

Reading YA with “Dark Brown Skin”:

Race, Community, and Rue’s Uprising

She has dark brown skin and eyes, but other than that, she’s very like Prim in size and demeanor.

—Collins, 2008

There aren’t many sentences in contemporary young adult literature (YAL) more understated and without *action* than Katniss Everdeen’s description of Rue, a fellow entrant in the 74th Annual Hunger Games. However, this single sentence and its clear signal of a young girl with “dark brown skin” illustrate the growing ecology of YAL and racial politics in the 21st century. With fans of the book both upholding the revolutionary potential of Rue and deriding the choice of a Black actress to play her in the film version, it is necessary to recognize that YAL and discussions of the genre encompass far more than simply the words on the page, particularly given their extension to digital forms and other media.

The extensions we see in YAL reflect pervasive cultural shifts that have been happening to myriad forms of media over the last few decades. “Participatory culture” allows people to interact much more as producers rather than simply consumers of media. As noted by Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel (2009), “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (p. 8). From fan art posted and shared on teen Tumblr pages to discussions of popular books on YouTube and social networks and even to communication with authors on Twitter, participatory culture is a signifi-

cant factor impacting the world of YAL today. However, typical analyses of participatory culture are done without scrutiny of how these cultural shifts intersect with racial identity. In light of this absence, we want to highlight how digital tools mediate how discussions of race and civic agency are emerging around YAL.

In this article, we argue that transmedia and online fandom create rich ecologies (Brown, 2000) and sites of connected learning tied to YAL. Youth engage increasingly with YA titles through open, complex, adaptive systems (Brown, 2000) by which they make sense of their selves in relation to their environments in spaces that are more robust than what many school contexts offer. By allowing ideas and learning to emerge within the context of such systems, engagement with YAL shifts away from traditional learning to include production of complex multimodal products, fan-driven activism, and communities of peers that give meaningful feedback. The role of race and gendered identity is particularly important to consider in how characters are framed by authors, assumed by fans, and depicted in transmedia and online fandom; the interwoven ecology of production, interpretation, and remediation represents a lived part of youth fandom today. While new media is often assumed to be a liberating tool for diversifying representations of race and gender in YAL, it is also a space that can reify presuppositions about racial identity *even* when such assumptions are textually incorrect. In the realm

of online fandom, sometimes “dark brown skin” is still assumed to be White. Recognizing this, we look at how YAL acts as a portal for critical civic learning about race in today’s digital spaces. In looking at the changes in how youth engage and interact with YAL and with each other via interest in YAL, it is important to recognize that civic lessons about race and identity are *already* happening. As educators and researchers, these are not simply *opportunities* for learning; this is a critical shift with which YAL scholars and educators must grapple.

Transmedia, Fandom, and the Learning Ecologies of Today’s Young Adult Literature

Participatory culture moves beyond the printed page to include actionable experiences vis-à-vis transmedia. A leading scholar of the emerging genre, Jenkins (2007) describes transmedia as “a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.” Transmedia allow narratives to be ever-present in ways that mirror the constant feeds and buzzes that often update youth throughout the day. A classic transmedia text like the Matrix series (see Jenkins, 2006), for example, began as a blockbuster film but grew to include videogames, cartoons, comics, websites, and additional film installments. These were not retellings of the story of Neo but, instead, continuations and evolutions of the original. The 2003 video game *Enter the Matrix*, for example, centers much of the story on Niobe, a woman of color who, in the film franchise, takes an ancillary role to traditional White, male Hollywood stars. Though YAL is slowly embracing similar opportunities, students, as both consumers and producers within a YAL ecology of learning, must look at how the worlds of popular fiction encapsulate opportunities for racialized lessons of civic life, particularly the inclusion and exclusion of racialized voices and experiences. Whose voices *could* emerge in a transmedia world that zooms in on the other districts of Panem (*The Hunger Games*), for example? As educators, we must consider how transmedia allow new narrative points of view to emerge.

YAL-related examples of transmedia can be seen in the extended stories that provide readers new insights *between* the publication dates of titles in franchised series. The Lost Files, for example, provides additional exploration into the mysteries of the I Am Number Four franchise. With the tenth volume of The Lost Files due out in December 2014, these “extras” outnumber the original series volumes. Further, the series itself is one that invites online exploration. Purporting to have been written by Pittacus Lore—an alien—the book’s plethora of URLs and QR codes embedded on the covers and in backmatter encourage readers to extend their narrative engagement well beyond the pages of the books.

Similar to the extending possibilities of transmedia, we also would like to highlight the participatory nature of YAL with the proliferation of fan fiction. As of December 2014, there were more than 41 thousand separate fan fiction stories related to *The Hunger Games* posted on fanfiction.net (just one of numerous online fan fiction sites). While this number is a fraction of those of book juggernauts like Harry Potter and the Twilight series (more than 692,000 and 216,000 entries respectively), the number speaks to the many fans who are choosing to engage with a contemporary text beyond simply reading about, reviewing, or talking with friends about a book. In their recent edited collection, Hellekson and Busse (2014) outline six ways that fan fiction can be interpreted:

1. Fan fiction as interpretation of source text.
2. Fan fiction as a communal gesture.
3. Fan fiction as a sociopolitical argument.
4. Fan fiction as individual engagement and identificatory practice.
5. Fan fiction as one element of audience response.
6. Fan fiction as a pedagogical tool. (pages 8–9)

Looking at this list, we can see the powerful ways in which race and civic identity can be interwoven as important factors of fan fiction. *Whose* perspective is highlighted when the narrative is shifted in fan fiction? *Who owns* fan fiction, too, is an important question for readers to grapple with in today’s digital, capitalist landscape (see Grossman, 2011). In considering these questions, the participatory acts of producing, interpreting, and sharing fan fiction are civic acts: As an author, do you subvert the gendered and racialized assumptions about characters? If Harry Potter is Black

or if the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* is actually occurring in present day urban Los Angeles, what do these newly authored texts say of equity for their readers?

We emphasize fan fiction and transmedia here not as disparate elements of participatory culture but as interconnected pieces addressing race in the YAL ecology. As Black (2005) notes, “It is not uncommon for authors to insert themselves into their fictions as characters that possess a mixture of idealized and authentic personality traits” (p. 123). Even with books that are marketed as containing predominantly White casts of characters, fan fiction functions as a liberatory tool for youth to insert themselves within a text, to render the mainstream text disrupted with one’s own civic act. With the success of Printz-nominated author Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013), the questions of ownership and legitimacy of fan fiction are being read and presented to mainstream YAL readers—pushing the genre beyond the already burgeoning legion of fan fiction producers.

Looking at the various ways that just two aspects of participatory culture—transmedia and fan fiction—are being taken up within YAL, the civic possibilities of YA texts for today’s “networked youth” (boyd, 2014) are significant. Likewise, as fan fiction communities signal how youth are already producing and learning *with* (not just from) YAL, the role for educators in these spaces must be considered. In particular, if these are the sites of authentic, voluntary learning for youth, how do we help guide students toward challenging questions of representation and participation? How is race enacted in transmedia examples? Fan fiction—both the reading and writing of it—provides a space that can liberate narratives from otherwise White perspectives.

Further, from a pedagogical standpoint, we can see these forms of participatory culture representing what researchers are recently labeling as “connected learning” (Ito et al., 2013). Looking at the intersection of academic, peer supported, and passion-focused engagement, connected learning is socially embedded, interest-driven, and oriented toward educational, economic, or political opportunity. Connected learning is realized when a young person pursues a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults and is, in turn, able to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career possibilities,

or civic engagement (Ito et al., 2013). The environment in which youth are voluntarily learning—civically, socially, and academically—is, then, not a formal schooling environment. YAL speaks to youth interests and is the space in which learning is shaped and mediated. Recognizing this fact, it is useful to consider the proactive ways educators can help cultivate and shape the learning ecologies that emerge around youth interests today.

Expanding his definition of a “complex adaptive system,” Brown (2000) explains that one of the powerful factors that makes “an ecology so powerful and adaptable to new contexts is its diversity” (p. 19). Thinking of the large audiences that participate in fan fiction and connected learning around YAL, we can see popular books functioning as hubs for necessary discussions around racial politics. It is the YAL ecology around *The Hunger Games*, for instance, that allows readers to challenge the dominant narrative of Katniss as the revolutionary hero and bestow instead the title on Rue. As online fans have explained (Prismatic Bell, 2013), it is the death of Rue that instigates nationwide revolution in *The Hunger Games*, not the actions of Katniss. We’ll further explore this case in the next section, but we point to it here as an example of how a learning ecology can function as a space for readers to challenge and muster support for counter-narrative discussions of race within YAL.

Similar to the potential of Rue, Rachel Rostad’s viral spoken word poem, “To JK Rowling from Cho Chang” (2013), weaves nuanced insight from close readings of the Harry Potter series to question marginalization of the Chinese student noted in the poem’s title. The poem traces the lineage of Cho, the Chinese woman’s donning of a Korean name, and the perpetuation of stereotypes within a beloved series. And while Brown’s (2000) theoretical framing does not discuss racial diversity, per se, within a learning ecology,

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it provides a helpful lens to consider; as educators, how do we engage and utilize the assets of participatory culture to bring in the diverse voices within our classrooms? How do we cultivate ecologies that embrace difference and challenge dominant narratives in YAL? As the comments section on the YouTube page for Rostad's poem highlights, it is difficult work. The top comment on the page is: "You simply can't do ANYTHING without some girl bitching about it." Two comments lower, we read:

Jesus this comes off as a bunch of whining. I cant tell if this is meant to be taken seriously or not. Is she seriously complaining about there not being enough diversity in a world that at one point existed in a single persons head? Its fiction bitch, and its pretty damn ungrateful considering they gave you a damn position in the movies. [sic]

These are the learning spaces with which our students frequently interact. Yes, Cho, like Rue, came from the fiction of a single author. However, as a foundation for a learning ecology, we must encourage entry into the texts and into fan communities as sites for civic engagement and racial exploration.

Online "Communities" and The Hunger Games

Looking at the opportunities for enthusiasts of YAL noted in the previous section, we can imagine deep communities thriving in equally vibrant learning ecologies. The learning in this new and digital context is rich, peer supported, and *fun*. However, as researchers who are passionate about YAL as sites for critical engagement around topics like race, class, and gender, we are also careful to consider the ways these digital spaces may exclude and push against the agencies of many readers. As evidenced by the comments sections of pages like YouTube, as highlighted above, online spaces can be incendiary, offensive, and exclusionary. With this in mind, we wonder what counts as a "community" around YAL today? Who is included and excluded in public spaces like Tumblr pages, Twitter, or Facebook? With YAL as a fulcrum for rich, contextualized, connected learning ecologies, we want to illustrate how a singular text—in this case, *The Hunger Games*—plays a role in constructing civic identity for YAL readers.

Harkening back to the opening passage of this manuscript, the description of Rue is innocuous

enough, isn't it? She is a dark-skinned girl who tragically (and statistically likely as a participant in the 74th annual Hunger Games) dies near the midpoint of Collins's novel. And while we endorse an interpretation of Rue as a girl who is strong and young and Black and functions as the fulcrum of revolution in *The Hunger Games*, we are also very aware of how the public reacted to the casting of Rue by Black actress Amandla Stenberg. The article headline from the online site, Jezebel, states the case clearly: "Racist *Hunger Games* Fans Are Very Disappointed" (Stewart, 2012). *Hunger Games* fans used public spaces like Twitter and Facebook to voice strong reactions against the inclusion and representation of non-White characters in both the literature series and the film. The article shares images of tweets that stated, "Kk call me racist but when I found out rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself [sic]" and "cinna and rue werent supposed to be black . . . why did the producer make all the good characters black smh [sic]." One tweet complaining about the race of Rue was followed by the hashtag #sticktothebookdude, apparently questioning the validity of casting a Black actress in the role of a girl with "dark brown skin."

The social media frenzy and outrage over Rue imagined as a young Black girl illustrates the racial limitations of many *Hunger Games* readers. It also speaks to the need for more diverse representations in YAL; there is a need for more stories, both fictional and nonfictional, that represent the experiences and histories of diverse peoples. Without these stories, YAL, and by extension film, perpetuate a fan "community" exclusively for its assumed White-dominant readership.

In a recent book chapter (Garcia & Haddix, 2014), we looked at how online fandom highlighted the revolutionary potential of Rue in *The Hunger Games*. Recall, briefly, that in the novel (and film adaptation), Katniss's life is spared by Thresh; he does not kill her because she tried to protect and actively mourned the death of Rue. In one viral meme around the incident, several fans discussed how this pivotal moment in the book reframes power and race in Collins's trilogy: "The revolution really doesn't start with Katniss. It starts with Rue," writes one individual in a post shared more than 300,000 times by Tumblr users alone (Prismatic Bell, 2013). For those who embraced the powerful lessons of Rue as an empowered, Black,

female revolutionary, *The Hunger Games* is a book all too misunderstood in having Katniss paraded as the leader of a movement she inherits from her fallen comrade. Clearly, the civic lessons of YAL can be shared, reframed, and *taught* by and to fans. And while we will later contrast the powerful civic agency exuded by youth of color with racist online responses to the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, we believe that the digital spaces of YAL are expansive ecologies for racial and civic learning.

In her blogpost, “‘Why Is Rue a Little Black Girl?’ The Problem of Innocence in the Dark Fantastic,” YAL scholar Ebony Thomas (2014) writes,

I am just at the beginning of this side of my work, but after more than 15 years of teaching, writing, and interacting online and in various fandoms, I have found a few things to be true. One of them is the dire consequences that a person of color—or even *a character of color*—faces when he or she steps outside of his or her assigned place, or flips the script in any way.

In this case, even when Collins clearly describes the racial features of her characters, the characters’ non-Whiteness poses a threat to the overall credibility of the text and, by extension, the transmediation of the text to film. As Thomas goes on to say, “When Collins’ Panem was transmediated from page to screen, young Amandla Stenberg and her costars were targets of this threat. The idea of Rue as the slain mockingjay—the symbol of purity and innocence—was likely strange, even alien, to some young readers conditioned by the scripts of our society.”

Thomas ends her post by arguing that if we do not want YAL readers to automatically assume that Rue is White despite Collins’s direct statement otherwise, we must have conversations about the online tweets and fandom that suggest racism is still alive and well. There are ecologies where racist ideologies are circulating and being reproduced without mediation. If we are to move toward a society that is socially just and inclusive of racial diversity, classrooms must become spaces for the uncomfortable yet necessary conversations about why Rue is expected to be White and why it is considered incredible for her to be otherwise.

In looking at these considerations for participating and entering into a community, we wonder how discussions of race in YAL ecologies invite and exclude participants. The National Council of Teachers of

English’s 2014 “Statement on Anti-Racism to Support Teaching and Learning” recommends that all English language arts educators “actively identify and challenge individual or systemic acts of racism, bias, and prejudice in educational institutions and within our profession, exposing such acts through external communication and publications.” In her teacher preparation courses, Marcelle urges her students to unpack their assumptions and beliefs prior to entering school communities for observation, student teaching, and careers as educators, posing such questions as:

- How do you understand the position and role of people from this community?
- What do you bring to this community?
- What do you take from this community?
- How do we develop communities that honor the “funds of knowledge” of the community members?
- How do you critically and purposefully engage in questioning who you are by addressing any assumptions you might have of people and communities that are different from you and from what you know?

With this in mind, we are preparing and supporting educators to create classroom spaces where teachers and students actively study, question, critique, and work against dominant oppressive structures (NCTE, 2014). This work, though, takes a new turn when we consider the ways racism persists within online fan communities. The assumed anonymity of such spaces permits its members to voice and enact racist ideologies in ways that one might hesitate to do in physical spaces. Questions like the ones above can be adapted to encourage YAL readers to think critically about their role and participation in online fan communities and consider how they maintain or work against racism in such spaces. Specifically, we must reveal and address the assumptions we have about members of these spaces and our relationship to them. For exam-

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ple, how might *Hunger Games* fans' public reactions to the casting of Rue as a young Black girl on online spaces like Twitter have been different if these fans acknowledged the diverse racial makeup of these community spaces? Would fans still freely voice racist and

exclusionary ideas if they believed and imagined other YAL readers to be of a race different from their own? Expanded notions of community to include online spaces necessitate that educators create classroom opportunities where students develop voice and agency to participate in new public discourses in anti-racist ways.

Further, we must consider the imperative role that teachers play in the critical anti-racist work that diverse YAL ecologies demand. Educators must

prod youth to consider challenging the questions we frame above. Even when the answers are difficult ones for us to acknowledge, the spaces for empowerment are felt when we can identify the problematic absences in our communities, our texts, our ecologies. Further, in helping youth look at how texts (and the ecologies they support) are or are not founded on diverse principles, teachers play a vital role in helping students break the stereotypes of who can be seen as a sophisticated reader.

The Racial Politics of Fandom: Portals for Civic Learning

In looking at the previous section's considerations for participating and entering into a community, we wonder how discussions of race in YAL ecologies invite and exclude participants and how assumptions of Whiteness are mapped onto YAL readership. This raises two questions: First, does the discussion of race in YAL push against the socialized norms of various online communities? Second, does *being* a YAL fan of color challenge traditional norms of participation in these spaces? We are cautiously optimistic that peda-

gogical instruction that interprets YAL as *more than text* can be done so deliberately in an effort to shore up discussions of race and highlight student voice as a civic action. We can imagine the possibilities that emerge from bridging classroom and online communities in efforts to unpack issues of race and civic life.

The proliferation of online communities that dialogue about literature, engage with authors, and publish fan fiction means that fan communities are "geeking out" (Ito, 2009) more than ever before. In this sense, the power of participatory media like fan websites, social networks, and Twitter help connect enthusiastic readers. Further, these opportunities highlight the role YAL can play in supporting the civic identity of readers. In this light, being a fan of the work of, say, John Green means not simply reading his books. It is, instead, a portal into conversing with Green on Twitter and Tumblr, watching his various YouTube videos, and sharing in a smattering of online dialogue and new fiction inspired by the worlds of adolescence in his books. Green's efforts to "fight world suck" (vlogbrothers, 2009) by becoming "Nerd-fighters" allow his readers to take on real-world issues as a result of initial literature-focused fandom.

Similarly, the Harry Potter Alliance and Odds in Our Favor are two online networks that leverage fandom for social good. Under the guise of joining the fictitious group of revolutionaries, Dumbledore's Army, the Harry Potter Alliance has taken on numerous challenges of eliminating "real-life" horcruxes, including challenging perceptions of body image and illiteracy. Likewise, using a familiar catchphrase from *The Hunger Games*, Odds in Our Favor (2014) is a similar project (created by the Harry Potter Alliance) that addresses and confronts systemic inequality across the globe. By planning, interacting, and publicizing their efforts, YA fans can transfer the heroic actions of their favorite characters in *The Hunger Games* into real-life civic deeds. The classroom for civic learning, then, is not the 12th-grade class students may daydream throughout, but a meaningful, participatory space found both online and off.

While the potential for civic learning through YAL is exciting, we also must wonder who participates in these spaces? Who is welcomed? Visiting Oddsinourfavor.org in July 2014, we are greeted with a grid of participants' faces—"selfies" that reflect a form of popular literacy performance today. Though there is a

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balance of gender representation, the majority of these fans are White, perhaps alluding to the “participation gap” (Jenkins et al., 2009) frequently found in online media. Just as we must problematize the representation of race *within* YAL, we must also question the politics of representation when looking at YAL as platforms for participation. Though not explicit in denying membership, a quick visual cue of membership at Odds in Our Favor—like the covers of the vast majority of contemporary YA novels—implies that this is a community for primarily White youth. It also supports and furthers a deficit framing of non-White youth as being non-readers and disengaged from this participatory literacy culture.

In essence, the damaging implication is that if non-Whites do not participate, it is because they do not want to, they simply can’t, or they aren’t able. This, too, acts as a lesson in how transmedia furthers the challenges of representation within and around YAL. If a large enough YAL readership (consciously or unconsciously) negates the race of a central character like Rue—to the extent that it leads to racist tweets—we can see the pervasive role that White privilege plays even in the civic fandom that emerges around these texts. It is not enough for a space like Odds in Our Favor to exist if the odds are never in the favor of participants who are not White. Academic settings can bring these issues to the fore. Beyond lessons that focus on literacy development and literary analysis, it is incumbent upon teachers to prompt students to acknowledge, question, and understand the pervasive nature of White privilege and its impact on the interpretations of YAL texts like *The Hunger Games*.

Conclusion

The world of YAL is clearly in a state of flux: the texts themselves are larger than merely the encapsulation of plot as derived from authors. Instead, these books are the bedrock of ecologies of engaged fandom in which participants communicate with one another; *The Hunger Games*, for example, is the foundation for broader dialogue and production for its fans. As such, these texts necessitate the consideration of the communities they naturally support. While interest in a specific book, author, or genre may lead to participation within the text-created communities, we also argue that such new spaces can be inherently

exclusionary. In particular, the role of racial politics can cloud how books are interpreted (in the case of the powerful counter-narrative of Rue as the true hero of Collins’s novel), how others’ interpretations are critiqued (in the case of Rostad’s “To JK Rowling from Cho Chang”), and who gets to participate. That’s a lot of change happening to a genre that educators may feel they already grasp. As a field of educators, we must acknowledge that it is no longer enough to challenge and lecture about racial politics in young adult literature in academic settings. As Brown (2000) explains, we are in the midst of “a shift [from] using technology to support the individual to using technology to support relationships between individuals. With that shift, we will discover new tools and social protocols for helping us help each other, which is the very essence of social learning” (p. 20). We must explore, interact, and produce within the ecologies built upon popular YA texts.

Further, with YAL functioning within rich learning ecologies, the opportunities for critical dialogue to emerge are ever-present. The capacity of participants on social networks and of educators to build critical engagement and to challenge troubling perspectives related to race and representation in YAL is more important than ever before. We believe in supporting youth in developing critical consciousness through the engagement of fan communities. Questioning who is present in these communities and in the textual platforms on which they are situated is a necessary and constantly needed practice.

As we mentioned earlier, this critical engagement with complex nuances of texts, potentially exclusionary spaces, and online racist responses is already how YA texts are being encountered. As educators, the question of where and when to engage in critical dialogue around YAL is moot. However, we must also engage in and explore these online spaces alongside our

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students. While we can bridge this work into classroom discourse, we must also traverse the “messy” space of online fandom to explore how various civic and racial identities are celebrated and challenged (and often both).

The racist responses to the casting of Ms. Stenberg as Rue in *The Hunger Games* film adaptation are neither surprising nor out of the ordinary. Only months later, similar backlash emerged when African American actor Michael Jordan was announced for the role of the Human Torch in the latest *Fantastic Four* adaptation. Likewise, when Quvenzhané Wallis was cast in the most recent adaptation of the musical *Annie*, online racist response reached its typical fervor. Producing counter-narratives and challenging racial assumptions on YAL platforms such as The Hunger Games franchise is a civic responsibility. It is about more than surface-level reading and analysis; it is about helping our youth see their own “dark brown skin and eyes” reflected in the books and communities they inhabit.

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