

Legend, Exceptionalism, and Genocidal Logic:

A Framework for Reading Neoliberalism in YA Dystopias

Authors of young adult speculative fiction have the opportunity to create whole new worlds and, indeed, brave new worlds. But for the past decade, it has been books about authoritative and repressive regimes, rather than beautiful worlds, that have held great currency with young readers. We have consequently begun to ask our students why they are drawn to dark and cynical speculative fictions, especially dystopias. Many of them tell us that they appreciate how young adult dystopias confirm their cynicism and their lack of faith in their own futures, given the state of the economy since the Great Recession began in 2008, the persistent threat of terrorism, and the challenges that climate change and other environmental issues pose to human well-being. The perceived corruption inherent in the presidential election of 2016 has further deepened their cynicism. For many of our students, the pessimistic tone of young adult dystopian fiction is an accurate reflection of the lack of potential they perceive in their own lives. At the same time, and we argue somewhat paradoxically, many of our students also report being drawn to the genre because it reconfirms their faith in the individual's ability to rise above (and overthrow) oppressive social systems.

Dystopian fiction's contributions to the project of social criticism are well documented. In a standard work of literary criticism, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*, Booker (1994) argues that "[t]he modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems" (p. 20). Echoing this point, literary critics Hintz and Ostry (2003) describe the genre as inviting

"people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing them or predisposing them to political action" (p. 7). If, however, as Trites (2000) argues, YA novels are one of the social mechanisms that indoctrinate teenagers into working within capitalistic institutions, then teachers and students themselves would do well to ask what political and economic ideologies young adult dystopian fiction invites adolescents to adopt.

Against this backdrop and in this age of globalization when young adult dystopias (and young adult novels, more generally) generate enormous profits for publishers, movie studios, and international corporations, we wonder, Are students being fully prepared to evaluate the neoliberal ideologies underpinning much of the dystopic fiction that they read? We define neoliberalism as an economic philosophy that, among other things, privileges free-market capitalism as the economic engine of the world and emphasizes individual entrepreneurship over the social welfare of the larger collective. We contrast it with more progressive ideologies that argue that social justice is best served when collective forces provide social support, especially for the disadvantaged, in terms of people's long-term needs through such mechanisms as healthcare, social security, and public education. If neoliberalism privileges the individual as entrepreneur, progressivism privileges how the entire population can be best served through government interventions. Our goal in this essay is to help both teachers and students raise their awareness about the frequency—and the complacency—with which young adult dystopias manipulate readers into accepting a singular econopolitical worldview.

In this article, we present a critical framework that we suggest teachers and students can use to identify neoliberalism in young adult dystopian fiction.

Although our focus is on the dystopic, we argue that this model can also be used to analyze the economic politics of young adult fiction in other genres, including realism. Given the genre's cultural prevalence, however, and the reality of space constraints, we will confine our discussion to dystopic fiction. In the sections that follow, we define neoliberalism at greater length and examine what our review of the literature and analyses of many young adult dystopias have led us to identify as four of

its attendant forces. In response, we highlight a series of questions that readers can ask of young adult fiction in the service of determining whether it reflects, or resists, neoliberal ideals. We then apply these ques-

tions to a recent and commercially successful work of young adult dystopian fiction, *Legend* (Lu, 2013), to illustrate how reading for neoliberalism makes available to teenagers complex ideological readings that subsequently enable them to understand how young adult novels can both reinforce and subvert neoliberalist ideologies. To conclude, we discuss the implications of reading neoliberalism in young adult fiction for teachers and students.

Critical Framework for Reading Neoliberalism in Young Adult Fiction

Our review of scholarship on neoliberalism, coupled with our close reading of many young adult dystopias, have led us to identify what we suggest are four concomitants of a neoliberalist worldview (see Figure 1 below). We begin our discussion with the work of noted anthropologist David Harvey, who provides a standard definition of neoliberalism and highlights what we regard as one of its attendant forces. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is based on an assumption that “individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” thrive when they are unfettered by social institutions, so neoliberalism purports to empower the individual by freeing every citizen-as-entrepreneur from the shackles of institutionalized regulations (p. 2). In doing so, it privileges the economic power of the individual over the economic power of collective forces and positions institutions traditionally entrusted with protecting the rights and interests of people—for example, government or public education—as a threat to individual freedoms.

As evidenced by the upper-left portion of the Venn diagram in Figure 1, our critical framework for reading neoliberalism in young adult literature is in part concerned with attending closely to representations of social institutions in individual novels for the purpose of examining how they are shown to impact people's lives. As an example, in *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010), one could argue that author Suzanne Collins depicts government (as represented by either the Capitol or District Thirteen) as an institution that, if not oppressive, at the very least limits individual freedoms. At the same time, the narrator, Katniss Everdeen, describes the education system in Panem as complicit in this oppression insofar as it prepares young people to participate in an unjust economic system that exploits their labor in order to

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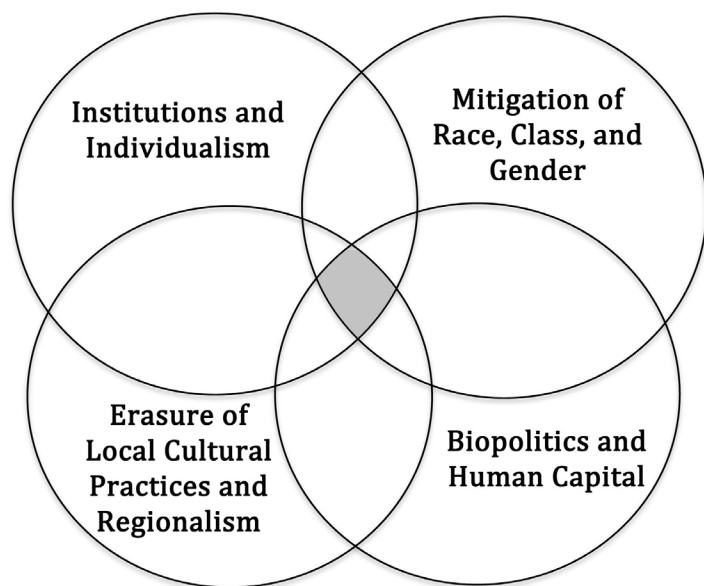


Figure 1. Attendant forces of neoliberalism

produce goods and resources for consumption by a colonizing power. A first question that we therefore suggest teachers and students can ask of individual works of young adult fiction is: *What institutions are depicted in a work of young adult fiction, and how do the protagonists experience them?*

Pomerantz and Raby (2015), scholars in Girlhood Studies, link neoliberalism to young adult literature when they demonstrate how, in the realm of popular culture, it has resulted in the emergence of a specific type of individual: the “smart supergirl” (p. 291) or “post-nerd smart girl” (p. 287). Reflecting a second aspect of the critical framework shown in Figure 1, Pomerantz and Raby argue that in emphasizing individual agency, neoliberalism ignores the role that social systems play in advantaging some people and marginalizing others, with the result that:

modern-day girlhood is now defined by individualism, consumerism, hypersexuality, and the belief that girls can do, be, and have anything they want without fear of structural inequalities such as sexism, racism, or homophobia interfering with their individual efforts to achieve success. As a consequence, *such structural inequities have now come to be seen as individual rather than social problems.* (p. 288, emphasis added)

In Pomerantz and Raby’s analysis, characters such as Gabriella Montez from *High School Musical* (Barsocchini, 2006) are super smart, beautiful, strong girls who succeed within their social context because of their own individual talents—and without ever giving credit to those social structures that have helped make it possible for them to succeed, such as their schools or their middle-class status (pp. 296–297). This focus on individual talent also serves to mitigate, if not erase, the effects of constructs such as race and social class. A second question that teachers and students can therefore ask of young adult fiction is: *How are social constructs such as race, class, gender, and age dealt with in a work of young adult fiction, and to what extent are they acknowledged as empowering and/or marginalizing the protagonist(s)?*

A third piece of the critical framework that we propose using to read neoliberalism in young adult literature is based on an assumption that in an age of globalization that favors homogenization over cultural distinctiveness, it is also important to ask how neoliberalism impacts the local. According to Australian critics of children’s literature Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum (2008), globalization “compress[es]

space and time” in ways that make a large corporation-run “single globalised marketplace and village” entrenched rather than promoting individually owned entrepreneurial efforts (p. 40). One need think only of how many locally owned and operated stores have been displaced by Walmart to understand this concept. Through its insistence on building a globalized marketplace, neoliberalism threatens to erase the local. As international corporations (think McDonald’s or Subway) target consumers around the world, locally owned businesses and cultural practices, such as eating regionally specific foods, suffer. For these reasons, Bradford and her colleagues advise that any attempt to critique neoliberalism in texts for children and adolescents begin by acknowledging how globalization homogenizes the world (p. 41). Thus, a third question in the framework that we propose using to critique neoliberalism in young adult fiction is: *To what extent does a work of young adult fiction acknowledge or erase local cultural practices and regionalism?*

Our framework for reading neoliberalism in young adult literature also includes a recognition of how neoliberalism encourages business enterprises to expand economic production by moving into new territories, which in turn creates environmental tensions (Pellizzoni & Ylönen, 2012, p. 4). Strip-mining in West Virginia and fracking in South Dakota, for example, have created long-term environmental effects that impact the people who live in these regions. That said, the ever-encroaching nature of industrialization also has ramifications that are biopolitical, in the sense that Foucault (2008) uses the term. As defined

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by Foucault, *biopolitics* refers to all of the laws and statutes that regulate the human body, animal welfare, the environment, or any biological phenomenon, including such things as food regulations, hospital safety standards, and laws that mandate clean water. In a neoliberal economy, the market (rather than concerns for individual well-being) comes to regulate all biological phenomena—people, animals, the environment—with the outcome that a town like Flint, Michigan, can end up with tainted drinking water as a result of biopolitical decisions made by elected leaders who privilege profit over the collective well-being of local citizens.

Legend exemplifies how neoliberalism and progressivism are poles along a spectrum; the book is not entirely neoliberal, but neither is it as committed to progressivism as it might initially appear.

As this example suggests, the term *biopolitics* implies that a relationship exists between biological forces and government control. As evidenced by Figure 1, our proposed critical framework for reading neoliberalism in young adult literature is thus concerned with examining how biopolitics provide a logic for organizing and regulating society. This phenomenon operates at the heart of popular young adult dystopian series such as *Divergent* (Roth,

2011, 2012, 2013) and *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007). In both instances, the premise on which these books are based involves governments that manipulate the biophysical properties of people's bodies and brains in order to control them. Both of these series critique biopolitical government controls by demonstrating how governments that emphasize exceptionalism have the potential to engage eventually in metaphorical or literal genocide.

Moreover, in a neoliberal economy, "immaterial production" (e.g., the production of information or knowledge) begins to replace material production as the core of the economy, so that people themselves become the raw material (or human capital) on which governments and corporations depend. Breu (2014), a literary critic grounded in Marxist theory, reads Foucault's work as suggesting that neoliberalism prioritizes the production of any individual (includ-

ing immaterial production) as a cog in the economy, such that even the individual's biologically situated body is regulated through economic forces (p. 15). For example, in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the workers in District Twelve provide *material* production to the neoliberal economy in the form of coal, but the workers of District Three provide *immaterial* production in the form of the knowledge production that leads them to create new technologies. A fourth question, then, that teachers and students can ask in the service of investigating the neoliberal in young adult fiction is: *How are biological phenomena used to organize people in a work of young adult fiction, and to what extent do they determine a person's worth to society?*

Collectively, the above insights into the relationships among economic forces, social structures, the impact of globalization on the local, and biopolitics serve as a basis for the analytic questions presented in Figure 2 and provide a framework that we suggest readers can use to evaluate whether a work of young adult fiction is critiquing or condoning neoliberal values. In the sections that follow, we apply this framework to a previously mentioned work of young adult dystopic fiction, *Legend* (Lu, 2013), a novel that we suggest both typifies the plot structures of recent dystopias in which super-special individuals triumph over a repressive regime and also obliquely endorses neoliberal economic politics.

Moreover, we have elected to examine Lu's novel because we read it as demonstrating how a focus on individual exceptionalism can unwittingly result in a genocidal political logic. Our goal, therefore, is to use *Legend* as an example to demonstrate when a typical

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 2. How are social constructs such as race, class, gender, and age dealt with in a work of young adult fiction, and to what extent are they acknowledged as empowering and/or marginalizing the protagonist(s)?
 3. To what extent does a work of young adult fiction acknowledge or erase local cultural practices and regionalism?
 4. How are biological phenomena used to organize people in a work of young adult fiction, and to what extent do they determine a person's worth to society?
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Figure 2. Framework for reading neoliberalism in YA dystopian fiction

young adult dystopia endorses, and when it resists, neoliberal values. In that regard, *Legend* exemplifies how neoliberalism and progressivism are poles along a spectrum; the book is not entirely neoliberal, but neither is it as committed to progressivism as it might initially appear.

Finally, because dystopic fiction has a long tradition of contributing to the project of social criticism (Booker, 1994), we regard novels such as *Legend* as offering an accessible entry point for those interested in exploring the economic politics of young adult literature.

Reading Neoliberalism in Marie Lu's *Legend*

Institutions and Individualism

Legend, the first novel in a dystopian series of the same name, takes place in the distant future and is set in Los Angeles, California, now part of the Republic of America. Due to rising sea levels produced by climate change, the city is periodically inundated by floodwaters; it is the poor, relegated to slums along the shoreline, that experience the consequences most severely. A government edict requires that all children, upon turning 10, take the Trial, a standardized test that is used to determine their opportunities in life. Children who score between 1450 and 1500 attend one of the Republic's four elite universities upon completing high school. Those with a score between 1250 and 1449 are permitted to attend high school and are later assigned to a college. A score between 1000 and 1249 prohibits citizens from attending high school; instead, they are assigned undesirable (and often dangerous) jobs and are condemned to "join the poor" (p. 7). Although the official government narrative is that children who fail the Trial are sent to labor camps, the reader learns that they are in fact put to death in a genocide meant to "cull the population of weak genes" (p. 246).

Narrated in the first person, *Legend* employs two focalizers: Day, a 15-year-old prodigy from an impoverished family who escapes death after ostensibly failing the Trial and who thereafter engages in a campaign of subversion against the Republic, and June, a 15-year-old prodigy from a wealthy family who, upon completing her military training, is charged with bringing Day to justice after he purportedly murders her brother, Metias. June succeeds in doing so only to discover that Metias was in fact murdered by the mili-

tary after he learned that the Republic was exposing people in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods to strands of the plague to assess their effectiveness as bio-weapons for use in the Republic's war against its enemy, the Colonies. At the conclusion of the novel, June helps Day escape from prison, and the two embark on a journey to Las Vegas, where they plan to seek help from the Patriots, an underground resistance group.

The first question in the framework (see Figure 2) that we present for reading neoliberalism and its attendant forces in young adult fiction is: *What institutions are depicted in the text, and how do the protagonists experience them?* In *Legend*, government and school represent two of the institutions that Day and June experience, and they are both portrayed as hostile to individual freedoms. As noted, a government edict requires that all 10-year-olds take a standardized exam, known as the Trial, which decides their fate in life. Although the test is ostensibly used to identify talented individuals, the government instead uses it to reproduce the status quo and preserve its grip on power. Thus, even though Day earns a perfect score on his Trial, the government, having recognized "something dangerous in him. Some defiant spark, the same rebellious spirit he has now" (p. 202), falsifies his test score and fails him. Having been identified as an exceptional individual who is not easily controlled and whose immaterial production is hence not easily harnessed and commodified by the government, Day is subsequently subjected to medical experiments conducted by military doctors and left for dead. The text thus openly critiques authoritarian governments, but it also positions institutions, such

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June also earns a perfect score on her Trial, but

because she comes from an upper-class background, which permits her to live comfortably, the government does not perceive her as a threat to the social order. More important, June, unlike Day, is permitted to attend school, an institution that, as depicted in the novel, exists to produce conformity by immersing students in official government propaganda. Far from learning to think critically, June is instead taught to accept ideologies to which those in positions of power expose her without ever questioning them. She parrots her professors, for example, when she reiterates their argument that “better

genes make for better soldiers make for better chance of victory against the Colonies” (p. 13), and unlike Day, she is ignorant of the fate that awaits children who are sent to the government’s labor camps.

The institution of school is depicted as hostile to the individual in other ways, as well. Although she is assigned to the Republic’s premier university to be groomed for a future as an officer in the military, June’s coursework fails to challenge her. When she formulates her own challenges to test her abilities, she draws the ire of her instructors. Bored with drills meant to prepare her to climb walls while carrying weapons, June leaves campus and instead “scale[s] the side of a nineteen-story building with a XM-621 gun strapped to [her] back” (p. 13). This results in her being sent to the Dean’s office, where she is reprimanded for her actions and assured that her behavior will not be tolerated when she is assigned to a platoon. In contrast, Thomas, a friend of June’s who is considerably less capable yet willing to mindlessly

comply with expectations his superiors impose on him, manages to climb up in the ranks of the military. In *Legend*, institutions such as government and school do not exist to empower people; quite the opposite, they impede people’s ability to capitalize on their utmost potential, thus reflecting the neoliberal view of public institutions as hostile to individuals.

Mitigating the Influence of Class

A second question that we suggest teachers and students can ask in the service of reading neoliberalism in young adult fiction is: *How are social constructs such as race, class, gender, and age dealt with in the text, and to what extent are they acknowledged as empowering and/or marginalizing the protagonist(s)?* We argue that it is possible to read June and Day as embodying the qualities of the neoliberal hero and as exemplifying what Pomerantz and Raby (2015) refer to as the superspecial individual.

As explained, both June and Day are child prodigies—legends—who, as a result of their intellectual and physical exceptionalism, manage to rise above other people in their society and break free from the chains of conformity. June makes a name for herself after earning a perfect score on her Trial, an accomplishment that results in her attending “the country’s top university at age 12, four years ahead of schedule,” and graduating early after she skips her sophomore year and earns perfect grades (pp. 12–13). Likewise, although Day purportedly fails his Trial, the reader learns that he is in fact the only other person besides June to earn a perfect score. Indeed, his talents are so prodigious that the Republic, fearing the threat that a working-class genius poses to its grip on power, attempts to kill him. Despite this, Day manages to escape and eventually goes on to wage a sabotage campaign against the Republic. By himself, he steals large sums of money from Republic banks (p. 167); by himself, he vandalizes the Department of Intra-Defense (p. 168); and by himself, he sets fire to fighter jets intended for the warfront (p. 168). In these ways, Day is the antithesis of his older brother, John, who conforms to the expectations his society establishes for him and who once instructed Day, “*You never fight back. Ever*” (p. 275, emphasis in original). Exceptional individuals, Day and June both refuse to comply with their society’s conformist expectations, and the text positions readers to respect them as a result.

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As the above reading suggests, June and Day represent the exceptional individual that Pomerantz and Raby (2015) argue has arisen in popular culture in response to neoliberalism. As evidenced by their perfect scores on the Trial, they are both “supersmart,” and their individual accomplishments mark them as “superspecial” in their society. Despite this, neither June nor Day fully acknowledges the role that social systems play in supporting them. June, for example, recognizes that Day “doesn’t act like a desperate street kid,” and she wonders whether “he has always lived in [the] poor sectors” (p. 130), yet she is largely unaware of how her own social positioning as a member of the upper class privileges her. Rather than acknowledge how the opportunity to attend an elite high school and university might have advantaged her, June instead insists that her intellectual and physical attributes are innate, a result of “what the Republic considers *good genes*” (p. 13, emphasis in original).

In much the same way, Day’s lower socioeconomic background poses few (if any) obstacles for him in the novel. He and his family may be considered poor, but his unique talents enable him to come into large sums of money whenever necessary, whether through criminal activities or otherwise. Although the military’s access to weapons and technology permits it to oppress people who inhabit the city’s slums (p. 252), these same resources pose few (if any) obstacles for Day, who succeeds in spite of them. In much the same way, the character of Thomas, who grew up in poverty, attributes his rising through the ranks of the military to his own hard work. As he tells Day, “*I’m from a poor sector too. But I followed the rules. I worked my way up. I earned my country’s respect. The rest of you people just sit around and complain and blame the state for your bad luck*” (pp. 218–219, emphasis in original). His assessment neglects to acknowledge, however, that Metias, June’s brother and an officer in the military, “had been the one to recommend Thomas (who had a high Trial score) to be assigned to the prestigious city patrols, despite his humble background” (p. 40). In these ways and others, the social class system in the storyworld that Lu imagines neither advantages nor disadvantages characters. Instead, consistent with a neoliberal worldview, their accomplishments are presented as attributable to their unique talents and perseverance, with the result that June and Day are able to understand themselves as “the same person born into two different worlds” (p. 304).

Significantly, although the text positions the reader to empathize with people who toil under the Republic’s oppressive class system, it never meaningfully interrogates the capitalist system that is responsible for (re)producing social inequity. Instead, there are occasions when the text seemingly invites the reader to envy June for her material comforts. For example, when she attends a military ball with Thomas, June explains, “I ended up choosing a corseted sapphire dress lined with tiny diamonds. One of my shoulders is covered in lace, and the other is hidden behind a long curtain of silk.” Thomas’s “cheeks turn rosy” when he catches sight of her, but June is unable to understand “what the big deal is,” given that she has “worn nicer dresses before” (p. 175). True, June appreciates that her ability to wear such a dress is emblematic of her privilege; it occurs to her, for example, that the “dress could’ve bought a kid in the slum sectors several months of food” (p. 175).

Likewise, when she drinks out of an antique glass “imported from the Republic’s islands of South America,” she reflects, “Someone could’ve bought a plague cure with the money spent on this glass that I use to drink water out of” (p. 251). She subsequently “hurl[s] it against the wall” so that it “shatters into a thousand glittering pieces” (p. 251). She wants to reject her own materialism but does not think about how to transform her anger into a productive action that helps others. While June appreciates the injustice of an economic system that privileges some people and oppresses others, her critique of it is only symbolic, and hence superficial; shattering an expensive glass that can be replaced or feeling guilty about wearing fine clothes yet all the while continuing to participate in an unjust system does little to disrupt the social structures that permit poverty.

In much the same way, Day, whose family experienced poverty, boasts about having used money he came into after robbing a bank to purchase “a nice

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pair of boots” on the black market, along with “an entire outfit, brand-new shirts and shoes and pants” for Tess, a young girl he protects (p. 71). Upon catching sight of June dressed in her military regalia

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(just moments before he is scheduled to be executed, no less), Day is struck by the “[s]hining, luxurious epaulettes draping from each of her shoulders. A thick full-length coat made from some sort of rich velvet. Scarlet waistcoat and elaborate, belted boots” (p. 284). In these ways, the text celebrates the materialistic aspects of capitalism, even while ostensibly critiquing it. Although June and Day have experienced intense grief, having lost both of their parents and a brother each

to a regime bent on preserving a rigid class system, Day is nonetheless able to assert that, “Money is the most important thing in the world, you know. Money can buy you happiness, and I don’t care what anyone else thinks. It’ll buy you relief, status, friends, safety . . . all sorts of things” (p. 136, ellipses in original). At no point does the novel critique or problematize this assertion and the materialism it implies. Instead, it allows it to stand as fact, thereby perpetuating the neoliberal assumption that amassing financial resources matters far more than maintaining personal relationships or demonstrating social responsibility.

Locality, Culture, and Race

A third question that teachers and students can explore in the service of evaluating whether young adult dystopias reflect and/or resist neoliberal values is: *To what extent does the text acknowledge or erase local cultural practices and regionalism?* Although librarians, teachers, and others who work with young adult literature sometimes point to *Legend* as an example of a text that acknowledges diversity and multiculturalism, we read it as, for the most part, erasing the local. As explained, *Legend* is set in a future Los Angeles—part of a country known as the Republic of America,

formed after the fall of the United States. In this sense, Lu acknowledges the specificity of the story’s locale by occasionally referencing places and landmarks that readers in the know will associate with Los Angeles. June, for example, passes a military academy housed in the former Walt Disney Concert Hall (p. 39); Day’s mother is said to hold a position as a janitor at Union Station, an important train station in Los Angeles (p. 50); and references are made in passing to Sacramento (p. 39), Stanford University (p. 7), and other locales in both California and the American West. Other than these few specific references to geography, however, the majority of the novel occurs in a setting that could be any North American megatropolis.

To a lesser extent, there are instances when Lu appears to reference her Asian American heritage. At one point, June and Thomas meet for lunch in a cafe where they dine on “pork edame” (p. 236), a dish that is common in parts of Asia (p. 236). Likewise, June describes the space where her brother’s funeral is held as decorated with “white carpets; round white banquet tables overflowing with white lilacs,” while those in attendance are said to “wear their best whites,” as does June, who is adorned in “an elaborate white gown” (p. 60). Although it is possible to read these traditions as alluding to those Chinese customs that associate the color white with death, Lu offers an alternative explanation that ignores Chinese rituals altogether. Recalling her older brother, June explains:

Metias once told me that it was not always this way, that only after the first floods and volcanic eruptions, after the Republic built a barrier along the warfront to keep the Colonies’ deserters from fleeing illegally into our territory, did people start mourning for the dead by wearing white. “After the first eruptions,” he said, “white volcanic ash rained from the sky for months. The dead and dying were covered in it. So now to wear white is to remember the dead.” (p. 61)

In offering this explanation, Lu effectively erases any reference to specific aspects of Chinese funerary practices. Few other references to Chinese or Chinese American cultural practices occur in the novel.

In much the same way, *Legend* largely erases race or racial identity. Day is said to have “some Asian blood” (p. 180), and June describes him as “a mix of Anglo and Asian” (p. 125), yet his primary defining features are his blonde hair and blue eyes. Likewise, although Day describes June as “a little paler than other girls I see in the sector,” with “large dark eyes that shine with flecks of gold,” her race is otherwise

ambiguous. As Day explains, “I can’t tell *what* she is, which isn’t unusual around here—Native, maybe, or Caucasian. Or something” (p. 112, emphasis in original). Beyond this, with the exception of the heir-apparent to the Republic of America, who is also said to have “some Asian blood” (p. 180), few if any other references are made to the race of characters in the novel. Indeed, in regard to cultural and racial specificity, there is little to prevent *Legend* from reading like it is set in a futuristic Mall of America. In *Legend*, race is elided, and as we will demonstrate in the next section, social stratification is instead accomplished in the novel through a biopolitical system that privileges eugenics.

Biopolitics, Human Capital, and Genocidal Logic

The final question in the framework that we have presented for reading neoliberalism in young adult dystopias invites readers to ask: *How are biological phenomena used to organize people in the text, and to what extent do they determine a person’s worth to society?* In regard to this question, we argue that *Legend* is critical of neoliberalism’s tendency to view humans, animals, and the environment as fodder for consumption by governments and corporations. In the novel, biopolitics, especially in the form of eugenics, offers the government a rationale for using biological phenomena to engineer a socially stratified society.

People in this dystopia are placed into social castes according to the perceived quality of their genes, an assessment that is made via the Republic’s administration of a standardized test known as the Trial. Those who earn the highest scores eventually work for the government; those who earn the lowest score are killed. Following their death, government scientists examine their remains for the purpose of studying their imperfections and improving the genetic quality of society. In this way, a person’s worth is determined according to the person’s perceived usefulness to government and industry, a fact that Day makes clear when he explains, “An inferior child with bad genes is no use to the country” (p. 8).

The government’s use of biological phenomena to organize and control society takes a second form in *Legend*, as the reader learns that the Republic is secretly targeting families in working class and poor neighborhoods with strands of a plague that initially spreads among animals in underground slaughterhouses and that military scientists subsequently culti-

vate and weaponize in government laboratories. The plague is then disseminated either via the city’s water system or through an elaborate network of underground pipes that surface beneath people’s homes in impoverished parts of the city. By using the plague as a bioweapon, the Republic is able “to cull the population of weak genes, the same way the Trials pick out the strongest” (p. 246).

June learns the truth about the Republic’s eugenics program when she reads a series of journal entries that her older brother, Metias, left for her online before he was assassinated by the military. In addition to discovering the truth about the plague, June comes to understand that her parents were murdered after her father, a scientist for the military, discovered the truth about the government’s intentions. For her, the plague comes to serve as a metaphor for the government. She explains:

The plague has gotten its claws around all of us, in one way or another. The plague murdered my parents. The plague infected Day’s brother. It killed Metias for uncovering the truth of it all. It took from me the people I love. And behind the plague is the Republic itself. The country I used to be proud of. The country that experiments on and kills children who fail the Trial. (p. 250)

June is horrified at the government’s casual attitude toward genocide, so she subsequently decides to align herself with Day and the Patriots, a small band of freedom fighters dedicated to overthrowing the Republic’s leadership. Especially in its emphasis on eugenics, *Legend* is a thinly veiled allegory for the horrors of the type of genocidal thinking that led to the Holocaust. The text makes clear that no government has the right to murder its citizens or to use them for biological experimentation. Although *Legend* frequently exhibits, as we have argued, neoliberal tendencies, in this ideology, it strongly asserts an ethos that governments govern best when they protect citizens, rather than harm them.

A deconstructive tension thus lies at the biopolitical center of *Legend*: on one hand, the text wants to assert that genocide is wrong, but on the other, it asserts that some people simply are biologically superior to other people.

While we read *Legend* as criticizing the practice of using biological phenomena to arrange people in hierarchical relationships, and though we regard it as simultaneously condemning a neoliberalist assumption that regards people as human capital to be exploited by those in positions of power, it is worth noting that the novel nevertheless also invites the reader to identify with characters who are themselves biophysically exceptional people. That is, the novel, which is narrated in the first person using June and Day as focalizers, does not position the reader to understand events from the perspective of characters who are less physically and intellectually capable. Instead, it positions the reader to identify with characters who stand out in their society as superspecial people (Pomerantz & Raby, 2015), and in doing so, it reifies, even if unwittingly, the neoliberal assumption that exceptional individuals, rather than institutions or the collective, are best positioned to combat oppression and injustice. A deconstructive tension thus lies at the biopolitical center of *Legend*: on one hand, the text wants to assert that genocide is wrong, but on the other, it asserts that some people simply are biologically superior to other people. Unfortunately, we fear that any biopolitical system that asserts that some lives (in this case, June's and Day's) are more exceptional than others ultimately becomes vulnerable to something of a genocidal logic by which superspecial people are positioned to have more power and more rights than inferior peoples.

Implications of Inviting Students to Read Neoliberalism in YAL

Left unquestioned, neoliberalism too often leads to a logic by which superspecial individuals and their "right" to have their entrepreneurial economic interests protected are prioritized over those who are not as obviously successful in economic terms. Moreover, neoliberalism creates the impression that material and economic success are purely individual accomplishments, the inverse of which implies that people who are experiencing economic hardship are somehow entirely responsible for their situation. Inquiries into the nature of neoliberalism thus afford readers the opportunity to question the econopolitical forces that shape how whole groups of people—such as undocumented immigrants, the poor, members of minority groups, or prison inmates—are treated by the body politic.

We believe that when young people learn to become aware of the econopolitical assumptions in the novels they read, they are better positioned to interrogate, critique, and possibly change unjust econopolitical structures at work in their own lives.

Given the influence of neoliberalism in the United States and other Western nations, it is not surprising that young adult literature and other texts for adolescents reinforce neoliberal values. Hollindale (1988) distinguishes between a text's surface ideology, wherein an author communicates personal beliefs and values directly to readers via explicit ideological statements (pp. 10–11), and passive ideology, which encompasses an author's unexamined assumptions (p. 12). As Hollindale explains, "A large part of any book is written not by its author but by the world its author lives in" (p. 15). If this is the case, we argue that educators benefit students when they support them in naming the economic politics that shape the world they live in and when they assist them in examining the ideologies at work in the literature they read.

And let there be no mistake: neoliberalism impacts contemporary young people in a myriad of ways beyond the books they read. It is evident in mandates that charge schools with preparing students to be "college and career ready," a direct reference to the emphasis that neoliberalism places on human capital, as though the sole purpose of education is to prepare cogs for the global economy. It is evident in the barrage of annual standardized assessments given at every educational level and the way that our society conceptualizes learning as an individual undertaking and regards knowledge as quantifiable. Reflecting a logic of biopolitics, students' performances on standardized tests may be used to determine their academic track in school, the consequences of which are considerable so far as their future education is concerned. Neoliberalism is also discernable in prepackaged curricula that erase the local by ignoring regional, cultural, and linguistic differences. Beyond that, its influence is felt in movements that aim to defund and privatize public institutions that young people experience, such as public schools, libraries, and universities.

Ultimately, if teenagers and college students understand the globalized neoliberal forces pressuring them to become cogs in an economic system, they may feel empowered to resist, to critique, and to understand the benefits of other economic systems, including those that treat people fairly, even if they are

underprivileged. Most important, when young people understand that the fiction they experience has the potential to manipulate them ideologically, they can be empowered to critique the failures of neoliberalism that are currently shaping their educations and their own economic futures.

In our introduction, we described the cynicism of the students we teach. Many of them recognize the black-and-white moral universes at work in dystopic fiction; good and evil—and the way that good can be twisted easily into evil—are at the heart of *Legend* and other popular young adult dystopian series, such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Uglies*. The prevalence of political evil in these novels too often confirms teenagers' willingness to believe that our country's problems are also insoluble. We want instead to invite young readers to think about dystopias less as a confirmation of their own cynicism and more as a way to understand the complexity of the econopolitical institutions that will shape their futures.

We also mentioned in our introduction that our students paradoxically report being drawn to young adult dystopia because the genre reaffirms their faith in the individual's ability to overthrow oppressive social systems. We interpret this as evidence of just how pervasive neoliberal ideology is in contemporary society. Complex social problems, such as racism, classism, sexism, and heteronormativity (all of which are founded on an assumption that some people are of more worth than others), are systemic problems, and as such, addressing them requires a collective, rather than an individual, effort. At the same time, one need only consult our current social and historical context to appreciate that our well-being as individuals is inextricably bound up in the health of our society. Thus, our hope with this framework for reading neoliberalism in dystopic fiction and other genres of young adult literature is to encourage young readers into a type of critical inquiry that ultimately brings more pleasure than mere cynicism does: a type of inquiry that recognizes the complexity of the world, but that also acknowledges that only by fully recognizing and embracing that complexity and setting aside our individual interests to work with others can we ever hope to change unfair social, political, and economic systems.

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