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COMPLICATING GENDER BINARIES IN THE FEMINIST ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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For at least forty years, teachers have theorized about how to empower girls in the literature classroom—and the solution for many has been to engage feminist pedagogies. In this chapter, we trace how issues of critical thinking have led feminism (and misunderstandings of feminism) to intersect with secondary English education in the United States in order to contextualize a study we conducted of four high school teachers who self-consciously problematize gender while attempting to expose issues of critical thinking in their literature classrooms. We follow our consideration of texts and teachers with a demonstration of how two Young Adult (YA) novels marketed to girls—E. Lockhart’s *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*—represent gender as a multivariate social construct.

Our findings lead us to believe that YA novels provide a way for teachers to purposefully lead students to analyze feminism in terms of critical thinking—including asking students to think about issues of language, community, identity, and empowerment—because neither girls nor boys can effectively engage with social justice when they rely on stereotypes about gender and feminism. Most important, we find that a review of the literature on feminism and high school classrooms, a teacher survey we conducted, and the novels we investigate all demonstrate the importance of validating emotions in the teaching of social justice. Researchers and teachers indicate that adolescents (both female and male) who engage in empathetic understandings of situations and issues seem better prepared to understand how social problems, gender included, are created. Since YA novels tend to engage adolescent readers on many levels, including an emotional one, they provide ample opportunities for teaching critical thinking that is personal, analytical, and complex.

The Research

Ira Shor demonstrates that the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* (*Nation*) report generated multiple reforms in secondary education, including those that led to greater emphasis on critical thinking and critical reading for social justice issues, gender included (1). *Nation* identified students' inability to think critically as a fundamental weakness in the public educational system. Much of the research to follow was influenced by *Nation's* reliance on concerns about stereotypes and various binaries, such as "male/female," "privileged/underprivileged," or even "right/wrong." For example, Gail Flynn's early feminist pedagogical work on gendered reading strategies among late adolescents shows male readers "rejecting" or "dominating" stories because they cannot empathize with them, whereas "women are often receptive to texts in that they attempt to understand them before making a judgment upon them" (251). While dividing readers into two types, male and female readers, Flynn also privileges concepts of critical thinking and critical reading skills as the "right" way to read: interpretation works best in her judgment when "self and other, reader and text, interact in such a way that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance" (237). This last sounds laudable as an articulated goal, but Flynn's language elsewhere betrays what she perceives as right and wrong ways of approaching texts; that is, critical thinking and reading belong to the receptive approach ascribed to her female readers, while perceived patterns of rejection, dominance, and lack of empathy are the habit of male readers. In this economy of binary equivalences, then, *Nation's* desire for citizens "to reach some common understandings on complex issues" becomes an excuse to rely on stereotypes rather than foster new pedagogies.

In another argument based on the "right/wrong" binary that critical thinking pedagogies sometimes engage, Margaret Anne Zeller Carlson argues that books by and about women need to be included in the high school literature curriculum so that girls and boys can "learn to recognize each other in new ways" (30). Her concern is primarily focused on literature and its ability to liberate people from past stereotypes—but it also involves the dualistic thinking of male/female and right/wrong ways of reading.

Additionally, several scholars in Nancy Mellin McCracken and Bruce C. Appleby's 1992 *Gender Issues in the Teaching of English* demonstrate that some of the emphasis on using gender to teach critical thinking leads to unintentionally reinforced gender stereotypes. Nancy R. Comley reads a Hemingway text with students to demonstrate how, "as a binary opposition, birth and death are linked in this story to another binary, women and men" (79); Cynthia Ann Bowman generalizes: "girls' responses in their learning logs reflect nurturing, patient, sharing individuals, where the boys' logs show very practical, judgmental, and impatient people" (87); McCracken herself advocates teaching girls and boys "to read as girls"—just like girls have been taught to read like boys ("Re-gendering" 55).

One reason for this stark divide between female and male reading perspectives may be that the literature itself is infused with gender stereotypes; Hemingway, for

instance, is not known for his enlightened views on gender issues, which is why we advocate for teaching YA texts such as the ones we examine later. Such texts complicate the social construction of gender in ways that raise questions rather than assume answers about identity and empowerment. However, it is important to note that if the reaction to *Nation* served to increase public awareness of the importance of social justice in general, then teaching a more gender-balanced literature curriculum in particular was a practical and expedient means to a broader end. Feminists wisely hitched their wagons to contemporary intellectual trends, unsuspecting that gender could then become only one more binary by which critical thinking skills were taught.

In 1992 the AAUWEF's report *How Schools Shortchange Girls* effected another series of reforms that this time were specific to educating girls. This report influenced many English teachers to reconsider how language and coded stereotype messages replicate gender stereotypes in English classes (St. Pierre 31). The result was a movement from binary thinking about gender to more complex and multivariate forms of interpretation. For example, in 1997 Megan Boler critiqued Freirean models that rationalize and politicize learning, noting that they may be inadequate in situations where students have an emotional response that prohibits new learning (417). Her argument, especially pertinent to feminist educational theory, asserts that teachers should "take account of ... the affective dimensions of our speech [and] the affective intensities and expressions of our bodies – gesture, rhythm, movement" (417). Boler argues that emotions, even unwieldy ones that are not easily identified by language, share a role in education.

The *English Journal* in 1999 also showcased work important to a feminist pedagogy of literature, including an examination of gendered discourse, collaboration, and restructured classroom spaces (O'Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky); an interrogation of gender difference (Crocker); gender as a social construct (McClure); and problematic language that replicates stereotypes (Cleary and Whittemore). No longer could gender be studied just as a means to an end such as (binaristic) critical thinking. Moreover, feminist thinkers were increasingly embracing the relationship between identity and critical thinking. By 2006, Janet Alsup could argue in *Teacher Identity Discourses* that although training teachers to think about their identities is "difficult, messy, and complex," the most successful teachers are those willing to problematize their identities within their classrooms (5). This meant that subject matter and how students thought about it were no longer the only culprits in influencing critical thinking skills.

Another important analysis of the relationship between teachers who are not self-conscious about their identity and binary thinking emerged in Mark Bracher's *Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity, and Social Transformation*. He argues that in pedagogies focused on resistance and protest, "teachers seek recognition for their own identity vulnerability or deprivation, or that of a subaltern group with which they have identified, and oppose the authorities and establishment systems that are presumably responsible for this deficiency" (95). The goals of such pedagogies are to

gain recognition for what he calls the “identity damage” of the group under study, to expose systems and master signifiers responsible for that damage, and to acquire new master signifiers that allow group members to recognize, enact, and re-value aspects of their identity that previously were oppressed, repressed, or alienated. In terms of gender, the goals expressed in the early feminist literature surveyed above serve these exact ends: to guide students toward understanding the systematic devaluing of women and female perspectives in literary texts, to locate the systems and signifiers responsible, and to enact new ways of thinking that enable students to call out oppression where they find it while learning to re-value women’s ways of knowing and thinking.

By 2008, pedagogical theorists such as Heather E. Bruce, Shirley Brown, Nancy Mellin McCracken, and Mary Bell-Nolan were advocating pedagogical strategies designed to help teachers understand their own identities while simultaneously empowering students—regardless of gender binaries—in the high school English classroom. The classrooms they describe involve de-centered authority, rooms in which every student—female, male, transgendered, or questioning—has a voice, rooms in which emotions, ethics, and bodies are respected and empowered. Their emphasis implies much about the ways discourse can be used to empower students by destabilizing authority and making them aware of the relationships between language, community, identity, empowerment, and emotions—especially motions.

Teacher Approaches and Discoveries

As previously noted, we conducted a study in which we provided four teachers with extensive questionnaires asking about gender and feminist practices in their classrooms. With what we knew about the scholarly literature we had examined in mind, our goal was to inquire about the teachers’ self-identification as feminists and attendant practices in teaching literature. What emerged indicates that these teachers know the relationship between their understanding of feminism and the practice of thinking of gender in terms of binaries. All of these teachers write about the role of language and emotions in affecting cultural understandings of gender, and all of them think that asking students to identify gender issues in the books they read corresponds to the goal of teaching critical thinking skills. At least two teachers do talk about gender on a spectrum of empowerment that allows students who do not enact traditional gender roles nor identify with the oppressor or the oppressed in typical power dynamics to explore gender in multi-faceted ways. Respondent A (“Amanda”) teaches primarily freshmen in a mid-size charter high school; respondent B (“Bill”) teaches all levels in a rural high school; respondent C (“Callie”) teaches sophomores and A/P seniors in a large urban school; and respondent D (“Deidre”) teaches juniors and seniors in a large suburban high school. We asked all teachers to comment on their feminist practices, on students’ responses to feminism, and on texts they teach that communicate gender ideologies.

All respondents describe needing first to define feminism for students in ways that address both misconceptions and student hostility. As all note, many students continue to harbor binaristic stereotypes that cast feminists as (only) women who are (always) angry, rather than as people of both genders seeking equality and identity recognition.

Amanda’s students begin the year “not really notic[ing] gender issues in the text.” She gets “the occasional ‘who cares?’ from a male student early on when we talk about gender issues.” Students tell her “everything is equal now between men and women.” They “don’t perceive that there are gender inequalities until we really unpack what they are and how gender roles in our society reinforce those inequalities.” Bill and Callie have students who are more vocal in starting the year with negative connotations of feminism based more in their emotional registers than in intellectual or cognitive ones. Both report students who initially reject feminism as a “lesbian” value system. As Bill puts it: “I find that most students believe that a feminist outlook has a negative connotation attached to it.” He finds that discussion is the best way to “set the record straight.” Deidre, on the other hand, writes: “My students often come to me knowing that I am a feminist, yet few know exactly what this means.”

Respondents discuss the importance of teaching students to be responsible for multiple analyses of their culture and the texts they read. Amanda describes wanting her students “to be aware of and responsible for a good portion of their learning.” Deidre uses discussion and textual analysis to teach her students “to understand that the process of reading a text is political and social.” For these teachers, reading texts is a way to learn to analyze culture, and discussion is a way for students to learn how to think and feel differently about feminism. For all four teachers, their self-consciousness about employing feminist pedagogies is an aspect of their teacher identity.

Amanda: Language, Social Constructs and Empowerment

Amanda recognizes that the pedagogy of critical thinking can lead to power imbalances. One of her concerns is the way that classroom debate leads to what she calls “intellectual bullying.” To avoid such situations, Amanda asks freshmen to rely on Socratic dialogues wherein they prepare questions for each other and then prepare evidence to answer those questions. Students subsequently lead the classroom discussion. Moreover, Amanda uses YA novels, such as *The Hunger Games*, to provide students with examples of strong female protagonists operating under complex understandings of how gender identity can empower or disempower girls. By the end of the year, Amanda finds that freshmen who initially rejected concerns about sexism can discuss gender “in a safe, cooperative environment.”

Amanda also notes that through her pedagogical choices students find multiple ways to experience gender and power, especially as they learn about social constructs:

The beauty of using social constructs as a lens is that gender discussions don't just revolve around the inequalities for women due to living in a patriarchal society. Especially after looking at the hero quest, typically carried out by males, it's an easy opening to discussing the limitations and absurdities of male gender roles in our society and literature. All students have experiences based on gender discrimination.

Ultimately, Amanda feels the best way to prevent students from thinking dualistically is to teach them about the relationship between language and social constructs. She writes: "Language is the most important tool we have to shape and change our worlds. We are empowered when we are able to define what is happening to us and what it is we do to those around us." For Amanda, her ability to teach critical thinking that considers larger issues of justice depends on asking students to think about gender as multivariate and socially constructed.

Bill: Female (and Male) Community

More than the other teachers in this study, Bill reports student resistance to discussions about gender—perhaps because he teaches in a rural area, or perhaps because he is male, which allows students to reject his identity as a feminist. Because these students do not perceive Bill in the role of the oppressed, they may not feel compelled to identify with his position. Bill writes about feminism:

Most students seem to think that the issue is humorous in nature, and I attribute that to our poor cultural sensitivity and the media's portrayal of gender in general. Most students do not seem to realize that the "ignorant father" (a la *Everybody Loves Raymond*, etc.) is also an issue of gender. It can take a while for them to realize the issue is more pertinent and farther reaching than originally perceived.

Bill also finds himself providing a counter-balance to his students' tendency "to water down the issue to a very basic 'Who's better, guys or girls?' debate that I always have to reshape and mold into a more educated, informed approach." He reports that the most effective piece of literature in getting students to think about gender in non-binaristic ways is Laurie Halse Anderson's YA novel *Speak*.

I teach this novel the first month of freshman year, and it features an abundance of power issues between teenage girls. This book really resonates with 99% of my students, as it opens up real dialogue about cliques and stereotypes they experience. The notion that teenage girls will turn on one another, and treat each other with such cruelty, is prevalent here, and students really respond with open minds and hearts. It can lead to some wonderful, insightful dialogue.

Bill is not afraid to confront the powerful emotions that *Speak* elicits through its intense portrayal of the aftermath of the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl by an older classmate. While he uses this novel to teach students to value female community over female competition, he also teaches that the issues presented are not just "of equality, but of attitude, focus, respect, integrity, and understanding that applies to both men and women." As students begin to grapple with the way power issues affect both genders, their thinking becomes more complicated: "Students seem to catch themselves in sexist language, and this is nice to see." Bill's ability to model feminism as a male authority figure provides him with a basic teacher identity that invites students across the gender spectrum to value community over competition and to see that both males and females have much to gain when gender stereotypes are dispelled.

Callie: Identity and Emotion

Callie believes students' initial inability to analyze gender is tied to their age and social class because most of them "have a mother that does, and has, stayed in the home to work, and thus the roles shown to them in their actual lives are often very traditional." She is also aware that her identity influences how students learn from her: "let's face it ... women *being* teachers is another traditional role ... I might be a feminist ... but I am a woman in an *expected* role." Callie understands that her identity affects how her students position themselves in her classroom:

In order to get conversations in which students really delve into their own opinions you need to create an atmosphere that creates comfort in doing so ... a space in which all opinions can be respected, part of this can only be done with teacher honesty and transparency ... which occasionally means saying something like "I think this is an area in which I am a little biased, I try to be fair, but I know I've a block up regarding X" ... not only does this allow your students real knowledge in how far they can go in some areas, but, as well, it forces a teacher to confront themselves ... something which I think is not done often enough. As teachers we often forget, or perhaps never learn, from where our own reactions to certain pieces of literature come; it is certainly worth investigation.

To help students overcome binary thinking of feminism "as something aggressive, angry, and potentially 'anti-Western society,'" Callie teaches a unit in the first semester in which she compares narratives from the same era, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, both written in 1899.

Conrad's statements about the nature of women living in their own worlds "that would fall apart" if women were to ever have to deal with the reality of war, finance, pain, etc. is vastly different than what Chopin writes regarding

the same created social fantasy. Initially most students find Chopin MORE offensive than Conrad ... this provides excellent areas of discussion.

Callie draws students' awareness to their anger and sense of injustice. Because they are still dependent on their parents, her students respond emotionally to Edna in *The Awakening* and criticize her for valuing her independence more than her children. By contrast, "the relationship to which Milkman relegates Hagar in *The Song of Solomon* taught in the second semester is taken on completely by the students themselves." By this time students begin to understand injustice in a more critical way—and to express their emotions about mistreatment based on broader gender issues rather than their own identity experiences.

Callie's willingness to examine her own identity in the classroom helps her students understand gender issues on a spectrum: "questions regarding gender issues become more natural as the year goes on." Like Amanda and Bill, Callie models feminist awareness as a teacher identity issue that enables her to teach gender in nuanced ways that allow students to admit to feeling injustice as an emotional and complex issue—even, they tell her, when examining texts outside of her classroom.

Deidre: Social Constructs and Self-Identity

Deidre is a self-conscious reformer, working actively to change the curriculum in her large suburban school district to ensure "that there is often a female protagonist that challenges androcentric norms" among the texts taught in the English classroom. Like Callie, she finds *The Awakening* to be a useful vehicle for teaching about gender in non-binaristic ways and "to consider the political and social constraints that held women to a higher moral standard than the male counterparts." Deidre—like Bill and Callie—reports the importance of studying historical context as a function of gender roles. Identity exploration is central to her students' understanding of gender: "High school students are quite interested in exploring gender differences. They are still working out their own sense of self and seemingly are quite anxious to openly discuss gender as a social construct."

Deidre teaches her students to notice how often they are asked "to identify with a male point-of-view" as one way of countering the type of binary thinking that makes women compete with each other. She does not teach YA novels because she believes that "many young adult novels have a female protagonist who is a victim of abuse." Although such novels as *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* and *The Hunger Games* openly address victimization and its attendant emotions, Deidre is still concerned that many YA novels are predicated on gender imbalance: "These protagonists overcome, but I worry that my students will see this victimization as a norm."

Deidre talks to her students about emotions as a key factor in self-aware gender identity, and she emphasizes the difficulty of thinking about gender without relying

on binaries. Even while she questions basic assumptions about how gender has been constructed historically and how women are more often depicted in competition than community, she still acknowledges that women—and her female students—must exist within an educational environment that largely regards gender in terms of binaries.

These teachers all understand that their identities affect their students. They also believe that gender identity is fluid and not as easy to define as feminists might have indicated in their early work. Continually demonstrating that gender is a social construct provides an opportunity to deconstruct it in a way that critical thinking based on binaries does not allow. For these teachers, feminism allows students to question their thinking about sources of identity as they live within socially constructed gender roles. Between them, they use literature to demonstrate issues of language, community, and emotional expression regardless of gender. Students come to see empowerment as it exists within a more complicated matrix of factors that leads to greater understandings of larger social justice issues.

One of our most interesting findings involves Amanda's and Callie's recognition that a lack of empathy creates a major obstacle to students' ability to think about gender, echoing Boler's conclusions about reluctant emotional response. In answer to the question "What are the chief obstacles to the feminist pedagogy of YAL in your classroom?" Amanda writes:

Empathy. The chief obstacle to feminist pedagogy of YAL is getting students to be willing and able to see something from someone else's perspective, but that would be my answer for just about everything I teach. It is the most important expectation that I have and it is the most difficult concept for students to first understand and then embrace both developmentally and ideologically.

Callie writes that teaching feminism

takes time, and it takes empathy ... reminding boys that they are not "allowed" to cry when frustrated and hurt, and girls that when they do, the response is seen as weak and female ... it takes going personal sometimes. When we relate literature to actual lived experiences the best conversations, and the best thinking, occurs.

Empathy undercuts binary thinking because it complicates an emotionally distanced, evaluative response with the messiness of emotional connection and sympathetic understanding.

Learning through Literature

While the teachers surveyed tend to teach books considered canonical, we find that much recent YAL that students pick up and read on their own helps scaffold critical

thinking about language, community, identity, emotion, and empowerment, all issues both researchers and teachers we studied thought important. E. Lockhart's *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* is exemplary in this respect. Through a third-person narrative voice that is detached and focused, Frankie emerges as a careful critical thinker, a keen observer of hierarchy and group dynamics, and a strategist who weighs each word carefully to measure its potential effect before uttering it. During the summer between freshman and sophomore year, Frankie develops a body that earns her notice from Matthew, the most desirable boy at school. When Matthew chooses Frankie as his girlfriend, she gets the opportunity to observe how boys operate.

Frankie continually analyzes the way boys work to manage competitiveness and community through humor, and the way they smooth out potential conflict through self-effacement, turning even the most embarrassing situations into public performances of their superior position. Frankie also notes the degree to which the boys' public camaraderie is underwritten by their participation in a secret society called the Loyal Order of the Basset Hounds, an organization she knows about through her father, a former member. She spies on the Bassets and finds their activities banal, but realizes that the point of the group is not what it does but what it is: an exclusive, secret, boys-only club that requires loyalty for loyalty's sake. Frankie chafes at being excluded from the public and private community of boys and the fact that she is only welcome as Matthew's girlfriend and not on her own merits. She eventually realizes that "because of her sex, because of her age, because (perhaps) of her religion and her feminism, she could sit at their [lunch] table every day and she would never, never, ever get in" (195). She is angry that these boys rely on gender as a binary to justify disempowering and excluding females.

But Frankie is not one to accept the status quo. Throughout the text, readers learn that Frankie is a strategist. She recognizes when she is being manipulated, and she strategizes how she might use her already developed skills in debating, as well as her more nascent powers of sexual attractiveness, to get what she wants. The narrator alerts readers to Frankie's processes through anecdote and direct narration of her thoughts. Many of her reflections revolve around gender, but she is careful to parse gender as a social construct that carries with it confining expectations of behavior and attitude that she does not accept, even as she sees their utility. For instance, in the early stages of her relationship with Matthew, Frankie realizes that he likes her best when she behaves like someone who needs his help and accepts his opinions without serious challenge; because being his girlfriend grants her (albeit limited) access to his world, she plays her part. Eventually, Frankie rejects this position for herself, but not before she has thoroughly tested it. Significantly, she tests it most fiercely by asserting herself with her former boyfriend, Porter. When he tries to warn her about losing herself to Matthew, she yells at him for assuming she can't look out for herself. In the aftermath, she considers how she feels about her outburst:

Frankie hadn't *liked* herself when she'd been yelling at Porter—but she'd admired herself. . . . She admired herself for taking charge of the situation, for deciding which way it went. She admired her own verbal abilities, her courage, her dominance.

So I was a monster, she thought. At least I wasn't someone's little sister, someone's girlfriend, some sophomore, some girl—someone whose opinions didn't matter. (144)

The stakes with Porter are much lower than they would be had Frankie asserted herself with Matthew; after all, she still likes kissing Matthew, in addition to the power she enjoys from being his girlfriend. But she is clearly engaged in a project of thoughtful self-definition, of figuring out who she wants to be and whether it is more important to be loved or admired, a dilemma that persists until the end of the book. Gender is a large part of the mix, but mostly because for girls it is an impediment to power in a patriarchal society.

One of the most interesting metaphors for Frankie under this reading is her language play. Prompted by P.G. Wodehouse, she begins experimenting with what she calls "neglected positives"—words that exist only as parts of other words that make use of a negative prefix. For instance, Wodehouse's famous example is that "gruntled" should be the opposite of disgruntled, but, as Matthew is quick to instruct Frankie, this is not the case; they actually mean the same thing. But Frankie finds it amusing to play with these words, using "mayed" when she means the opposite of dismayed, and "turbed" as the opposite of disturbed, and so on. It is a quirky expression of a more serious structure; she realizes that Matthew sometimes makes her feel "delible," as in erased, as opposed to what she wants to be, which is indelible.

This linguistic play alerts readers to Frankie's more general take on the problematic of gender as a binary opposition. In a discussion with a classmate who is attempting to essentialize gender opposition through species comparison, she argues:

Because once you say women are one way, and men are another, and say that's gotta be how it is in people, then even if it's somewhat true—even if it's quite a good amount true—you're setting yourself up to make all kinds of assumptions that actually really suck. (162)

Frankie understands gender as a construct, but also intuitively she is disadvantaged by a system that posits girls as the neglected positives of boys. When she covertly takes over the Bassets, Matthew never once suspects her because he sees her as harmless, an extension of himself that does not legitimately exist without him, much like the neglected positives that Frankie invents. Moreover, his disregard of her language play shows her exactly what he thinks of those neglected positives: They are not in his dictionary, so they are wrong and impossible. They do not exist. Ultimately, Frankie embraces her anger and defines her limits: She will not succumb to her

desire for Matthew because it means being someone who does not matter the way she wants to matter in the world; her critical thinking skills get a crucial assist from her emotions in figuring out the kind of woman she wants to become.

Katniss Everdeen of Collins' *The Hunger Games* is another emergent critical thinker grappling with numerous injustices contextualized by her gender. Set in a dystopic future, the novel details how the Capitol demands that each of the twelve districts in the U.S. send two adolescent "tributes"—a girl and a boy—to participate in the nation's Hunger Games each year. Only one "winner" can survive the games. Although the novel establishes a male–female binary, Katniss undercuts that binary, strategically analyzing how doing so can serve to her advantage. Before the games, she is her family's hunter and gatherer, so she uses her prowess with a bow and arrow to survive in the arena of the Hunger Games. Her partner during the games is Peeta Mellark, far more nurturing and emotionally perceptive than Katniss, although she shows her gentle side on several occasions. Katniss is highly analytical. She can assess who among the opponents relies on strength to win in combat and who relies on evasion and strategy. But Peeta has his own strengths. He is physically stronger and his emotional awareness enables him to earn the public's approval of Katniss and him as a team. In this novel, males and females display a broad range of traditional gender roles, but neither gender is the sole proprietor of any particular trait.

The players with the greatest advantage, however, remain those who know how to analyze what they observe. For example, Katniss changes the balance of the game when she observes that several of the stronger players have formed an alliance—but they are not protecting their food supply, which she finds "perplexing" (216) and "complex" (218). She tells herself: "There is a solution to this, I know there is"; consequently, she shrewdly figures out how to trip the landmines that these players have built to protect their stores (220). When the Capitol reverses an earlier decision to let two members of one team win, which pits Katniss against Peeta, she deduces how to call the rule-maker's bluff. Peeta tells her, "We both know they have to have a victor" (343–44), which inspires Katniss to realize that the best way to rebel against the institutional repressiveness of the games is to provide the Capitol with *no* winner. Evoking the double suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*, Katniss convinces Peeta that they should commit suicide simultaneously by eating toxic berries. The strategy works, and they are both proclaimed winners, although the President is clearly displeased that these two players have subverted the system. Katniss tries to offer the patriarchy an alternative to their binary thinking, but everyone is either a winner or a loser in the economy of the Hunger Games. The Capitol wants one winner—not two, and clearly they do not know, as Katniss has threatened, how to respond to the threat of no winner at all.

Throughout the novel, Katniss and Peeta value self-definition more than anything. Katniss's first success in pleasing the crowds watching the Hunger Games comes when she follows a mentor's advice to "be yourself" because people "admire your spirit" (121). She wins the game on her own terms—but still feels she is lying

to Peeta and to Gale, the boy she hunted with before the games, because she cannot decide which of the two she loves. Katniss recognizes that emotions are not binaries and that empathy is messy. She rejects traditional gender roles, and she loves more than one person, exploding the binaries inherent in classic love triangles. Peeta, too, values self-definition, although he consistently knows he loves Katniss unconditionally. Before the games, he tells her: "I want to die as myself. . . . I don't want them to change me in there" (141). And Peeta does not change. He protects those about whom he cares, and he fights mercilessly against those corrupted by the system. Even in the final moments of the Hunger Games, he offers his life so Katniss can live—and when she dismantles the Hunger Game's binaries, he still knows who he is: "His smile is the same whether in mud or in the Capitol" (361).

The Hunger Game's most important feminist gesture may be its emphasis on empathy, which is presented in non-gendered ways. When they were children, Peeta empathized with Katniss enough to give her a loaf of bread from his family's bakery because she was starving, even though he knew he would be beaten for it. Bread thus becomes the novel's symbol of empathy in this nation named, appropriately enough, "Panem." Katniss identifies Peeta's loaf of bread as her first "hope," but she always acknowledges it came to her because of Peeta's empathy (32). Although Katniss cannot "even imagine" being beaten by her parents, she feels concern about the black eye his mother has given him because of the bread. When Katniss later discovers that Peeta's mother has no confidence in him, she can "see the pain in Peeta's eyes"—and reminds him that she has only been able to survive so long because he helped her when she was starving (90). Ultimately, Katniss thinks of Peeta as the "boy with the bread," and she does not want to lose him (297), although she struggles at the end of the novel, when she insensitively admits that she does not love him the way he loves her, which means that "the boy with the bread is slipping away" (374).

During the games, Katniss creates a female community with Rue, a tribute who reminds her of her sister. Katniss refuses to compete with this girl because she feels so much empathy for her. When Rue lies dying, Katniss cradles her, sings to her, and wreathes the girl's body in flowers to show the Capitol "that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (237). Understanding the basic humanity of every individual is a prerequisite to feeling empathy—and to understanding the importance of social justice. Rue's district sends Katniss a loaf of bread to publicly thank her for her gentle treatment of Rue and to symbolically thank her for her empathy. For Katniss, strength and strategic thinking are a hollow victory without empathy because empathy allows her to think beyond binaries and disrupt the social constructs of both gender and injustice.

Between these two strong female protagonists, Katniss and Frankie, readers are exposed to characters who perceive the problem with being the neglected positives of boys and who employ critical thinking to reject binaries. They refuse to accept victim status and understand that community and self-acceptance play a role in

social empowerment. While Frankie is empowered by manipulating language and Katniss through empathy, both characters display enough emotional complexity to be attracted to different males for differing reasons. Neither ends their story with the “happily ever after” denouement of many YA novels. Instead, Katniss and Frankie learn analysis can be an empowering tool—and weapon—best tempered by empathy.

Conclusion

Teaching critical thinking skills is a significant factor in any literature curriculum, but when critical thinking devolves into binaries, concepts of social justice become bankrupt and girls still suffer the continuation of age-old stereotypes. Education theorists such as Megan Boler are right in acknowledging that emotions complicate pedagogy; likewise, those like Janet Alsup are aware that teachers need to model the “difficult, messy, and complex” nature of identity for their students (5). When teachers like Amanda, Bill, Callie, and Deidre face student opposition to feminism in their classrooms, they are experiencing the binaristic thinking that implies one term in the binary (here “male” or “female”) is better than the other. But when these teachers and others recognize the importance of language, community, identity, and empathy in teaching critical thinking skills, they acknowledge that the best way to explode binaries is to teach students to validate the emotional experiences of injustice.

Reading literature is one way to understand empathy, and YA novels such as *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* and *The Hunger Games* allow discussion about the intricate nature of empowerment and disempowerment—and empathy. Teaching YAL thus serves multiple purposes, including demonstrating how empowering girls involves deconstructing language, emphasizing community, and exploring identity. Because of the affective range of most YAL, the genre also lends itself to complicating what it means to be empowered, what it means to have an identity, and what it means to experience social justice—or injustice. If, as Amanda argues, a lack of empathy is the “chief obstacle to feminist pedagogy,” then perhaps teaching novels that require *all* readers to experience a strong female’s sense of injustice is one way to teach students to understand how complex issues of gender and empowerment really are.

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