniqueness, in reality the book may actually encourage hetero-normative standards by pushing young women to adopt nurturing roles in relationships.

Another fantasy series with problematic gender depictions is Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight Saga*, which surpasses *Savvy*'s hetero-normative ending by blatantly endorsing the erasure of the female's agency through involvement in romantic relationships. The *Twilight* series, like the

*Harry Potter* series, has a dual existence as both book and movie series; together, the books and movies span almost a decade. *Twilight*, the first book of the series, was published in 2005, and the fifth movie *Breaking Dawn: Part 2* is set for release November 2012. Though marketed as young adult fiction, some of Meyer's most avid readers and viewers include women in their twenties and thirties, older than the protagonist Bella Swan, who is seventeen in the first book *Twilight*, and nineteen by the fourth and final book of the series. There are several online fan clubs especially for the slightly older *Twilight* fans; for example Twilight Moms is a site especially for mothers over eighteen. Karen Backstein in "(Un)safe Sex: Romancing the Vampire" tries to explain the renewed popularity of vampire narratives which include *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. One reason may be the dynamic, male vampire characters who have been transformed into "handsome romantic heroes, haunted by [their] lust for blood and guilt for the humans [they've] killed in the past." Backstein continues: "Another attraction may be the point of view. These are female-centered narrative that strive for audience identification with the heroine—with her strength, her extraordinary capabilities, her status as an object of desire, or a combination of these traits" (38). However, identifying with Bella is problematic for several reasons. The conventions of the genre frequently position female characters in a dependent position. Like Mibs from *Savvy*, Bella models finding self-actualization through hetero-normative relationships. Bella isn't a very dynamic character. What makes her character appealing for readers and viewers is that she is desired, not only by a hot vampire, but also by a sexy werewolf. Thus, young female readers of this text may simply be learning that the most important thing they can strive for is making themselves desirable for the (more powerful) males around them.



As examined in Chapter One, a common feature of contemporary children's literature and film is the erasure of children protagonists. Similar to Pixar films, the *Twilight Saga* excludes children and young adults in favor of adult protagonists. Even though the series has been marketed as young adult fiction, adults avidly read the books and watch the film adaptation, making the books cross-over from young adult fantasy into adult fantasy/ romance. The YA category itself has been undergoing dramatic changes. YA now extends from early teens into mid-twenties. The ramifications of this change will be discussed more in Chapter Four, but suffice it to say that in the case of *The Twilight Series*, the text itself excludes young people, and adult readers have appropriated the texts. The concerns in many texts reportedly written for younger viewers and readers are resonating with adult audiences. One common trend in contemporary literature and film is that young readers are encouraged to "read up," about characters older than themselves while adults are frequently reading about characters younger than themselves. This may tie into the issue of ageism and the importance of attaining the ideal age of early twenties. These issues could be explored in further studies.

Another issue is that despite the popularity of the text, there are several ageist assumptions embedded in the novels. The ageism encompasses the marginalization of both children and older adults. Bella, at seventeen, is the youngest character in the books, and all the vampires are over one hundred years old. Being a vampire, however, preserves the vampires in perpetual youth. As Bella describes Edward's "father" Carlisle Cullen, she notes "I'd seen Dr. Cullen before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection" (*Twilight* 322). When Bella realizes that Edward Cullen, in reality 104 years old, is never going to physically age past looking like a hot seventeen-year-old, she has a nightmare on her eighteenth birthday. In the dream, there is an older woman who she initially supposes is her

deceased grandmother, but then, she realizes in horror that she is looking at a future vision of herself. She describes the woman in her dream: “Gram hadn’t changed much; her face looked just the same as I remembered it. The skin was soft and withered, bent into a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath. Like a dried apricot, but with a puff of thick, white hair standing out in a cloud around it.” When Bella realizes that the older woman is herself, she is horrified. “That was *me*. Me—ancient, creased and withered. Edward stood beside me, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen. He pressed his icy, perfect lips against my wasted cheek” (*New Moon* 3-6). Ageism for the elderly seems especially harsh on women. In a series like *Twilight*, where women are valued for their desirability, aging reduces their value. Ageism in this series is not limited to demeaning portrayals of the elderly.

Unfortunately, children are depicted pretty poorly too throughout the series. There are no vampire children. Meyer creates vampire lore which tells a bloody story about the immortal children, children who were changed at a young age into vampires and never learned to control their impulses. Completely dominated by their appetites, these children threatened the stability of the vampire world. As a result, all of the vampire children were destroyed. In *Breaking Dawn*, the last book of the series, Bella, while still a human, conceives a child on her honeymoon with Edward. The fetus grows at an alarming rate and endangers Bella’s life. The fetus is seen as threatening and evil. Even when the Cullens and the wider community realize that the baby is harmless, ageist ideas about childhood continue. Luckily for the child Renesmee, vampire childhood only lasts for seven years. After seven years, Renesmee, like her mother and father, will stop aging and remain forever frozen in her late teens or early twenties, the idealized age in the *Twilight Saga*. The portrayal of childhood in this series echoes the anxieties present in Pixar’s animated films; childhood is something to escape, a time to grow out of as soon as possible. In

fact, it is Renesme's alarmingly fast growth rate that preserves her from destruction by the vampire council who have decreed that all vampire children will be put to death. In Meyer's series, ageism is complicated and layered. Inside the text, both the elderly and children are frightening, and outside the text, adult readers appropriate a story from the intended YA audience.

Though the sales of the *Twilight Saga* have vied with the *Harry Potter* series' position on best sellers lists throughout the past few years, the *Harry Potter* books and films have remained a widely popular cultural text for children during the past ten years and with the release of the last film in the summer of 2011, this series continues to affect the imagination of young readers and viewers. Because of the continued popularity of this series and its widespread influence on readers and moviegoers, I've chosen to focus an in-depth analysis on the *Harry Potter* series.

The *Harry Potter* series has generated controversy among mainstream audiences and critics alike. Roberta Seelinger Trites states, "If the purpose of the School Story is to indoctrinate school-aged children into their place in the market economy, then the *Harry Potter* books certainly succeed" (474). Tammy Turner-Vorbeck asserts that the *Harry Potter* series is a site of ideological enculturation in that it "conveys socially normative messages about families, community, race, and gender" by omitting several voices from the conversation (20). Turner-Vorbeck continues: "What appears to be represented in the *Harry Potter* books is an aggregation of quintessential, hegemonic, hierarchical middle-class social and cultural values" (20). Undeniably, the *Harry Potter* series endorses the hegemonic ideology of late capitalist consumerism. The aggressive marketing and the eager consumption of the books, movies, and associated paraphernalia indicate that far from subverting global, multinational capitalism, the series thrives on avid consumerism. In addition to fueling consumerism, the series reinforces

conservative and repressive gender politics. Many critics have objected to the conservative gender politics of the *Harry Potter* series. The most important characters of the series—Harry, Dumbledore, and Voldemort—are male. Predominantly, males are shown as being wiser, braver, and more self-realized than the female characters. Elizabeth Heilman in “Blue Wizards and Pink Witches: Representations of Gender Identity and Power” explores gender relations in the series:

The *Harry Potter* books feature females in secondary positions of power and authority and replicate some of the most demeaning, yet familiar, cultural stereotypes for both males and females. Themes related to power and gender seem to conform to a rigid set of patterns, which reflect capitalist and patriarchal gender regimes. (222)

Heilman asserts that the series adheres to highly familiar depictions of gender and power.

Females comfort, console, and provide emotional support; males are depicted obtaining a goal and overcoming obstacles.

The depictions of Hermione clearly support Heilman’s assertions. Hermione is an enabler. Her knowledge is vital but used only to further Harry’s adventures, not fuel her own. In *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Hermione attempts to confront a troll, but she is overwhelmed by the troll’s vicious attack, and she must be rescued by Harry and Ron. This early depiction of Harry, Ron, and Hermione battling the troll establishes their typical working relationship. In the troll scene, Hermione has lost her wand, so she hides under the bathroom sinks instructing Ron how to use the spell “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” Each friend contributed to the defeat of the troll: Hermione contributes knowledge, and Ron and Harry directly apply that knowledge. This is a typical pattern for their collaborative efforts against evil. It is important to emphasize that Hermione isn’t depicted applying her knowledge directly. She is powerless

and dependent in the situation and only able to relay information to Ron that he is then able to use to defeat the troll.

Negative body images are conveyed through the descriptions of Hermione. She is initially describes as having “a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 105). For the Yule Dance during the Triwizarding Tournament in *The Goblet of Fire*, Hermione gets a makeover. Hermione is depicted as a passive princess as she walks down the stairs in her pink dress and takes the arm of her date, Viktor Krum. Hermione’s makeover (including a spell to reduce the size of her front teeth) and her attachment to Viktor result in exclamations from her classmates and a new level of attention rarely afforded bookish Hermione Granger. In discussing this scene, Heilman asserts that female consumers of the *Harry Potter* series are being given the negative message that they, like Hermione, are not intrinsically valuable and are in dire need of a makeover. The series creates a female protagonist who seems initially like a self-actualized, liberated character, but throughout the series, Hermione is used to reinforce the conservative position as an assistant to the male hero.

The *Harry Potter* series endorses hegemonic masculinity. The male heroes are brave, confident, and charismatic; whereas, the weak and unsuccessful males are despised and marginalized (Heilman 231). Hegemonic masculinity encourages males to mask their feelings, compete, and accentuate their prestigious position in society. The *Harry Potter* series contains numerous male characters that are ridiculed because of their failure to conform to the hegemonic ideals of manliness: Argus Filch, Professor Flitwick, Neville Longbottom, and Colin and Dennis Creevey, and, occasionally, Ron Weasley. In *The Order of the Phoenix* Harry obtains a memory of Snape’s schoolboy days at Hogwarts. Awkward and unpopular, Snape was viciously humiliated his peers, Harry’s father and Sirius Black. It is evident that Harry is uncomfortable

about his father and godfather's actions, but their cruelty in ridiculing Snape's inability to participate in the hegemonic ideal of masculinity is actually rewarded in the text. Harry's father and Sirius are both more sympathetic characters than Snape. Further enforcing hegemonic maleness, Harry's father was successful in winning the beautiful woman (Lily, Harry's mother) that Snape desired. The ramifications of these early traumatic experiences of being unable to adhere to the dominant ideal of masculinity are apparent in the adult Snape's remoteness and cruelty to students. In representing the all too familiar cultural stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, the series perpetuates damaging gender politics. Heilman states: "Repeated and varied examples of demeaning [gender] stereotypes are significant... The gender ideologies are especially powerful because the books are pleasurable and popular" (235).

Despite its participation in consumer capitalism and the conservative gender politics, the *Harry Potter* series does contain entry points for subversive readings. The series allows for such readings by treating numerous themes in a manner that challenges the dominant, conservative ideology of late consumer capitalism. The series exposes racism and xenophobia. It also provides positive models for organizing grassroots political activism (a timely theme especially in 2011-2012 with widespread, global protests.) Additionally, the series challenges the dichotomy presented in many mainstream texts between absolute good and absolute evil by a constructing a more nuanced (though limited), unhierarchical portrayal of the forces of good. Noel Chevalier states: "Although Rowling, Harry, and Warner Brothers may be complicit with the legal and market forces that create the Harry Potter phenomenon, Rowling and her books... offer a limited resistance" (401). This limited resistance occurs predominantly in the middle texts of the series and occurs in the form of a critique of racism, the portrayal of student-led, grassroots resistance,

and the nuanced depiction of good and evil. In the fourth and fifth books especially, the lines between good and evil are blurred.

Racial discrimination is one of the major themes of the *Harry Potter* series. The pursuit of racial purity motivates Voldemort and his followers, the KKK-styled Death eaters, to terrorize and murder racially mixed characters in the series and anyone who attempts to protect them. Brycchan Carey in the article “Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and Historical Context of J.K. Rowling’s Antislavery Campaign” states: “One of the central messages of [the series] is that discrimination, particularly racial discrimination, is a characteristic of evil” (113). The dominant racial conflict of the wizarding world is fueled by proponents of “pure-blood,” wealthy, aristocratic wizarding families such as Lucius Malfoy. The proponents of “pure blood” wizardry oppose the Muggle-born wizards and wizards who have one Muggle (non-magical) parent. Muggle-born wizards are people possessing magical powers born to non-magical families. The desire to purify Hogwarts and, by extension, the larger wizarding world, by removing muggle-born children from the school is a long-standing, powerful desire. Though held by a minority of the characters initially, the desire for racial purity becomes an increasingly dominant theme of the series. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the Ministry of Magic has become a powerful tool in prosecuting and removing all wizarding rights from Muggle-born wizards. The Ministry makes the following public announcement: “*Recent research undertaken by the Department of Mysteries reveals that magic can only be passed from person to person when Wizards reproduce. Where no proven Wizarding ancestry exists, therefore, the so-called Muggle-born is likely to have obtained magical power by theft or force*” (209). What we see initially as schoolboy taunts become Voldemort’s political manifesto. Ironically, as Karin Westman notes in her article “Specters of Thatcherism: Contemporary British Culture in J.K.

Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* Voldemort is not a pure blood wizard; he had a witch mother and Muggle father. Westman states: "To be 'pure blood' means not to be of pure blood, per se, but to subscribe to a particular set of ideological beliefs based on differences in social class and its concomitant power" (315). The blatant exposure of racism in the series is culturally important for contemporary U.S. when the Ku Klux Klan, other hate groups, and more subtle political groups such as the Tea Party are seeing a resurgence in direct response to issues of immigration and gay rights.

Racism in the wizarding world extends beyond the "pure blood" vs. Muggle-born issue. Non-human, marginalized racial groups such as giants, werewolves, centaurs, and House-Elves are heavily discriminated against. Tellingly, these four racial groups are characterized by their grotesque and frequently frightening bodies. Hagrid, a half-giant, has rounded, distorted features and wild hair and beard. He is overweight, shabbily dressed, and speaks a non-standard dialect of English. Lupin's transformation into a werewolf in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* is frightening. His familiar, friendly face stretches and distorts. His teeth and claws are sharp and threatening. Even more dehumanizing, he drops onto all fours and gallops into the bushes. The centaurs are dark and swarthy, their features harsh and their natures wild and ungovernable. The House Elves are the most pitiful-looking non-human species. They are short with huge heads. Their ears are long and pointy, their eyes bulging, and their skin flabby. John Fiske in *Television Culture* explores the role that representations of grotesque bodies serve in opposing the dominant ideology:

The grotesque realism of the ugly, distorted body is therefore opposed semiotically and politically to the dominant. It is an appropriate means of articulating the social experience of many subordinated and oppressed groups in capitalism whose everyday sense of the social system is not one of fairness and



equality; positioned as they are as “losers,” the subordinated (whether by class, gender, or race) have little sense of being “respected” by the winners, nor do they necessarily feel admiration for the socially successful. (249)

Through the inclusion of grotesque bodies, the series articulates the experience of powerless groups and explores their abuse by the dominant class.

Discrimination against non-human populations is not limited to the evil characters. Tellingly, Ron expresses highly prejudiced sentiments against giants, werewolves, and house-elves. Ron, who actively condemns the racism of the Malfoys and Voldemort, accepts the dominant cultural beliefs about giants. *The Goblet of Fire* states: “Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed,” as he explains, “They’re just vicious, giants...It’s in their natures; they’re like trolls...They just like killing; everyone knows that” (373-374). Hagrid, the gamekeeper, is discriminated against because his mother was a giant. Giants are perceived as vicious, stupid, violent, and irrational.

Werewolves are another highly marginalized population. Professor Lupin, Harry’s third year Defense Against the Dark Arts Teacher, mentor and friend, is ostracized by the wizarding world. Dumbledore instated him as an instructor, but parental complaints force Lupin’s resignation. He is always depicted shabbily dressed, illustrating how challenging it is for him to find employment because of rampant racial discrimination. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Lupin and Tonks are expecting a baby, but Lupin is tormented by feelings of guilt and shame for fathering a baby and potentially subjecting the child to the cruelty of a racist world.

Lupin states:

You don’t know how most of the Wizarding world sees creatures like me! When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me! Don’t you see what I’ve

done? Even [Tonks'] family is disgusted by me...My kind don't usually breed! It will be like me, I am convinced of it—how can I forgive myself, when I knowingly risked passing on my condition to an innocent child? (213).

Discrimination against werewolves is not limited to Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Ron voices prejudiced feelings against Lupin; he screams: “*Get away from me, werewolf!*” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 253) while Lupin was still his teacher.

The House-Elves are the most highly marginalized racial group in the wizarding world. They are unpaid, slave laborers, literally owned by the aristocratic wizarding families. The Malfoys own Dobby; Sirius Black inherited Kreacher when his mother died. But, the exploitation of House-Elves extends beyond aristocratic wizarding families. Hogwarts is maintained by House-Elves. All the delicious food that seems to magically appear on the Hogwarts tables is prepared by the unpaid, slave labor of the House-Elves. “Good” characters that we sympathize with—Sirius, Dumbledore, and Ron—all perpetuate the marginalized status of the House-Elves. Sirius threatens and belittles Kreacher. Dumbledore continues the exploitation of House-Elves at Hogwarts, and Ron declares that the House-Elves are happy in their enslavement. Hermione retorts to Ron’s statement: “It’s people like *you*...who prop up rotten and unjust systems” (*Goblet of Fire* 112).

Only Harry and Hermione exhibit concern about the House-Elves’ position. Harry’s involvement with the plight of the House-Elves is a personal one, centered on his relationship with Dobby, but it extends later in *The Deathly Hallows* to his treatment of Kreacher. Throughout *The Chamber of Secrets*, Dobby, Lucius Malfoy’s house-elf, attempts to convince Harry to leave Hogwarts in a comical and often disastrous attempt to save Harry from Malfoy’s anti-Muggle-born campaign that involves summoning the ghost of a young Voldemort,

unleashing a basilisk, and almost killing Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. After witnessing Malfoy's abusive treatment of Dobby, Harry frees Dobby by tricking Malfoy into giving Dobby a sock. (House-Elves can be freed by giving them an article of clothing.) In the final book of the series *The Deathly Hallows* Dobby dies rescuing Harry from Voldemort.

Hermione's concern for the position of the House-Elves in the wizarding world takes the public form of political activism. She creates a student organization called the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare in an attempt to educate her fellow students about the injustice of the House-Elves' situation. In the fifth book, Hermione researches, organizes, and even learns to knit hats, which, if picked up by a House-Elf when cleaning, would free him or her from slavery. Hermione's classmates and the House-Elves themselves are ambivalent about Hermione's activism. The House-Elves have been enslaved so long that many students assume that enslavement is the "natural" position of House-Elves in society. Many of the House-Elves are unable to imagine being free. Carey states: "Even when freed, or acting alone, the elves continue to follow their internal logic of bondage" (104). Hermione's organization has nominal effect. She does raise student awareness about the plight of House-Elves. Her activism influences Dumbledore's decision to employ (and pay) Dobby after he is freed. In *The Deathly Hallows*, Hermione encourages Harry's efforts to treat Kreacher with respect.

The complex issue of racism in the series presents many opportunities for subversive readings. By extending the issue of racial discrimination to include non-human species that appear grotesque, the series articulates the experience of marginalized groups under consumer capitalism. By allowing sympathetic characters to express racist sentiments, the series illustrates the pervasiveness of racism throughout society. Additionally, *The Order of the Phoenix* depicts students organizing against racism, allowing readers and viewers to participate in organized

resistance against the dominant ideology simply through engagement with the text. By providing a grassroots model of resistance, the series has the potential to motivate readers to organize in opposition to the dominant ideology.

*The Order of the Phoenix* focuses on three distinct political activist groups. The first, Hermione's Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare (with the unfortunate acronym "S.P.E.W."), is motivated by Hermione's desire to educate Hogwarts about the exploitation of House-Elves. Hermione's focus is public outreach and education. Unlike the two other political organizations, S.P.E.W. is not intended to directly confront Voldemort and The Death Eaters. Interestingly, Hermione's organization is concerned more with supporting domestic workers' rights, a historically women dominated fight, while the male organized campaigns are focused on political rights.

During the same year at Hogwarts, Hermione is also instrumental in establishing a student organization called Dumbledore's Army. This organization teaches interested students defense against the dark arts. Led by Harry Potter, "a heroic resistance figure" (Chevalier 398), the student organization resists the abusive policies of Professor Umbridge who, under the authority of the Ministry, determines that students have no need to learn the practical aspects of defending themselves against threatening magic. She teaches only theory about the dark arts in preparation for the exams. She attempts to control students' access to knowledge about how to defend themselves, thus seriously limiting their wizarding skills. In response to her restrictive policies and abusive punishments, students organize and begin learning and using defensive spells, such as how to disarm their opponent, how to protect themselves with a shield charm, and how to summon a Patronus. Even though Umbridge criminalizes all student organizations, Dumbledore's Army continues to meet. The students involved have no intention of over-

throwing the existing power structures. They organize to acquire the skills that will allow them to defend themselves if threatened. Though the organization is discovered by Umbridge and the participants severely punished, Ron, Hermione, Harry, Neville, Ginny, and Luna defend themselves against the Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, employing the defensive skills they practiced. In the sixth book, *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's Army rallies against Death Eaters who successfully invade Hogwarts. Working alongside The Order of the Phoenix (the next political organization I will discuss), Dumbledore's Army defeats the invading Death Eaters.

The Order of the Phoenix was founded by Dumbledore in response to Voldemort's first rise to power. The original Order included Sirius, Lupin, Mad-Eye Moody, and Harry's and Neville's parents, among others. Dumbledore re-assembles the organization in *The Order of the Phoenix* because of the increasing threat posed by Voldemort's return. Similar to Dumbledore's Army, the members of the Order of the Phoenix have no desire to procure power for themselves. Rather, the Order is devoted to organizing human and non-human populations against the threat posed by Voldemort and his followers. Also, the Order directly confronts Voldemort when necessary. The Order is dedicated to stopping the evils perpetuated by Voldemort.

All three organizations are motivated by a desire to challenge the proponents of the dominant ideology in the series. These organizations support and protect marginalized, subordinate populations, specifically groups marginalized because of race, age, and class. The series' most powerful subversive potential resides in these models of subordinated groups resisting the abusive practices of the dominant ideology. Readers are empowered to challenge and resist elements of society that, in turn, marginalize them.

The next entry point for a subversive reading of *The Order of the Phoenix* is the subversion of traditional conventions of good and evil. The controversies surrounding *Harry Potter* have focused primarily on the series' treatment of good and evil. In the series, good is unhierarchical; there is no "God the Father" figure in the series. More interestingly, evil in Harry Potter's world is hierarchical. The Death Eaters serve Voldemort. The Ministry of Magic is hierarchically structured under a Prime Minister, a position that becomes throughout the series increasingly corrupt and eventually dominated by Voldemort. Rebecca Stephens in her article "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority" explores the controversial reception of the *Harry Potter* series. She states: "What is truly troubling to *Potter* detractors seems to be the lack of a single controlling authority in the books, not just the practice of magic... Traditional power structures are actively subverted... Regulations created by authorities are made to be broken" (56-58). The series subverts the traditional hierarchical power structures; there is no single "right" or "good" source of power. The power is diffused. All the forces of good are decentralized.

Stephens asserts that this decentralized nature of good repeatedly leads to the defeat of evil. Harry's repeated triumphs over Voldemort are always group efforts. Stephens states:

That the evil force is the one with a single authority is in direct opposition to the Christian rightist belief that there is a divine design for good in the world and one true source of power ordering it. The inverted depiction and the threat it poses to de-elevate hierarchies of power as the correct world order is perhaps the real menace of Harry Potter (58).

Initially in the series, Dumbledore appears to be the god-like figure, but as the series progresses, readers and viewers realize that Dumbledore himself is opposed to authoritarian leadership.

Chevalier states: “Dumbledore’s principles transcend regulation and conformity. He believes that when a rule or tradition comes into conflict with a higher principle, it must be declared faulty” (405). Also, Dumbledore’s power to affect good is limited. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, two characters—Buckbeak, the hippogriff, and Sirius Black—are falsely convicted and condemned to death, and even though Dumbledore is convinced of their innocence, he is unable to directly intervene and prevent their deaths. Dumbledore is an extremely talented wizard and the headmaster of Hogwarts, but his authority and ability to affect good is limited. To prevent the execution of Buckbeak and Sirius Black, Dumbledore must work with Hermione and Harry. Evil is only defeated through a collaborative effort.

Additionally, Dumbledore is not infallible. His past is troubled with dark secrets and the abuse of power. Dumbledore admits that he willfully withheld information from Harry about his destiny and made poor judgments about Harry’s future. Dumbledore dies at the end of *The Half-Blood Prince*, and there is no triumphant resurrection scene. The ultimate defeat of Voldemort is affected only through the tremendous effort of every character in the book who resisted Voldemort (and even a few that served him). The collaborative, community-center depiction of the forces of good sharply contrasts the individualistic hero model common in consumer capitalism.

Another site for subversive readings is the blurred distinction between good and evil characters. There are no moral absolutes in the series. The simple binary of good vs. evil is deconstructed. Several “good” characters—Ron, Sirius Black, and Ginny—effect great harm. Ron espouses intensely racist sentiments against highly marginalized, non-human populations. Sirius Black has a capacity for ruthlessness. About Ginny, Veronica Schanoes states: “Her susceptibility to evil and unwilling complicity emphasizes the potential of unimpeachably good

and kind characters for evil” (136). Conversely, several unsympathetic characters show a great capacity for sacrifice and forgiveness. Narcissa Malfoy, Draco’s mother, spares Harry’s life. Snape endures great personal sacrifice in order to effect the ultimate defeat of Voldemort. Readers and viewers are forced to consider characters’ individual actions as constructive or destructive instead of seeing the characters as good or bad characters. “Good” characters do destructive things while “bad” characters do constructive things.

Through the series’ resistance to framing the world in terms of absolutes, readers and viewers are actively encouraged to participate in the meaning-making of the text. The dominant ideology contained in the text is challenged by the eagerness of readers and viewers to actively participate in creating their own meanings from the text. Fiske explores the ability of readers to resist the dominant ideology of a text: “The hegemony of a text is never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against the diversity of meanings that the diversity of readers will produce” (93). Fiske asserts that viewers frequently resist the “incorporating devices” (45) encoded in texts. He continues: “The problem with much traditional textual analysis, whether its impulse has been ideological or aesthetic, is that it has tended to produce an authoritarian, even ‘correct’ reading of a text, and has tended to ascribe to the text the power to impose this reading on the viewer” (45).

The readers and viewers of the Harry Potter series have creatively resisted the dominant ideology inscribed in the series by appropriating the world of Harry Potter for an expression of their own personal experiences. In a study conducted by Sara Ann Beach and Elizabeth Harden, children relate their experiences with the series. Children have found the series inspiring because, in contrast with the lack of power most children experience in their lives, the children in the series are able to affect their lives significantly. For example, in *The Order of the Phoenix*



Harry organizes a group of students who resist the injustice imposed by the intolerant headmistress, Dolores Umbridge. Fiske states: “Finding discourse in a text that makes sense of one’s experience of social powerlessness in a positive way is the vital first step towards being able to do something to change that powerlessness” (70). Beach discusses the experience of a young reader named Morgan who said: “If I were in Harry’s place, I would have felt like I could do anything that I wanted to do because I had powers” (3). Fiske discusses children’s playful and imaginative engagement with characters and themes from popular culture texts. He states: “The play may not in itself be resistive or subversive, but the control or empowerment it entails produces a self-esteem in the subordinate that at least makes resistance or subversion possible” (232). Far from being enculturated by the ideology of late consumer capitalism, children readers respond actively to themes of resistance and apply them to their own experiences.

Rebecca Borah in “Apprentice Wizards Welcome: Fan Communities and the Culture of Harry Potter” explores the phenomenon of fan communities that has developed around the *Harry Potter* series. Borah asserts that fans actively generate their own meanings of the text: “Rather than being passive receivers of consumable texts, fans are active participants who share their experience and rework texts” (345). Fan communities challenge the incorporating devices of the text and also the producers who own the rights to the characters and the concepts. Borah explores organized youth fan community resistance against Time Warner and controversy surrounding Time Warner’s harassment of online fan communities and legitimate nonprofit sites. In 2000, when Time Warner gained the ownership of the *Harry Potter* franchise, Time Warner contacted numerous teen web site owners, demanding that the owners transfer the sites to Time Warner. Numerous web owners including Alistair Alexander and Heather Lawver, cofounders of Defense Against the Dark Arts online community, resisted. Their campaign against Time Warner

included press releases, legal measures, and a boycott of the film and associated products. Fiske describes the phenomenon of “excorporation” (315) which is “the process by which the powerless (in this case youth fans of Harry Potter) steal elements of the dominant culture and use them in their own, often oppositional or subversive, interests” (355). In the particular example of the Defense Against the Dark Arts online fan community, Alexander and Lawver appropriated the name of a Hogwarts’ class and rallied against unfair corporate action, modeling student led organizations presented in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Active readers and viewers of the *Harry Potter* series continue to resist both the dominant ideology prevalent in the series and the exploitative tactics of the owners of the *Harry Potter* franchise.

The *Harry Potter* series has been widely critiqued for its commodification by consumer capitalism. John Frow in *Time and Commodity Culture* claims that it is inappropriate to censor a work because of the conditions it was produced under: “The crucial caution that must be entered is that the term ‘commodity’ cannot be used as a criterion by means of which to find mass-produced works wanting, because no work of art is now produced outside of the system of commodity production” (61). The numerous entry points for subversive readings in the *Harry Potter* series, predominantly *The Order of the Phoenix* and the enthusiasm of young readers and viewers to reframe the text to articulate their own personal experiences of powerless and resistance illustrates the ability of a text to resist the dominant ideology of late consumer capitalism despite the conditions it was produced under and the heavy commodification it was subjected to.

The ending of the series, however, undercuts the subversiveness of *The Order of the Phoenix*. In film terms, the Harry Potter texts, literary or filmic, are what Richard Neupert, in his book *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema* calls “closed texts” (35). Neupert goes on

to say that “The Closed Text film has the most secure ending of the four groups and satisfies conventional demands for unity and resolution. Closed Text films are historically dominant because their narrative modes derive from classical traditions [and] they have proven commercially successful. [Their] resolution, with an epilogue as a closure device, returns the viewer to a pleasurable spectator position” (41). Neupert’s discussion of closed text films is clearly relevant to a discussion of the Harry Potter texts. Throughout the sixth and seventh books, we see a slow yet steady movement away from an expression of marginalized positions to a centric position. For example, in the sixth book, Dumbledore dies, beginning the erasure of the elderly. Also Harry, Ron, and Hermione, the children protagonists of the series, become adults. In effect, the kids and the elderly disappear from the narrative. The ageism of the final pages of the series is pretty complete. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione are the ideal young couples, and they watch their children board the train to Hogwarts. The couples are the focus of the narrative, and the kids' story is truncated, leaving them as dead, for the readers and viewers, as Dumbledore. Another way that the ending of the series undercuts the progressiveness of *The Order of the Phoenix* is that many of the marginalized characters are also killed off by the narrative. The Harry Potter world doesn't seem to become any more integrated by the end of the film. Dobby (House Elf) is killed; Lupin (werewolf) is killed. Most of the "grotesque" characters are killed off. The final way that the series neatly reifies the characteristic fantasy, mainstream portrayal of the world is by pulling back from the nuanced portrayal of good and evil that we saw in the middle texts of the series. The apocalyptic good vs. evil battle at the end of the series has clearly defined sides. Good and bad aren't as malleable as they were earlier in the series. The Christ-like resurrection of Harry smacks of Christian allegory, reminding readers familiar with the genre of fantasy of the ultra-conservative fantasies of C. S. Lewis.

Centric endings are common in fantasies. Susan Cooper's children protagonists have their memories erased. Ingrid Law's *Savvy* pushes the young female heroine into a heterosexual coupling. The children in *The Magic Treehouse* series return to their home where no time has passed and nothing changed. The ending of *Harry Potter* highlights the thirty-something-year old married couples. In mainstream children's fantasies, happy endings resolve most if not all of the texts' thematic conflicts and in the process reify the dominant ideologies of the era and the historical conditions within which the text was produced. American blockbuster franchises such as the *Harry Potter* series try to subvert society's normative values in regards to race, class, gender, and age but still inexorably move toward centrist endings that ironically support the very status quos they try to challenge. Generally speaking, the children grow up, the elderly die, the marginalized don't find more power, and marriages rule the day.

Why do texts like *Harry Potter* and many other children's and young adult mainstream fantasies as they move toward their final chapters tend to silence the marginalized voices heard over the whole series, revert back to the basic dualisms of "good" and "bad" characteristic of much second-rate, dogmatic children's literature, and yet still remain phenomenally popular? Why end with these kinds of endings?

An obvious cause of this final weaving together of the strands of one's life, or this gravitational pull toward the center, is the powerful force of commodity production in consumer capitalism. Books and films are commodities. Many of them, deliberately or otherwise, promote the dominant ideology of any given historical moment and since writers and directors are developing their texts from within the dominant, historically determined narrative, their stories are laced with mainstream ideology. Additionally, producers and distributors are required to

make a profit, so non-conformist literary and filmic texts whose endings are not, broadly speaking, happy, are marginalized.

We cannot blame everything on the materialism of the commodity, however, because this takes away agency from people, leaving them without any responsibility for what they consume or an understanding of the dreams that shape their lives. As pointed out, fans frequently resist a text's more conservative strands in order to weave for themselves something acceptable they can use in real life. For many people, the happy ending is literally symbolic, not symbolically literal. It is what might be, not what has to be. In *The Enchanted Screen*, Jack Zipes draws on the work of Ernest Bloch to argue that fairy tales, including contemporary fairy tale films for the young, offer all people hope for the future. Jung argues a similar point but from a more archetypal perspective. In "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," Jung writes about the paradox in which the child is "delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and is in continual danger of extinction" but yet also "possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity" (170). Those powers, Jung argues, are tantamount to a kind of divinity that touches people emotionally and allows them to make sense of the directions in which their lives are travelling even as they are unaware of where they are going and why. Jung continues that the child is the "ineluctable urge in every being to realize itself" (170). In short, the centrist ending in which all of the marginalized characters are replaced by an image of the happy family functions as an archetype of the end but with a promise of renewal. In short, the ending of the series overlaps with a host of new beginnings, a transition that must be understood dialectically, as an intersection between the powerful driving forces of history no doubt fuelled by the commodity and the equally powerful forces of myth as they are revealed in the archetypes of human existence that call to us from deep within our unconscious but which are, of course, in the final

instance grounded in the material conditions of history. The success of the series, despite the ending, is in part because of the ending. The fairy tale ending has little to do with either money or magic but the way in which people throughout time have appropriated art as a way of understanding what they are experiencing at any given point in their lives. In this way, art is constantly alive, always changing in accordance with broad, general historical eras but also in line with the responses of individuals caught up in those historical moments. At the end of these American mainstream movies, all the marginalized characters who have spent the life of the movie struggling for their identity—the very old and the very young, the inhumanly grotesque and the impossibly attractive, for example—are erased, eliminated, banished and exiled from the world they have fought so hard to defend. They are replaced by the image of the middle aged, married couple and their children (whose stories remain untold), an archetypal image both wondrous and fearsome and yet also historically determined.

But as this cycle is played out as a result of several complex factors, children are repeatedly seeing the reinscription of the dominant ideology. In a genre as potentially open-ended and subversive as fantasy, the repeated return to mainstream, centric positions could be devastating to reading and viewing children. Instead of the just the escape from real life that good fantasy books and films seem to promise, these texts could possibly offer more to young audiences. Interestingly, texts written and produced in the United States and Britain seem to uphold the dominant ideology more completely than multi-cultural texts. If all texts could become more open, they could offer opportunities for readers and viewers to create meaning and to potentially take action in support of the marginalized or more progressive positions.

### Chapter Three:

#### Working-Class Children: Disappearing from Contemporary Children's Film

As I have been discussing throughout my dissertation, children's films are sites of ideological transmission between adults and children. Elizabeth Freeman in "*Monsters Inc: Notes on the Neoliberal Arts Education*" sees children's films as "portable professors" that enculturate children while, simultaneously, allowing adults a deeper look into our society's ideologies (85). Jullian Hinkins in "'Biting the Hand That Feeds': Consumerism, Ideology, and Recent Animated Film for Children" states, "Filmic text is embedded with ideologies and often has specific didactic intentions" (49). Henry Giroux in *The Mouse that Roared* writes: "Media culture is a substantial educational force in regulating meanings, values, and tastes" (2-3). Children's films instruct children on how to both perform childhood and find their place in an adult world by dramatizing imaginary relationships between children and all facets of their lived experience. Althusser describes the imagined relationship established by ideology between individuals and their lives: "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals but the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real condition of existence" (162.) Notably, the imaginary relationships that children's films have been building between children and the issue of class over the past three decades seems to be more ideologically conservative and reactionary than in previous decades. Contemporary children's films are examples of what Roland Barthes describes as the "bourgeois myth." These films appeal to a generalized humanity by obscuring social ills such as gender inequalities, racial discrimination, marginalization because of age, and the very existence of the

lower social classes. While the issues of racial discrimination and gender inequality seem, at least ostensibly, to be having some limited treatment in recent children's films (think Tiana, the first African American princess, in Disney's 2009 "princess film" *The Princess and the Frog*), the issue of social class has gone primarily ignored in recent, mainstream live action and animated children's films. Many recent children's films, most notably the films produced by Disney and its subsidiary Pixar, continue to focus their films on middle and upper-class protagonists.

*The Princess and the Frog's* heroine Tiana is not only Disney's first black princess; she's also the first princess who is a member of the working class and the first princess to ever be turned into a frog. In fact, not until the ending of the film when she marries Prince Naveen does she become a real princess; for most of the film she's a working class girl. Well, really, for most of the film, she's a frog. So how does Disney treat Tiana's working class roots? Tiana's mother and father are industrious, hardworking, and happy. Before her father's death, Tiana's family is shown as loving, community-minded, and hardworking. The first ten minutes of the film, the only part of the film where Tiana is a child, shows her mother sewing lovely princess dresses for the spoiled Charolotee LeBeuaf and her father coming home from work. When they were all together, they cooked amazing gumbo to share with their community of shanty house residents. Only later in the film does Tiana realize just how exhausted her parents both were from their long working days.

After her father's death in World War 1, the film jumps forward to Tiana at eighteen. She works two waitressing jobs and slowly saves towards opening the restaurant of her father's dreams. Like her mother before her, she also works for Charlotte's family, but she serves food at parties instead of sewing clothes. When she kisses Naveen, who had been turned into a frog by



the evil Dr. Facilier, a voodoo witch doctor, she is turned into a frog because she wasn't a real princess. While a frog, she falls in love with Prince Naveen. Even though he doesn't have an inheritance, he is a prince, and in marrying him, Tiana gains a title and transcends her working class roots. After their wedding, both in human form again, Tiana and Prince Naveen make a down payment on the restaurant with the money Tiana had been saving. The two sketchy lenders are scared into accepting the down payment by Tiana and Naveen's friend, a trumpet playing alligator. At the end of the film, Tiana and Naveen are shown working side-by-side in the thriving jazz club they own, Tiana's Place.

This film, while positively depicting a black working class family, has some problems. First, even though it is set in a real, historical period, it ignores the racial and class pressures that make the resolution of this film unrealistic. Tiana, a young black woman, simply couldn't have owned a jazz club and married a white prince in the 1920s South. The film glosses over the issue of class by setting the film in a distant past and having the main character move up the social scale from black service worker to princess at an accelerated rate. The movie seems to imply that all a person has to do to move out of the working class is have a dream.

Tiana and her family aren't the only members of the working class in the film. In addition to the working class African-American families who live in New Orleans shanty towns, there are also poor whites who live in the bayous outside the city. The firefly Ray, a warm-hearted, idealistic character who helps Tiana and Naveen return to their human form and embrace their mutual affection, is ridiculed a little by the narrative because of his love for a star, Evangeline. He is killed by Dr. Facilier. The other poor whites are three frog hunters who try to catch Tiana and Naveen for dinner, but they are incredibly stupid, and they are easily outsmarted in their fumbled attempts to catch the two frogs. *The Princess and the Frog* situates class in the distant

past and depicts class as something pretty easily overcome. It also uses members of the lower class, namely poor whites, for moments of slapstick humor. While it simply isn't politically correct to use poor African Americans for a comedic effect as in the crows in *Dumbo* and the monkeys in *The Jungle Book*, it's still pretty safe to ridicule poor whites.

2010 and 2011 were especially bad years for representations of the working class in children's films. Most children's films such as *Tron: Legacy*, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows 1 and 2*, *Cars 2*, *Kung-Fu Panda 2*, *Tangled* and *The Tooth Fairy* ignored the issue of social class entirely while others such as *Shrek: Forever After*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, and *Toy Story 3*, alluded briefly to a specific character's working class roots dismissively as something the protagonists were destined to transcend. Disney's 2010 animated/ live action film *Tron: Legacy* completely ignores the working class with its focus on Sam Flynn, the son of legendary Kevin Flynn, owner of ENCOM Corporation and creator of a virtual world known as the Grid. In *Tron: Legacy* Kevin is abducted by his own virtual world, and his son Sam attempts a rescue. The film doesn't have much plot beyond this, and so it relies on stunning, lavish, computer-generated technological effects. In fact, this film could easily not be seen as a children's film except for the advertisement of its release on children's television and during the previews for other children's films and the extensive co-marketing which targeted children consumers. In *Tron: Legacy*, both in the real world and virtual world of the Grid, Sam is in a place of privilege because of both his father's extensive estate and computer genius. This computer genius that Kevin and Sam possess, viewers are left to surmise, results from a genetic proclivity and unlimited access to cutting edge technology. *Tron: Legacy* provides an example of one reason that the working class is increasingly being pushed from children's films. Over the past three decades ever increasing technological inventions have been a major subject of

children's films, and access to technology depends, to a certain extent, on wealth and opportunities often afforded by wealth. Sam Flynn has access to the virtual world created by his father because of his wealth and the technological access and leisure time afforded him also because of his wealth.

Several recent children's films include characters with working class roots, but the issue of social class is only treated marginally. Shrek has "working class" roots, and in *Shrek Forever After*, his one wish is to return to his bachelor, pre-fatherhood days and his working class roots. This wish is granted, and the results for Shrek are disastrous. He spends the rest of the film trying to win his wife Fiona's heart again, storm the castle, and regain his place of privilege. Hiccup, the protagonist of Dreamworks' *How to Train Your Dragon*, is the Viking chief's son, but a series of misadventures and his puny size results in a lowly apprenticeship to a blacksmith. His thankless job echoes the position of working class children, but thanks to his ability to fearlessly communicate with dragons, he regains a position of honor in his village. In these major theatrical releases, the narratives focus on protagonists privileged by either wealth or parentage or characters who overcome their working class roots. The real issues facing the working class are obscured.

There was one major theatrical release listed in the top ten children's movies of 2010 that briefly treats the issue of social privilege, if not the issue of social class. Dreamworks' *Megamind*, directed by Tom McGrath and featuring the voices of Will Ferrel, Brad Pitt, and Tina Fey, tells the story of the supervillain Megamind who was sent to Earth by his parents to escape the black hole that was causing his home planet to collapse. Megamind was heading to a wealthy home with nurturing, attentive parents in Metrocity until his space pod was forced off course by the escape pod of another infant who would become Megamind's arch rival: the superhero

Metro Man. Megamind's space pod lands in a prison yard, and he is raised by Metrocity's criminals. At school he is ridiculed because of his strange home life, his clothes, and his appearance. Every attempt he makes to fit in with his peers and win the approval of his teacher fails miserably, so Megamind decides that the only thing he is good at is being bad. He becomes a supervillain and terrifies the citizens of Metrocity. The rest of the movie focuses on his gradual realization that he doesn't want to continue always being the bad guy. In the end, he and his sidekick Minion, a piranha-like fish in a robot suit, are able to save Metrocity from a supervillain. Megamind is hailed as the new hero of the city.

The first ten minutes of *Megamind* offer a pretty direct critique of the role of wealth, privilege, and social class in shaping the character of an individual. Megamind, the film seems to say, would have turned out differently if he had had the same social advantages as his arch rival Metro Man. The film directly contradicts one of the main messages of Disney's children's films. Booker in *Disney, Pixar, and the Hidden Message in Children's Films* states that Disney films focus on characters that are predetermined or somehow destined to assume a certain position in life. In the nurture vs. nature argument, Disney comes down on the side of nature. This emphasis of nature over nurture is seen in Disney's very first feature length film *Snow White* up through *Tron: Legacy*. In *Snow White*, despite the attempt on her life and the backwoods refuge with the dwarves and animals in the middle of the forest, Snow White still gets the prince because, the film insists, she was destined to become a queen; it was in her nature. Dreamworks, the distributor of *Megamind*, Booker observes, has repeatedly challenged some of the dominant ideologies of Disney. In *Megamind* Dreamworks weighs in about the importance of nurture in shaping a character's life. If Megamind had had the same privileged conditions as Metro Man, he wouldn't have devoted himself to a life of crime. Disney's repeated focus on nature over nurture

in children's films can lead to an irresponsible approach to social problems. Since, for example, working class children have limited access to certain privileged aspects of society such as education, travel, certain careers and other opportunities, the ideology supported by Disney seems to imply that working class children's inability to succeed as dramatically as privileged children is not the fault of their society but, instead, a personal flaw. The emphasis of nature over nurture in many children's films is another major reason why working-class children haven't gotten much screen time.

Recent children's television shows also fail to depict working class kids. Cartoon Network's most popular shows *Adventure Time*, *BenTen: Ultimate Alien*, *Generator Rex*, and *Johnny Test* don't have any working class characters. The issue of class is ignored completely. In *The Regular Show*, created by J.G. Quintel, protagonists Mordecai (a blue jay) and Rigby (a raccoon) are twenty-three year old best friends working as groundskeepers at a park. While occasionally they complain about the work and their poor pay, which their boss Benson gives them in loose change in plastic baggies, they typically evade their work and get into surreal adventures including a video game play-off with GBH (a giant bearded head), a race through their memory to catch Mordecai's traumatic sighting of Pop's, as Rigby puts it, "junk mail," and a play-off against a pop song that takes over the park.

Nickelodian's most popular shows, including *Dora the Explorer* and *The Backyardigans* which target pre-school audiences, animated series such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and live-action series *True Jackson VP* and *iCarly* all exclude working class characters and completely erase the issue of class. *iCarly*, for example, focuses on the web show starring Carly and her best friend Sam. Carly and her friends are well-off, and the world created by the show is wealthy and exclusive. In the three part movie *IParty with Victorious* most of the film is set at a huge party in

LA in the luxurious home of Kenan Thompson. According to Bill Gorman, this single episode, “drew 7.3 million total viewers. The 90-minute original, which unites the casts of Nick’s mega-hit *iCarly* and ratings smash *Victorious*, has also taken the top spot, ranking as the number-one entertainment telecast of 2011 across all TV with kids 6-11 and tweens 9-14” (n.p.). While I’m certainly not advocating that every children’s film or TV show has to include a working class character, it is problematic that working class kids are so routinely excluded from children’s texts in favor of children of the middle and upper classes.

Children’s television shows and films have not always relied on upper- and middle-class protagonists and depictions of worlds that required substantial wealth to join. Robert Sklar in *Movie-made America* states: “They [movies] were the first of the modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up, receiving their principle support from the lowest and most invisible classes in America ... The urban workers, the immigrants and the poor had discovered a new medium of entertainment without the aid, and indeed beneath the notice of the custodians and arbiters of middle-class culture” (3-4). The first forty to fifty years of children’s films, from the silent films of the 1890s through the post WWII era, include several films that focus on working-class kids including *Oliver Twist* (1912), Chaplin’s *The Tramp* (1915) and *The Kid* (1921), *Our Gang* and *The Little Rascals*. Several films from the silent era actually depict social problems experienced by working class children such as child labor, child abuse, and overly large families because of inadequate birth control methods. These films include *Children who Labor* (1912), *The Blood of the Children* (1915), *Where are my Children?* (1916), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1917). After World War II, children’s films became more conservative. Ian Wojcik-Andrews describes the ideological shift that occurred in children’s films after WWII:

Unsurprisingly, in the post-World War II era, we see children's cinema and film emerge as a site of phenomenal commercial success and deep ideological commitment to conservative family values. Corporate Hollywood's use of film to highlight social injustice, so prevalent in the silent era and the early 1930s, fades entirely from the post-World War II era. Film as a tool for promoting social equality is assigned to Italian Neorealism (1940s), Third Worldism and Black Cinema (1980s and 1990s), Independents and women directors (1980s and 1990s.) In the post-World War II era, Hollywood got in it for the money alone. (73)

After WWII children's films began moving away from depictions of working class children to focus primarily on the imagined children of the middle and upper classes. While the 1960s did produce some films that reflected First World countercultural changes, creating what Wojick-Andrews terms a "schizoid" image of the child (meaning that both conservative and progressive politics were present in children's films simultaneously), the past three decades have witnessed a regressive and conservative backlash against those limited changes.

Since its inception in the early 1930s, Disney has been at the forefront in producing and distributing animated films. Throughout its eighty years in children's film production, Disney has become an icon of American culture and a disseminator of middle-class family values. Disney's conceptualization of childhood has helped shape America's definition of childhood since the 1930s. Giroux states, "Disney defines the US as a white/ ideological construct, suburban, middle-class and heterosexual" (127). This definition of childhood is evidenced in the imagined viewing audience. "Walt Disney and his successors recognized the importance of catering to families, but they were not interested in catering to all families but to conventional, white, middle-class, heterosexual families" (Giroux 40-41). Giroux continues, "These films

produce representations and codes through which children are taught that characters which do not bear the imprint of white, middle-class ethnicity are culturally deviant, inferior, unintelligent and a threat” (103). Children who fit into Disney’s definition of childhood were further indoctrinated into their role as children by these films. Children who did not fit into this definition were further marginalized.

Not only do children learn how they should perform childhood through watching children’s films, but viewers and critics of children’s films can see shifts in how our culture envisions children and childhood. Kathy Jackson states: “By looking at the image of children on the screen, one can gain insight into the changing beliefs about the child” (8). One main shift that seems to be occurring is a shift away from the importance of gaining adult-like qualities, say for example the appreciation of hard work as advanced in Disney’s *Snow White*, towards a more complete devaluation of childhood. Children are encouraged to become miniature adults. Wojick-Andrews states that the children’s films of the 1990s ignore the pressing social problems facing children. He asserts that there is a growing gulf between the cinematic depictions of children and children’s lived experiences (108, 111). This tendency of ignoring pressing social problems facing children has grown in the twenty-first century. For example, Pixar films have taken children out of children’s films. How can there be a meaningful treatment of problems children are facing without children protagonists? The tremendous financial success of the Pixar films undoubtedly indicates that depictions of children—whether human or anthropomorphized animals or objects—are not a necessary component of successful children’s films. In Pixar films, child protagonists are replaced with primarily adult anthropomorphized characters including toys, ants, fish, cars, rats, and robots. As Pixar excludes child characters repeatedly from its blockbuster films, a pattern seems to be emerging. Childhood is not valued as much as



adulthood; children are encouraged to identify fully with adult characters' struggle with adult feelings and adult emotions instead of identifying with children characters who have adult-like qualities. Children are encouraged to grow into adulthood more quickly. Several of Disney's live action/ computer generated films also reveal this tendency. Disney's *Tron: Legacy* (discussed earlier) features a twenty-seven year old protagonist, Sam Flynn. Sam is nine when his father disappears. But after the opening five minutes back story, the focus is on the adult Sam. Children are disappearing from children's films, and as the overall number of children in both animated and live action children films diminishes, most working-class children have been cut from children's films.

Another pattern is observable in contemporary children's film. As children are being steered towards adulthood earlier and earlier through the portrayal of older protagonists in children's films, children are also being increasingly valued for their role as consumers in our society. Children have been the target of marketers since the 1930s, but marketing that directly targets child consumers grows each year. Jack Zipes in *Happily Ever After* writes: "Most importantly for Disney and other producers of fairy-tale films was the manner in which they could 'hook' children as consumers not because they believed their films had artistic merit and could contribute to children's cultural development, but because they wanted to control children's aesthetic interests and consumer tastes" (91). The main goal of the producers and distributors of children's films, even more than the transmission of ideology, is to secure a greater and greater profit.

Several factors in the history of children's films have contributed to the increasing focus on their profitability. Wojcik-Andrews states, "The 1960s are an important decade in the history of children's cinema and film. The ownership of the studios passes from individuals to individual

corporations” (95). In the late 1970s and 1980s, children’s films were doing poorly in the box office, but since the reinvention of Disney and the advent of “New Disney” in 1989 with *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991, children’s films have become a hugely profitable market. The increasing desire to secure a profit limits the portrayal of working-class children in two important ways. First, films attempt to reach the largest possible viewing audience. Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* states that the desire to appeal to all children “serves to close off a set of cultural divisions, divisions in which not only children, but we ourselves are necessarily caught” (7). The desire to create a text with a blanket audience appeal results in films that obscure all differences and divisions of race, class, and gender.

Second, because children are increasingly desired as consumers they are depicted in children’s film as consumers. The act of consumption is one of the main ways that the protagonists of children’s films, whether they are anthropomorphized characters or played by actors (frequently adults), are shown to be powerful. In Pixar’s *Cars*, for example, the plot revolves around consumption. The cars are shown buying organic fuel, going out to the diner, and purchasing new tires. These filmic acts of consumption encourage children viewers to associate the acts of consumption with being a powerful individual, a.k.a. an adult. Simultaneously, by viewing the film and purchasing the accompanying merchandise, children are consumers in their lived experience. Making a profit by depicting children as consumers and then providing opportunities and co-marketing merchandise for them to actually become consumers in their lived experiences is the main goal of children’s films. Working-class protagonists can’t believably participate in conspicuous consumption; therefore, they can’t model the type of avid consumption that filmmakers seek to cultivate in their viewers. Thus, the

children who are privileged in children's films are those with more economic resources at their disposal: the children of the middle and upper classes.

Most children's films today choose to depict protagonists who are fairly well off. Wojcik-Andrews states: "Under late capitalism children's films do not make class disappear: They simply narrow it down and conceal it whenever possible behind all those traditional humanist themes of friendship, romance, innocence, and so forth" (141). The seeming invisibility of class in most children's films simply parallels the invisibility of the working-class in our cultural imagination; we seem to think that if we ignore the issue of class and the accompanying problem of poverty that these social ills will disappear. Unfortunately, this is far from the case. According to a recent report in the *Washington Times* by Cheryl Wetzstein, poverty in the US has hit a fifteen-year high with over 43.6 million Americans living at or below the poverty level. Ignoring the working class will not make it go away.

A few children's films in the past thirty-five years, however, have taken on the issue of class, often with an accompanying nod towards racial diversity as well. Interestingly, Disney and Pixar's animated films typically steer clear of class issues, while a few of Disney's live action films and companies such as Warner Brothers and Columbia pictures included more working class children in their films. Though typically invisible, working class children characters are more often found in live action children films and in computer generated films designed to look and feel like live action films than in animated films. *Stand by Me* (1986) and *The Newsies* (1992) are two landmark films depicting working class children. Also, several Christmas films, including the recent computer generated motion capture films *Polar Express* (2004) and *The Christmas Carol* (2009), contain working-class characters. The working-class children in these films are treated in one of two possible ways. They are either seen as noble savages who rise

above social class (for a brief period of time) because of their inherent goodness (Chris from *Stand by Me* and Jack Kelly from *The Newsies*, for example), or they are pitied and/ or ridiculed (for example Billy from *The Polar Express*) by the other characters in the film with whom the audience is encouraged to identify.

*Stand by Me*, the 1986 adaptation of Stephen King's novella "The Body" directed by Rob Reiner and nominated for an Oscar in 1987, ostensibly approaches the working class sympathetically through the character of Chris Chambers (River Phoenix). The protagonist Gordy Lachance (Wil Wheaton) is shown at the opening of the film as an adult remembering a childhood journey he took with three of his buddies. His memory of the events, which shapes our understanding of the film, is colored by his knowledge that Chris Chambers, his best boyhood friend and only member of the working class, was murdered as an adult when trying to break up a fight. From the start of the movie, viewers are conscious that the working-class protagonist will die an untimely, violent death.

The film centers on four twelve-year-old boys who are setting out on a two-day trek to look for the body of Ray Bower, a boy about their age who has been missing from home for three days. Chris is the natural leader of the gang and Gordy's best friend. Accompanying them on the journey to look for the body are Vern Tessio (Jerry O'Connell) and Teddy Duchamp (Corey Feldman). The primary antagonists of the film seem to be the gang of older boys led by Ace Merrill (Kiefer Sutherland) and including Vern and Chris' older brothers; however, the boys' conversations as they are walking and later talking around the camp fire at night, focus on other, more unsettling occurrences and people in their lives than the gang of older boys.

Gordy's older brother died four months earlier, and Gordy feels that his father wishes that he had died in his brother's place. Teddy's dad is in a mental hospital after burning Teddy's ear

by pressing it against the stove. Vern is overweight, and he is ridiculed by his older brother. Chris is the only character struggling with a set of typical working-class problems. Chris comes from “a bad family.” When Chris and Gordy are talking by the campfire after the other boys are asleep, Chris says that the whole town just thinks of him as “one of those low-life Chambers kids.” He describes an incident where he stole the milk money from his classroom, but then he felt guilty and returned it. His teacher, however, who saw him return the money, stole the money after Chris had returned it, used it to buy new clothes, and then accused Chris of never returning the money. The principle was already convinced that Chris, with his working-class roots, was prone to criminality, so he was suspended from school. The principle sided with the teacher against Chris because of Chris’ lower social class. Chris feels that his life is predetermined for him. Because of his working-class background, he says that while Gordy goes on to college prep classes, he’ll be stuck in shop class. He says that people assume that because of his family “he has shit for brains.”

*Stand by Me*’s treatment of class is interesting since it is set in the world of childhood during extraordinary circumstances in which normal day-to-day class markers are rendered mostly irrelevant. What the characters own is less important than personal virtues of courage and perseverance. Chris is a natural leader. He is self-sacrificing and compassionate. In the woods with his buddies, away from the judgmental opinions of the town, he can excel and succeed, but he has no illusions about how his social class affects his life in town. Wojcik-Andrews writes, “Gordie believes that friendship can transcend class. Chris is fully conscious of his own class and how it will affect his friendship with Gordie when they enter Junior High in the fall” (142). It seems, initially, that Gordie was right. With Gordie’s encouragement, Chris goes on and enrolls in college prep classes. He makes it out of the stifling economic situation of Castle Rock,

Oregon. He finishes college and becomes an attorney. Even though Chris is able to get out of town and become a lawyer, and apparently transcend his working-class background, his fate, as he seemed to recognize all along, is predetermined for him. In spite of his achievements, he cannot escape a violent death. He dies trying to break up a fight in a restaurant. His ability to escape from his working-class roots could only extend so far. The film's treatment of Chris' death seems to present a stark message about how inflexible class boundaries really are in America, but this message is hidden under the guise of how friendship can transcend class boundaries.

*The Newsies* (1992), a live-action Disney film directed by Kenny Ortega, is based on the historical account of a newsboy strike in 1899 in New York City. The first few lines of the film describe the group of teenage boys as a "ragged army of orphans and runaways." These boys make a meager living by hawking papers in the streets of New York City. When *The World* newspaper owner Joseph Pulitzer (Robert Duval) raises the price that the newspaper boys pay for the papers they sell 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a cent per paper, the newsies who already can barely afford the papers they're selling, go on strike led by charismatic Jack Kelly (Christian Bale) and level-headed David Jacobs (David Moscow). Kelly's group of newspaper boys persuades the newspaper boys across the city to unify and strike. But the cruel newspaper distributors use brute force against the boys, including gangs of rough men and mounted police battalions. At a rally of all the newspaper boys, the police storm in, trampling boys with their horses, beating them, and arresting many of the boys and taking them to "The Refuge," a juvenile detention hall. When all appears lost for the striking newspaper boys, a newspaper reporter for the rival *New York Sun*, Bryan Denton (Bill Pullman), begins covering the strike, but his story is suppressed by all of the New York City papers because people in New York City are scared that news of the strike might

spread to other child workers in the city. That's exactly what happens. Using an abandoned printing press, the newsies publish Denton's story and distribute it widely throughout New York City. Hundreds of additional child workers join the strike, and news of the strike and the poor working conditions of child laborers reaches the office of Governor Teddy Roosevelt. He rallies in support of the striking children, and the price increase of the papers is reversed. At the end of the film, the newsies are depicted happily celebrating their victory. A closer reading of the film, however, shows that the working-class children, like Chris from *Stand by Me*, are raised above their social class only for a short period of time. There are no real changes in the child labor system in New York City.

*The Newsies'* portrayal of working-class children, instead of encouraging real social change, reinforces common stereotypes held about the working class. Since the film is set in 1899, *The Newsies* makes the issue of social class a thing of the past. The problems faced by the teenage newspaper boys are problems that the audience can comfortably place in America's distant past. The protagonists' struggles are not issues that we usually associate with the working class of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If anything, the film reinforces the idea that social class isn't a problem anymore. The audience can feel relieved that the problems of child labor and runaways and street urchins are no longer troubling the United States.

Additionally, the portrayal of the newsies themselves is so fantastical that the issue of social class seems obscured. The film is full of choreographed dance routines and songs. All of the newsies are amazing dancers. Even though the boys are dressed in ragged clothes, their physical fitness, dance training, and vocal abilities erase the discomfort that the audience might feel about their situation. It's hard to believe these boys are hungry and homeless when they seem so happy and energetic throughout the film. They seem to enjoy their work; they are just

dissatisfied by the price hike. Portraying child laborers as lighthearted and carefree is a re-occurring problem in Disney films. Booker describes the similar treatment of working-class children, the chimney sweeps, in *Mary Poppins* who are shown singing and dancing on the London rooftops, much happier than Mr. Banks, suggesting that poor people are happier under capitalism than the rich. Booker states:

Such suggestions are not just silly and they are not just lies. They are potentially harmful lies that give children a version of the world in which they live that is not only false but false in ways that will make it easier for the powers that be in this world to manipulate and exploit them as they grow up under the illusion that poor workers are happy workers.  
(33-34)

*The Newsies*' falsified portrayal of working-class children, when seen in conjunction with the widespread dismissal of social class problems, creates a difficult situation for viewing children to navigate.

Another way that *The Newsies* actually downplays the harsh realities facing children of the working class is that the victory of the strikers is so small. The newsies successfully defeated the 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a cent raise per paper, and they celebrate wildly at the end of the film. It's easy to forget that even at the beginning of the film, before the price of papers was raised, the newsies barely had enough to eat. The strike didn't result in any real change in the lives of these characters. Even a film supposedly about the working-class obscures and ignores the realities of the working class. Like Chris Chambers from *Stand by Me*, Jack Kelly, David Jacobs, and the other newsies are elevated for a brief time above their working-class roots, only to be even more firmly situated at the end of the film in the inescapable social situation they were born into, but at the end of the film they seem happy with their situation.



Despite the relatively few portrayals of working-class children in films, Christmas films explore issues of class with higher frequency than do other films. The two most recent children's Christmas films that treat the issue of class are *The Polar Express* and the 2009 computer animated *Christmas Carol*. Sue Saltmarsh writes, "Stories, books, and films that focus on the celebration of Christmas provide a surprisingly rich source of cultural information about the ways in which children and childhood are constructed in reference to the broader social world." Saltmarsh continues: "In contemporary Christmas texts ... children are reconfigured as integral to and a driving force within the spaces of capitalist production" (5). Christmas is depicted as a magical time when class barriers are lowered and people are more kind. Since the class divisions are imagined as being lowered, class issues are addressed with greater frequency in Christmas films. Christmas is also a time of rampant consumerism. Children are the focus of this consumerism through ritual gift giving. In children's Christmas films, there is always the presence of a character with enough excess capital to erase any disparities between children of different classes. In *The Polar Express* the benevolent gift giver is Santa Claus; in *The Christmas Carol* the gift-giver who elevates the working-class children is Mr. Scrooge. In *The Polar Express*, every child who rides the train of the title receives a gift, so in this imagined space, class positions are less important than the individual child's capacity for believing in Santa and magic. Only the children who believe in Santa Claus can ride the train to the North Pole. In *The Christmas Carol* Scrooge's generosity brings Christmas to the working-class family of Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchet.

*The Polar Express*, a computer-generated film that "feels" real, directed by Robert Zemeckis with voices done by Tom Hanks, is a Christmas narrative based on the book of the same title by Chris Van Allsburg. *The Polar Express* tells the story of a magical train that on

Christmas Eve picks up children who are still longing to believe in Santa Claus and takes them to the North Pole where Santa lives with his industrious elves. The narrative focuses on a ten-year-old, middle-class boy who is struggling with his growing disbelief in Santa. He gets on the Polar Express bound for the North Pole and is immediately welcomed by singing waiters who elaborately serve rich hot chocolate. He settles into a train car full of warmth and laughter and other excited children. He belongs.

The Polar Express' last stop before continuing to the North Pole is Billy's house, located, states one child already riding on the train, "on the other side of the tracks." A sharp distinction is made between the narrator of the story and the under-privileged, working class Billy. Billy's house is located on the edge of town, and in comparison to this small, unpainted home, viewers realize the material wealth and economic security of the narrator. When Billy is introduced, the narrator's comfortable social status is suddenly highlighted. Billy is only wearing an oversized shirt and rain boots when he comes out to meet the train, clothes of noticeably poorer quality than the matching pajama set, blue robe and slippers worn by the narrator. Besides the one comment about the house's location, the children don't make any other observations about Billy, but as they watch him stare in confusion at the huge steam engine idling in his front yard, we viewers become complicit in making assumptions about Billy's life. We look at his pinched expression, his uncertainty, and his bashfulness and read these as the signs of poverty and a lack of experience. Billy's hesitation almost causes him to miss his train, but at the last minute, he jumps aboard. Once Billy is on the train, he doesn't come into the well lit car with the other children where waiters are singing and dancing and pouring hot chocolate for the children. He sits alone at the back of the train, in the last car which is dark and unheated, further acknowledging his separateness from the other children.

After riding for several hours, Billy is shown singing “When Christmas Comes to Town” at the back of the train. The narrator and his friend, an African American girl, join Billy at the back of the train. The girl begins singing with him, but Billy only sings the poignant lines of the song that mention poverty and lack. For example, about Christmas presents he sings, “All the things I’ve heard about but never really seen.” After the song, he says to the other two children, “Christmas doesn’t work out for me—never has.” It’s left up to the audience to assume why. Billy’s family hasn’t had the money to celebrate Christmas. They don’t have the excess wealth to participate in rampant consumerism.

Later in the film when the children reach the North Pole, Billy finds a big white and green Christmas present with his name on it. He risks life and limb to keep a hold of his present. At one point, when faced with what seems like a life or death situation, Billy chooses keeping the present even though it could have resulted in a fatal fall. His determination to hang on to his present can easily be understood as a result of his poverty. The other children watch him in disbelief. Like the viewers, they realize that the present is so special to Billy because it is one of the only ones he has ever received. I watched this film with my children, ages 5 and 9, and when it looked like Billy was facing certain death because he wouldn’t let go of his presents, my children made fun of him. The film encourages us to either pity or ridicule Billy because of his social class.

Billy is not the only member of the working class in the film. The train’s engineer and fireman are members of the working-class, and their role in the film is simply to add humor. The fireman and engineer joke with and scold each other in stereotypical working-class accents. They are shown as incompetent, and their lack of skill is portrayed as slap-stick comedy. For example, when the pin that controls the brake rattles loose at one point on the journey, the

engineer and fireman are shown scrambling for it, bumping into each other, tripping, falling down. Then, the engineer accidentally swallows it. Meanwhile, the train is skidding towards a dangerous patch of ice. When the fireman jumps on the engineer, the pins flies out of the engineer's mouth and then out the window. The comedic scene ends with the fireman calmly pulling out another pin from his hair; the second pin had been there the whole time, making the whole breathtaking scramble to prevent a train wreck completely unnecessary. Repeatedly in the film, these two characters are set up to be ridiculed. As seen through the characters of Billy and the train drivers, in *The Polar Express* the members of the working class are both pitied and ridiculed.

The 2009 computer-generated *A Christmas Carol*, also directed by Zemeckis and featuring the voices of Jim Carrey, Steve Valentine, and Daryl Saraba, is a familiar Christmas story based on Charles Dickens' novel. The primary appeal of the film is its technological inventiveness and 3-D presentation. Scrooge, the miserly owner of a counting house, is confronted by three ghosts, and as a result of these encounters he becomes more generous. He is especially supportive to his employee Bob Cratchet and Cratchet's young son Tiny Tim who is depicted in the film as under-nourished, weak, and sickly. Tim's illness and sweetness win him the sympathy of the audience. Scrooge provides financial support to the Cratchet family, and Tim gets well. Like *The Newsies*, *A Christmas Carol* situates the issue of the working class in the distant past. While the audience is encouraged to feel sympathy for the Cratchet family, the film reifies the popular idea that the problems associated with social classes have been overcome. Also, the film ends happily for the Cratchet family, and the audience can easily forget the other members of the working class who briefly appeared throughout the film. Disney is comfortable asserting that individual greedy people are bad for society (for example, Pulitzer from *The*

*Newsies* and Scrooge before his change of heart), but Disney does not criticize the capitalistic system that it relies on for securing an enormous profit.

Over the past thirty years, shifts in the ideologies promoted in children's films and the ever increasing goal of producers and distributors of children's films to secure a profit have reduced the overall number of children, especially working class children, in children films. Children's films, once seen as an avenue for critiquing the oppressive treatment of children, are used primarily to secure a profit and shape children earlier and earlier into successful consumers. Since working-class children have less access to expendable resources, they are seen as a less profitable market, and they are usually ignored by filmmakers and producers. When working class children are included in mainstream films, the reasons usually are to give the more privileged viewing audience something to laugh at or to reinforce the dominant cultural beliefs about the working class.

## Chapter Four:

### Why Contemporary Young Adult Literature, especially Multi-cultural Literature and Dystopias, Deserves to be Read Critically

Young adult literature is a problematic genre for many reasons. First, the genre has historically been hard to define because the name and conventions of the genre keep changing. An early form of young adult literature was the “Junior Novels,” innocuous novels that skirted all taboo subjects and, much like Disney films, championed white, middle class lives. In the late 1960s, *The Outsiders* and *The Pigman* introduced “New Realism” and the problem novel to the expanding genre. As generic conventions have changed, so has the name of the genre. Previously known as “Adolescent Literature,” it is most commonly referred to as “Young Adult Literature” now, but the name “Teen Literature” may crown the genre soon. The changing name of young adult literature reflects how hard it is to define the genre, and since it’s hard to define the genre, it become hard to define the audience. Typically YA texts target an audience between the ages of twelve and eighteen, but recent trends might indicate that YA books are trying to reach readers as old as twenty-one. To distinguish YA literature from both children’s literature and adult literature, it’s important to look at the characters, setting, and marketing. Typically, YA texts (unlike animated films for children which typically have adult characters) feature a protagonist about the same age as the target audience. Even though the genre is hard to define, young adult literature is widely understood to deal with themes of personal identity, an individual’s place in society, corrupt authority and the pursuit of justice, and the definition of goodness. Coats offers a definition of the genre:

YA fiction is organized around the same sorts of tensions that preoccupy the physical bodies and emotional lives of its intended audience: tensions between growth and stasis, between an ideal world we can inhabit, between earnestness and irony, between ordinary bodies and monstrous ones, and perhaps, most importantly, between an impulsive individualism and a generative ethics of interconnectedness. (315-316)

Often recognized as the first true young adult novel, *The Outsiders* treats social class. With its emphasis on what Eric Tribunella calls “New Realism” or the “new didacticism” (89), it appears to deal with tough truths of life. However, many “New Realist” texts, while treating tough issues such as social class in the middle of the story, create endings that make the novels safe and fairly non-threatening for readers. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, like Disney’s *The Newsies* (discussed in Chapter Three), treats the issue of class as a relic of the past. *The Outsiders* ostensibly critiques the problems related to social class while simultaneously neutralizing the issue of social class. In some ways, *The Outsiders* is a unique text because it was written by an adolescent for an audience of young adult readers. *The Outsiders* discusses hard truths about social class, but its treatment is non-threatening because of the situation of social class in the past and because of the resolution of both texts.

S.E. Hinton describes some of her motivation for writing *The Outsiders*: “One of my reasons for writing it was that I wanted something realistic to be written about teenagers. At that time realistic teenage fiction didn’t exist” (185). However, how realistic is Hinton’s portrayal of how social class affects young people? Throughout *The Outsiders* Hinton describes the class conflict through the protagonist Ponyboy: “We’re poorer than the Socs and the middle class. I reckon we’re wilder, too. Not like the Socs, who jump greasers and wreck houses and throw beer

blasts for kicks...Greasers are almost like hoods; we steal things and drive old souped-up cars and hold up gas stations and have a gang fight once in awhile...I'm not saying that either Socs or greasers are better; that's just the way things are" (3). But even though Hinton describes class violence, her description of class doesn't seem to threaten in any way the status quo of consumer capitalism in America.

While *The Outsiders* was written by a teenager for other teenage readers it still has a surprisingly didactic quality. It's impossible to judge whether a text has an "authentic" voice or not, but the ending of the novel seems to propose conservative, adult-like solutions to the classist gang violence in the story. After the death of three young men as a result of class-related violence, Ponyboy's solution is to write down the story: "Someone should tell their side of the story, and maybe people would understand then and wouldn't be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair-oil he wore" (179). He wrote the story to pass his English class. The solution for the problems explored throughout the book, then, seems to be: get an education.

There are a few more issues that make me question the effectiveness of the story's portrayal of social class. First, the conflict between the Greasers and the Socs seems very location specific and dated. I wonder how far-reaching and subversive this exposure of class violence which occurred about forty years ago seems to contemporary readers. The book situates class issues in the distant past, making the class issue less threatening. Instead of providing a direct social critique, *The Outsiders* actually minimizes the threat of classism by having the protagonist escape the difficulties of social class through education and by situating the rather obscure social conflict in the distant past. Despite these issues, *The Outsiders* has found a place in the canon. Frequently it is the only YA book included in the secondary curriculum. Even



though some of the issues it discusses may seem irrelevant to contemporary readers, it reveals fascinating information about class in America.

Educators and parents often assume that young adult literature does not display the same quality, whether in terms of style, plot, or complexity of theme, as texts written by adults for an adult audience. This assessment has made it nearly impossible for young adult literature to assert a permanent place in the English curriculum of junior high and high schools across America. According to Arthur Applebee's study *Literature in the Secondary School*, the ten most commonly taught book-length works in American junior high and high schools are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Hamlet*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Lord of the Flies* (233-235). Out of these ten books, none of them are contemporary young adult literature, and only three include children or young adult protagonists. Applebee's study also revealed that the same texts are being taught over and over which may, in part, account for students' lack of interest in reading. Also, his study showed that texts are selected without much consideration of the audience, and since many of the canonical texts are unappealing for the students, the pressure to make the text accessible and enjoyable largely falls on teachers. Sandra Stotsky in her *Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey* counted a single young adult novel—*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson—amongst the twenty most frequently assigned book-length works in high school English classes. So while the number of YA books on the shelves continue to attract readers, they are widely excluded from the curriculum in favor of traditionally canonical texts, but canonical works of American fiction might be discouraging young people from embracing reading. Excluding YA literature from a place in the canon limits scholarly interest in seriously analyzing this growing genre. Cindy Lou Daniels, in her article "Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: An Open Frontier for

Critical Studies,” states that “to date there has not been a large body of work created that explores the genre, so there is plenty of opportunity for original scholarship” (79). She continues: “In this field [YA] there awaits the opportunity to not only expand our knowledge of literature as a whole and to challenge the restrictions of the canon” (81). Coats writes: “What remains rare in the critical discourse are studies that seek to theorize YA fiction as a type of literature that has its own constellations of concerns that mark it as distinctive from literature either for children and adults” (317). I argue that not only should YA literature be the subject of more scholarly attention, but also that educators on the middle and high school levels should be encouraged to incorporate more YA into the curriculum and lead their students to engage these popular texts critically. Janet Emig states that “the purpose of teaching literary theory at the secondary level...is to encourage adolescents to inhabit theories comfortably enough to construct their own readings and to learn to appreciate the power of multiple perspectives” (qtd. in Appleman, 2000).

Educators are increasingly concerned by students’ lack of interest in reading. Perhaps depictions of children in canonized texts of American literature may not be sufficient or satisfying enough for young adult readers, thus marginalizing young people from the act of reading. Possible solutions for this problem may be found in offering young readers texts that reflect their interests and experience more accurately than canonical texts by including more young adult novels in the curriculum and also in encouraging young readers to look critically at the texts they are interacting with. In *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom* Jeffrey Wilhelm and Bruce Novak provide a list called “Ten Easy Ways to Ruin Reading.” The first item on the list begins as follows:

We teach texts that are too hard for our students, and that are too distant from their experiences and concerns. Instead of focusing on specific human beings (our students)

and promoting the human activity of reading, we focus on texts. And we choose texts that are highly nuanced and written for expert adult readers, instead of from the rich sources of literature written particularly for students in their current states of being and stages of literary development—children's and young adult literature. (86)

While it is fairly common for students in university English courses to study texts associated with popular culture and to question how those texts challenge or reinscribe aspects of the dominant ideology, the high school literature curriculum privileges canonical literature. This is especially noteworthy in so far as it limits high school students' access to young adult literature in school. Including more young adult literature may stimulate young people's interest in reading.

One reason that canonical texts might not generate a wide readership is because the young characters, if any are included at all, in canonized pieces of American literature often are used for plot devices instead of to accurately represent childhood or engage younger readers. Three examples of children characters being used as plot devices in highly nuanced works of canonical literature often taught in high schools are found in Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*, William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

*What Maisie Knew* investigates how Maisie is treated by her parents after a nasty divorce. Maisie is used as a tool by her parents to try to hurt or anger each other. Initially the parent whose turn it was to care for Maisie (they switched every six months) would enjoy keeping Maisie because he/ she would think about how much the other parent must be missing Maisie. Then, as Maisie grew older, the parents try to force each other to have longer and longer turns taking care of Maisie. To complicate matters, after Maisie's mother and father remarry, Maisie's step-mother and step-father fall in love with each other, and increasingly Maisie is shuffled from

household to household with no personal agency. Maisie was rarely told what was going on; she had to figure out the nuances of the complex situation on her own. James writes: “The new arrangement was inevitably confounding to a young intelligence intensely aware that something had happened which must matter a good deal. . . . It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before” (21). Even though *What Maisie Knew* may seem to be describing a real-life marginalizing situation many children experience, the text itself contributes to the very marginalization that it seems to be attempting to call into question. Maisie is a stock character, used by James to tell the story of a traumatic divorce. We as readers don’t really get to know Maisie because she isn’t well developed. The knowledge we do have about her takes the form of pronouncements made by James. For example, he writes: “She found in her mind a collection of images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, and the games she wasn’t big enough to play” (23). This stylistic device of a detached omniscient narrator removes readers from the immediacy of Maisie’s experience and causes us to focus instead on the sordid affairs of the parents, further reinforcing Maisie’s marginalized status. With the way James presents Masie, it’s difficult not to view her as helpless, weak, and lacking all agency.

William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* also limits the agency of the child character.

Vardaman functions more as a stylistic device than as a sympathetic or even realistic portrayal of a child experiencing grief. His character primarily seems confused and overwhelmed by his childhood experiences, especially the death of his mother. He lacks personal agency; he is very much a victim of his father’s selfishness and self-absorption. The youngest of five children, Vardaman seems to be about six or seven when his mother dies. *As I Lay Dying* is divided in

sections, each narrated by a different character. Vardaman has five sections in the novel. Though he is given his own narrative sections (more agency than afforded Masie), his thoughts and dialogue seem highly contrived and stilted. Vardaman's chaotic sections resemble the dialogue of Benji, a mentally disabled character in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Vardaman is used to emphasize the chaos of Addie Bundren's burial. In one section, Vardaman thinks:

*But Jewel's mother is a horse. My mother is a fish. Darl says that when we come to the water again I might see her and Dewy Dell said, She's in the box; how could she have got out? She got out through the holes I bored, into the water I said, and when we come to the water again I am going to see her. My mother is not in the box. My mother does not smell like that. My mother is a fish. (196)*

The main difference between Vardaman's sections and the sections of his siblings is that there is more nonsensical, internal dialogue. Though he does make observations and overhears conversations, his grasp on reality seems less than that of his siblings, even less than Darl, who is labeled crazy and taken to a mental institution in Jefferson. All the characters in *As I Lay Dying* lack personal agency, but the lack of agency is most pronounced in Vardaman's character who seems to be more of a device, used for a specific role in the novel, than a well-developed character. Neither Maisie nor Vardaman provides younger readers with a clear character to identify with. While it's definitely not a problem that the above texts, intended for adult audiences, may not appeal to younger readers, I think that compounded with the fact that young adult literature, which may provide readers with more engaging, relatable characters, is rarely taught in schools, the lack of strong children and young adult characters in many canonical texts becomes a more serious concern.

While Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* narrates events that may be pertinent in young people's lives today, the treatment of the theme of racism and prejudice, located so palpably in the 1960s, may alienate groups of readers. Atticus's willingness to represent Tom Robinson, an African American man accused of rape, a shocking move at the time, doesn't have the same cultural relevance today. Additionally, since so much of the narrative is devoted to describing Scout and Jem's childhood (the book covers Scout's seventh through ninth year), teenage readers might not find as much to relate to as they could potentially find in a text that explored the life of a character their own age. While I'm definitely not arguing that *To Kill a Mockingbird* be removed from the curriculum, I do think that adding more timely texts, especially texts that address issues of racism in contemporary American society, may peak students' interest and foster increased engagement with the texts as well as meaningful conversations.

While many canonical texts either essentialize children by using them as stock characters or over-emphasize adult topics and the importance of growing up, thus glossing over the lived experiences and real life struggles that children face, there are several YA books that are more willing to address the challenges involved in being a child in America. Multi-cultural books for young adults and dystopian fiction are two genres which offer young readers stories that may be more compelling and more accurate and provide the most direct challenge against mainstream assumptions about childhood. Both multi-cultural and dystopian texts are willing to take risks, be vocal about real social issues, and at least ostensibly critique the status quo. Since the meaning of the term "multi-cultural" has been debated, I want to clarify that in my dissertation, I am using the problematic term to refer to texts written by non-white authors that frequently contain subversive elements.

Since childhood in America is a white space, children's literature and film frequently assume a white audience. Certain genres, including fantasy and animated children's film, are directed at a primarily white audience. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, the protagonists of children's fantasy books are usually white, and the medieval European settings are exclusively white spaces. Many other texts such as Pixar films simply avoid the question of race by anthropomorphizing most of the characters. In our racialized cultural climate, repeatedly ignoring the issue of race when constructing narratives for children endorses the hegemonic idea of the white, male, middle class child as the normal child against which other expressions of childhood seem like pathological deviations. Murray states: "Both racial assumptions and gender assumptions remain deeply entrenched in society and are reflected in children's literature as pervasively as they are anywhere else" (207). Mainstream American texts assume a white audience, often neglecting the stories of non-white audiences. In a 2008 study of Scholastic book order forms distributed in elementary schools around the United States, Jonda McNair observed that out of the 1,219 books included on the lists no books "were by or about American Indians, three were by or about Asians, and two were by or about Hispanics. There were more, though not significantly more, about African Americans, but these books were too often couched in terms of Black History month, or were didactic books, on subjects such as manners, that few children would enjoy" (qtd. in Reilly and Gangi 25). Additionally, Philip Nel in his 2012 Children's Literature Association presentation observed that many texts which do feature non-white protagonists are whitewashed, meaning that a white character is featured on the cover to represent the non-white protagonists. Literature, like film, is often a white space. Mary Reilly and Jane Gangi in *Deepening Literacy Learning* observe that American public schools privilege books by and about middle- to upper-class whites and "marginalize children of color and the

poor. Multi-cultural book award titles sell nowhere near as well as books that receive the more prestigious...Newberry and Caldecot” (25). Multi-cultural texts receive less recognition and smaller distribution, but they are willing to challenge the dominant ideology in ways that mainstream texts are not.

Rose observes that children’s literature is governed by an assumption that “writing for children can contribute to prolonging or preserving—not only for children but also for us—values which are constantly on the verge of collapse. The child, therefore, is innocent and can restore innocence to us” (44). Authors from marginalized populations seem to feel less compelled to preserve and uphold the supposed virtues of mainstream America in their texts. This may be because these authors have lived on the periphery of mainstream values and experienced life outside the American culture depicted most commonly in books and movies. Additionally, multi-cultural authors, as a result of their life experiences, may feel that children’s literature should deal honestly with the unique challenges of childhood instead of being used to preserve mainstream American values. Rose states that many people, since the beginning of children’s literature, have seen the genre as a “depository that keeps privileged experience and sensibility from cultural decay” (43). Marginalized groups have frequently been outside of this “privileged experience”; therefore, culturally diverse authors seem more willing to openly investigate problems in our culture for a young reading audience.

bell hooks in *We Real Cool* states: “Most black males are bombarded in early childhood with the message that they are inhabiting an all-powerful universe that not only does not want them to succeed but wants to ensure their demise” (86). However, racially marginalized adults are writing children’s and young adult books that attempt to honestly critique racism and other forms of marginalization in today’s society. There are several non-white authors who work



against the dominant cultural narrative by creating texts that expose ageism, classism, racism, and sexism in our culture. These texts not only critique the discrimination that non-whites experience; they also offer honest depictions of childhood and positive portraits of people who typically face discrimination.

Several children's books by African American authors acknowledge the challenges of being young and black in American. There are also several pieces of young adult literature that attempt to "teach young African Americans how to deal with [racism and sexism], not necessarily solve them, so that racism and sexism do not hinder their lives irrevocably" (Rountree 2). Contemporary writers of African American young adult fiction push the boundaries of literary content by discussing controversial topics. Rountree states: "Young adult novels are written for an audience that is meant to identify with the protagonist and his/her problems" (57). The African American texts directed towards an adult readership that I examined use the central child character to illustrate the numerous types of marginalization African Americans experience and to help their protagonists and, by extension, the reader heal from the experiences of living in a racist, sexist, and ageist society. These authors subvert the ideal of the generic child and examine the very real difficulties of growing up American.

Ellen Tarry, a civil rights activist who moved from Alabama to New York and became involved with Catholic organizations to help African Americans during the depression and WWII, wrote four children's books: *Janie Bell*, *Hezekiah Horton*, *My Dog Rinty*, and *The Runaway Elephant*. Her books depict the everyday lives of African American children in urban settings. In her autobiography *The Third Door* she writes: "There were almost no books for young readers which showed the Negro other than Uncle Remus or Little Black Sambo...as a steady, exclusive reading diet such books would have given children a stereotyped idea of the

Negro. Today there are many beautifully illustrated juvenile books... which show Negroes in all walks of life. To have had a small part in adding to this list has been a privilege” (303). In the 1940s, when Tarry was writing her children’s books, left-wing authors also began writing books that were more realistic, gender inclusive, and racially diverse. Mickenburg states: “It took time to transform children’s literature from a genre overdominated by sweetness and light, by didactic lessons, and by moral precepts to a genre that actually spoke to the experiences of childhood in all their diversity, presuming a child reader who would eventually—if not right away—be capable of making the world anew” (19). In the last twenty years African American authors have written several children’s books targeting African American readers.

Biographies show children strategies that African Americans have used to overcome oppression. Mickenberg states that biographies: “offer powerful examples of human achievement and will, and children are encouraged to find role models in the figures they read about from the past” (239). *Rosa*, written by Nikki Giovanni and illustrated by Bryan Collier, describes Rosa Park’s refusal to get out of her bus seat. When the bus driver told her to move, she said, “Why do you pick on us?” She thought of all the people who supported civil rights. Rosa “sighed and realized she was tired. Not tired from work but tired of putting white people first. Tired of stepping off the sidewalk to let white people pass, tired of eating at separate lunch counters and learning at separate schools” (n.p.). Because of Rosa’s resistance, the African American community in Montgomery boycotts the buses and organizes a peaceful protest. A year later, the Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of buses was illegal. *Rosa* deals honestly with the injustice of racism and illustrates the ability of individuals to effect social change.

*The Voice that Challenged a Nation* by Russell Freedman describes Marian Anderson’s struggle for equal rights. A world famous singer who had performed in concert halls throughout

Europe, Anderson was barred from singing at the Constitution Hall in Washington DC because she was African American. A free outdoor concert at the Lincoln Memorial was arranged. Thousands of people came, sending a “powerful message of defiance against the injustice of bigotry and racial discrimination” (56). By showing characters who resist racial oppression, biographies of famous African Americans “implicitly encourage children to think and act independently, positing this as a kind of civic duty” (Mickenberg 259). Through biographies of famous African Americans who worked against racial oppression, African American authors are attempting to instill racial pride in their young readers and model how to resist oppression.

Ezra Jack Keats, Don Freeman, and Norton Juster use the illustrations in their preschool children’s books to depict diversity and racial tolerance. Unlike biographies or books that overtly deal with African American cultural heritage, the protagonists in these stories are African American children navigating common place experiences like playing in the snow on the first snow of the year, going to the laundromat, and visiting grandparents. In Juster’s *Sourpuss and Sweetie Pie* the protagonist, a four or five year old African American girl, describes the many moods she experiences throughout the day when she is visiting her grandparents. She says; “Most of the time I really am Sweetie Pie. But sometimes I can be a real Sourpuss. Like when I’m angry or somebody hurts my feelings or yells at me for no good reason.” By describing common childhood experiences in a racially inclusive way, these authors are promoting a more diverse view of childhood.

Rountree in *Just Us Girls* explores how African American women writers have transformed the coming-of-age novel into a literary form where the concerns of African

American teenagers can be addressed. Rountree states: “Women writers of young adult literature for African American girls reveal and validate the difficulties of growing up young, black, and female, while seeking to improve the lives of their readers through literature” (7). *The Music of Summer* by Rosa Guy explores the effect of Eurocentric standards of beauty on young African American women. Rountree writes: “Rosa Guy portrays Eurocentric standards of beauty as a destructive power that can still corrupt the minds of African American girls, particularly those labeled as middle class” (43).

*The Music of Summer* explores the relationship of Cathy and Sarah, girls who have been friends since childhood but started growing apart in high school. Sarah still clings to the friendship despite Cathy’s growing coldness. Cathy is light-skinned and attempting to climb the color hierarchy. Sarah is darker and cannot “pass.” Because of Sarah’s long attachment to Cathy’s family, she is invited on a family vacation to Cathy’s grandmother’s house in Cape Cod. All of the adults can see Sarah’s beauty and talent, but Cathy and her friends ridicule and exclude her, their hatred for the black body even reaching the point of attempted homicide. Sarah is floating on a raft in the ocean, and even though the other young people know Sarah can’t swim, they pull her off the raft and into the deep water. Rountree writes: “Cathy and her friends’ belief in their own superiority and their own self-loathing cause them to reach a point where they almost commit a literal homicide and a symbolic genocide, killing blackness” (49). Sarah is rescued from drowning by Jean Pierre, tall, dark and handsome, who is devoted to restoring Africa and wants to marry Sarah and take her with him to Africa.

Sarah is torn between her love for Jean Pierre and her devotion to her family and her desire to be a musician. Sarah decides not to marry but stay and work on herself. Jean Pierre’s attraction to her certainly helps Sarah see herself with more confidence, but Jean Pierre wants to

fully possess her. He even ridicules her desire to be a musician. Sarah uses the confidence she gained through being with him to pursue her music education. *The Music of Summer* investigates how racism is perpetuated inside of the African American community. Guy is encouraging young readers to become more aware of the pervasiveness of both inter- and intra-racism. Additionally, Sarah models the importance of crafting a life for herself by choosing to pursue a degree in music instead of marrying at seventeen.

*I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Lena* by Jacqueline Woodson explore the inter-racial friendship of Marie and Lena. Rountree writes: "Inter-racial friendships and relationships are not often explored in African American young adult literature. It is an issue that uncomfortably forces most people—adults and children—to directly address racism and discrimination" (63). *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* shows the parents harboring racist and classist attitudes more than the children as Marie, a popular, middle class African American girl, becomes friends with Lena, a working class, white girl. Both Marie and Lena's mothers are gone; the girls have a lot in common. Woodson states: "I wanted to write a novel about friendship and in it, I wanted to show how destructive racism and classism can be." *Lena* is the sequel to *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. Shifting perspectives, Lena narrates her and her sister Dion's escape from their sexually abusive father. The girls hitchhike across the country. Readers see how much Marie's friendship meant to Lena and Dion: the bubble baths, hot chocolate, secure walls, someone who cared about them. They meet Mrs. Lily, an elderly African American woman, who takes them in and gives them warm food, supper, and a bed. Dion explores her own racism. Woodson writes: "Dion's face was scrunched up a bit, the way Daddy's used to when he saw black people." Dion acknowledges and recovers from her prejudice, "I don't want to be prejudice, Lena... I don't

want to be like Daddy” (76). *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Lena* illustrate children's ability to overcome prejudice and develop close inter-racial friendships.

Woodson's *The House You Pass on the Way* tells the story of Staggerlee, a bi-racial teenage girl who is sexually attracted to other girls; she experiences confusion about her sexuality, but she doesn't have anyone to talk to about it until her cousin Trout comes for the summer. The two girls confide in each other; both of them have felt sexually attracted to other girls. Rountree states: “Woodson is advocating for a more tolerant view of lesbianism and trying to foster sexual tolerance in her young readers...and pushing the limits of acceptable content in African American young adult literature” (57). Staggerlee's friendship with Trout gives her the confidence she needs to perceive herself as normal.

The protagonist of *Hush* is thirteen year old Toswiah Green. Her father, the only African American policeman in Denver, witnesses the murder of Raymond Taylor, an African American teenager, by two white police officers. The police officers shoot Raymond three times in the chest, claiming that he was armed and going for his gun. Toswiah's father, who arrived on the scene just before the shooting, saw Raymond raise his hands over his head before he was shot. Toswiah: “Cops murdering. Cops murdering a black kid. White cops murdering a black kid...Black wasn't a dangerous thing” (37). Her father testifies against the two police officers, and they are convicted of manslaughter. Towsiah's family has to seek protection through a witness protection agency. They have to leave their home in Denver and assume different names and identities. Her father becomes increasingly withdrawn and depressed. At their new apartment, he sits and stares out the window. Her mother becomes a Jehovah's Witness, and their family's traditions change drastically; they don't celebrate birthdays or holidays anymore. Toswiah and her sister have to adopt new names and new identities. They both have a hard time

making new friends. “It feels like everyday the world falls a little more apart,” Toswiah says (99). After seven months in their new home, her father tries to kill himself; he’s hospitalized. *Hush* doesn’t end with a neat resolution, but Toswiah expresses hope that she and her family will be able to survive the transition. *Hush* confronts racism and the possibility of negative ramifications for exposing injustices. In all of her novels, Woodson addresses difficult topics including racism, sexism, child abuse, homosexuality and injustice in an attempt to teach cultural awareness and promote tolerance. She creates protagonists that African American teenagers can identify with.

African-American young adult literature presents the harsh realities of child abuse and gang violence as well as previously taboo personal struggles such as defining sexual identity. Since multi-cultural literature occupies a marginal space outside the mainstream, it is more willing (and more able) to take risks. African American authors of children and young adult literature provide readers with stories to help them navigate the treacherous terrain of childhood, racism, and sexism. African American young adult literature and children’s fiction honestly investigate the numerous manifestations of oppression in American culture.

In recent years, more mainstream YA literature has taken a darker turn. In the summer of 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* printed a controversial article “Darkness too Visible” by Meghan Gurdon in which she claimed that contemporary YA fiction is “So dark that kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18.” She feels that the young adult literature industry is out of control, trying to push violence, sex, and crudity onto young readers. She cites profit as the only motivation behind this surge in lurid YA texts, but profit can only be part of the explanation. Developing a genre that appeals to young readers is a positive change, and creating

texts that move away from the didacticism of texts created for younger children is also positive. However, young adult texts—even the most brutal ones—aren't free from didacticism and mainstream ideology, far from it. Reading young adult fiction from the standpoint of literary theory can erase the boundary between canonical literature and young adult literature while encouraging a love of reading, and in doing so shed light on young adult literature's literary richness and the way it functions to bolster or subvert dominant ideologies. In her book *Critical Encounters in High School English*, Appleman states that “literary theory can provide a repertoire of critical lenses through which to view literary texts as well as the multiple contexts at play when students read texts—contexts of culture, curriculum, classroom, personal experience, prior knowledge, and politics” (3). By encouraging younger readers to engage YA texts critically, they may come to think more critically about the worlds inside and outside of the texts. Thinking critically about the texts helps readers “‘unravel’ the constructs that surround us and to re-examine the relationships between appearance and reality” (Appleman 97). To further stress the importance of approaching young adult literature critically, Mike Cadden states:

When an adult writer speaks through a young adult's consciousness to a young adult audience, he or she is involved in a top-down (or vertical) power relationship. It becomes important, then, that there be equal (or horizontal) power relations between the major characters within the text so that the young adult reader has the power to see the opposing ideologies at play. (146)

While many YA authors might not feel compelled to follow Cadden's advice, many YA books, even if they don't provide a full exposure of conflicting ideology, often do provide inroads to explore conflicting ideology and seek to expose misconceptions about adolescence and life in general. Being willing to deal with issues like societal violence, beatings, and kidnapping, while



too dark for Gurdon, may allow YA literature to spark responses in readers that could lead to a better understanding of themselves and their place in the complicated world surrounding them.

The following analysis of the *Hunger Game* series will hopefully illustrate that works of young adult literature are often complex, multi-faceted texts, deserving to be read and taught carefully through the lens of theory. Since *The Hunger Games* series is a young adult text, it also contains several genre conventions of young adult dystopian fiction in addition to the characteristics it shares with adult dystopian fiction. Frequently cited as the third most popular YA series, following only *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, this series has reached a wide readership. With the first movie's record released on March 23, 2012, scoring the best ever opening day for a non-sequel movie at 68.3 million according to *Entertainment Weekly's* John Young and the host of commercial tie-ins that will predictably follow, the series will likely cultivate an even larger following. The movie's popularity will help ensure that young readers are willing to read and interact with the books. In a recent interview with a local middle school librarian Morton Hardaway he credited film adaptation as one of the primary ways that a book becomes successful with young readers. He said that he can't keep *The Hunger Games* series on the shelves because of the high demand. Additionally, since the audience of this text is wide, it's important to investigate the series critically and consider its subversive aspects as well as areas where it may be, even inadvertently, reinscribing the dominant ideology of post-capitalist, American consumer society. Two major facets of the series are important in this respect: how the *Hunger Games* series participates in and furthers current dystopian trends in young adult literature as well as the series' construction of gender.

### ***The Hunger Games: Young Adult Dystopian Fiction***

Initially the plot of Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* seems implausible and incredibly dark. Twenty-four children are selected to fight to the death in an arena in a widely televised annual event; the last child alive wins the game and supposedly enjoys a life of opulence and acclaim afterwards. *Hunger Games*, while shocking, is a dystopian YA novel that builds on a long tradition of adult and young adult dystopian fiction. Booker investigates the motives behind dystopian fiction which developed as a response towards utopianism and charts that shift from utopian optimism to dystopian skepticism. One of the goals outlined in his book is to try to show that dystopian literature is worthy of critical attention because, like YA literature, much dystopian fiction has been treated as pop culture artifacts, not as serious works of literature. YA dystopian novels, therefore, have two stereotypes to work against. Dystopian thought, long part of adult literature, has recently been taking a stronger hold in YA literature, prompting many negative responses such as Gurdon's *Wall Street Journal* article. Many adults still try to assert that childhood and adolescence is a time of innocence, that children need to be protected, not always from the harsh realities that many children face, but from the fictionalized accounts of those difficulties. Sherman Alexie, author of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, in "Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood," a response to Gurdon's article, asks: "Does Ms. Gurdon honestly believe that a sexually explicit YA novel might somehow traumatize a teen mother? Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?" Since its inception, YA literature has been more willing to grapple with harsher aspects of reality, but in recent years the growth of the popularity of dystopian YA fiction hints at changes in how we understand adolescence. Elizabeth Bullun and

Elizabeth Parsons write: “Children are emblematic of the future by virtue of the lives ahead of them. In the popular imagination they are impetus for social change, and their very existence offers a sense of hope for the future. This conception of the child militates against the dystopic impulse in ways that typically refigure the genre in its children’s literature manifestation” (128). Instead of preaching against the shift, a more productive response would be to engage the resulting text critically and see how they can help us understand our contemporary climate. Booker states that dystopian fiction serves as social criticism: “The modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems” (20).

Many dystopian YA books have been written in the last decade including Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, Collin’s *Hunger Games* series, M.T. Anderson’s *Feed*, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* series, Moira Young’s *Dustland* series, Jeff Hirsch’s *The Eleventh Plague*, and Marie Lu’s *Legend*, to name a few. All of these books ask readers to envision different, futuristic worlds. Bullen and Parson write that these novels: “interrogate global capitalism, the socialization of the young, and the political climate of individualization inherent in the current socio-political climate of risk society” (132). Booker states: “If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre. It lies at the heart of the literary project” (176). Through a careful analysis of the most popular YA dystopian series, I hope to illustrate that YA dystopian fiction, like its adult counterpart, deserves scholarly attention and a place in the secondary education curriculum.

*The Hunger Games* trilogy (*Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*) is set in an unspecified future, in an unrecognizable place, identified by the narrative as the remains of North

America. According to the state propaganda read annually at each Hunger Game, Panem is “the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America.” Booker writes that “dystopian fictions are typically set in places or times far distant from the author’s own, but it is usually clear that the real referents of dystopian fictions are generally quite concrete and near-at-hand” (19). The propaganda disseminated by the capital continues that after a series of disasters: “the result was Panem, a shining capital ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its districts” (18). In reality, the residents of the twelve districts (according to state propaganda, District Thirteen was destroyed after trying to revolt) are being exploited by the Capitol.

Each district supplies the capitol with important products. For example, District One makes luxury items for the capitol, District Four provides seafood, District Eleven provides produce, and District Twelve supplies the Capital with coal. In District Twelve, the majority of the eight thousand residents live a hand-to-mouth existence. Coal mining is a dangerous occupation, and many people, including Katniss’ father, are killed in mining accidents. Katniss describes the residents of District Twelve: “Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many of whom have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces” (4). To compound the problem, the residents of District Twelve are not given a sufficient wage, so they are often forced to register their children’s names multiple times in the drawing for the Hunger Games in order to receive a small allotment of grain and oil, a tesserae. Even then, starvation is not an uncommon fate in District Twelve. Katniss says:

Who hasn’t seen the victims? Older people who can’t work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines. Stragglers through the streets. And one day

you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall...Starvation is never the cause of death officially...But that fools no one. (28)

The untenable living situations of the residents throughout the twelve districts lead many people to eventually rise up against the despotic government, which culminates in a revolution that topples the government by the end of book three. Parallels can be drawn between the political struggles in the *Hunger Games* and current world events. In our current global environment, despotic governments, protests, riots, revolts, and bloody regime changes have become increasingly prevalent. Booker states: "If dystopian literature functions in a sense as social criticism, it is also true that such literature gains its principal energies precisely from its literariness, from its ability to illuminate social and political issues from an angle not available to conventional critics" (175). The tension in *The Hunger Games* between the exploited working class and an oppressive government seems all too familiar, but the series highlights the problem with a new urgency and vigor.

In addition to reflecting tensions between the under-privileged working class and the government, *The Hunger Games* reflects on additional concerns shared by contemporary American society. Booker states: "The best dystopian fiction is always highly relevant more or less directly to specific 'realworld' societies and issues'" (19). In fact, one of Collins' intentions for writing the series was to critique contemporary conflicts. In an interview with Susan Dominus, Collins described her inspiration for writing this series. Dominus writes:

Collins has said that the premise for *The Hunger Games* came to her one evening when she was channel-surfing and flipped from a reality-television competition to footage from the war in Iraq. An overt critique of violence, the series makes

warfare deeply personal, forcing readers to contemplate their own roles as desensitized voyeurs (31).

Later in the interview, Collins states: “I don't write about adolescence.” She continues: “I write about war. For adolescents.” She states that failing to inform young adults about the realities of war puts them at a disadvantage (32). So while for many the series may seem too dark for young readers, Collins’ impulse behind writing the series is to promote social change. Booker writes: “The dystopian warnings of impending nightmares are ultimately necessary to preserve any possible dream of a better future” (177).

An additional concern expressed by these books is about the role of media and technology in creating and disseminating information. From the opening of the first book, it is clear that the people of Panem have very few freedoms and absolutely no freedom of speech. The Capitol guards, ironically named “Peacekeepers,” roam throughout the districts, enforcing the Capitol’s harsh regulations and closely monitoring people’s actions. The government heavily regulates all expression of ideas; there’s an official story for everything disseminated through the television. Phones, when available, are tapped, all written correspondence monitored. While hunting deep in the woods, Gale can speak honestly about the political conditions of the districts. He says to Katniss, “It’s to the Capitol’s advantage to have us divided among ourselves” (14), but he doesn’t dare express his dissent aloud in the district. Even though the residents of the districts know the media is constructed and that their lives are untenable, they feel so fully under the control of the state that they aren’t able to resist.

The residents of the district are under constant surveillance, but Katniss feels a new level of exposure when she volunteers as the tribute for District Twelve in the place of her younger sister, Prim. As soon as she volunteers, basically putting her life on the line, she begins thinking

about the viewing audience, not about her own feelings, because of the dominance of the media. She thinks, “I don’t want to cry. When they televise the replay of the reappings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I’ll be marked as an easy target” (23). Roberta Seelinger Trites observes that in the *Harry Potter* series that the students live in “an atmosphere of constant surveillance designed to remind them of their powerlessness” (475). In *The Hunger Games* the pervasive presence of the media amplifies the atmosphere of constant surveillance. Throughout the whole series, from the time Katniss volunteers as Tribute through her role as the Mockingjay, a revolutionary symbol, for District Thirteen in the third book, Katniss has to, in varying degrees, suppress how she feels and try to act a part for the cameras, thus capturing the audience’s attention. Repeatedly, she has to acknowledge that her life and the lives of people she loves are dependent on the impression she makes on the viewing audience.

The media is everywhere, but nowhere is its role more despicable than in its coverage of the Hunger Games and the resulting effect it has in the shaping of Katniss’ identity. About the Hunger Games, Katniss states: “To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others” (19). Every aspect of the Hunger Games is televised and broadcast throughout the country. From the reaping when the two tributes from each district are selected to the presentation of the tributes in the Capital to the slaughter in the arena, the event is followed and constructed by the media. Repeatedly images of Katniss serve to define her sense of self. During the opening ceremony for the first Hunger Games when she and the other Tributes are first presented in the Capitol, she is dressed in a flaming black costume, but the televised image of herself is what captures her attention, more than the physical experience itself: “At first I’m frozen, but then I catch sight of us on a large televised screen and am floored by how

breathhtaking we look” (78). This is her first experience with how malleable and constructed by external forces both her physical appearance and personality are.

When she and the other Tributes are being transported to the arena from the Capitol, tracking devices are inserted into their forearms so that their location can be monitored at all times. In addition, cameras are hidden everywhere throughout the arena. The event is broadcast live, so anytime the games start to get boring, the gamemakers add additional threats to the Tributes’ lives. For example, when Katniss gets over a mile away from the other Tributes, a wildfire forces her back down into the valley. During the games, Katniss discovers that if she plays for the audience’s sympathy, performing for their expectations, she can receive gifts from the sponsors, things she needs to stay alive. Since the audience is wildly sympathetic towards the star-crossed lovers as a result of Peeta’s declaration of love during their interviews before the games, Katniss plays to the audience and fabricates a romance with Peeta. When she and Peeta kiss and share intimate stories in the cave during Peeta’s recovery from a knife wound, they are instantly rewarded. As soon as Katniss states that Peeta doesn’t have any competition for her affection and kisses him passionately, she and Peeta hear a noise outside their cave. They find a silver parachute with a basket full of food they needed to keep their strength up in the game. Through this event and others, Katniss learns on a deeper level how to perform for the media. While she isn’t entirely sure if she has feelings for Peeta (or maybe for her best friend Gale), she willingly succumbs to manipulation by the intrusive presence of the media in order to survive.

By learning how to play to audience expectations, she realizes that she can use audience expectations as a defense against the gamemakers. Her greatest manipulation of the media occurs at the end of the games after Cato is dead and she and Peeta are the only survivors. In accordance with an abrupt rule change in the middle of the game, she and Peeta should be allowed to share



the victory and survive the game together, but the rule is changed again, back to the original, after Cato's death. When the rule change is overturned, Katniss decides that they will stage a suicide to ensure that both of them survive, prepared to kill themselves instead of killing each other. During the final moments of the game, Peeta and Katniss prepare to both eat poisonous berries in a joint suicide, but the Gamemakers intervene at the last second because their awareness of the audience's expectations forces them to intervene and prevent the double suicide. As Katniss and Peeta raise the berries to their mouths, they hear trumpets and the frantic voice of the head gamemaker shouting: "Stop! Stop! Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to present the victor of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Game, Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark! I give you—the tributes of District Twelve" (345). This act of televised dissent, possible and unpreventable because of audience expectations, forever alters the course of Katniss' life. Even though she was simply trying to preserve her and Peeta's life, her act establishes her identity as a symbol and rallying point for the coming revolution. For the remaining books of the series, her identity continues to be constructed by the media—but instead of being a pawn in the Capitol's games, she is instead used by the revolution. Her persona, the Girl on Fire, rallies rebels to the cause.

Carrie Hintz, in her article "Monica Hughes, Lois Lowry, and Young Adult Dystopias" states that YA dystopian novels "use the transition from adolescents to adulthood to focus on the need for political action and the exercise of political will within a democratic society" (255). Hintz states that one additional characteristics of the YA dystopian novel is that the protagonists are exposed to harsh environments and experience shame. In addition, Hintz states: "the well-being of the community frequently comes at a steep price which is often paid for by the young protagonist" (256). All of these characteristics are present in *The Hunger Games* series. Katniss

experiences enormous amounts of guilt throughout her life. She blames herself for her friend Rue's murder in the arena in the first book and constantly compares herself to Peeta. In her last conversation with Peeta on the eve of the first game, Katniss thinks that she is inferior to Peeta: "While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self" (142). As the series progresses and the revolution spreads, casualties mount and Katniss' guilt deepens. During the third book, Katniss blames herself for all of the casualties of the revolution. As she's walking through the ruins of District Twelve after the entire district was firestormed and completely destroyed, she passes the decomposing dead bodies of her former neighbors. She thinks: "*I killed you...And you. And you. Because I did. It was my arrow, aimed at the chink in the force field surrounding the arena that brought on this firestorm of retribution. That sent the whole country of Panem into chaos*" (5-6). Through her experiences, even though she struggles with guilt, Katniss realizes the importance of her political action, but the political system of *The Hunger Games* complicates genre conventions of the YA dystopia.

In most YA dystopias there is only one governmental system, usually drawn in such a negative light that it's easy for the readers to see the flaws of that system and understand why the protagonist opposes it. When the character rejects the existing political system, there's frequently a sense of hope that maybe the protagonist can find or help establish an alternative. For example, in *The Giver*, one of the best known YA dystopian novels, after realizing the corruption of his community, the protagonist Jonas leaves in search of Elsewhere, an alternative society. While the ending is ambiguous, readers later discover through *The Giver's* sequel that Jonas survives. In *The Hunger Games* an alternative to the bloody, lavish, exploitative fascism of Panem is offered by the organization and regulations of District Thirteen, a district that

successfully rebelled against the Capitol and has lived underground for several years while plotting a revolution. Initially District Thirteen seems to offer hope and a revolutionary model for the other districts, but slowly Katniss starts perceiving flaws in District Thirteen. Even though the rigidly regulated, utilitarian society of District Thirteen seems initially to stand in direct contrast to the decadence of the Capitol, as *Mockingjay* progresses, Katniss sees disturbing similarities between the two governments. The first thing that troubles Katniss is how her prep team is abused at District Thirteen for stealing a piece of bread. She found them “half-naked, bruised and shackled to the wall” (46).

Later, she realizes that she is being used by District Thirteen, just as she has been the pawn of many other powerful people in the Capitol. After she agrees to be the symbol of the revolution for District Thirteen, Katniss thinks: “First, there were the Gamemakers... Then, President Snow. Next, the rebels... And now Coin, with her fistful of precious nukes and her well-oiled machine of a district” (59). Katniss realizes that Coin, the President of District Thirteen, has similar cravings for power as those she observed in President Snow. In fact, by the end of the series, Coin’s cruelty mirrors Snow’s. She’s responsible for bombing Capitol children and the medics (including Katniss’ sister Prim) who rush in to help the children. After President Snow is deposed and the Capitol falls to the rebels, President Coin suggests a final Hunger Game using the privileged children of the Capitol. She states: “What has been proposed in lieu of eliminating the entire Capitol population, we have a final, symbolic Hunger Games, using children directly related to those who held the most power” (369). Katniss thinks: “All those people I loved, dead, and we are discussing the next Hunger Games in an attempt to avoid wasting life. Nothing has changed. Nothing will change” (370). In an attempt to prevent further governmental abuse, Katniss shoots and kills Coin, proving yet again, similarly to her attempted

suicide during her first Hunger Game, that no amount of societal or political pressure can cause her to completely lose her will. She, like Peeta desired to do, maintains her purity of self.

By introducing two fascist governments, Collins may be trying to do something slightly more complex than other YA dystopian novels. There's no promise of future peace for the realm; Katniss has a role in toppling both corrupt governments, but there's no utopian society to turn to. The ending of the book does hint at positive changes throughout the districts. For example, Katniss' mother works for a new hospital in District Four, and the mines in District Twelve are shut down to build a factory that makes medicines. Katniss and Peeta, after fifteen years, take a risk on the future and have two children. Katniss says: "The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there are no more Hunger Games. But they teach about them at school..." (389). She continues: "On bad mornings, it feels impossible to take pleasure in anything because I'm afraid it could be taken away" (390). She's most worried about her children's future and her ability to care for and protect them in ways her parents never could for her and Prim. Her motherly concerns are valid because under the previous governments, the children took the brunt of the inflicted suffering.

In *The Hunger Games* everyone suffers under the government's corrupt rule, but the suffering is lavished upon children in particular. The very structure of the games, pitting twenty-four young adults between the ages of twelve and eighteen for a battle to the death, illustrates how young people are singled out in this dystopian narrative. Katniss describes the games: "Taking kids from the district, forcing them to kill each other while we watch—that is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy" (18). For Katniss and the other tributes, the games are a form of torture; in the first Hunger Game, children are stabbed, mutilated, poisoned, and strangled. The games, however, are much larger than the torture and

death of twenty-four frightened young people. Because of the media's role, every citizen in Panem has access to a televised account of the games. The inability to protect children from the horrors inflicted by the government, introduces the second kind of punishment, a ceremonial punishment, intended to break the spirits of the residents of Panem. The symbolic punishment of the tributes undermines everyone's sense of liberty. Adults are rendered helpless in the face of the horror; they are unable to protect the children they love, and they are forced into voyeuristic participation in the games. So therefore, in Panem, many forms of punishment are employed through the games, resulting in a rigidly controlled, fear-based community. The *Hunger Games* series offers a powerful social critique by depicting a dystopia that can easily be seen to reflecting contemporary concerns. However, the genre of YA dystopian isn't free of mainstream ideology.

In *The Call of Stories* Robert Cole asserts: "The whole point of stories is not solutions or resolutions but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggle" (129). While for most of the series, the focus of the narrative is on the struggle, the novel may be actually re-inscribing the status quo. Susan Stewart in her insightful article "A Return to Normal: Lois Lowry's *The Giver*" states about *The Giver*: "What initially appears to be a radical approach to adolescent literature actually reinforces cultural norms. In short, the text represents a return to normal" (23). Stewart asserts that dystopian YA often asks us to critique the social problems of the fictional world, not of our own. So, while readers may be shocked and appalled by the violence in *The Hunger Games* and come to abhor both President Snow and President Coin, unless readers are encouraged to engage the text critically, the series itself may "reaffirm what readers have learned to value" (29). After reading *The Hunger Games* the atrocities inflicted by contemporary governments pale in comparison to the abuses suffered in Panem. Readers have the option of

comfortably relaxing into the realization that our lives, thankfully, aren't as bad as Katniss'...yet. Or, readers can be encouraged to engage the text critically, mining it for valuable critiques of contemporary life.

### ***The Hunger Games and Gender***

*The Hunger Games* series is surrounded by many widespread, popular assumptions. One of the most common is that this series, through the character of Katniss Everdeen, is supporting women's equality and offering young female readers a newly empowered subject position. Finally, many readers assert, we have a self-actualized female character who breaks down gender inequalities. Katniss is athletic, adventurous, skilled with weapons, and brave, all characteristics frequently drawn as masculine in many mainstream texts and perceived as masculine in contemporary society. Additionally, Katniss performs tasks typically assigned to men. For example, after her father's death, Katniss provides for her family. While Collins' intention may certainly have been to open more subject positions to women by portraying a strong female protagonist, it's important to evaluate whether the *Hunger Games* series really helps to re-define women's roles in American culture or, in fact, serves to reinforce patriarchal cultural values.

To begin with, it's important to ask how subversive a wildly popular text really can be. Elyce Helford in her introduction to *Fantasy Girls* states that producers' goals, which are motivated by the same desire for profit as book publishers and distributors, are to secure a profit by "alienating as few viewers as possible and targeting specific audiences without pushing the boundaries too far." She observes that all mass media must also "negotiate the particular cultural mood of the era" (7). Her study of female heroines in 90s television shows revealed that the strong central female characters reflect the cultural mood of 90s America similarly to how the

protagonists in dystopian adolescent literature of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century reflects the current cultural mood of America. Because the *Hunger Games* series is both set in and produced by patriarchal cultures (Panem has frightening similarities to the US), Katniss' agency is limited both inside the text and in the readers' worlds. In fact, *The Hunger Games* might perpetuate the system that it hopes to subvert in its portrayal of Katniss.

Katniss Everdeen's survival in the arena depends on her desirability to the primarily male sponsors and to the viewing audience in the capitol and across the twelve districts. After Katniss volunteers as tribute, she is subjected to several alterations to make her more appealing for the viewers. Katniss' lack of agency is most observable in the treatment of her physical body. Trites states that: "Growth in adolescent literature is inevitably depicted as a function of what the adolescent has learned about how society curtails the individual's power" (473). Katniss' lack of agency is observable in many instances throughout the series, most notably after she volunteers as Tribute in place of Prim. When she arrives at the Capitol, she is scrubbed and waxed by her prep team at the Remake Center, common beauty practices in contemporary American style, but torturous for Katniss: "My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of [hair], leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting" (61). In the interview before the games, Peeta confesses his hidden love for her to all of Panem, immediately winning the crowd's sympathy. Katniss observes: "Peeta has absolutely wiped the rest of us off the map with his declaration of love for me" (134). She is furious and attacks Peeta as soon as they return to their chambers. After she explains to Haymitch that she is angry for being used, Haymitch chastises her:

You are a fool... That boy gave you something you could never achieve on your

own....He made you look desirable. And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department. You were as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. (135)

For Katniss to gain the attention of the viewers, she has to be desired by a male character. For the males in this series, their strength or prowess gains them the favor of the crowd. While initially Katniss' position as an object of desire seems to stem from the shallowness of the viewing audience in the book, establishing Katniss as desirable permeates the book in an attempt to appeal to male and female readers and viewers, though in slightly different ways. While more critical work is definitely necessary on this topic, it appears that the males inside the texts model for readers and viewers how they should perceive Katniss: desirable. The enormous sales of *The Twilight Saga* and the recent trilogy *Fifty Shades of Gray* attest to the enormous appeal among female readers of the triangulation of the female character and two male protagonists.

The narrative positions Katniss between two love interests: her best friend and fiery-tempered hunting partner Gale and her fellow tribute Peeta. Throughout the series, her affection alternates between the two characters, though both men remain constant in their affection for her until the end of the third book. The desire to discover who Katniss ends up with drives the plot of the series. This triangulation involving the main female protagonist is not new to YA literature and film. In fact, the three most popular young adult series have love triangles involving the main female characters, but the love triangle is featured in varying degrees in the different series. In *Harry Potter* Hermione is positioned between Harry and Ron, and her role is to support and enable the trio's adventures. When the focus of the narrative shifts from the trio to Harry in the later works of the series, Ron and Hermione become a couple, breaking the triangle only after it isn't a needed plot device anymore. In *Twilight* triangulation plays a central role for the first



three books of the series. Bella isn't a very dynamic character. What makes her character appealing for readers and viewers is that she is desired, not only by a hot vampire Edward, but also by the sexy werewolf Jacob. In fact, many readers and film viewers tried to influence who Bella eventually settled on, dividing up into "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob." And, of course, Katniss is centered between Gale and Peeta. Thus, young female readers and viewers of these three series may be learning that the most important thing they can strive for is making themselves desirable for the (more powerful) males around them.

One of Katniss' prominent characteristics is her violence. She's a skilled huntress; she can kill squirrels with an arrow through the eye. During the Hunger Games she isn't afraid to kill other tributes. Surely such a violent character must be empowered, right? Unfortunately, simply being violent isn't enough to guarantee empowerment. In her book *The Violent Woman*, Hilary Neroni posits that violence in films can either reinscribe or subvert the dominant ideology, depending on how it's presented in the text. She states: "In fact, the very existence of the violent woman testifies to ideologies' propensity for failure...what matters in the end is the attitude that we take up towards her [the violent woman]. Do we embrace the antagonism that her violence exposes, or do we take shelter within the attempts to narrativize that antagonism?" (11) Neroni continues: "Female violence doesn't fit neatly into our ideas of the feminine, and, because of this, it has a disruptive and traumatic impact" (59). Neroni asserts that the less narrativized the violence, the higher the subversive potential. In the case of Katniss Everdeen, I would argue that her violence is explained and heavily justified throughout the text. She hunts out of necessity because her father died and her mother couldn't take care of the family. The narrative suggests that she only developed her hunting talents out of the necessity to care for her mother and sister. She learns about weaponry as self-defense for the arena. The few times that she does kill another

tribute in the arena are in an attempt to protect someone else. Katniss is a benign killer whose violence is highly narrativized and thus less of a threat. Through Katniss' construction as a desirable character using the all too familiar triangulation pattern as well as how completely the series narrativizes her violence, Katniss is not a revolutionary feminist character. In fact, one of her main goals throughout the novel is survival: survival after her father's death, survival in the arena, survival during the revolution, and survival after the revolution. Her other main concern throughout the narrative is keeping the people she loves alive: her mother, her sister Prim, Gale, and Peeta. So while Katniss' character may display more spunk than other familiar female characters, the two driving motivations—survival and protecting the people she loves—certainly are dominant characteristics in how our culture draws femaleness.

While Katniss' character may not significantly question the dominant ideology's conception of femininity, I would argue that Peeta's character challenges gender stereotyping and has the potential to open more subject positions for males. Hegemonic masculinity encourages males to mask their feelings, compete, and accentuate their prestigious position in society. Peeta does none of these things. His public declaration of his love for Katniss is a true revelation of his feelings, not, as Katniss assumes a ploy to gain the audience's favor. In the first game he and Katniss compete in, he isn't shown consistently as valiant and strong. In fact, he spends much of the game hiding and wounded. Several times Katniss compares him to Gale. While Gale is a hunter and a fighter, Peeta is an artist and a baker. But, at the end of the series, it's Peeta whom Katniss chooses. She explains her choice: "What I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself... What I need is... the promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that" (388). Peeta's character may provide readers with a male character who subtly differs

from the dominant construction of masculinity, a character who expresses his feelings openly and is focused on renewal and new life instead of violence.

## **Conclusion**

In English departments, young adult literature is beginning to gain the critical attention it deserves. A series like *The Hunger Games* provides fascinating information about current trends in dystopian YA literature as well as America's continued construction of gender and is being discussed at conferences and beginning to receive critical attention. However, young adult literature, especially multi-cultural and dystopian fiction, is markedly absent from the junior high and high school curriculum. By giving young readers compelling texts that grapple with tough issues and the tools they will need to engage with these texts, parents and educators alike can begin fostering the development not only of readers but also of thinkers, young people, who if ever placed in a moral dilemma as Katniss was, will be more able to stay true to themselves.

## Chapter Five

### Working towards a New Model of Literacy while Promoting Children's Agency

Throughout the course of my dissertation, I have been consistently plotting out problems in many texts written and produced by adults for audiences of children as well as issues in how texts are selected in educational programs. Despite the problems many children's texts seem to leave unaddressed, there are steps parents and educators can take to help make the relationship between children and texts a more rewarding one. The purpose of this chapter is to offer possible solutions to the problems discussed in detail throughout much of my dissertation.

As much recent scholarship including the work of Paulo Friere, Maria Nichols and Jeffery Wilhelm indicates, reading is not a passive activity, and children are active meaning makers when interacting with texts. Michel de Certeau states: "The text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception" (170). Even when adults fail children by providing them with texts that do not reflect their interests or experiences, children respond creatively and build meaning for themselves on their own. In addition to providing young readers with engaging texts and equipping them with theoretical lenses with which to interact with these texts, creating opportunities for young people to produce their own texts will enable children and young adults to assume a more active role in the construction of childhood. In fact, involving children in text production is not a new concept.

Several texts for children depict children actively involved in creating texts. One series that repeatedly depicts children creating texts is the graphic novel series *Captain Underpants* written and illustrated by Dav Pilkey. The protagonists of the series, George Beard and Harold Hutchins, are fourth graders at Jerome Horwitz Elementary School. George and Harold are class

pranksters, and they are always in trouble with the teachers and principal. One prank they repeat in almost every book is bringing their most recent comic, one they've written, illustrated, and produced through their distribution company Tree-House Comics, to school to sell during recess. In the comics, there are always unflattering, subversive images of the school administration. While in the narrative of the story, George and Harold always play pranks on the teachers and school administration, in the comics they write, they end up helping their principal's alter ego Captain Underpants save the school and, ultimately, the world from the invasion of vicious toilets, space aliens, a huge dandelion, and the crazy scientist Professor Pippy Pee-Pee Poopypants. In the original series, George and Harold's comics appear alongside the story of George, Harold, and their friends and enemies at school. George and Harold are shown writing and distributing comics for other kids to read.

*The Adventures of Super Diaper Baby* takes George and Harold's text production farther. The whole book is an extended comic. George and Harold are listed as the authors, and Tree-House Comics is listed on the cover as the publisher. The whole book is in comic book form, written and illustrated in a stereotypical fourth-grader scrawl. Words are misspelled to give the book an "authentic feel." For example, on the cover of the book, the word "laughs" is spelled phonetically as "laffs." The whole book poses as an authentic, child authored text even though Dav Pilkey authored the book.

Another example of a series that positions children as text-producers is *Home Movies*, an animated television series that aired on UPN in 1999 and was later picked up by Cartoon Network for four seasons (2001-2004). Created by comedian Brendon Small, the series focuses on 8-year-old Brendon, a young filmmaker who writes, directs, acts, and "co-executive produces" home movies with his friends Melissa and Jason. Tanja Nathaneal during her

Children's Literature Association 2011 conference presentation entitled "'Life through a Fisheye Lens': The Subversive Quality of Distortion in Brendon Small's *Home Movies*," stated that "Brendon's use of the video camera provides both a distorted view of childhood and of adult life through the eyes of the child, which in turn provides a peculiar kind of clarity, a resonance that illuminates both childhood and adulthood in unexpected and delightful ways." Here again, as in *Captain Underpants*, we have an adult who has created a young protagonist who then creates a narrative for a young viewing audience.

These two series share a common theme. Both series depict abusive power figures. Nathaneal states that *Home Movies*: "poses a critical challenge to authority by exposing the arbitrary relationship between authority and power. Brendon's exposure of postmodern absurdity empowers him to push back at adult authority and subvert social expectations even when he loses." Layered texts like *Captain Underpants* and *Home Movies* can present a more authentic, potentially subversive view of childhood through the mediation of the imagined child author/producer. Speaking more broadly about comic strips in general, Martin Barker in *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* states:

In engaging with these [comic] strips, children are finding ways to think of these relations of power. They are learning distinctions between what can be done about authority in fantasy, and what in reality. In other words, they are gaining from these comics some of the mental resources they need to cope with the living reality of the power we adults routinely hold over their lives. These strips offer insight, and a form of control over the situation: through the game of absurdity. (86)

Through the use of a child author writing about the abuse of power, these texts may be more subversive than other texts produced for children; however, I would argue that in addition to

having adult authors pretending to write as children that children should be encouraged to write their own texts. The next logical step in text production is to help children have access to the resources necessary to write, illustrate, produce and distribute their own texts. While concerned educators, parents, and scholars may not be able to completely subvert Disney's ideology or totally revise the canon of children's literature, there are two main problems that we can begin to dismantle in an attempt to counter the problems present in our society in regards to children's literature and film.

Because of education trends sparked by the education bill No Child Left Behind, opportunities for children to interact with authentic texts have been reduced in favor of a "skill-and-drill" approach to literacy instruction. During a typical school day, children may be exposed to more hours of test preparation and fewer hours of literacy instruction. One result is that we are helping to create a generation of children that is reading less and isn't equipped with the necessary critical thinking skills. The second major problem which has been the subject of investigation throughout my dissertation is that in spite of many children's creative meaning making skills, so many texts continue to be created by adults that re-enforce inaccurate, ageist understandings of children and childhood. Jacqueline Rose states: "Children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and speaking to it might be simple" (1). Children are the only demographic in our society where virtually all their texts are produced by people outside of the demographic, namely, adults. Even the most candid portrayals of childhood by adult producers are frequently based on adults' memories of their own childhood, close association with children that may give authenticity to adult-authored texts, or adult appropriation of children's stories.

Widespread changes need to take place in our perception of children before the field of children's literature and film can be significantly revised. Adults will have to examine their perceptions of children's capabilities before children are given, for example, book contracts and movie production rights, but I advocate that those changes can be made. Of course, changes this dramatic will take time. During the 2011 Children's Literature Association Conference, a panel entitled "Disciplinary Unrest: On Childhood and Childhood Studies" which included speakers Marah Gubar and Kenneth Kidd, discussed the possibility of introducing Childhood Studies on university campuses. A Childhood Studies program would, much like my dissertation begins to do, investigate the changing concept of childhood in America through an examination of key texts and, most likely, include some direct application through activist work with children. But there is resistance to these types of changes. During that panel a few conference goers objected to the possibility of relegating the study of children's literature to a Childhood Studies department because they said they didn't even really like children. I can't imagine attending a conference on women's literature or African-American literature where a similar statement would be made. This is just one indication that there's still a lot of work to do. But, on our way to a more child-centric approach both to education and text production, changes can be made on a smaller scale both in ways we teach children how to interact with texts and in facilitating opportunities for children to create and distribute their own texts. Changes in literacy, children's text production, and our culture's overall perception of children are slowly beginning to spread across the United States through new educational strategies, grassroots writing programs, and more humane parenting practices.

Rose states, "Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver), and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but neither of them enter the



space between” (2). A necessary goal for all adults, especially educators, authors, and parents, is to disrupt this dichotomy between adults and children that exists in many texts made by adults for children and to enter the space between. Two important ways to disrupt this dichotomy are to approach adult-written texts creatively through strategies such as arts integration and transmediation and to encourage children to produce texts for their own consumption.

Instead of understanding reading, TV-viewing, and film watching as primarily passive, solitary acts in which the child reader/viewer consumes what the adult author/producer has made, all texts must be approached with a willingness to take them apart and enter the space between the viewer and author. Rose asserts that children’s literature has shifted away from the didactic narrator that dominated much of early children’s literature. Most children’s books rely on showing versus telling in which the events and characters speak for themselves. Rose asserts that adult intention has become increasingly invisible in children’s texts, and thus children’s books deny that they are constructed out of language; they deny “the fact that language does not simply reflect the world but is active in the construction of the world” (60). Acknowledging the constructed nature of children’s books is the first step in bridging the mysterious space between adult author and child reader.

In *Comprehension through Conversation: The Power of Purposeful Talk in the Reading Workshop*, Maria Nichols offers strategies for developing purposeful talk in the classroom. Nichols is opposed to the traditional educational model in which, “Teachers filled silent children with deposits of information in what Paulo Freire characterized as the banking model of instruction” (2). Meaningful conversations can help children think critically about the texts they read. As discussed in the previous chapter, an introduction to literary theory may help stimulate and deepen these conversations. In addition to creating meaningful conversations, arts

integration and transmediation can help students interact with texts using several modalities. Employing numerous modalities helps students both understand existing texts in a deeper way and prepares students to produce their own texts. Arts integration is defined as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form,” when, “students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both, (“Laying a Foundation: Defining Arts Integration”). Such a focus is supported by three different forms in the context of school: taking students to an arts performance, bringing an artist to the classroom, and teaching through an arts-integrated curriculum.

Arts integration brings several different types of art into a classroom including but not limited to: creative writing, dramatic activities, music, media, and visual arts. Arts-integration promotes meaningful connection with texts because it naturally draws on multiple modalities, allowing children to learn visually, aurally, and kinesthetically. Relying on a constructivist approach to teaching, arts integration is a way to create a structure that would allow students to participate actively in the learning process rather than to passively receive information.

Transmediation, as defined by Mary Ann Reilly and Jane Gangi in *Deepening Literary Learning*, takes art-integration a step further. Transmediation is recasting meaning from one sign system to another. According to Reilly and Gangi, sign systems include, “aural, dramatic, gestural, mathematical, movement, musical, scientific, visual, and written systems” (16). They write, “Sign-making across symbol systems—across multiple modalities—then is a currency to transmediate meaning... Through teaching that makes use of multiple modalities, meaning is advantaged as knowledge may be transformed and potentially understood in different ways as one shifts from one sign system to the next” (16). Through the use of transmediation, teachers and students alike can experience learning as a creative, open-ended process of discovery. Reilly describes a project that she and twenty-seven middle

schoolers completed at Morganton Middle School that combined reading, painting, and writing. The week long unit began by reading free verse poems with the students. Then, she demonstrated how to make an abstract painting using pen lids to swirl the primary colors on a small piece of canvas. While the paintings were drying, she asked the students to write a free verse poem about their paintings. After the paintings were dry, she helped the students scan their paintings and artistically combine the painting and poem. One project that I developed at Owl Creek middle school based on transmediation began by discussing familiar fairy tales with the students. Then, we watched and read several adaptations of traditional fairy tales including TV series *Once Upon A Time*. After examining several examples, we asked the students to write short plays adapting traditional fairy tales and then perform them for the other students in the program. The students seemed to really enjoy re-telling the fairy tales and watching how their classmates adapted the fairy tales. Helping children realize that learning is not a passive or close-ended process may stimulate their interest in learning and help complicate their thinking, fostering their ability to perceive nuances in texts and not simply absorb black and white/good vs. evil dualities presented in many texts created for young readers and viewers.

In addition to providing children with the necessary tools to de-construct texts and make meaning, adults can facilitate children's involvement in producing texts for other children to read and view. Certainly, rapid technological developments are allowing children to distribute their own texts. YouTube, for example, is a great avenue for children to create and distribute their own texts. For example, some of my boys' favorite YouTube videos are stop-action Lego skits, primarily spoofs of Batman and Star Wars. The skits are made and produced by sixteen-year-old Forest Whaley, known on YouTube as ForestFire 101. Even though YouTube, social media forums, and other electronic avenues are providing children and young adults with a means to distribute their texts, adults have an important role to play in fostering children's involvement in text production and distribution.

There are several grassroots community literacy projects that help children both engage more actively with existing texts and write and distribute their own texts. The four models of community literacy projects discussed in this chapter are 826 National, Tree House Books, the Fayetteville Public Library, and Razorback Writers.

826 National, a community literacy project spearheaded by Dave Eggers in 2000 in San Francisco, now has eight sites across the United States, including sites in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, and Washington DC. 826 National's mission statement is as follows:

826 National is a nonprofit tutoring, writing, and publishing organization with locations in eight cities across the country. Our goal is to assist students ages six to eighteen with their writing skills, and to help teachers get their classes excited about writing. Our work is based on the understanding that great leaps in learning can happen with one-on-one attention, and that strong writing skills are fundamental to future success. (citation)

826 National sites provide a safe and supportive place where children can develop reading and writing proficiency as well as access publishing and distributing opportunities through newsletters, chap books, paperback, and hardback books. Some recent 826 publications, all authored by children and young adults, include *We Think You're Old Enough to Know*, a collection of sixty-one coming-of-age stories, *How to Rise* which features memoirs, poems, and fiction by forty-six seniors about topics such as the death of a mother, a near-fatal car accident, and a year in a juvenile detention center, and *Tall Tales & True Stories*, a year's worth of writing by students at Childs Elementary School in Ypsilanti, Michigan which chronicles the lives and fantasies of thirty young writers. 826 sites across the US involve thousands of children every year in text production. Not only do many of these children learn how to interact more creatively with texts, many of the participants come to see themselves as artists and writers.

Treehouse Books in North Philadelphia offers homework help, summer camps, and magazine workshops to neighborhood children. Their mission is to create a community of readers, writers, and thinkers. The participating children's writing is published and widely distributed in a biannual magazine. For example, an international language camp in Hungary led by Molly Staeheli used the Treehouse magazine as a text and model. Thus, children are being exposed to texts written by other children through writing clubs and language camps.

In addition to the literacy project that I have been involved in for the past two years, there are several other programs that emphasize the importance of and support children's writing. Another local program in Northwest Arkansas is a creative writing class offered by the Fayetteville Public Library for children of the community. I had the opportunity to visit with Alyson Low, the director of this program. The six-week creative writing class is offered both in the spring for third through fifth graders and in the fall for sixth through twelfth graders. When I asked Low about specific ways she talks to her workshop participants about writing, Low said that she emphasizes to her classes that they have all had valid experiences to write about; she tells them to write what they know. She sees the class as a creative outlet, and she tries to make it fun. Every student has the opportunity to publish their favorite piece in *The Wanderer*, a library sponsored publication. Nancie Atwell in *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading and Learning* describes the importance of helping young writers publish their work: "A sense of audience—the knowledge that someone will read what they have written—is crucial to young writers." Atwell provides suggestions for numerous avenues that young writers can pursue publication. Some places she recommends include newspapers, magazines that feature young writers such as *Stone Soup* and *Writes of Passage*, yearbooks, and writing contests. Atwell

continues: “One of the writing teacher’s roles is to help writers go public and connect with readers” (489). Helping young writers pursue publication is one way a teacher can be an activist.

Additionally, as part of my PhD work, I have participated in designing and implementing an afterschool literacy project in Northwest Arkansas that has worked with over 200 children writers both in fostering their interest in and love of writing as well as publishing their stories, poems, letters, and other art work. In the first year of the project, three separate collections of the children’s writing were published, and in the second year these publications were part of the curriculum. Instead of reading books produced by adults, we are exposing children to texts written and produced by other children.

In May 2010 I was appointed the Activities Director by the Brown Chair Literacy Program for an afterschool literacy program called Razorback Writers located in Northwest Arkansas. Razorback Writers is a non-profit literacy organization providing literacy enrichment activities and publishing opportunities for underserved middle school students throughout Arkansas. Staffed with community volunteers, pre-service teachers from the University of Arkansas’ Masters of Teaching program, and graduate students from both the Department of English and the College of Education and Health Professions, Razorback Writers aims to help students practice and improve their reading and critical thinking skills and develop a lifetime love of both reading and writing. In addition, I worked as the site coordinator at two middle schools: Oakdale Middle School in Rogers, Arkansas for the 2010-2011 school year and Owl Creek Middle School for the 2011-2012 school year. Oakdale Middle School is fifty percent English Language Learners with the dominant language learners of Hispanic origin. Oakdale services a student population that is 70% free and reduced lunches, meaning that the students live at or below the poverty line. Owl Creek Middle School has a smaller portion of English

Language Learners, only about 15%, but racial diversity at the school is high. About half of the students are non-white, including African-American, Latino, and Asian. Additionally, more than half of the students receive free or reduced lunches (ADE Data Center).

At Razorback Writers the other teachers and I sought to create a space that fostered children's independence and supported their development as readers and writers. Our mission statement asserts:

Razorback Writers is a non-profit literacy organization providing literacy enrichment activities and publishing opportunities for middle school students throughout Arkansas. Staffed with community volunteers, pre-service teachers from the University of Arkansas' Masters of Teaching Program, and graduate students from both the Department of English and The College of Education and Health Professions, Razorback Writers aims to help our students practice and improve their reading and critical thinking skills and develop a lifetime love of reading and writing. (n.p.)

We all know that adults create texts for children to consume and that children aren't involved in any noticeable degree in the production of texts for their own consumption. But I don't think we really stop to ask what the implications are when children's entire text selection is constructed by adults. Nowhere else in our culture is there such a large group that has such limited access to the production and manufacturing of texts.

Adults create texts for children to consume, and these texts frequently aren't accurately reflecting children's lived experiences. Children are not involved in the production of books and movies; children need to have access to texts written, illustrated, and produced by other children. By creating a supportive space for children to write, revise, publish, and distribute their own

stories and poems, we at Razorback Writers hope to empower our students and help the texts they create reach a wide children readership so that children do have access to texts written and produced by other children.

### **Curriculum Design**

With this philosophy in mind, we began designing our curriculum. When we approached the administration at our chosen sites, we came in with three requirements. First, though we were certain that our project would help students to improve their performance on standardized tests, we were clear with our schools that our focus would not be on traditional test preparation. Next, we knew that we wanted to get the students reading and writing, but we wanted to integrate our curriculum with other art forms as well. Our third goal was that all of our projects would culminate in some kind of final project to be presented to members of the community beyond our classrooms. Overall, our focus was to get students excited about reading and writing and to make sure that they were doing a lot of both. What we hoped to do was to create a supportive space for children to write, revise, publish, and distribute their own stories and poems, which was a goal that fit well with both our commitment to arts integration as well as our commitment to the production of a culminating project. In the following sections, I will look more closely into our two driving approaches – arts integration and project-based learning – to show how the Razorback Writers project uses these approaches to accomplish our goals.

### **Arts-Integration**

We officially began the “Razorback Writers” project in the fall of 2010, though one of the most formative experiences for our program happened before we got started with a workshop that two site coordinators, including me, attended entitled, “Arts with Education.” During this



workshop, our staff learned about arts integration, which we understood as an approach to teaching that would allow students to understand and demonstrate their understanding of material through art (The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, 2010). For Razorback Writers, the arts-integrated curriculum was a natural choice. As an after-school program, we knew that we had little chance of creating a fertile atmosphere for reading and writing if we expected our students to remain in their seats at the end of a long school day. We also knew, though, that as an after-school program, we had the freedom to bring arts into our curriculum in a way that many of the middle school teachers felt that they could not. We learned from classroom teachers that most of them felt they did not have the time to integrate art into their curriculum, and consequently, students were not being exposed to much art during their school day; this was especially the cases for our low-level readers who were failing to meet proficiency on state and national exams and were already being pulled from extra-curricular courses for additional test prep. Considering that we were aware that our students would be those who were seen as the schools' lowest level readers, arts integration seemed to be a way that we could engage students who did not think of themselves as readers and writers and whose experiences with literacy may have been overwhelmingly negative.

While my in-depth analysis of four projects will detail the specific ways that Razorback Writers Literacy Project was able to integrate arts into curriculum, there are a few guiding concepts that can be seen in all of them. First, in all of the projects, we used art to grab students' interests in hopes of getting them excited about the texts. Second, we relied on art as a way to help students understand and digest written texts. Finally, we used visual art in combination with verbal art to expand how students could respond to and reflect on what they had read.

## **Project-Based Learning**

When we first began Razorback Writers, we knew that it was important to us that all of our work culminate in a final project. We knew from our own teaching and learning experiences that students would be more motivated to read and produce work if they knew that this would culminate in something finite and would give them an audience outside of our classroom. We also knew that assessment for these types of projects would be challenging, and thus we wanted to make sure that we would have something physical to show for our efforts at the end of each project.

The Buck Institute for Education explains that project-based learning (henceforth PBL) asks students to “go through an extended process of inquiry in response to a complex question, problem, or challenge. While allowing for some degree of student ‘voice and choice,’ rigorous projects are carefully planned, managed, and assessed to help students learn key academic content, practice 21st Century Skills (such as collaboration, communication & critical thinking), and create high-quality, authentic products & presentations” (Buck Institute of Education, 2011).

Overall, we found that leading our students to the creation of a final product was a natural part of the progression of our projects. Some final projects that our students worked on included films, newsletters, literary journals, and dramatic performances. These projects motivate most students to produce their best work, and, in the end, students continue to be proud to show their projects to their peers, teachers, and families.

## **Razorback Writers**

### **General Overview**

In the summer of 2010 The Brown Chair in English Literacy at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, in collaboration with the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program in

the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and with generous funding from the Walton Family Foundation, developed the Razorback Writers program with the goal of developing an after-school literacy enrichment program for middle-school English Language Learners (ELL) in Springdale and Rogers, Arkansas. Razorback Writers holds as its mission to both provide a meaningful teaching opportunity for pre-service teachers and deliver a program to local middle and junior high school students that will help these students to improve their literacy skills and develop a love of reading and writing.

The specific need for this project is palpable and results directly from the shifting demographics of Northwest Arkansas, which has experienced unprecedented growth in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Washington County, for example, grew from a population of around 118,000 in 1990 to around 200,000 in 2010. Benton County grew from around 84,000 in 1990 to nearly 226,000 in 2010. The most substantial growth has been seen in the number of residents who are of Hispanic background or origin. In 1990, Hispanic residents comprised 1.1 percent of the entire population of Northwest Arkansas; by 2000, that figure had increased to 7.4 percent. By 2008, residents claiming Hispanic heritage constituted 15 percent of Benton County and 14 percent of Washington County.

As the population of Northwest Arkansas has changed, the performance of students on the Arkansas Benchmark Literacy Examinations (given in grades three through eight) and the Arkansas Grade 11 Literacy Examination has dropped. Because of their desire to provide the needed support to their struggling students, area middle and junior high schools have been very enthusiastic to integrate Razorback Writers into their after-school programs. In the 2010-2011 school year, Razorback writers worked with 5 sites on 7 projects with over 50 volunteers and pre-service teachers. The project served more than 200 students in its first year of operation. In

the 2011-2012 school year, the Razorback Writers worked with four sites and 184 middle school and junior high school students.

I have chosen to highlight four Razorback Writers projects to illustrate how our goals of arts integration and project-based learning are interpreted and applied at different sites. Each site has a graduate student site coordinator who develops the curriculum and then guides and supports the volunteers and pre-service teachers who work at the various sites. By looking closely at three different curriculum designs, I hope to illustrate the flexibility and adaptability unique to arts integration and project-based learning. Nikki Holland, the project manager of Razorback Writers and the 2010-2011 site coordinator for Holt Middle school reflected on her curriculum design. Corey Thomas, site coordinator for J.O. Kelley Middle school shared his experience. In addition, I have written about the two sites where I served as site coordinator: Oakdale (2010-2011) and Owl Creek (2011-2012).

### **Site One: Holt Middle School**

The project at Holt Middle School took place from 3:00-5:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays every week. The students who participated in this project were participants in an after-school program run by a local Boys and Girls Club. Unlike our other projects, discussed in more depth later, these students were not selected for the project because of academic need. Rather, these students were a mix of 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> graders whose families are members of the Club and needed care for their children after school. Before our project came into the school, students were loosely supervised by two undergraduate employees of the club and were not engaged in any organized activities.

Because our projects are all staffed primarily by university students who are completing a practicum requirement as a pre-requisite to the Masters of Art in Teaching program, it is important that the “Razorback Writers” projects provide all of our pre-service teachers with the 60 service hours that they need to complete their practicum. An article I co-authored with Nikki Holland, Chris Goering, and David Jolliffe entitled “‘We Were the Teachers, Not the Observers:’ Transforming Teacher Preparation” describes in more details the benefits the pre-service teachers receive from participating in the program.

Because Holt Middle School was only able to run for two days per week, a weekly planning meeting was added to the schedule to help students earn their required hours. Interestingly, this weekly meeting became one of the major strengths of this particular site. In an interview I had with Nikki Holland, she said, “Because we meet together every week, I am able to give the pre-service teachers more support outside of project time, which means that they can take a larger leadership role on-site. My role in designing the curriculum this spring was to provide pre-service teachers with a text and some guiding concepts, based mostly on arts-integration and project-based learning, and then to sit in on planning meetings, not as a supervisor, but as a participant. The pre-service teachers then lead the lessons on-site, and I move back into the role of participant-observer.” The curriculum detailed below is a result of her collaborative effort with the pre-service teachers.

In January of 2011, before the start of the spring semester, Razorback Writers hosted two visitors from an after-school literacy project in Philadelphia: Michael Reid and Darcy Luetzow, the Program Director and Executive Director of Tree House Books, described earlier in this chapter. Mike and Darcy mentioned the success that they had had during their summer program with the novel *Seedfolks*, which inspired Nikki to take up this novel as the foundational element

for our spring project. In the novel, *Seedfolks*, each chapter is written as a portrait of one character. There is a picture of each character on the first page of the chapter, and the chapter develops these different characters' relationships with a community garden in the neighborhood where they all live. Throughout the course of the novel, the community garden draws the different characters together. When Nikki met for the first time with our staff of pre-service teachers, she gave them some ideas for creative projects and ways to get the students reading and writing, but the structure I provided was very loose. The pre-service teachers, over the course of the next few weekly meetings, came up with a final project and the reading, writing, and art that would flesh out the project.

Every day that the project met, participants began by completing homework with the help of our staff. This helps the middle-school students with school work, and is supported by parents who want their kids to have completed their assignments before they get home. Providing individual homework help is an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to bond with the middle schoolers and foster their meaningful engagement with texts. As students are finishing homework, the group transitions into our project with an activity we refer to as the "fishbowl." During their meetings, the staff came up with a number of writing prompts related to *Seedfolks*. Below is a selection of these questions:

- What is your favorite kind of weather? Make a list of five characters and relate them to different types of weather. (Ex. icy wind = what kind of person?)
- Like Ana, you spend a lot of time looking out of windows. What do you see? (This can be real or made up or both!)

- Think about when Ana dug up Kim's beans and how she felt. Do you have a moment in your life where you felt like that, or can you write a scene where a character feels similarly?
- Pick a few songs that relate to important moments in your life, such as when you were born, and explain why each of your choices illustrates that particular moment.
- Have you ever thought you understood a situation but later found out it wasn't what you originally thought? Tell us a real story or make one up.

These prompts are meant to get kids transitioning into thinking about the novel as well as reflecting on their own experiences. Activities like these help students investigate existing texts critically and use existing texts as a jumping off point to begin developing their own texts.

After all students completed their homework and everyone had a chance to work with a writing activity, Nikki's group transitioned the students into reading. Every day we read one short chapter with the group, and our reading strategies varied. Sometimes we had our staff read to model dramatic reading. Sometimes the students wanted to read round-robin style; if they made the request, we allowed them to do so. Overall, the most successful strategy for this group seemed to be to break the students into very small groups or, if possible, pair them one-to-one with a pre-service teacher to read in pairs. The small groups work well, as students seem the most engaged in this setting and are most willing to admit when they are having difficulties. Because we had the staff to work in small groups, we tried to do so frequently.

Each of the characters in *Seedfolks* comes from somewhere outside of Cleveland, and many are immigrants. To help students learn about these characters, we have asked our pre-service teachers to prepare mini-lessons to teach the students about the countries that characters

come from. We also worked with the International Culture Team at our university to get international students from these countries to come in and talk to the middle-school students about where they come from. This is particularly exciting for us, as most students in our project have little, if any, exposure to international students.

The art projects that Nikki developed to accompany our work with *Seedfolks* were based on our gardening theme. Students sprouted their own lima beans, just like the character “Kim,” and researched the conditions needed for beans to grow. They painted clay pots for narcissus cuttings that they received from one of the pre-service teachers. They made mosaics, creating self-portraits for the front page of their chapters, and were in charge of taking pictures and documenting all of their own work. In addition to the hands-on art projects, they also had the benefit of being in a school with a community garden. Because of this, students were able to plant their own flowers and vegetables. Vegetables grown in the community garden were later served at lunch.

As our final project with this group, students made their own chapters. Each student had four pages to work with, and they may include any variety of writing and art that they have completed over the semester. Razorback Writers published these chapters into a book similar to *Seedfolks* that was distributed to students, their families, and selected sites around the community.

### **Site Two: J.O. Kelly Middle School**

The “Razorback Writers” project at J.O. Kelly took place three days per week from 3:30 to 5:15. During that time, Razorback Writers worked with two rotations of students for about 50 minutes each. During the first semester of the program, the site coordinator focused mainly on



reading from one book and working with the dramatic technique of tableau. Even though the tableau did get students to reflect on their reading while also having the opportunity to get moving, they quickly became bored with doing this activity every day. Corey Thomas reflected on his involvement with Razorback Writers as the site coordinator at J.O. Kelley. “I came to this project with an interesting perspective in that I was a student volunteer during the first semester, but I was given the opportunity to return to the project in the spring as the site coordinator. For the new term, I had two main goals: to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to be more involved with the planning and instruction of curriculum and to keep students interested while still getting them to think critically about the reading. To address the latter point, I began by asking students what they wanted to read and received a clear response: scary stories. Rather than choosing to tackle an entire book, I chose to branch out and read works that could be completed in a shorter period of time. My reasons for doing this were several: we did not complete the book that we read in the fall; the spring semester has been cut short due to weather and testing; and I hoped that reading shorter works will allow more time for discussion and activities. With such a high population of English Language Learners, the briefer readings in small groups help to keep students from feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable. For this group, I found it important that everyone read out loud in order to build trust and open the group up for more meaningful discussions. Instead of reading in a large group, we break students up into smaller groups that are led by volunteers which helps to make students feel comfortable and keeps them focused.

So far this spring we have read poetry, including “Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allen Poe and short stories such as “The Most Dangerous Game.” We also find it important to bring in art whenever possible, as it provides a way for students who are struggling to learn

English to express themselves. After reading “Masque of the Red Death” each student designed and created a mask. While reading “The Most Dangerous Game,” we had an island-drawing competition through which we were able to get students to visualize the setting and details of the story. We also partnered with the archery instructor to allow students to simulate the ‘hunt,’ which is central to the story, in a safe and controlled environment.”

### **Site Three: Oakdale Middle School**

Oakdale Middle School’s section of Razorback Writers met three days a week from 4:00 pm to 5:10 pm Tuesday through Thursday. We worked with four sections of ten to fifteen students each: two sixth grade sections, a seventh grade section, and an eighth grade section. Similar to J.O. Kelly, Oakdale’s after-school project targeted specific students in need of literacy enrichment; over half of the fifty children involved in Oakdale’s Razorback Writers are Spanish-speaking English Language Learners, and several other students have learning disabilities. Similar to the service provided by the Boys and Girls Club at Holt, some children are allowed to participate if they have parents who work late.

At Oakdale I organized the curriculum so that each week we played a game or participated in some type of physical activity, read aloud, did a creative project, and completed a writing activity. The first term was divided into three units. The unit we started with was a unit on identity. Since it was the introductory unit, most of the activities were focused on getting to know the students, helping the students learn more about each other, and, hopefully, discovering new things about themselves in the process. We read selections from Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, created masks and collages, and wrote short autobiographical pieces.

One activity that we introduced the first week and have continued to use throughout the program is making tableau, which are still, silent pictures that the students make using only their bodies. When making a tableau, there are three important questions that the members in the group need to discuss. The questions are: “What will we make?” “What parts do we need?” “What part will you play?” Initially, we asked the students to show simple concepts like a bowl of spaghetti and a family pet, but once they grasped the concept of tableaux, we moved to representations of more abstract ideas such as love, hate, and other emotions. Then, we worked with opposites such as popular and unpopular, rich and poor, peace and war.

As we moved on to other units, we used tableau mainly when we were reading. When beginning a book, we ask the students to make predictions about the book using tableau. At several points in the story, we stopped reading and used tableau to make more predictions, to show what’s happening in a scene, or to explore characters and plot in more depth. Tableau helped the students become more engaged in the story instead of simply listening passively. Additionally, tableau speaks to kinesthetic learners and allowed low-achieving readers to demonstrate their understanding of a text.

After the first unit, we continued to approach projects in a way that would allow us and the students to read, write, and use art to deepen and demonstrate our understanding. As Halloween approached, we read selections from Neil Gaiman’s *The Graveyard Book* and Lois Metzger’s *Bites*. We worked with the students to write their own scary stories, encouraged participation by turning the story writing into a competition, and made a plan to publish the stories and distribute a copy to all students. In the final weeks before the winter break, we worked with students on projects ranging from writing about their favorite holiday memories to using Microsoft Publisher to make Christmas cards for their friends and family.

The spring we began photographing and archiving projects produced by the students each week for a magazine that was published in May 2011 entitled *You, Me, and the World*. Many of the students involved in this program were socially isolated; they didn't have a lot of opportunities to cultivate a global perspective. On the other hand, several of the participating students are recent immigrants to the United States. In an attempt to both bridge the gap between the students in the program and help all the students develop a deeper sense of their community and the broader global community, we focused this term on exploring the history of Northwest Arkansas and developing a broader global perspective. One way that we explored the history of the Ozarks, a famous mountain range that runs through Northwest Arkansas and southern Missouri, was through the music of a local, yet internationally acclaimed folk group called Still on the Hill. We watched several of their music videos about Ozark characters, and Still on the Hill performed for Oakdale's Razorback Writers. After we explored close to home, we invited speakers, more musicians, and international students to share about their life experiences outside of the United States.

During February and March we had visitors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Taiwan, Turkey, Bolivia, and Japan come and speak to the students about their countries. Then, our students had the opportunity to work with the international students in small groups and interview them about their countries, childhoods, education, and important life experiences. The students compiled these interviews into poems, short stories, and journalistic pieces. In addition to having international guests, we also celebrated Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day with our students by eating King Cake, making masks, and writing limericks. In April a Latino rapper Papa Rap came and performed for the students. Through all of these activities, our main goal has been to expose children to different cultures and to help them realize that everyone has an interesting story to

tell. Our job as writers is to find those stories and write them down. We tried to give the students the support they needed to capture those stories.

The pre-service teachers and mentors worked with me closely to design the curriculum. To help provide the pre-service teachers with the teaching experience that they need the pre-MAT students each designed a mini-unit that tied into the main project of the term: the magazine. One student with a background in biology had the idea to do a unit on the animals in the Ozarks. Another student with a background in history presented a unit about war and the soldiers that have come out of the Northwest Arkansas area in the past 100 years. We produced, archived, and collected material for our magazine, and designed the magazine *You, Me, and The World* with our students. Working in conjunction with Oakdale's technology instructor, we supported the students as they compiled the texts and art work that they've produced into a magazine.

An interesting yet vital factor in designing curriculum for these after-school projects is creatively using all the resources that are available to us. For example, Holt has a community garden space which ties in perfectly with *Seedfolks*. At J.O. Kelly, Corey coordinated with an archery instructor to bring a short story to life. As an instructor at an intensive English program (IEP), I have contact with international students who became actively involved Razorback Writers and provided a much needed global perspective.

### **Owl Creek Middle School**

In the second year that I was involved with Razorback Writers (2011-2012), I served as the site coordinator for Owl Creek Middle School in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The focus of the first semester, which ran for less than two months because of a late start due to funding and

scheduling issues, was telling stories through techniques such as drama, picture sequences, and flip books. Since re-telling fairy tales has become popularized with films such as *Hoodwinked 1* and *Hoodwinked 2*, *Mirror Mirror*, and *Snow White and the Huntsman*, as well as television shows such as *Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time*, many of the stories the students told were renditions of popular fairy tales. For example, one group of Saudi boys re-worked *Snow White*, adding an extra wicked step-mother and substituting a poisoned muffin for the poisoned apple. The revised fairy tales were acted out, recorded, and burned to DVD. Each student received a copy of the DVD.

My main objective in working with the fairy tales was to encourage the students to engage texts creatively. Since many of the students were struggling when asked to invent characters and plot from scratch, starting with a familiar story line helped them develop the confidence to develop their unique re-tellings of the popular fairy tales. Their inventiveness when developing plot and creating props and costumes displayed their investment in the project. During that term there was one group of sixth grade boys that I consistently struggled to engage with. Their favorite part of the project was playing kickball in the courtyard at the beginning of each day. When we introduced them to the concept of telling a story without words, they developed an intricate football game, told only with gestures, movement, and facial expressions. They crowded around the video camera and watched their skit several times. This one instance really showed me that engaging kids in creating their own texts requires inventiveness and flexibility. Really, the main quality that working in an after-school literacy project required is flexibility. Sometimes the kids were completely apathetic about materials I had designed, so we had to adjust what we were teaching. In several cases, factors beyond our control (kids not attending, space and technology availability, testing schedules, etc.) affected curricular plans. I

feel that as an instructor I learned how to think on my feet and how to model that for the mentors while still trying to support the middle schoolers grow as readers and writers.

In the 2012 Spring semester, the focus of the project was comic books because the kids all expressed interest in comic books, and the librarian at Owl Creek Morton Hardaway said that he had a difficult time keeping comic books on the shelf because interest was so high. We selected *I Kill Giants* written by Joe Kelly and illustrated by J.M. Ken Niimura which depicts protagonist Barbara's struggle with her mother's death and her escape into a world of fantasy and monsters. In her fantasy, Barbara is a monster killer. She owns a special hammer that can kill the Titans who she fears are trying to kill her family. Her eccentric behavior and outspokenness invoke the ire of the school bully, but Barbara confronts her bravely. In the end, Barbara encounters a monster who gently explains her mother's death to her. After this encounter, she is able to face her grief and connect with her family, friends, and counselor. About the book Karla, a participating middle schooler said: "I like how it showed that we need to be brave with the problems we have. With the bullies, she defended herself instead of walking away. She was brave enough to protect herself." Another student Mickey told me that she hated reading but that she liked *I Kill Giants* because the book was honest.

We read the book aloud in small groups. Most of the students adopted characters and read with expression, really bringing the text alive. While we were reading, we focused on the way Barbara's character was developed and how the illustrations worked with the text to tell the story.

To support and facilitate the students' ability to develop characters, we used many types of exercises. For example, one day Nikki Holland led a character building activity. She brought in an assortment of common household items such as glass bottles, a cork, measure tape, and a

Lincoln log. Nikki asked students and tutors to pick up a random object placed on the back counter, and to write some words on the page which described the object, focusing on the feel, sound, look, etc. After taking some time to describe our character, Nikki asked the students to think about the character's personality based on the descriptions of the item. Then, Nikki passed around beads with a question taped on; e.g. "What is your character afraid of? Why?", "What does your character look like? Why?" "What is your characters name?" Why did you choose it?" She pointed out the importance of "Why?" "Don't just say you chose your character's name randomly – think about why you made the choices you made." She emphasized the importance of knowing what our characters wanted, what their goals are. The final part of the project was to have the characters meet each other and see if they could help each other get what they wanted and achieve their goals. Fun and engaging exercises like this one helped reluctant students get over an initial fear of writing and start seeing themselves as writers.

As the semester progressed, many of the students were able to discuss their characters. For example Jeremiah shared information about his character named John who is a tuxedoed hero with a ninja sword which he can make appear on command, and blades in his shoes which he can extend by pressing a button with his heel. Jeremiah explained that John had attended school through college, but dropped out when he realized that he knew everything he needed to know. Jeremiah plans to have John fight bank robbers, criminals, and even aliens, ridding the entire world – and eventually the universe – of crime. As Jeremiah explained his characters, he would draw them to illustrate his point. He drew John, John's bladed shoes, the alien villain, and the alien's spaceship, drawing each in enough detail so that he can point out their key features.

## **Conclusion**



Several times throughout the two years that I served as site coordinator, I heard students say things like, “I used to hate reading and writing, but now I like it” and “Razorback Writers is my favorite part of the school day.” Some students said that they wished that they could skip the school day and just come to Razorback Writers. In fact, one student had to miss school for a dentist appointment but came in the afternoon to participate in our program. That the kids liked the program so much is high praise. Though it was obvious that the participating students were having a great time while still reading and producing texts, it wasn’t until test scores were published and the students were interviewed that we fully understood the impact the project was having on the kids’ lives. As mentioned earlier, assessing and measuring the success of a literacy project such as Razorback Writers can be challenging. We found that by investigating the benchmark scores at the different sites and by interviewing students about the experience with Razorback Writers that we could at least begin to assess the effectiveness of the program.

During the 2010-11 school year at Oakdale Middle School in Rogers, Razorback Writers served 60 students, 80% of whom were special education students, 70% of whom were low-income, and 20% of whom were English language learners. On the benchmark exams, 43% of the 44 participating students who were below-basic or basic on the 2010 exams became proficient or advanced on the 2011 literacy tests. School-wide, the percentage of students who were basic or below on the 2010 exams who became proficient or advanced on the 2011 literacy tests was 30%. For students in special education (IEP) school-wide, that number was only 21%. For low-income students school-wide, that number was 27%. For English-language learners school-wide, that number was 25%. This data shows that involvement with Razorback Writers does significantly impact the participating students’ literacy abilities. Hopefully, by helping students become more sophisticated readers and writers, they may come to see themselves as

successful readers and writers. Data from other school is still pending, but we hope to see similar improvements in literacy scores.

Another way that we assessed the program is through small group and one-on-one interviews. At Owl Creek I worked with Ian Whitlow, a MA student at the University of Arkansas, who interviewed the participating students about their involvement with Razorback Writers. After about six weeks of the program, he set up interviews with the students about their involvement in the program.

He asked Zaria what she liked best about the project. She said she liked seeing what the college students were doing. To clarify her point, she said: “Some of them want to be pediatricians, and I want to be a pediatrician. I can see where they’re going.” Simply having adults show interest in their lives brought a lot of joy to the middle schoolers. Jeremiah reflected on his experience with Razorback Writers. He said: “We can have an open mind at Razorback Writers. We can think what we want to.” He said it was very different from other places because at Razorback Writers, “we can think what we want, and if we think it, we can say it... Parents watch out and tell you what to think, and school tells you what not to think, but at RW, we can just think aloud, just your thoughts.”

In her study of a classroom of ethnically diverse third- and fourth-grade remedial readers who are moved from traditional round robin reading to a curriculum focused on classroom theater, Shelby Wolf (1998) wonders if struggling readers in higher grade levels would be as amenable to trying out an artistic curriculum as her young elementary students were. If our experiences with struggling middle-school readers over the past two years tell us anything, it is that the answer to this question is a firm “yes.” Whether through creative dramatics, painting, gardening, singing, dancing, drawing, or any other manner of artistic expression, we have found

that when we ask our students to get up, move around, play a part, or dig a hole, they want to. And when we succeed in creating a fun, warm atmosphere, students want to be with us. For Razorback Writers, by creating a welcoming space for our students through art, we are able to engage in interactions with verbal arts in a way that is less threatening and more inviting, especially for struggling readers. When Darcy and Mike from Tree House Books visited our project, one of the main messages that they left us with is that, ultimately, the most important thing that we can do is change the way that we think about students so that they will change the way they think about themselves. When our students walk into our room, they are not English Language Learners and students with Academic Improvement Plans and students with learning disabilities, they are readers and writers and artists and thinkers. When we can change this, we change lives.

Wilhelm and Novak write: “Imagine what the world would be like if the central effort of schools around the world was to awaken students to the light of their own and one another’s lives. What if we stopped treating our young primarily as tools for economic ends and started treating them as ends in themselves?” (212). Throughout my dissertation, I’ve explored several widely popular and highly profitable texts, texts that in many ways try to shape children and prepare them for adulthood and a life of work and consumption. When these texts are looked at critically, they yield important insights about children’s position in society. While the problems facing children will require the participation of everyone in society to solve, perhaps as parents and educators we can begin to make positive changes in what texts children have access to and how they interact with those texts. Programs like Razorback Writers try to help kids get texts that they are interested in and encourage them to write their own stories.

## Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation, I have been guided by the idea that contemporary texts produced for children, whether they are directed at an audience of three-year olds or twelve-year olds or eighteen-year-olds, whether they are literature or film, have, despite their dissimilarities, common qualities that identify them as a unified body of texts. The main similarity among these diverse texts is that the bulk of texts available to children, whether literature or film, are produced by adults for the consumption of children. Additionally, even though these texts are often dismissed as unworthy of scholarly attention, these texts do stand up under critical analysis and often reveal layers of cultural ideology. Since I am especially interested in the ideologies encoded in recent texts created for children, my dissertation has focused primarily on widely popular texts, texts that reach a broad audience of readers and viewers. It is in the highly marketed and extremely popular texts that many conservative ideas about gender, race, and class emerge. These texts seem particularly invested in attracting as many readers and viewers as possible by ostracizing as few people as possible. Additionally, popular texts affect a wide audience and, thus, the ideas forwarded by the texts are disseminated widely and continue to uphold dominant ideologies.

The ideology disseminated by texts constructed for young readers is especially fascinating because adults create texts for children to consume. Murray states: “Millions of adults...will mentor children through what they write, say and do and thus continue to perpetuate the cultural values that matter to them” (212). Children are not usually involved in the production of texts for their own consumption. There are several results when children’s entire text selection is constructed by adults. Murray asserts that the texts of children’s literature “tell us more about the image of the ideal child that society would like to produce than they do about the real child”

(xv). Jacqueline Rose explores the role of children's literature in maintaining our cultural assumptions about childhood. She asserts that children's literature serves the needs of adults, and that it is used to try to preserve and spread cultural values. She states, "There is no child behind the category 'children's fiction,' other than the one which it needs for its own purpose" (10). She explores the way children's literature assigns clearly defined roles for both children and adults. "Children's fiction," Rose writes, "sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space between" (15). Truly subversive children's literature, I assert, would seek to blur those dualities.

Texts continue to replicate stereotypes about children and childhood and perpetuate the dominant ideology. Additionally, because they appeal to children, the texts themselves may be marginalized. In their marginalization, they may escape the critical analysis that they deserve. For instance, children's literature is still fighting for a place in English departments. Many specialists in children's and young adult literature have had to diversify their scholarly interests in order to secure teaching and research positions. On a more personal note, when people discover that my specialty is Children's and Young Adult Literature and Film, they often laugh and ask how serious critical research can be conducted over such simple, childish texts. However, when children's literature is examined seriously, fascinating studies emerge, and these studies yield valuable information about cultural ideologies and the construction of childhood in America. The annual Children's Literature Association Conference and numerous respected journals such as *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *The Looking Glass* focus on texts for young people. The field is growing, and these texts are beginning to receive more critical attention.

Whether the texts are “good” or “bad” doesn’t matter as much as whether they are discussed, written about, and analyzed.

Another way that texts written for younger audiences are marginalized is by omitting them from many curricula. Secondary education curricula privilege canonical literature, and frequently these older texts feel inaccessible to modern day readers. As a result of not liking the texts they are exposed to, many young people say they don’t like to read. Instead of labeling children’s and young adult literature as low art or popular culture, by treating these texts as literature, we can reap enormous benefits. Pulling children into these conversations will help them become better readers and, hopefully, writers of their own texts. Wilhelm and Novak state, “Students have a desire for challenge and a need for edgy and substantive work that lead to applications in the world, to their own personal growth and evolving competence, and to encountering other both like and unlike themselves” (211). Texts like the *Harry Potter* series which, despite its participation in the conservative genre of fantasy, is open for subversive readings and the dystopian *Hunger Games* do offer challenges to readers and can result in real-life applications.

When looking critically at popular texts directed at younger audiences, it’s easy to see that there have been shifts in the ideology disseminated by children’s and young adult literature and films. In Chapter One, I investigated some of the genre conventions established in the late 1930s through the 1950s by Disney’s highly popular animated films. Even though these films were originally released over fifty years ago, several factors have kept them relevant in America’s cultural imagination. Because many of Disney’s stories re-tell fairy tales, the Disney version is often used when older generations share the traditional stories with the young. Also, Disney’s persistent marketing keeps the characters, products, and films easily available. Because

of the popularity of the films and pervasiveness of the ideologies in the broader American culture, changes in cultural identity have been slow in coming. In fact, the exclusion of children from most Pixar films may show an increase of conservatism in children's animated films. One question I think we need to ask is, "What are the consequences for children of not seeing themselves represented in texts?" One of the benefits of literature is that it allows us to imagine other lives besides our own, but when many children's texts focus on adult characters and adult concerns such as securing a good job, and when they reinforce mainstream ideology, we do a disservice to young readers and potentially limit subject positions. For example, for years, Disney films offered one main life decision for female characters: whom to marry. If texts directed at young people could depict a broader spectrum of ideas about gender, race, and age, children may have an easier time growing up. The cumulative lack of acknowledgement of the child or teenager behind the text seems socially irresponsible.

But there is hope. For example, when contrasting the gender roles in *Snow White* and Pixar's *Brave*, we can see huge shifts in how gender roles are constructed by the texts. *Snow White* seems instinctively to nurture the dwarves by cleaning for them, cooking their meals, and establishing a standard of cleanliness. Even though they grumble, the dwarves flourish under her care. Assuming traditionally masculine roles, they leave the house every morning, heading off to a day of hard physical labor. Jump forward sixty-five years to another widely popular film. Pixar released its most recent film *Brave* on June 22, 2012 (just in time to be included in my dissertation.) *Brave* hints at changes in some aspects of the dominant ideology while further reinforcing certain conventions. *Brave* is Pixar's first fairy tale. It's located in a distant past of 10<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. Like many fantasy films, *Brave* is set in a space inaccessible to viewers, so much like Dreamworks' *How to Train a Dragon*, some of the methods used to achieve a

resolution of the film (such as obtaining a magic potion from a witch and following a line of will-o-wisps) are not available for viewers. Also, like other fantasy films, the traditional setting of medieval Western Europe is an exclusively white space.

In *Brave*, Pixar seems to merge its technological inventiveness with Disney's fairy tale princess story; however, *Brave* reinforces Pixar's theme of individual choice over determined destiny. Merida, the red-headed princess, is destined to marry a suitor from one of the three tribes, but Merida is no traditional princess. Instead of delighting in the finer arts of public speaking, embroidery, and cooking, Merida loves riding and archery. The suitors vie for her hand in an archery contest, but Merida fights for her own hand and outshoots them all. She wins her own hand. Her mother is scandalized because Merida broke tradition, and war among the tribes seems inevitable.

Her mother insists that Merida marry, and Merida runs away. Following a trail of will-o-wisps into the forest, Merida finds a witches' hut. She secures a spell that will alter her mother and change her own destiny. Little does she know that by eating a piece of the enchanted tart, her mother (and later her three younger brothers) will be turned into bears. After her mother is changed into a bear, Merida and her mother reverse roles. Suddenly Merida has to look out for and protect her mother. She has to teach her mother how to hunt fish. Also, she serves as a civilizing influence for her mother when her mother gets absorbed too deeply into her bear nature. Finally, Merida is able to turn her mother back into a human by mending a tapestry she tore earlier when she was mad at her mother. By mending the tapestry and openly expressing her love for her mother, she is able to restore her mother. Her mother is changed by the experience. She seems focused on her relationships with her children and her husband, and she places less emphasis on decorum and propriety.



While *Snow White* seems to insist that fulfilling one's destiny is the most important thing in life, *Brave* asserts that if a person doesn't like her destiny, that she can "look within" to determine her own path. Snow White is still a princess even when she is in the woods, and the remote location and a poisoned apple cannot prevent her prince from finding her. Merida, in contrast, has three princes to choose from but finds them all lacking. She insists upon being her own person and waiting to marry. While Merida's refusal to marry and her insistence on following her own heart may signal a shift in how our cultural envisions subject positions for women, the film still lacks a strong child protagonist. Merida's struggle to avoid an arranged marriage is also not a dilemma facing American children. So while Merida isn't the same passive princess found in early Disney films, she may not be the redemptive figure needed to continue to deconstruct cultural ideologies, especially ideas about femininity.

Though aimed at a slightly older audience, *Hunger Games* offers more subject positions for both males and females than the animated films discussed in my dissertation. Although Katniss is shown as a nurturing presence, she uses a bow rather than a broom to care for her family. She is confident and comfortable in her body, and she doesn't need to be rescued by a prince. In addition, Peeta is a baker and artist. Though physically strong, he has to rely on Katniss for support. He's rescued by her during the first Hunger Game, and later she is able to help him regain his sanity after being tortured by the Capital. Though not the stereotypical masculine figure, he ends up with Katniss at the conclusion of the series. Both *Brave* and *The Hunger Games* illustrate that shifts are occurring in mainstream ideology.

The texts examined throughout my dissertation reveal fascinating information about how the American cultural imagination perceives children and the ideology disseminated in the texts. Children's and young adult literature as well as children's and young adult film should be the

subject of serious study. In order to detect the ideologies encoded in the texts, young readers and viewers should be encouraged to ask questions of the texts. One way to help young people become more perceptive readers and viewers is to expose them to literary theory. By becoming aware of materialism, racism, and ageism, for example, young people may be better equipped to think critically about these texts and the world surrounding them, the world in which the texts are produced.

Another change that would benefit the field of children's and young adult literature and film would be to include texts written and produced by children. By helping children write, illustrate, and distribute their own stories, the construction of childhood will become more diverse. Children's and young adult literature is the only body of texts that is produced almost entirely by people who are not members of the population. I think if this were to change, we would see shifts in childhood in America. However, children need support. Right now most avenues of text production are inaccessible for them. While this situation will not change overnight, small steps are being made to help young people start to see themselves as authors. Grassroots literacy programs like Razorback Writers work closely with young people and foster a love of both reading and writing. These programs help change what young people perceive as possible.

Zornado states: "The adults' physical and emotional domination of the child characterize the childhood experience of Western culture" (*xiv*). However, this doesn't always have to be the case. As an educator and parent I try to treat my students and children with respect and help them assume a more active role in the crafting of their world view. Empowering children to consume texts critically and construct their own texts are two of the best ways to combat ageism. If children were able to share stories about their struggles and introduce new possibilities for young

reader and viewers, they may be able to change the face of childhood in America. As children and young adults gain confidence in their creativity and obtain more opportunities to distribute their work, I predict that we will see highly entertaining, creative, and diverse texts being produced by young authors.

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