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White, Traditionally Beautiful, and Straight: An Analysis of Racial and Gender (In)Visibility in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

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*Dedico questo lavoro a mio papà Stefano,
alle mie sorelle Elena e Giulia
e alle mie bellissime nipoti Maria ed Emma.
A mio nonno Dario e ai miei nonni Norina e Sergio.
E alla mia bellissima, straordinaria mamma Sonia,
la mia forza, la mia migliore amica.*

ABSTRACT

The overwhelming success of young adult literature in the twenty-first century has been largely determined by its unique ability to embrace a wealth of genres and forms. Among these, young adult dystopian fiction, through extreme and pessimistic representations of contemporary society, aims at encouraging its readers to critique their own social reality and, thus, to take action in the hope of social change. Following a general introduction to the evolution and fundamental aspects of young adult literature, this thesis explores the possible ways dystopian texts fail to fulfil this pedagogical purpose with reference to the persistent and significant role of race, gender, and sexuality in the organisation of contemporary social life. Specifically, drawing upon Suzanne Collins's blockbuster Hunger Games trilogy, published between 2008 and 2010, I will examine how the dismissal of the potential implications of the portrayal of a black female character and her entire social community within the series, necessarily reinforces hegemonic frameworks about social and racial hierarchies. At the same time, by observing the protagonist's development throughout the books, I will discuss how her apparent initial and rebellious intention of challenging heteronormativity is gradually replaced by the reification of traditional patterns of femininity and heteroromantic love. Furthermore, as counterexample to Collins's narrative silence, I will proceed with the analysis of Sherri L. Smith's dystopian novel, *Orleans*, published in 2014, as an effective and conscious exposure of the inevitable interplay of various systems of power and oppression which the main character, as a black fifteen-year-old girl, is subjected to throughout her struggle for survival. Thus, through my analysis, I intend to stress the evolving nature of young adult literature which, from bestsellers that merely reinscribe and normalise the current social structures and hierarchies in the West, can advance towards texts that, by contrast, succeed in addressing and interrogating them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Chapter 1	
1. An Introduction to Young Adult Literature	14
1.1 Analysis of the critical reception of the young adult genre in the last decades	14
1.1.1 Scholarly marginalisation of young adult literature	14
1.1.2 Critical reluctance to distinguish the young adult from children’s literature	15
1.1.3 Relative youth of young adult literature and its readership	16
1.1.4 Transformation of the teenage experience	18
1.1.5 Educational employment of the young adult genre	19
1.1.6 External pressures: marketing and censorship	20
1.1.7 Young adult books are simply “not serious enough”	21
1.1.8 First critical approaches to young adult literature	24
1.2 Towards an accurate definition of young adult literature	26
1.2.1 Broad and detailed definitions	26
1.2.2 The ‘young adult’: a sociocultural construct	28
1.2.3 Young adult literature evolving with its implied reader	32
1.2.4 Agency, authenticity, and power dynamics	38
1.3 Representation and identity: the transformative nature of young adult literature	40
1.3.1 Racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity	40
1.3.2 Gender and sexual diversity	45
1.3.3 Disability diversity	46

Chapter 2

2. Problematic Racial and Gender Representation in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction	48
2.1 An introduction to young adult dystopian fiction	48
2.1.1 Speculative fiction	48
2.1.2 Dystopian fiction	49
2.1.3 Resonance with young readers	51
2.1.4 The crossover phenomenon	55
2.2 Racial and gender representation in young adult dystopian fiction	57
2.2.1 Character representation in young adult dystopian fiction	57
2.2.2 Problematic representations of race	59
2.2.3 Problematic representations of gender and sexuality	66
2.3 Case study: <i>The Hunger Games</i> series by Suzanne Collins	69
2.3.1 Introduction to the analysis	69
2.3.2 Dystopian features	70
2.3.3 The reinstatement of slavery	74
2.3.4 Risks of ‘echoing without naming’	79
2.3.5 Rue is the true Mockingjay	80
2.3.6 Reification of heteronormativity in Panem	82
2.3.7 Conclusions	87

Chapter 3

3. Authentic Representation of Racial and Gender Diversity in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction	88
3.1 Case study: <i>Orleans</i> by Sherri L. Smith as counterexample	88
3.1.1 Introduction to the analysis	88

3.1.2 Dystopian features	90
3.1.3 Hurricane Katrina: reliance on history to authentically represent racial diversity	96
3.1.4 Racial privilege and oppression in the characters of Daniel and Fen	102
3.1.5 Fen's performance of femininity	107
3.1.6 Gender oppression in Orleans	111
3.1.7 Conclusions	113
3.2 What more can be done: the role of authors, editors, and readers	114
3.2.1 Authors fostering racial and gender diversity	114
3.2.2 Publishers promoting racial and gender diversity	117
3.2.3 Readers demanding more authentic representations of racial and gender diversity	120
Conclusion	122
Bibliography	125
Sitography	130
Summary	132

INTRODUCTION

“When people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberating spaces.” (Thomas, 2019, p. 2)

The aim of this research is the investigation of the ways in which racial and gender diversity may or may not be depicted within twenty-first-century young adult dystopian fiction. In particular, dystopian texts targeted at young readers emerged for the first time in the 1980s and 1990s and, with their revival in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, have gained immense popularity as cautionary tales focusing on totalitarianism within a given imagined community and the response from the people residing in it (Campbell, 2019). In this respect, R. Fitzsimmons (2020) argues that, other than mere entertainment, the main intent of young adult dystopian fiction is to be a form of social critique that can inspire its readers to action within the contemporary society they inhabit. Indeed, the worlds depicted by dystopian authors, while futuristic and relatively distant, are never completely disconnected from the present-day reality. On the contrary, by advancing worst-case scenarios, dystopian writers appear to offer horrifying warnings-by-hyperbole of what might come if people do not engage in social change. The overwhelming success in the 2010s of dystopian trilogies such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*, and James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* is due to multiple factors. Namely, Sherman Alexie (2011) emphasises how the unforgiving violence frequently portrayed in these series may resonate with young readers who, because of financial pressures, ongoing wars, and the aftermath of a global pandemic, experience daily feelings of rage, frustration, sorrow, loneliness, and despondency. C. Hintz and E. Ostry (2013) substantiate this view by adding that dystopias are powerful metaphors for the life of the adolescent who, while on the brink of adulthood, is unable to enjoy its privileges and, instead, is constantly subjected to its surveillance and control. These elements, together with hope being repeatedly preserved within young adult dystopias, arguably engender readers’ emotional involvement, reclaiming of agency, and identification with the narratives and their characters. My analysis is the result of an agglomeration of personal and academic experiences as, respectively, a teenage reader and a university student. On the one hand, my adolescence was marked by the reading of

the most well-known dystopian sagas, specifically those mentioned above. My accidental discovery of the first instalment of *The Hunger Games* franchise led me to read Collins's entire series as well as those that, in its wake, achieved similar success in both the publishing and film industries. As a teenager, I displayed these novels on my shelves, I appreciated them for their stories without questioning them further, and I naturally identified with the female heroines of all three works. Growing up, I progressively recognised the glaring issues of these texts, which evidently tend to prioritise the lives, experiences, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of obstinately white, attractive, and heterosexual protagonists. As a university student, thanks to the courses I had the opportunity to attend and, more precisely, to the study of Octavia Butler's seminal *Kindred* (1979), I was equipped with the necessary critical tools that allowed me to grasp specific, reiterated, and problematic patterns that motivate the striking absence of diversity within the mainstream dystopian trilogies I had read in my adolescence. Thus, the purpose of my research has been to better understand what these patterns are, their effects, causes and, conversely, to detect possible strategies to counter them.

To contextualise this approach to the dystopian subgenre within young adult literature, the first chapter focuses on this literary category targeting young readers. More in detail, the body of literature intended for young adults is introduced through its peculiar critical reception in the last decades which, notwithstanding increasing hopeful exceptions, remains overall adverse. In this sense, by drawing upon Caroline Hunt's 1996 essay, I examine how the scholarly marginalisation of the young adult genre is produced by a combination of elements. First, despite a number of scholars conceding or, especially in the most recent years, promoting the existence and subsequent study of young adult literature as independent and worthy of theoretical examination, the assimilation of young adult texts with children's literature persists. The relative youth of works targeted at young adults (which do not date back earlier than 1942 with the publication of Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*) may further impede critical conversations about them as representatives of a literature of its own. Additionally, dealing with and addressing an ever-changing sociocultural entity whose boundaries are more and more blurred, young adult literature necessarily replicates its readers' amorphousness. Just as responsible for the ambiguous nature of young adult texts may be the swift transformation of adolescent trends, interests, tastes, slangs, and habits throughout the decades. Moreover, the lack of

thorough theoretical attention to young adult works may be also due to the general tendency of deeming them as not serious enough to be properly regarded and treated as literary works. With reference to this, columnist Ruth Graham's *Slate* article (2014) provides a significant angle whereby young adult literature, dismissed as unrealistic and absolutely separate from the literary community, cannot exceed its status of blockbuster fiction. The counterarguments developed with regard to similar demeaning assessments of children's literature as oversimplified, immature, ephemeral, and essentially 'written down', are instrumental to demonstrating that, under the guise of seemingly easily accessible language and topics, might hide complex, unique, and conscious understandings of the world. In light of these considerations underlining the instabilities associated to the notion of young adult literature, this research proceeds by attempting to develop a more accurate and comprehensive definition of it. To this end, it is relevant to analyse the implied reader, that is, the adolescent who, being a social construct from its emergence in the twentieth century, consistently evolves with the historical, temporal, spatial, and cultural context he/she lives in. In today's post-industrial Western societies, economic hard times generate the conceptualisation of adolescence as a considerably extended process that leads teenagers to reach adulthood and assume its responsibilities later than it would have been presumed in the past. Simply put, adolescence loses its transitional character as the human stage between childhood and adulthood. From this perspective and considering the sudden notable increase of teenage population in the U.S. from the turn of the twenty-first century, it is no surprise that literary production designed for young adults has been equally growing and making efforts to provide truthful, bold, and straightforward portrayals the audience can automatically identify with. In this respect, I investigate how readers' identification with characters within a young adult novel may be fostered through the representation of voices and faces that are racially diverse, LGBTQIA, and/or with disability. Through an outline of the recent development of narratives gradually moving from advancing stereotypical and detrimental pictures of diversity to endeavouring to depict this latter in a more authentic, daring, and innovative manner, the transformative quality of young adult literature is as a consequence further stressed.

It is from these premises that the second chapter moves the focus on the problematic racial and gender representations in contemporary young adult dystopian

texts. Namely, this section describes the primary features of dystopian fiction by referring to the wider speculative genre it is part of. As the clever blending of science fiction and fantasy (Cart, 2016a), speculative fiction for young adults makes its first meaningful appearance with the publication and subsequent massive success of the *Harry Potter* books in 1997. It is with Collins's trilogy that, followed by Roth's and Dashner's series, a golden age of young adult dystopian literature is ushered in and that, by attracting the interest of young and adult audiences alike, dystopian fiction becomes a crossover phenomenon. Relying on Cadden's arguments (2021) about the significance of the inclusion of characters' quantitative as well as qualitative characteristics in order to encourage the reader's identification with them, I claim that the iteration of the same physical and personality traits in young adult books may result in the failure of authors' mission of inviting racially and gender diverse readers to recognise themselves in the characters they portray. In the specific case of contemporary dystopian works, the creative and revolutionary nature provided by their depiction of female protagonists as autonomous, agentic, emotionally and physically strong, is disrupted by the fact they are also white, beautiful, and heterosexual. The hopeful ending they experience and, on the other hand, the sacrifice or rejection reserved for female characters of colour, seem to suggest that freedom, social equality and progress can be attained only by the former (Toliver, 2020). I further demonstrate that popular young adult dystopian texts share a narrative silence on crucial sociocultural concerns such as race and gender, which (whether deliberately or inadvertently) may have substantial consequences on the message authors convey to the young readership. Through the analysis of excerpts taken from Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Scott Westerfeld's *The Uglies*, and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* trilogy, this work sheds light on a series of strategies employed by the three authors to eliminate racial issues. By way of illustration, through typically white-privilege frameworks such as colour-blindness, the reliance on pseudo-scientific methods to claim a race's biological superiority over another, and the myth of the white saviour rescuing the defenceless and incapable people of colour, I argue that the dystopian subgenre might become an efficient resource for the perpetration and reification in the reader's mind of hegemonic ideologies whereby race is a non-issue and which, thus, favour the dominant race. Similarly, I analyse how, with their novels, dystopian authors often reinscribe heteronormativity, promoting the binary distinction between masculine and feminine as

well as heterosexuality as the preferred mode of sexual orientation, through the homogenisation of gender portrayals. The case study on Collins's *The Hunger Games* is approached through these specific lenses. After establishing the elements that make the series dystopian, my analysis shows how the peculiar depiction of District Eleven, one of the communities within the totalitarian society of Panem, is grounded on a full-fledged reinstitution of slavery. Echoing without properly naming the workings of racial oppression in a community based on agriculture and largely populated by African American people who are used to being poor, hungry, to working long hours under the persistent and cruel surveillance of guards, to risking unjustified punishments and executions, to using music as a form of communication allowing them to elude control, might imply Collins's intention to reinstate the systemic racism of the past and present Western societies without challenging it. Analogously, the traditional performance of femininity is, rather than problematised, validated by Collins who bypasses the protagonist's ability to traverse genders as well as her independence by making her conform to the expected ideals of beauty, heterosexual romance, and the conventional role of mother.

Conversely, the third and last chapter of this research centres on the novel by Sherri L. Smith, *Orleans*, as second case study to reveal contrasting patterns through which the impacts of contemporary systems of oppressions might be depicted within a dystopia in a constructive manner. More in detail, among the qualities that allow to define the text as dystopian, I single out the post-apocalyptic scenario of Orleans, separated from the rest of the country by a wall after being infected with a bloodborne virus, called the Delta Fever. The disease that the residents of the former New Orleans contracted brought about a new system of social hierarchisation based on blood types. However, forms of oppression related to race and gender persist. In this sense, J. A. Belkhir and C. Charlemaine's analysis (2007) of the social dimension of Hurricane Katrina is especially useful to explore the intersectional relevance of Smith's choice of such a historically and culturally significant event as the disaster that triggered the dystopian reality she imagined. Indeed, through the exposition of the characters to the storm's catastrophic aftermath, I discuss how climate-driven natural disasters are never detached from the social structures of race, gender, and class imposed by political institutions. Notably, through Hurricane Katrina and the following storms, Smith seems to exacerbate the

existing inequalities of the present-day New Orleans. Through several excerpts, I show how racism remains critical in the novel as the leading cause of the continued spread of the Fever and, thus, of the unbearable living conditions in Orleans. Other textual passages highlight how racial diversity is the norm within the dystopian reality narrated by Smith and, as such, may be understood as the author's condemnation of white-privilege norms that allowed affluent white residents to flee before the first storm hit. This greater possibility of survival is embodied in the text by Daniel, who accesses Orleans with the confidence of being able to engineer a cure and save all the infected in the city. The white saviour ideology advanced in mainstream works is, nevertheless, progressively sabotaged by Daniel's own realisation that Orleans' condition exceeds his expectations and capabilities. Faced with the protagonist Fen, whose knowledge comes directly from her own experience as a teenager grown up in Orleans, Daniel's inexperience, naiveté, powerlessness, and misplaced trust in technoscience and the U.S. military force rapidly erode. On the other hand, Fen's character demonstrates how the representation of racial diversity is not dependent on a mere list of physical attributes (effortlessly negligible by a white audience, as occurred with Rue's character in *The Hunger Games*). Rather, it requires a certain cultural and ethnic richness as well. Furthermore, Smith's awareness as a dystopian author who is tasked with calling young readers' attention to sociocultural matters that continue to be paramount in their contemporary world, may be evidenced by a brief investigation of a number of slave narratives' typical tropes potentially embedded in the text. In addition, Fen's gender performance is observed to stress that, compared to Collins's Katniss, Fen's taking on maternal duties as the story unfolds does not constrain her ability to traverse genders, nor does it entail a negation of her agency as part of a heterosexual relationship. In other words, contrary to Collins, Smith showcases her innovativeness with regard to the representation of femininity by firmly rejecting traditional and stereotypical images of this latter as a synonym of passivity and submissiveness. Lastly, gender oppression as immediate social product of Orleans' destruction is tackled through the dangers and risks women are more vulnerable to as effective or potential mothers as well as objects of sexual abuse. As a result, my study attest to the vitality and restlessness of the dystopian subgenre (and, thus, of young adult literature) by way of Smith's success in, in contrast to widespread works, accomplishing dystopian fiction's main pedagogical purpose to urge young readers to critically inspect

the social reality they inhabit through a plausible, challenging, and inspiring dystopian world. To conclude, my work wishes to emphasise the value of a communal and concurrent effort of authors, publishers, and readers to welcome as well as push towards increasingly brave and honest portrayals of diversity within young adult literature.

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Young Adult Literature

1.1 Analysis of the critical reception of the young adult genre in the last decades

1.1.1 Scholarly marginalisation of young adult literature

For decades after the publication of what is frequently cited as the earliest critical acknowledgement of a “separate, identifiable body of books to be read by [a] separate, identifiable body of readers, that is, young adults” (i.e., Dwight L. Burton’s 1951 essay “The Novel for the Adolescent”) (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.2), young adult literature has been perceived in the field of literary theory as a relatively new concept that, as a category distinct from that of children’s literature, could hardly stand up on its own and thus be worthy of close study. This marginalisation is pointed out in 1996 by scholar Caroline Hunt who in her essay “Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists” seeks to draw critical attention to the need to take action and foster meaningful conversation around a genre that until that moment had been disregarded by most authoritative literary scholars. However, the persistent underappreciation and neglect of young adult literature as a viable and independent genre in the following years, noted by Professor Crag Hill in the “Introduction” to his collection of essays *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature: Coming of Age* (2014), seems to suggest that the explicit and extensive examination of the body of literature published for young adults over the recent years remains severely limited. Cindy L. Daniels (2006) validates this view in her article “Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies” (2006), where she observes: “[...] contemporary works that have been labelled as YA tend to be ignored by many serious literary critics” (p. 78). Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale confirm this in 2009 by observing the scanty theoretical analysis of young adult literature despite the sudden expansion of the latter, determined by the rapid increase of adolescents in the U.S. population at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Almost a decade later, Amy Pattee (2017) corroborates the same perspective by speaking in terms of a ‘fragmented’ approach of literary criticism to the young adult genre, resulting from an extremely little growth in attention to young adult texts over the years as most

commentary has been repeatedly addressing the same literary phenomena. In this sense, this fragmentation contributes to the lack of research that aims to “theorize YA fiction as a type of literature that has its own constellation of concerns that mark it as distinctive from literature for either children or adults” (Coats, 2010, p. 317). Interestingly, the underlying reasons for the fact that young adult literature, with a tradition of at least fifty years (Hunt, 1996), lacks a robust critical base that might legitimise it as an autonomous and distinct genre, appear to largely correspond to those identified by Caroline Hunt.

1.1.2 Critical reluctance to distinguish the young adult from children’s literature

A first crucial issue is related to the idea that “virtually no theoretical criticism attaches to young adult literature *as such*” (Hunt, 1996, p. 4). This implies that literary academics may handle the latter not as a separate and unique phenomenon but as an indistinguishable component of a wider field of study, that is, children’s literature. Thus, young adult literature is not tackled and discussed in the capacity of a stand-alone genre whose potential and specific theoretical issues might differentiate it not only from literature for adults, but from books targeted at younger children as well (Hunt, 1996). Rather, the great theorists of the 1980s seem to favour the exploration of literature for young adults and children with no distinctions (Hunt, 1996). Namely, it may be the case of Jacqueline Rose’s seminal *The Case of Peter Pan; or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984), of Juliet Dusinberre’s *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children’s Books and Radical Experiments in Art* (1987) or Zohar Shavit’s *Poetics of Children’s Literature* (1986), which all argue their points through lists of young adult and children’s titles that are not differentiated as such. What is more, for instance, while elaborating on her theory that there exists an imbalance of power in the relationship between adult author and child reader, Rose’s critical attention is not directed towards the demographic, racial, ethnic, social, gendered nature of the ‘child’. As a matter of fact, although she recognises these possible differences, her perspective stays all-encompassing through her definition of the ‘child’ as a notion purposely constructed to satisfy the needs of children’s literature authors and critics (Rose, 1992). In the 1990s, despite the possible acknowledgement of distinct features, these do not appear to suffice in order to represent a specific set of

literary qualities and concerns that may designate a literature of its own. Other than Peter Hunt's 1991 work, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature*, and the 1995 landmark volume *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*, both of which implicitly separate children and adolescents but do not directly address them as two categories, Caroline Hunt mentions both John Stephens's and Perry Nodelman's critical studies as prime examples. In the former, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992), Stephens goes a step further and expresses better awareness by paying attention to age differences, though occasionally (Hunt, 1996). More explicit is Nodelman's show of recognition, in the first edition of *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* (1992), of the possibility of differing critical perspectives that, conversely, require the need to regard the young adult genre as a self-determined form of literature. In this regard, he claims:

Many people disagree with my contention [...] that young adult fiction is merely a subgenre of children's literature. I've been told that I ought not to have even mentioned young adult literature in a book about children's literature. As a kind of writing intended for teenagers, a group of people quite different from younger children, young adult literature [appears to some people to be] a completely different kind of writing, with its own distinctive characteristics. (Nodelman in Hunt, 1996, p. 4)

In other words, then, critical studies developed and published in the fifteen years preceding Caroline Hunt's essay, either conceived young adult literature as subsumed within children's literature and thus not worthy of being distinguished from the latter or, while admitting differences of opinion, still made the arbitrary decision not to separate the two. In both cases, Hunt (1996) highlights that "from 1980 to 1955, [...] not a single major theorist in the field deals with young adult literature as something separate from literature for younger children" (p. 5).

1.1.3 Relative youth of young adult literature and its readership

The second cause of the difficulty in establishing and nurturing a theoretical understanding of young adult literature as such is identified with the relative youth of the latter and its intended audience: "[t]he very nature of the genre and its readership prevents the saying of any critical last word" (Coats, 2010, p. 328). As Hunt (1996) notes, in fact, one way the young adult genre departs from children's literature involves the distinctive lengths of their traditions. More in detail, the recorded history of children's books could

go back to the English eighteenth-century publisher John Newbery, celebrated as the father of the genre, or to Puritan minister and author James Janeway's seventeenth-century books, or potentially even to the Sumerian period (i.e., fourth century BCE) (Hunt, 1996). On the other hand, a number of scholars and librarians may acknowledge as the actual period that saw the birth of a distinct body of literature for young adults the 1960s, with the publication of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968), which brilliantly epitomise the emergence of realism as the most suitable form to portray the delights and dilemmas experienced by teenagers in the changing world of their time (Cart, 2016a). A second proposed origin of the genre may be otherwise traced back to J. D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye* which, despite being targeted at adults as well, was so well received by adolescents for its "tone, attitude, and choice of narrative incidents" that it became a model for the modern young adult novel (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1). Alternatively, young adult literature as a distinct category is argued to begin no earlier than the 1940s with the publication of Maureen Daly's debut novel *Seventeenth Summer* in 1942, although the author herself pointed out in 1994 that it was originally intended as a "full adult novel" (Berger in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1). In any case, no one seems to suggest that the young adult genre begins before World War Two. Furthermore, it may be claimed that the recent development of young adult literature evidently mirrors the relative youth of the conceptualisation of the audience it aims to address, which appears to date back only a little over a century (i.e., 1904) or even less (1930s) (Cart, 2016a). Moreover, not only is the concept of 'young adult' culturally defined, as it is "much more firmly entrenched in North America and Europe than elsewhere" (Hunt, 1996, p. 5), but it is an extremely blurred concept as well. As it will be explored in the following paragraphs, in fact, young adult literature expert Michael Cart (2016a) remarks that, while a modern perception of adolescence views the latter as between the ages of twelve and nineteen, the same notion in the contemporary American (and European) society describes a "significantly more attenuated process" that may extend up to the age of twenty-eight (Part 2.9). Hence, as it tends to be inevitably related to an ever-changing and evolving sociocultural entity, the young adult genre as well as this latter's relationship with the 'young adult' cannot but be, to a certain extent, equally ambiguous. Marc Aronson illustrates this perspective by delineating young adult literature as "[...] an agglomeration of instabilities. It requires us, simultaneously, to

define three inherently unstable terms: what are young adults, what is literature, and what is the literature that has some special link to those readers” (as cited in Hill, 2014, p. 7). Without any united agreement about the nature of the young adult as a literary genre, C. Hunt observes that critical commentary and research conducted on the subject may be hardly carried out without raising further questions (Hill, 2014). Similarly, it appears just as evident that a literary genre which has existed for eighty years at most accrues scarce theoretical discussion in comparison to a literature with a longer recorded history such as that for children.

1.1.4 Transformation of the teenage experience

Strictly related to the nature of the ‘young adult’ and its body of literature is the ephemerality of the teenage years leading young adult texts to age more promptly than those for younger children (Hunt, 1996). As a matter of fact, this could be the case of older titles from the late 1960s and 1970s which, by providing an accurate representation of language and dialogue made of specific speech patterns and slangs, of particular tastes in clothing, amusements, and drugs, as well as of special cultural references and attitudes, may seem to the contemporary readership similar to historical novels. To illustrate, C. Hunt mentions a 1996 student’s feedback on Paul Zindel’s 1969 *My Darling, My Hamburger*, whose dialogue is described as mainly outdated and stiff. Conversely, young adult books imbued with contemporary slangs and featuring the alternative new format of the text message would be hardly grasped by the young reader living before the digital age. Namely, American writer Lauren Myracle’s *Internet Girls* series (2004-2014) is composed of single titles which are typical abbreviations that adolescents nowadays may use, such as *ttyl* (i.e., ‘talk to you later’), *tfn* (i.e., ‘ta-ta for now’, an informal way of saying ‘goodbye’), *l8r, g8r* (i.e., ‘see you later, alligator’, another informal way of saying ‘goodbye’), and *Yolo* (i.e., ‘you only live once’, a modern version of the Latin phrase *Carpe diem*, that is, ‘seize the day’). With regard to the stylistic form, American author Lisa Greenwald operates similarly to Myracle with her more recent young adult series *TBH* (2018-2021). At the same time, in terms of content, it could be said that the immediacy and versatility as well as the pressures and risks that come with the habit of communicating through social media in young people’s present lives affect, for instance,

the development of both Becky Albertalli's young adult book *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015) and Casey McQuinston's romance novel *Red, White & Royal Blue* (2019) in ways that adolescents from older generations may struggle to fully comprehend. Supposedly, then, the swift evolution of lifestyles and habits reflecting teenagers' search for identity over the decades necessarily has a more significant impact on young adult social realism than on that of children (Hunt, 1996). With reference to this, Hunt (1996) proceeds to emphasise the fact that, if the young adult genre is presented as an essentially "disposable record of a fleeting moment" (p. 6), critical in-depth-studies may be more likely to direct their attention to social issues rather than literary theory. In this sense, Coats questions whether those books that are seemingly strongly rooted in the historical, social, and cultural period they are conceived and published in can be theoretically approached in alternative valid ways that may reveal young adult literature's complexity. Indeed, she wonders:

How does one think seriously about texts that are apt to have a short shelf life because their success depends on their responsiveness to a readership who are, by definition, in a state of flux? Should we only study those texts [...] which engage in weighty philosophical and ethical questions? Or should we find ways to think about the more ephemeral books, the ones that are widely read, but probably won't outlast their generation? (Coats, 2010, p. 321)

If "ephemeral" texts can be seriously thought of, Zindel's novel as well as those by Myracle, Greenwald, Albertalli and McQuinston are to be intended as young adult texts that possessed (and still possess) theoretical relevance due to their depictions of adolescence as a universal experience of:

intensified formation of identity, of awareness of sexuality [...], of adult fallibility, of recognition/articulation of inequality, of recognition and potential resistance to authority (familial and societal), of formation of lifelong ideals/goals, of recognition of mortality, and of recognition of differences, [...]. (Hill, 2014, p. 19)

1.1.5 Educational employment of the young adult genre

A further meaningful cause that encourages C. Hunt to call on theorists to focus on young adult literature as a critical subject is the idea that, in the academic field, courses on the young adult genre tend to be (at least until when she published her essay) service

courses for Education and Library Science majors, thus likely concerned with topical lists and trends, analyses of literary elements, pedagogical studies and applications, and issues of censorship (Coats, 2010). In this respect, Coats mentions Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen P. Nilsen's *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, first published in 1980, as the definitive textbook in the field. A similar educational approach is present, for instance, in Suzanne Elizabeth Reid's handbook *Book Bridges for ESL Students: Using Young Adult and Children's Literature to Teach ESL* (2002), Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo's guide *From Hinton to Hamlet: Building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics* (1996), John H. Bushman's and Kay Parks Haas's *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* (1993), and Robert T. Vacca, Jo Anne L. Vacca and Maryann E. Mraz's *Content Area Reading: Literacy and Learning Across the Curriculum* (1999), whose didactic aims are centred on the interaction between texts and readers, specifically on the latter's engagement with and response to the former. Thus, the young adult genre is typically employed as, rather than a "destination in and of itself", a medium, a stop among many, a "house you pass on the way" towards the true ultimate and more relevant destinations, that is, the teaching and subsequent learning of sociocultural or pedagogical values, historical facts, a language, classical and supposedly more complex literary pieces (Coats, 2010, p. 316). In other words, as Hunt (1996) argues, "the mindset of a YA class [...] remains resolutely pragmatic" (p. 8). While the situation may have been improving since Hunt's essay, the publication of revised and updated editions of textbooks such as the one by Hertz and Gallo (published in its second edition in 2005), by Donelson and Nilsen (published in its ninth edition in 2013) or by Vacca, Vacca and Mraz (published in its thirteenth edition in 2020), still seems to suggest a stable and consistent connection between the young adult genre and classroom applications.

1.1.6 External pressures: marketing and censorship

Additionally, Hunt (1996) pinpoints two particular non-academic phenomena which divert the attention of several authors and scholars that may otherwise theorize the field of young adult texts. The first refers to the marketing strategies employed by publishing companies, bookstores, and libraries which, by issuing young adult titles in the form of paperbacks instead of hardcovers and by leaving room only for a limited

number of chosen writers in their YA sections, might prevent the potential intensified inspection of young adult literature (Hunt, 1996). A second external pressure relates to the threat of censorship to young adult books. Indeed, as they typically render more or less faithfully the adolescent condition, young adult texts can involve a language that some adults do not deem appropriate for their readers, students, or sons and daughters, experiences (especially concerning sexuality, drinking and drugs, violence, mental illness, etc.) that can make adults uncomfortable, as well as the possibility of serious challenges to authority figures that adults might not appreciate. Consequently, adult denunciation of these allegedly sensitive topics or taboos, much less present in children's literature, can considerably affect theorists' approach to young adult books.

1.1.7 Young adult books are simply “not serious enough”

A central reason that, on the one hand, brings together young adult and children's literatures and, on the other, explains the lack of analysis of the young adult genre in the academic literary field, is that this latter is conceived as a body of literature that is not serious enough to stand among the great literary genres. To better illustrate, while acknowledging the existence already in his time of novels written for and read by teenagers displaying credible and well-developed plots (the most widely praised among these being Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*), scholar Richard S. Alm describes in his 1955 essay the majority of books for adolescents as “sugar-puff”, oversimplified stories that fail to “penetrate beneath the surface” and thus capture “superficial, often distorted, sometimes completely false representations of adolescence” (p. 315). It could be said that this perspective is echoed in a way by the provocative *Slate* piece “Against YA”, published in 2014 by Ruth Graham. By addressing the crossover phenomenon which, as it will be later examined, motivates to a certain extent the immense popularity of young adult books, Graham (2014) appears in fact to mercilessly condemn the consumption of these texts by an adult audience: “Today's YA, we are constantly reminded, is worldly and adult-worthy. That has kept me bashful about expressing my own fuddy-duddy opinion: Adults *should* feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children” (para. 3). With specific reference to realistic fiction and, as case in point, John Green's 2012 novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, Graham proceeds to interrogate the idea that an adult

reader, equipped with a maturity granted by his past life experiences, might find meaning in stories apparently devoid of the depth, the truthfulness to reality, the sophistication, the moral and emotional ambiguity, the dark endings, the complex (to the point of being at times unlikable) characters that can be generally encountered in adult literature (“Against YA”). A similar view appears to be shared by several literary critics that devalue the young adult genre by accusing it of being “for children only”, “somewhat simplistic”, “chick lit for teens”, “less than literary”, “not serious enough for use in schools”, “a marketing ploy”, “written by less serious or amateur writers”, “experimental”, “not established enough to bid for spots in the canon” (Stephens, 2007, p. 34). These kinds of negative assessments undoubtedly result in the dismissal of young adult literature as “disconnected to the literary community” (Daniels, 2006, p. 78). Nevertheless, Graham’s analysis of Green’s text fails to take into account, for instance, its peculiar conclusion which is by no means generalisable as the happy and satisfying ending that presumably characterises all young adult fiction. As a matter of fact, if the ending of Hazel and her lover’s romance could meet the expectations of the reader who appreciates tragic love stories, the aftermath sets the stage for a somehow unresolved conclusion to the book. After the death of her lover the reader is left with multiple unanswered questions about Hazel Grace’s fate: will she live? Will she meet someone else? Will she reconcile with the author of her favourite novel? Simply put, what will happen next? From this perspective, then, Green’s young adult novel seems to offer no real closure to the reader, just like the author of Hazel Grace’s favourite novel does. The same argument could be made about an unlimited number of young adult books. By way of illustration, the ending of Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* series (2008-2010) (belonging to the dystopian genre that is dismissed by Graham as “transparently trashy stuff”) (2014, para. 4) is barely positive and gratifying. Katniss’s final words in the epilogue (“But one day I’ll have to explain about my nightmares. Why they came. Why they won’t ever really go away”) (Collins, 2010, p. 438), seem to suggest that, despite having survived and finally found some semblance of peace and closure, she will never be able to completely overcome her traumatic past. In addition, Katniss can hardly represent a likable and two-dimensional character thanks to the first-person narrative employed in the books. Indeed, throughout the trilogy, the reader is constantly and immediately exposed to Katniss’s every thought, reaction, and emotion which, when she feels for instance confused, in denial or lost and

acts accordingly, can make her appear obnoxious and unsympathetic. Clearly, this is not supposed to imply that in order to be complex, a character must necessarily be disagreeable. In the series, Peeta is a righteous character who is likely to elicit empathy and solidarity in the reader from beginning to end, and this is precisely what gives him substance. Graham's generalisations about character development, likability, bleak endings, ambiguity, adherence to reality, and weight of the story are defied by a considerable number of young adult texts, i.e., Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Robert E. Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (1999), Ned Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (2006), Amy Reed's *The Nowhere Girls* (2017). As a result, young adult literature cannot possibly be reduced to a form of writing that is simply too inherently shallow to actively challenge its readership, ordinary and academic.

Keeping in mind all this, Alm's and Graham's evaluations about young adult books may parallel the lack of serious adult consideration of children's literature which is disqualified by the theorists as a "non-subject", rooted on narrative, fundamentally "simple, ephemeral, popular, and designed for an immature audience" (Hunt, 1991, p. 6), as well as primarily feminine, that is, predominated by female writers, teachers, librarians, and critics (Moss, 1982). Although the field of children's literature has been undergoing a steady growth of critical interest and activity since after World War Two, nourished by the circulation of good periodicals as well as the academic study favoured in colleges and universities, to the point of being acknowledged as part of the mainstream of literature in the 1970s (Hunt & Butts, 1995, p. 238), diverging views about judging children's books by the same critical and literary standards as adult literature persist. In this respect, scholar Barbara Wall speaks in terms of "writing down" to indicate the creative process of an author for children who, after recognising the apparent intrinsic differences in the skills, interests and areas of experience of his audience, is required to restrict and adapt the material and techniques of the discourse so as to make it accessible (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999). However, the possible simplicity of texts for young readers in their style, vocabulary, or content should not be regarded as a yardstick for their quality, worth, and substance nor as a definite identifying mark of the genre. Children's books' writer Nathalie Babbitt successfully emphasises this perspective. Specifically, maintaining that children's literature is neither naturally less serious, nor necessarily concerned with

“simpler” or “different” emotions (“[...] there is, in point of fact, no such thing as an exclusively adult emotion, and children’s literature deals with them all”) (as cited in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999, p. 24) or with lighter issues (“[...] war, disability, poverty, cruelty, all the harshest aspects of life are present in children’s literature”) (as cited in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999, p. 24) than adult literature, Babbitt argues that language usage is not a criterion according to which children’s and adult books can be thoroughly distinguished. More in detail, she shows this by considering the language differences between two opening sentences. The first, taken from a text typically appreciated by an adult readership, *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway (1929), features two coordinated clauses and a fairly common lexis: “Now in the fall the trees were all bare and the roads were muddy” (Babbitt in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999, p. 24). On the other hand, the second, opening the short children story by Rudyard Kipling, *How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin* (1898), includes a subordinate clause and a more sophisticated vocabulary: “Once upon a time, on an uninhabited island on the shores of the Red Sea, there lived a Parsee from whose hat the rays of the sun were reflected in more-than-oriental splendour” (Babbitt in Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999, p. 24). Consequently, the potential employment of a seemingly simplified language, the ever-increasing cultural and commercial importance, and the major crossover appeal, could all be perceived as evidence of a deeper, more complex, and complete understanding of people and the world concealed under the surface of books for young readers. In other words, it is a comprehension of reality that implies a capability of giving meaning and interpreting that only a young readership can possess as it is more “intellectually confident, mentally supple and relatively free of ideological harness” than an adult audience (Hollindale, 1995, p. 86).

1.1.8 First critical approaches to young adult literature

Despite the obstacles listed by C. Hunt, it is crucial to note that in the last two decades, writers creating stories, the ever-growing reading audience, schools and teachers revising the curricula to be adopted, bookstores and libraries setting up and gradually expanding the shelves dedicated to texts for adolescents, newspapers and magazines increasingly including these latter in their bestseller lists, and film studios adapting them into profitable movies, stress the increasingly pressing and relevant necessity to

distinguish between young adult literature and the other existing literary genres. It should be also taken into account that, in order to be considered as a literary genre, a body of literature should convey meaning by using distinctive strategies and by focusing on concerns that are not addressed by or felt as deeply by other kinds of writings. If Coats's perspective about the importance of the young adult genre as a "destination literature" instead of an "in-between phenomenon" (2010, p. 317) is adopted, young adult literature's innovative and unique nature must be acknowledged as the foundation of its development and progress as a specific literary category of its own. With reference to this, a number of academics do recognise the originality of young adult books. Following the lead of theorists in the field of children's literature, they in fact commit to building and fostering a rich body of criticism that explores the young adult genre and can effectively drive discussion among writers, readers, educators, and scholars (Hill, 2014). Daniels (2006), for instance, defends the critical conversation about young adult texts by referring to David L. Russell's introduction to *Literature for Children* (2005). Notably, she infers that, if literary criticism is essentially the analysis of literature carried out in order to interpret its meaning, to assess its quality, to promote its appreciation as well as high literary standards as Russell maintains, then there is no plausible reason to avoid the serious theoretical study of the young adult genre. As Coats (2010) underlines, the primary purpose of these scholars is to establish a history of young adult literature and a canon of valuable texts that can demonstrate the genre's "ability to stand up to the rigors of critical scrutiny" (p. 317) and thus legitimise it as independent in the field of literary studies. Accordingly, in his 2010 article "Kicking It Up Beyond the Casual: Fresh Perspectives in Young Adult Literature", David Cappella outlines four trending theoretical approaches to young adult literature, which arguably contribute to "further define" its purpose, to "elevate" and "expand" it beyond the idea of employing it merely as a tactical or capitalising device in the classroom or popular culture (p. 9). He takes note, in particular, of scholarly studies situating the young adult novel in contemporary literary, political, or cultural theory, of those revisiting neglected or older texts, of those gauging work in other cultures and, finally, of analyses applying interdisciplinary modalities to more recent books (Cappella, 2010). In this regard, Mike Cadden's essay, "The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel" (2000), may testify to the growth of serious theoretical reflection on the young adult genre by interrogating the role and

validity of the narrative voice in young adult novels through the case studies of S. Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and R. E. Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. Similar serious critical attention is discernible in the collections of essays by Giselle Lisa Anatol's (*Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays* and *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays*, published in 2003 and 2009) and by Mary F. Pharr, Leisa A. Clark, and Donald E. Palumbo (*Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, published in 2012), developed, respectively, around the Harry Potter and Hunger Games phenomena in the first decade of the twenty-first century. A more recent case in point might be Crag Hill and Victor Malo-Juvera's *Critical Explorations of Young Adult Literature: Identifying and Critiquing the Canon* (2019) which examines an array of some of the most discussed works for young adults through varied, at times differing, critical lenses (e.g., Judy Blume's *Forever* is considered through the framework of feminist literary theory and gender criticism, whereas Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* is read through an ecocritical approach). This kind of works, then, underpins young adult literature as a genre that is perfectly capable of existing on its terms, constantly evolving, totally legitimate as authentic and honest representation of the human experience and thus absolutely worthy of critical consideration.

1.2 Towards an accurate definition of young adult literature

1.2.1 Broad and detailed definitions

As stressed by C. Hunt and Aronson, the recent nature of both the concepts of 'young adult' and, as a result, of 'young adult literature' might prevent to a certain extent the exploration of the latter in the field of literary criticism. Being said that, as summarised above, the acknowledgment of young adult literature as stand-alone implies the firm separation between the latter and the literatures for children and adults, how can the young adult genre be exactly defined? Scholars propose in this respect various definitions, broad or detailed. Potentially including "everything from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Cujo* to *Harry Potter* to *The Gossip Girls* to *Looking for Alaska* to the Bible" (Hill, 2014, p. 6), for instance, J. H. Bushman and K. P. Haas broadly define young adult literature as "literature for and about adolescents" (as cited in Hill, 2014, p. 6). It could be argued, however, that such descriptions do not properly offer the necessary criteria that can help better

understand what is meant by ‘young adult literature’. With reference to children’s literature, P. Hunt remarks a similar critical tendency: “[c]hildren’s literature, [...] can quite reasonably be defined as books read by, especially suitable for, or especially satisfying for, members of the group defined as children” (Hunt, 1991, p. 61). Assuming that, logically speaking, the same definition could be applied to young adult literature, the issue with this statement may be that subjective qualities such as *good*, *suitable*, and *satisfying* fail to unbiasedly illustrate the special functions or purposes that a given children’s or, in this case, young adult book should fulfil to be recognised as such. Simply put, several objective variables may need to be included in order to put forward a definition of young adult literature that is universal, comprehensive, and delimiting as opposed to excessively partial, generic, and vague. In this sense, some critics such as R. Small provide more elaborate definitions by listing a number of characteristics that supposedly qualify every young adult book:

[T]he main character is a teenager, events and problems in the plot are related to teenagers, the main character is the center of the plot, dialogue reflects teenage speech, including slang, the point of view presents an adolescent’s interpretation of events and people, the teenage main character is usually perceptive, sensitive, intelligent, mature, and independent, the novel is short and rarely more than 200 pages, and the actions and decisions of the main characters are major factors in the outcome of the conflict. (as cited in Hill, 2014, p. 6)

Observing that Small’s definition, together with a profusion of others (offered by researchers such as P. Cole, R. Hopper, J. Stephens, P. Campbell) (Hill, 2014), seems to suggest that young adult literature exclusively consists of realistic fictional narratives, Hill (2014) attempts to include all subgenres (i.e., fantasy, historical fiction, mystery, biography, memoir, science fiction and non-fiction) and narrative styles (multiple narrators viewpoints, lack of chronological linearity) ascribable to young adult literature:

YA literature is generally perceived as fiction that immerses readers in the experiences, lived and imagined, of young adults aged 14-18. Frequently written in the first person, YA narratives across genres enable identification with the narrator and/or encourage empathy for the protagonist and/or other characters. (p. 8)

At the same time, it should be noted that the intended audience of such literature seems especially difficult to outline in unequivocal terms. Indeed, not only is the existence of the ‘young adult’ definitely more established in the industrial and post-industrial western

realities, but its age range has been gradually expanded by the contemporary social and economic conditions of the Western world (Cart, 2016a). Evidently, when concerned with the adolescent, and as essentially a portrayal of a specific cultural, social, political, and historical moment, literature cannot but incorporate its subject's changing nature. In this respect, embraced by theorists in the field of children's literature (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1999), an insightful approach to the young adult genre may involve its investigation through its separate components. Therefore, this paragraph aims to shed light on young adult literature through the exploration of the transformation of the concept of 'young adult' in American culture and society, of its effects on the literature targeted at young adult readers, as well as the peculiar relationship and power dynamic between reader, author, and text.

1.2.2 The 'young adult': a sociocultural construct

It has been anticipated that, as is the case for children's literature, young adult literature is traditionally defined by its readership rather than its writers (Coats, 2010). Consequently, it is crucial to establish above all what is meant by 'young adult'. In his guide to *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* (2016), Michael Cart explains that until the beginning of the twentieth century American society officially recognised only two categories of citizens, that is, children and adults:

For a while it was acknowledged that there were human beings who occupied an ill-defined developmental space somewhere between childhood and adulthood, the *idea*, the *concept*, the *notion* that this space comprised a separate and distinct part of the evolution from childhood to adulthood was still foreign in a society accustomed to seeing children become adults virtually overnight as a result of their entering the full time workforce, often as early as age ten. (Part 1.1)

Specifically, S. Mondale and S. B. Patton observe that, until 1900, no more than 11.4 percent of the entire fourteen- to seventeen-year-old population was enrolled in school, and those that were received on average only five years of education (in Cart, 2016). The situation started to change only four years later, with the publication of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall's seminal *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904), which introduced for the first time the notion of a new category of human being, that is, the

adolescent (Cart, 2016a). While most of Hall's theories about adolescence has been discredited (such as the idea that child development is closely connected with the notion of 'race'), his vision of this new stage of life as a time of storm and stress, inner turmoil, rebelliousness, awkwardness, and vulnerability, became extremely influential, to the point of being embraced both by educators and the population of youth workers of the time (Cart, 2016a). Such view remained valid in the 1990s, when the darker aspects of teenage life involved alcohol and drug abuse, distress, suicide, pregnancy, rape, assault, arson, murder, vandalism, and gang fights, as well as in the contemporary western society, especially with respect to issues like depression, anxiety, substance abuse, gun-related school violence, bullying, and suicide (Cart, 2016a). It should be noted that, while the specific term 'young adult' is not employed by Hall and his disciples, their definitions of adolescence tend to embody the modern sense of young adults as somewhere between twelve and nineteen years of age (Cart, 2016a). It is, then, with the Great Depression that the existence of 'young adults' as a separate category of human development would start to be socially acknowledged, with teenage youth being pushed out of the workplace and into the classroom (Palladino in Cart, 2016a). As Cart (2016a) observes, by 1939, 75 percent of fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds were high-school students and by 1940, nearly 51 percent of seventeen-year-olds were earning diplomas. As a result of young people being in each other's company on a daily basis, a youth culture centered on high-school social life, concerned with matters such as dating and dancing, arose (Cart, 2016a).

Nowadays, the concept of 'adolescence' could be generally defined as "an intense and challenging time of risk and change, of learning and growth, of biological and social development" (Hewlett, 2013, p. 2). It exists both as a social construct, that is, the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood, and a biological construct, associated with the onset of reproductive maturation (i.e., puberty) (Ember et al., 2017). In this respect, scholars A. Schlegel and H. Barry's 1991 cross-cultural study reports a global recognition of the fundamental meaning of adolescence as a distinct developmental category of human beings (Ember et al., 2017). At the same time, the duration of social adolescence as well as the modes of transition in or out of it can vary among cultures and societies. Indeed, some of them may require a formal and public ceremonial initiation rite marking this passage; others might involve a subtler form of transition, such as gradual changes in the young person's responsibilities (Ember et al., 2017). Moreover, biological

adolescence may also evade universal definitions as puberty involves a series of changes occurring over time rather than a single event (Ember et al., 2017). For instance, contemporary industrial and post-industrial western societies tend to redefine what is meant by the terms ‘young adult’ and ‘adolescent’ in a way that the distinctive aspects that once made adolescence a transitional stage of human life crystallised. As a consequence of economic hard times, young adults seem in fact less likely to rush to accept adult responsibilities by returning home to live with their parents as well as delaying both professional and personal commitments until their early thirties (Cart, 2016a). Coming of age, then, has become a considerably more extended process leading the adolescent to reach adulthood later than it would have been expected in the past. As B. Kantrowitz and K. Springen point out:

[t]he old view of adolescence was that it ended at 18 or 19. Now, with many young adults in their early 20s still struggling to find their foothold in the world, doctors call the years from 18 to 28 the second decade of adolescence. (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.9)

On the other hand, Schlegel and Barry’s extensive study reveals that in the large majority of non-industrial societies, “[i]ndependence as we know it would be regarded as not only eccentric and egotistical but also foolhardy beyond reason” (Schlegel and Barry, 1991, p. 45). As a matter of fact, not only are young adults expected to continue to live with their parents or other relatives, even after they married (Ember et al., 2017), but their primary source of financial and social support, livelihood, and standing in the community remains the family unit (Schlegel and Barry, 1991). Schlegel and Barry’s analysis (1991) also uncovers that most marriages in non-industrial cultures occur during adolescence (i.e., between the ages of fourteen and sixteen for females, and between the ages of sixteen and twenty for males). In addition, it is perhaps worth noting that, if the threshold between adolescence and adulthood was to be equated with the end of education, young adults can leave school by the age of ten in Bangladesh, fifteen in Nigeria, and eighteen in Argentina. Or, if the line between the two stages were to be associated with the minimum age of legal employment, in the abovementioned countries this would, respectively, be fourteen, fifteen, and eighteen (Hunt, 2021). In view of all these contrasting social realities where the notion of adolescence can encompass differing characteristics, it may be inferred that the consensus on a valid conceptualisation of the ‘adolescent’ and the ‘young adult’ ends with the idea that it is a life stage stretching from the end of childhood until the taking on

of adult competence and responsibility. Thus, possible more specific meanings are formed by the particulars of a given historical, social, and cultural situation.

Simultaneously, from a diachronic point of view, it could be observed that childhood (intended as the period of human life that, according to the old child-adult binary, also incorporates the modern concept of adolescence) appears to be remarkably complex to define as extreme and conflicting versions of it have been taken to be absolute truths throughout the centuries. Namely, in seventeenth-century America, the ‘child’ was posited by the theoretical and spiritual doctrine of Puritanism as tainted by original sin and inherently evil, thus in need to be restrained through discipline. As John Robinson, pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers before they set sail for the New World, asserted in his essay “Of Children, and their Education” (1625):

And surely there is, in all *children*, (though not alike), a stubbornnes, and stoutnes of minde arising from naturall pride, which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down; that so the foundation of their *education* being layd in humilitie, and tractablenes, other virtues may, in their time, be built thereon. (as cited in Clark, 1860, p. 447)

At the opposite end of the spectrum was the prevailing belief that, from the mid-eighteenth century until a century later, fostered a more positive perspective on the child as emblem of innocence, freedom, creativity, and self-discovery, that must be shielded from the horrors and hardships of the world (Reynolds, 2014). Alternatively, the conditions created by the Civil War, the two World Wars as well as postwar times threatened and eventually rejected the eighteenth-century pastoral portrayal of the child. Indeed, the hectic pace of modern life, the juvenilisation of poverty, the pressures of high-stake testing as well as the commercialisation of desire gradually led to the recognition of young people as necessarily capable, armoured, and aware in order to face the world’s future threats, dangers, and desires (Sánchez-Eppler, 2021). As American historian Steven Mintz (2004) remarks, American contemporaneity maintains a postwar approach based on the understanding of youth as a ‘project’, whose ultimate objective is the development of all the skills, knowledge, competences, and personality traits deemed crucial for adulthood success. Based on these considerations, the ‘young adult’ (together with the ‘child’) cannot be regarded as a diachronically stable concept. Equally, if examined across cultures or geographical locations at the same point in time (i.e.,

synchronously), discrepancies persist. Hence, it may be concluded that the notion of ‘young adult’ shifts constantly from culture to culture, place to place, period to period.

1.2.3 Young adult literature evolving with its implied reader

As young adult literature depends on the involvement of its audience, differences in cultural and social positions and understandings on the ‘young adult’ must have visible consequences in its production. In other words, as the notion of adolescence manifestly continues evolving through culture, space, and time, the literature intended for young adults, which refers to them within a given social reality, must vary accordingly. On the one hand, as already discussed, C. Hunt underpins this idea by listing among the probable causes of the lack of serious scholarly study on the young adult genre, the relative youth of both the notions of ‘young adult’ and, thus, of young adult literature. On the other hand, the historical and cultural evolution of children’s literature (which, as noted above, young adult literature was arbitrarily considered to be part of at least until the 1930s) and its purpose may validate this argument as well. Indeed, with reference to the aforementioned conceptualisations of the ‘child’, specific writings have been produced over time. Respectively, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the story of children’s literature in America began with the arrival of the Puritans: “[...] the circumstances of their coming, the nature of their settlements, and the attitudes they brought with them had an influence beyond their number on early American culture and on the development of an American literature for children” (Hunt & Butts, 1995, p. 102), whose main function was instruction in religious doctrine. For instance, this was the case of *The New England Primer* (1690), the first educational textbook designed for the American colonies, where verse, illustrations, and woodcuts were favoured to match most efficiently young readers’ capabilities and tastes as the authors understood them and, thus, to facilitate the memorisation of Puritan precepts (Hunt & Butts, 1995). Conversely, the subsequent radical change in the perception of youth “less as a period of preparation for adult life than as a time wonderfully separate from it” (Sánchez-Eppler, 2021, p. 40) was masterfully represented by the enchanting worlds in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1904), which would set the stage for the great fantasy authors of the twentieth

century such as C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip Pullman, and J. K. Rowling. Simultaneously, the profound alteration of the lives of young people in times of war, when they cannot be insulated from adult realities (Mintz, 2004), was rendered by Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869). Both novels, in fact, perfectly depict the struggle for economic survival, the feeling of desolation that comes with a family being disrupted and children being separated from their fathers, and the impossibility to preserve childhood and youth as a time of mere carefreeness and innocence brought about by the Civil War.

From its first appearance, similar reflections can be made about young adult literature, which “constructs as well as reflects an idea of adolescence, just as children’s literature does for childhood” (Coats, 2010, p. 324). In this respect, Cart examines the close relationship between young adults and the body of literature specifically intended for them throughout the decades. More in detail, he starts from the assumption that the emerging of books targeted at the newly found category of adolescents occurs very gradually (Cart, 2016a). While young adult literature might have had its roots in the publishing world of the immediate post-Civil War years (besides Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Nilsen and Donelson mention Horatio Alger Jr.’s *Ragged Dick*, also published in 1868), the approaches and theories developed in the early twentieth century about the adolescent did not have a considerable impact on the writing and publishing of books aimed at such readership (Cart, 2016a). In other words, as young adults were still widely regarded as children, there existed no separate category of literature particularly produced for them. It is from the early 1940s that “the new field of writing for teenagers became established” (Edwards in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1). According to American librarian M. A. Edwards, this emergence was marked by the publication in 1942 of Maureen Daly’s novel *Seventeenth Summer*. Thanks not only to the youth of Daly herself and the resulting autobiographical nature of the content of her book, but also to the fact that it told the story of summer love through the first-person voice of the seventeen-year-old protagonist and the daring inclusion of scenes of adolescents unapologetically smoking and drinking, Daly’s novel was rapidly followed by a series of imitations that attempted to replicate its success by similarly catching the hearts of young female readers. Namely, this may apply to the ‘junior novels’ written by Betty Cavanna, *Going on Sixteen* (1946), and by Rosamund du Jardin, *Practically Seventeen* (1949), which engaged in truthfully recording

the modern girl's dream of life and romance as well as the ways of adjusting to school and family experiences (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1). As Cart (2016a) underlines, such texts can be considered as early indicators to publishers of an emerging market for a literature entirely dedicated to the tastes and interests of teenagers. Richard S. Alm's essay (1955) testifies to the continuation in the 1950s of the publishing of books that, adhering to the distinction suggested by Stanley Hall back in 1908 ("Boys [love] adventure. Girls sentiment") (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1), tended to focus less on the unpleasant realities of adolescence and more, rather, on romance for girls and adventure, sports, cars, and animals for boys (Cart, 2016a). Despite the acknowledgement of a distinct group of works written for a distinct category of people, this 'head-in-the-sand' approach to the themes and topics of adolescence through "rather inconsequential stories" (Alm, 1955, p. 315) seemed to comply with publishers' final objective of capitalising on the market created and quickly expanding thanks to the emergence of youth culture (Cart, 2016a). Therefore, the young adult and literature (generally meant as the best, highest, densest, and most distinguished body of texts that a given culture can offer) still were not regarded as two notions to put together: "few works of young adult literature before 1960 would have qualified as literature. Indeed, many academics would have asserted that putting the words 'young adult' and 'literature' together produced nothing but an oxymoron" (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.2). As anticipated by Cart, then, the 1960s were a crucial period of transition for the young adult genre which, by contrast, begun to address the need to provide a more discerning and unwavering look at the conflicts and turmoils of American teenage life. Former children's book editor of *The New York Times Book Review* George Woods attested to these demands in 1966:

One looks for modernity, boldness, for realism. The teen-age novel, especially, should grapple with the delights and the dilemmas of today's teen-agers. Delicacy and restraint are necessarily called for, yet all too often this difficult problem is resolved through avoidance. A critic in touch with the world and aware of the needs of the young expects to see more handling of neglected subjects: narcotics, addiction, illegitimacy, alcoholism, pregnancy, discrimination, retardation. (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.2)

This same urgency would be reaffirmed by Polish-American children's and young adult writer Maia Wojciechowska two years later: "The gulf between the real child of today and his fictional counterpart must be bridged. And that is the responsibility of authors, publishers, and librarians. [...] For [they] have the power to build the bridge or dynamite

it” (Wojciechowska in Kingsbury, 1971, p. 327). Such calls for more candid depictions of adolescents in literary texts would be answered by a new and more straightforward generation of writers who, instead of sidestepping the potential taboos related to young adult life, would effectively break the silence with the power and frankness of their voices (Cart, 2016a). Arguably, leading these authors was S. E. Hinton with her 1967 novel *The Outsiders* which, by portraying mean urban streets inhabited by real, non-conventional teenagers who, rather than first loves and dates, agonize over their possible death in the next skirmish in their ongoing war with a rival gang, inaugurated the first golden age of young adult literature (Cart, 2016a). In this sense, Hinton’s novel, followed by Paul Zindel *The Pigman* (1968), forcefully disrupted the traditional connection of the young adult genre with predictable and stereotypical representations of adolescent lives and experiences. The first golden age of young adult literature extended from 1967 to 1975 and, thus, rested on the boldness with which authors would break new ground in terms of both subject and style (Cart, 2016a). The most significant innovation might be epitomised by Robert E. Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974), which bravely disturbed the overly comfortable universe of both teenagers and the adults who persistently made efforts to protect their sensibilities, by challenging complacency and, most importantly, by admitting that not all endings of novels and real lives are favourable ones (Cart, 2016a). Such purpose is shared by Cormier’s following thirteen novels until his last, *The Rag and Bone Shop*, published posthumously in 2000. Together with Cormier’s works, the 1970s saw the concrete emerging of a serious body of literary works that were expressively written and published for young adults. Among these might be Judy Blume’s novel *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret* (1970), dealing with social pressures in teenage lives; Alice Childress’s *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich* (1973), considering the theme of drug abuse as is the case of Walter Dean Myers’s *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975); Richard Peck’s *Are You in the House Alone?* (1976), which is the first instance in young adult literature treating rape; Newton Peck’s *A Day No Pigs Would Die* (1973), exploring the difficult relationship between fathers and sons; Lois Duncan’s *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1973) and *Killing Mr. Griffin* (1978), both concerned with (as is Zindel’s *The Pigman*) the issue of adolescent acceptance of responsibility; Lois Lowry’s *A Summer to Die* (1977), delving into the question of mortality. Through the debut of literarily and culturally powerful new voices as well as the contribution granted by

established authors, young adult novels in the 1980s persisted in giving an authentic voice to the adolescent. (Zolotow in Cart, 2016a). Nevertheless, realistic young adult fiction underwent a period of substantial decline in the 1990s, when horror tropes came to dominate the scene as a response to young people's eternal desire to shock their elders and their concurrent growing interest in all things odd and uncomfortable (Tucker in Cart, 2016a). In addition to books of gore and violence, American author Adam Hochschild argues that such downturn may be also due to the recovery of the romance series, staples of the 1920s and 1930s, as the preferred form of literary escapism for young readers, exasperated by real life: "One reason people write fewer traditional realist novels these days, is that modern readers are jaded. Film, radio, first-person journalism, prying biographers and, above all, TV have saturated us with reality" (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.4). Even more dramatic are Marc Aronson and Linda Zuckerman's perspectives according to which the 1990s led to a further period of transition that saw a weakening of the entire young adult genre's popularity to the point of being "at risk of extinction" (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.4). Engendered by the rise of a new kind of literary production (i.e., middle school literature) which from the 1980s gradually caused chain bookstores to include young adult books indiscriminately and summarily in the children's department and, thus, neglected the upper half of the young adult readership, such decline appeared to parallel a similar condition for the lives of adolescents (Cart, 2016a). These latter, in fact, were becoming:

increasingly endangered by societal and personal problems that ranged from poverty to homelessness, from fractured families to violence [...], from increased drug use to sexual harassment and rape and – perhaps as a result of all this – an exponential increase [...] in teenage suicide. (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.4)

However, young adult literature managed to endure thanks to a series of meaningful events that made its rebirth and revival possible. One of these is the employment in American classrooms of a new method of teaching reading, the whole-language movement, which favours the use of modern and contemporary trade books instead of classical basal readers (Cart, 2016a). Secondly, after a fifteen-year period of decline, America's teen population (between the ages of twelve and nineteen) spiked considerably, growing 16.6 percent from 1990 to 2000 to the point that, by the mid-1990s in the U.S. there occurred a "renaissance of youth culture" (Bernstein in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.5). As an increase in teenage population (whose current steady continuation is attested

by a nearly 7.2 percent growth of teens between the ages of ten and nineteen from 2000 to 2020) (United States Census Bureau, 2023) implies an increase in customers accessing the American marketplace (“In 1995, people between 13 and 19 spent \$68.8 billion on personal items, up from \$49.8 billion in 1985”) (Pogrebin in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.5), publishing houses, libraries, and bookstores implemented a number of changes through which they could successfully attract the attention of the young adult as the consumer par excellence. First, to remedy the assimilation of young adult literature’s original readership with the younger readers of middle school literature, the reconfiguration of Barnes and Noble’s older stores as well as the creation of separate stand-alone young adult sections in their new ones were carried out so that young adult texts would no longer be part of children’s departments (Parker in Cart, 2016a). Furthermore, strategies to market the genre were put into action. Namely, these would involve publishing more affordable editions as well as books belonging to the new subgenre of bleak-books, focused on depicting the harsh realities of teenage life in the 1990s; book reviewing and advertising on typical teenage platforms such as TV channels (MTV) and magazines (e.g., *Seventeen*, *Sassy*, *Spin*, *Teen People*, *Cosmo Girl*); opening shopping mall-based bookstore chains (e.g., Waldenbooks and B. Dalton) and thus shifting the book market from schools and libraries to bookstores; establishing young adult literary prizes (e.g., created in the form of the Michael L. Printz Award by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 1999). Based on the idea of the young adult as a literary category that may cross “all the barriers” (Block in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.5) and that potentially satisfies all interests, young adult texts also began being cross-promoted through their inclusion in both children’s and adults’ catalogues (Cart, 2016a). As a result of all this, Cart infers: “Simply stated, this means that we adult professionals are no longer considered the principal purchasers of YA literature, the marketing-and-sales emphasis having now shifted to the young adults themselves” (as cited in Hill, 2014, p. 4). Such conditions remained unchanged at the turn of the twenty-first century, as a 2003 article of *The Washington Post* notes: “Teenagers are the demographic that almost everyone in the book industry – librarians, publishers, booksellers – wants. As the number of teenagers in the population has risen [...], so has teen buying power for all kinds of items, including books” (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.8). The young adult literature market has been undergoing, then, a relentless expansion in the years since the 1990s. In this sense, Simon and Schuster editor David Gale confirms

in 2015 that “YA over the past few years has been sustaining the industry” (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.8). Thus, the last decade of the twentieth century should be regarded as the beginning of a second prolonged golden age of young adult literature, which continues nowadays and, arguably, is motivated by its evident capability to transform and evolve with its own cultural and social context of production.

1.2.4 Agency, authenticity, and power dynamics

Within the field of children’s literature, a third fundamental consideration arises in a more explicit and visible manner with reference to the fact that the young reader is dealing with texts that are designed by adults. As a consequence, children’s literature (in the English version of the label) seems to reveal a particular power dynamic between author, book, and reader through the possessive *s*: specifically, “does *children’s* mean texts that are *for* children, *by* children, *belonging to* children, or *of* childhood?” (Hunt, 2021, p. 43). It might be claimed that, differently from adult literature, a similar observation can be made with respect to young adult literature: is it produced *for* or *by* young adults? Does it *belong to* them? If so, to what extent? In her essay, Marah Gubar (2013) claims that theorising the relationship between adult author and young reader of a literary text is a “risky business” (p. 450), as they enjoy differing levels of power. Cadden (2000) corroborates Gubar’s argument by questioning the validity of the adolescent narrating voice in texts written for adolescents by adults, as it never is and can never be truly authentic. By being, in fact, simulated by the adult author, the teenage voice in the text is nothing more than a mere construct, a vehicle through which the writer can impose their own subjective position on the young reader. Hence, this kind of power dynamic subtly undermines readers’ agency, that is, their ability to make choices about their actions and to express their own ideas (James and James in Christensen, 2021). More in detail, Cadden (2000) speaks in terms of “irony” to refer to the function of what he calls a “top-down (or vertical) power relationship” which occurs “[w]hen an adult writer speaks through a young adult’s consciousness to a young adult audience” (p. 146) as if such conscience could be grasped by an adult one. To some extent, Cadden’s view is shared by scholar Jacqueline Rose. According to her analysis, when the young reader approaches children’s and young adult literatures, they inevitably enter a world in which

the adult comes first in the capacity of author, maker, and giver, and the young reader comes after in the capacity of reader, product, and receiver, while neither of them ever accesses the space in between (Rose, 1992). In this respect, this special author-reader dynamic may parallel other models of adult authority and child/young adult receptivity such as those of teacher-student, parent-child, or coloniser-colonised (Ford Smith, 2021).

As for young readers potentially fulfilling a more active and productive role during the reading experience, Jack Zipes does not seem to admit such opportunity: “there has never been a literature conceived by children for children, a literature that belongs to children, and there never will be” (as cited in Hunt, 2021, p. 43). Nonetheless, the case may be a little different for young adults, to which literature can belong in various ways. Other than a number of narrative techniques and devices whose use in the text may grant a certain degree of agency to the teenage reader (e.g., open endings, connotations, allusions, intertextuality, etc.), it should be noted that, while reading, they might bring to books their personal attitudes to and their knowledge and experience of other literary works and life, their cultural backgrounds and potential prejudices as well as their race, class, age, gender, and sexual identities. As author Susan R. Suleiman highlights, together with “innumerable other minutiae of personality, background, and upbringing”, all these aspects will concomitantly “affect the way in which we [readers] make meaning: what we understand and what we take to be important”, regardless of the book’s supposed objective meaning (as cited in Hunt, 1991, p. 70). Robert Protherough stresses a similar point: “there is a spectrum between what is ‘objectively’ correct – that is, something which all speakers of the language will agree on as being ‘there’ in the text – and things which are subjective and purely personal” (as cited in Hunt, 1991, p. 88). If, because of their assumed maturity and life experiences adults might be considered as readers bound by the fixed schemas that characterise their own social and cultural community and determine to a certain extent their understanding of a text, then children, until their adolescence, may be regarded as developing readers, more autonomous and open to ways of interpreting texts and drawing private and special meanings from them (Hunt, 1991). The Internet surely fosters such aptitude by allowing readers to start conversations through the forms of online book clubs (e.g., the *Silent Book Club*, offering several online meetings as well for readers to discuss what they are reading; *Ohka*, a queer and black book club focusing on works by African, Caribbean and Afro-Latin authors; *Our Shared*

Shelf, a feminist space publicising books about equality and empowerment, though discontinued in 2020), forums, blogs, YouTube channels, podcasts, etc. Finally, a further way to possess a text relates to the fact that, as contemporary adolescence seems to represent an increasingly attenuated social process, young adults can even take up the role of authors. From this perspective, thus, young adult literature is, rather than *for* or *belonging to*, *by* adolescents. This too appears to be an opportunity granted by the Internet, through which may occur not only the creation and subsequent publication of completely original and independent young adult works, but also the writing and promotion of stories built by young adult authors around a text that they previously approached as readers. Specifically, fan fictions enable former young readers to respond to and have their say about their favourite books, to rapidly reach readers of all ages and backgrounds and, as a result, to receive more or less immediate and honest feedback from them. In doing so, young readers no longer just “passively swallow the narratives adult institutions allow them” but, instead, they “talk back” to the point of “develop[ing] aesthetic forms and traditions to suit themselves, outside of the direct control of adults” (Tosenberger, 2014, p. 22). Simply put, by producing their own pieces, young adults might be able to reclaim the agency traditionally neglected or denied by adult authors. As it will be further explored in the second chapter, this particular possibility for young readers can become extremely significant with reference to the lack of diversity in young adult books.

1.3 Representation and identity: the transformative nature of young adult literature

1.3.1 Racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity

As mentioned, young adult literature can be recognised as an everchanging process that mirrors the evolution of the cultural and social context it is produced in. This peculiar process also encompasses a series of transformations concerned with the inclusion of diversity in young adult books which, as it will be argued in the following chapter, lacked and can still be lacking for a number of reasons related to the author, the publisher, the text and the reader. At the same time, in light of Block’s acknowledgement of the young adult as the literary category that can most successfully bridge all

differences, there may not exist a more appropriate literary tool that can connect, rather than divide, diverse realities. With reference to these latter, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2021) shows that representation of diversity in the U.S. young adult genre should occur more naturally than in other national literatures by claiming that:

When it comes to considerations of diversity in children's [and young adult] literature[s], location and identity matter. Former settler-colonial nations, such as the US, Canada, and Australia, conceive of diversity as existing within the nation's borders. Though these countries have long histories of legal discrimination, their concept of nation is more heterogeneous: diversity refers to differences (ethnic, racial, religious, etc.) *within* national borders. In contrast, European nations tend to discuss diversity in terms of 'integration' or 'assimilation' within an individual nation, and in their sense of national identity, the populations of European countries seem comparatively more homogeneous. (p. 64)

Simply put, diversity must be portrayed in literature for young readers as it is part and parcel of the U.S. national identity. The U.S.' heterogenous nature appears to be necessarily determined by the change in patterns of immigration produced in 1965 when the United States Congress passed amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act that, as Cart (2016a) explains, "not only placed a ceiling on immigration from European countries for the first time, but set it lower than the newly established limits for those from other parts of the world" (Part 1.3). As a result, the numbers of immigrants from Europe dropped precipitously (from 70 percent in 1940 to 15 percent by 1992) whereas those of immigrants from Asia and the West Indies, specifically from Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, South Korea, China, the Dominican Republic, India, Vietnam, and Jamaica, dramatically increased (37 percent from Asia and 44 percent from Latin America and the Caribbean by 1992) (Cart, 2016a). Nonetheless, it would take nearly a decade and a half (from 1965 to 1980) for publishers to start to acknowledge these new facts of demographic life by beginning to offer a new body of 'multicultural' literature, that is, a literature that may render more or less truthfully the lives and experiences of people of colour in the United States, namely individuals who identify with African American, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, and Eskimo or Aleut heritage (Smith, 1993). As a matter of fact, race seemed to be mostly absent from the world of young adult books at least until the end of the 1960s (i.e., the beginning of the first golden age of young adult literature), in spite of innovative efforts such as *The Brownies' Book* (1920-1921). Established by W. E. B. Du Bois, it was the first magazine intended for

African American children where authors such as Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and Jessie Fauset published children's literature and poetry that eschewed racist caricatures in order to depict real-life Black children's needs, wants, hopes, and dreams (Thomas, 2021). While *The Brownies' Book* has the merit of advocating for positive and accurate representations of Black children's lives as early as the 1920s, a landmark denunciation of the paucity of racially diverse representations in literature for young readers is Nancy Larrick's 1965 *Saturday Review* article, "The All-White World of Children's Books". By undertaking a survey of 5,206 books written for a young readership and launched by sixty-three U.S. publishers between 1962 and 1964, Larrick (1965) revealed that only 6.7 percent of them featured references in text or illustration to African Americans. Further, of these latter, 60 percent were set outside the United States or before World War Two, thus showing "a way of life that is far removed" from that of the contemporary African American (Larrick, 1965, p. 64). Thirdly, Larrick (1965) stresses that the typical appearance of African American children in books still entailed racist stereotypes such as "heavy lips, bulging eyes, night-black skin and wooly hair" (Smith in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.3), in stark contrast to that of white children, traditionally portrayed as "cherubic, with dainty little bare feet or well-made shoes" (Larrick, 1965, p. 65). Within five years, in the wake of Larrick's landmark article excoriating U.S. publishers for not giving authentic faces to the increasing population of people of colour, of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement, and of the long overdue Voting Rights Act of 1965, the appearance of distinguished illustrators as Jerry Pinkney, Tom Feelings, Ashley Bryan, John Steptoe, as well as celebrated writers such as Rosa Guy, Alice Childress, Walter Dean Myers, Mildred Taylor, Julius Lester, Virginia Hamilton, marked the advent of a "black literary renaissance" (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.3), in which artists were deeply invested in presenting African Americans as "active agents fighting for their own physical, social, and economic liberation from stifling oppression" (Thomas, 2021, p. 65). On the other hand, a similar success for other cultural realities in young adult literature would have to wait longer. More in detail, the true diversity of Asian people in the United States who, as author Laurence Yep underlines, are incorrectly treated as a single, homogeneous whole through the umbrella term 'Asian American' when in actual fact "come not only from China and Japan but from the many countries around the Pacific rim, including the Philippines, Korea, India, and even Tibet [...], Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos", would find

rightful expression and representation only in the 1990s (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.3). The same would apply to Latino or Hispanic literature: a viable corpus of texts for and about a steadily growing portion of the U.S. population would not exist until the 1970s and 1980s. Among the possible causes of this, Roberto Rodríguez and Patrisia Gonzalez identify the very language of Latino literature: “Most of what we write is considered noise, foreign chatter at best. We are often unable to find a medium for our rich and textured prose – the amalgam of Spanish, English, Indian and *calo* (street talk). Many publishers not only find our writing unacceptable; they can’t read it” (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 1.3). The difficulty to read and comprehend Latino literature is strictly related to the scarcity of Latinx working in the children’s and young adults publishing industries, thus leading to a lack of knowledge of how to acquire, assess, and print for these markets (Cart, 2016a). It might be telling that the writers for young readers who began emerging in the 1970s and 1980s were none other than already established authors for adults (Cart, 2016a). Just like the literature for and about young readers belonging to differing Asian cultures, Latinx literature must wait until the 1990s for a new generation of authors to finally focus exclusively on writing for young people (Cart, 2016a). As for other cultures, Cart (2016a) reports, young adult books remained a “hard sell” (Part 1.3).

Considering that multicultural literature remains the most underpublished segment of the young adult genre, Cart also clarifies when he writes in 2016 that a moderate rise in the publication of multicultural texts is recorded. In this respect, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison (2023), which tracks diversity in books targeted at young readers, seems to confirm Cart’s argument. Indeed, as it can be observed, the number of books with both significant African-American and Latino contents increased fourfold from 2012 (respectively, 119 and 54) to 2022 (491 and 237). Over the same period, the number of titles containing Asian Pacific content increased fivefold (from 76 to 383), while that of texts including Indigenous subjects, though less promising, grew from 22 to 59. Other data may suggest that the inclusion of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in the young adult genre entails a slow process of advancement. Evidence of this might be, for instance, the widening of the gap between books created by Asian-American authors and those written for Asian-American readers over recent years: if in 2018 the former were 400 and the latter 343, the CCBC reported 634 for the former and more than 40 percent less (369) for the latter in

2022. Completely opposite is the situation with books produced by African-American writers and texts concerned with African-American content, as the gap between the two almost entirely reduced from 193 in 2018 (i.e., respectively, 214 and 407 titles) to only 29 in 2022 (i.e., 462 and 491 titles). Therefore, while it may be true that there are still a long way ahead and a lot of room for further improvement, these modest increases can give hope for a potentially more diverse field. Moreover, hope for more encouraging outcomes is certainly provided by the works and influence of authors such as Walter Dean Myers, whose ultimate professional and creative purpose is made clear in his 2014 *New York Times* article, “Where Are the People of Color in Children’s Books?”:

As I discovered who I was, a black teenager in a white-dominated world, I saw that these characters, these lives, were not mine. I didn’t want to become the ‘black’ representative, or some shining example of diversity. What I wanted, needed really, was to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me. (para. 5)

Through the realistic portrayal of the unforgiving world in which his young readers of colour are forced to live their lives, made of poverty, violence, drugs, guns, and even war and death (i.e., Myers was one of the first authors to give faces to young soldiers fighting in three American wars, namely, the Vietnam War in *Fallen Angels*, published in 1988, the Iraq War in *Sunrise over Fallujah*, published in 2008, and World War Two in *Invasion*, published in 2013), Myers makes it possible for *them* to become part of that mosaic. Similarly, hope for a better and more diverse literary future is also granted by the consistent work of the organisation We Need Diverse Books, sprung from a protest campaign inspired by the lack of diversity among speakers at the 2014 BookCon (Cart, 2016a). Adhering to a definition of ‘diversity’ that includes the notions of LGBTQIA, Native, people of colour, gender diversity, people with disabilities, ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities, We Need Diverse Books strives towards the promotion of a literature for young readers that may effectively reflect and honour the lives of all young people. As cofounder and President Ellen Oh states about the organisation’s final purpose, “We want to work as hard as we can so that a lack of diversity is no longer an issue” (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.9).

1.3.2 Gender and sexual diversity

With reference to the literary representation of LGBTQIA characters, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969) may be recognised as the first novel dealing with the subject of homosexuality, which would be followed only by eight more texts about the same topic until the end of the 1970s (Cart, 2016a). Nonetheless, these early attempts did nothing but perpetuate specific stereotypical views of homosexual lives, generally depicted as unrelievedly bleak, lonely, dangerous, doomed to a tragic end and, interestingly, led by white and middle-class people (Cart, 2016a). In this sense, the 1980s were characterised by story plots that disrupted these prejudices by offering more favourable and honest portrayals. Among these, Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* (1982) celebrated an idea of homosexuality as a mere form of love, while Norma Klein's *Breaking Up* (1980) and Gary W. Bargar's *What Happened to Mr. Forster* (1981) featured for the first time, respectively, a gay parent and a gay teacher (although the latter simultaneously establishes a new stereotypical perception of homosexuality as entailing self-sacrifice as the teacher gives up his job not to cause distress to his students). Exceptionally original was M. E. Kerr's 1986 *Night Kites* which treated for the first time AIDS, a subject that until that moment had been reluctantly approached in young adult books (Cart, 2016a). Overall, the 1980s saw the print of forty LGBTQIA titles, compared to only eight in the 1970s (Cart, 2016a). This expansion proceeded in the 1990s with the publication of seventy-five books, even though several of them were strictly centred on the coming-out experience and very few were concerned with the realities of living as an out teenager (Cart, 2016a). In addition, these texts maintained a certain gender imbalance by mainly representing homosexual males (69 percent) rather than lesbians (26 percent) or both (5 percent) (Cart, 2016a). Moreover, despite the increase of published titles, only 27 percent of these latter featured a gay protagonist, whereas, perhaps to make texts more accessible to non-homosexual readers, 73 percent included homosexuals merely as secondary characters that would foster further stereotyping (Cart, 2016a). Thus, either for their literary qualities or for the advances introduced in the realm of young adult literature, about twenty-five novels would genuinely be innovative and relevant in the 1990s (Cart, 2016a). Allegedly, the number of texts that gave voices to lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents continued to rise in the new century. From 2000 to 2015, in fact, Cart reports the publication of 319 LGBTQIA titles which also reflected a variety of trends that have

defined the young adult genre for the twenty-first century. Further, not only did LGBTQIA content finally start to give faces to the perhaps most invisible teens, that is, those who are transgender, asexual, intersex, gender fluid, and gender queer but it enriched a growing body of ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse literature, thus further expanding the possibilities of accurately representing diversity in the young adult genre (Cart, 2016a). Despite all its gains in the field, it should be noted that the LGBTQIA young adult remains a literature in transition (Cart, 2016a). Arguably, too many titles deal with homosexuality or transgenderism as an issue in the story, even though this latter may be a faithful reproduction of reality. Still, it may be deeply powerful and constructive to foster portrayals of LGBTQIA identity as normal, obvious, and ordinary, just as happens with texts about heterosexual characters. Concurrently, a higher number of novels suitable for middle-school readers (because of the increasingly early age at which young people appear to come out) as well as telling the stories about young people of colour from differing cultural and ethnic minorities should be published.

1.3.3 Disability diversity

It may be further argued that the sensitive subject of disability (it should be noted that the term ‘disability’ will be employed in the following discourse as encompassing physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, developmental disorders as well as chronic conditions and mental illnesses) is being progressively included in young adult literature as well. In support of this claim, the founding of the Schneider Family Book Award in 2004, which recognises the works of authors and illustrators for their excellent depictions of the disability experience for young audiences, may be significant. Moreover, in their 1987 article, Barbara H. Baskin and Karen H. Harris discuss how in the previous decades writers for young adults were likely to depict characters with extreme manifestations of a disorder rather than mild to moderate forms of an impairment. Further, they would typically tell stories of characters that were defined by their disability as well as disseminate misinformation and stereotypical views about the nature of an impairment, its symptoms, and potential progress (1987). Jen S. Curwood (2013) adds that the majority of past characterisations of individuals with disabilities was likely to be negative or restrictive with the purpose of arousing piety and commiseration in the readers.

Nevertheless, contemporary young adult books appear to be devoting more attention to sophisticated, informed, and responsible portrayals of characters with disabilities. They may do so by envisioning high expectations for their characters' futures, depicting flourishing reciprocal relationships with others, showing characters' positive contributions to society as well as the capability to act on their choices (Turnbull in Curwood, 2013). Generally speaking, the aim of these texts would be to create characters which readers with disabilities can finally identify with, as well as foster the development of attitudes of empathy within able-bodied readers. Furthermore, a notable number of books for young adults should meet the need for the representation of disability as a form of diversity to be respected and even celebrated, instead of an impediment that requires a solution (Van Hart, 2012). In any case, disorders should not be portrayed as the defining factors of characters' identity. In other words, then, in spite of the advances made in the last decades, it may be relevant to deal with disability as a peripheral feature that "does not constitute the central conflict of the novel but is rather just one element of the plot or characterization – and perhaps the key to finding resolution" (Van Hart, 2012, p. 34).

Keeping in mind all these considerations, as it will be analysed in the third chapter, some first instances testifying to a more open and inclusive attitude towards gender diversity, sexual orientation, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, diversity disability, and their combinations might be observed in contemporary young adult literature. In this sense, through the inclusion of diverse human experiences, this latter can serve as a "neutral center" (Cart, 2016a, Part 1.1) which allows its readership to encounter others with differences in ability and perspective and, thus, "promote a society that celebrates [them], a society that gains by adopting an inclusive attitude" towards unique groups of individuals (Van Hart, 2012, p. 34). As Cart (2016b) observes, the highest value and the true nature of the young adult genre resides in this "capacity for fostering, in its readers, understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader" (p. 11).

CHAPTER 2

Problematic Racial and Gender Representation in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

2.1 An introduction to young adult dystopian fiction

2.1.1 Speculative fiction

Based on the very expansiveness of young adult literature, determined by its ability to embrace a variety of genres, styles, and forms, this chapter will focus on young adult dystopian fiction, identified by Rebekah Fitzsimmons (2020) as an “inescapable feature” of the young adult book market and critical conversations since the beginning of the twenty-first century (p. 3). As such, dystopian fiction may represent a notably valuable field of investigation to detect the gradual advance of young adult literature towards the conscious inclusion of empowered and authentic diverse protagonists, that is, female, of colour, LGBTQIA, with disability, etc. To this end, a first step will entail the analysis of the twenty-first-century dystopian trilogy par excellence, that is, Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* books, published between 2008 and 2010. After an introduction to the revival of dystopian fiction as well as its fundamental characteristics, Collins’s series will serve as a case in point to expose the potential implications and risks related to the problematic representation of racial and gender diversity in contemporary young adult dystopian literature.

First and foremost, it should be noted that dystopian literature is a subgenre of speculative fiction, that is, “an interesting *mélange*, an exercise in bending and blending, in shape-shifting and morphing” of science fiction and fantasy (Cart, 2016a). With both its recent history and the narrow focus on realistic fiction, young adult literature gave little room for works of the imagination that could effectively be successful until the twenty-first century (Cart, 2016a). Indeed, a golden era of speculative fiction is ushered in with the publication of the *Harry Potter* books, the first published in its British and American editions in, respectively, 1997 and 1998 (while both editions of the seventh and final volume were published in 2007). As it sold 180 million copies in the U.S., more than 500 million worldwide, and it was translated into eighty languages (WordsRated, 2021,

Book sales and languages sections, para. 1), J. K. Rowling's series dramatically changed the world of publishing for middle-school readers and, most significantly, young adults (Cart, 2016a). The books' astounding success, further ensured by the release of eight film adaptations (the first released in 2001 and the last in 2010), the opening of theme parks, the creation of fan sites, fan fictions, as well as the organisation of fan gatherings, promotional tours and events (all reported in Melissa Anelli's account *Harry: A History*, 2008), spurred publishers to make haste in finding the next Harry Potter. As Cart (2016a) comments, they found it in an "unlikely place" (Part 2.8), that is, Stephenie Meyer's six-volume saga, *Twilight* (2005-2015). While they can by no means be compared to the literary quality of Rowling's magnum opus, Meyer's works sold over 160 million copies and were translated into thirty-seven languages, thus becoming the 'next big thing' in young literature since the publication of the first instalment in 2005 (WordsRated, 2022, Statistics section).

2.1.2 Dystopian fiction

While *Harry Potter* can be categorised as a fantasy work and *Twilight* as essentially a paranormal romance, it is with Suzanne Collins's trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), that the dystopian novel is reintroduced in the new century with over 100 million copies sold and translations in fifty-two languages (WordsRated, 2022, Statistic section). In the hope of recapturing the financial accomplishments of Collins's dystopian bestseller saga, both Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* five-volume series (2009-2016) contributed to the consolidation of the dystopian novel as "the next important trend in young adult literature" (Cart, 2016a, Part 2.8). It may be worth mentioning that, before this twenty-first-century re-popularisation of the dystopian subgenre, early acclaimed textual attempts to blend young adult literature and dystopia occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s with the publication of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985) and, notably, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) (Campbell, 2019). While other texts followed, such as Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Among the Hidden* (1998) and Sonia Levitin's *The Cure* (1999), it may be claimed that Lowry's seminal work best defined young adult dystopian literature by representing characters that, forced to live in overly stratified societies that push for conformity and repress their

free will, fight for a better future by transgressing these rigid social boundaries (Campbell, 2019). Accordingly, young adult dystopian books in the new millennium draw upon Lowry's novel: if, in fact, the young protagonists of early dystopian books "are all in various ways prevented from overthrowing the social order, or content to wait until their chance to affect change, the adolescent protagonists of the twenty-first century [just like Lowry's main character Jonas] move right into their roles as revolutionaries" (Campbell, 2019, pp. 92-93). This appears to apply to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, to Tris in *Divergent*, as well as to Thomas in *The Maze Runner* series, who all lead their given communities' rebellion against the totalitarian regimes they grew up in.

More in detail, it is crucial to establish what is meant by 'dystopian novels'. Laura Godwin describes them as "kind of cautionary tales", as "believable metaphors that arise from the social milieu or situation of the time [...] taken to their logical extreme" (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.8). The social milieu Godwin refers to may be the one experienced by John Stuart Mill who in 1868 coined the word 'dystopia' to respond to the historical and social landscape of his time, characterised by modern warfare and the ruthless sides of industrialisation and capitalism (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Another may be the one caused by Hitler's quest towards the implementation of the Aryan nation during the Second World War, not to mention the 9/11 tragedy, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, international terrorism, global warming, and worldwide economic distress. In all cases, the dystopian subgenre seeks to articulate fears about the ever-increasing role of science "in creating weapons of mass destruction, surveillance technologies, medical advancements, mechanized labor, eugenics, and climate change" (Claves in Fitzsimmons, 2020, p. 5). Further, the coinage of the term 'dystopia' may be juxtaposed with Thomas More's invention of the word 'utopia' in 1516 (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Specifically, Fitzsimmons (2020) clarifies that utopia entails a standard or goal reality which, by virtue of its existence alone, aims at casting a critical eye on the presently imperfect but improvable society. Moreover, Campbell (2019) suggests that at the time of the inception as well as of each iteration of utopias, certain individuals are selected for while others are excluded from the utopian society. As a result, he claims that the concept of utopia inevitably contains within itself a "dystopian impulse" (Campbell, 2019, p. 86). Fitzsimmons (2020) validates this intuition by stating that "one man's utopia [...] [is] other men's and women's dystopian nightmare" (p. 5). For what concerns the structure

of the texts, dystopias, like utopias, are usually set in the future and exist in isolated or insulated places, separated from other social realities either by space (as islands or distant planets) or political events (e.g., wars, closed borders, restricted communication technologies) (Fitzsimmons, 2020). They are generally described by insiders that, by detailing the social and hierarchical structures, the governing body, and everyday life of their post-apocalyptic reality, naturally invite comparison to readers' contemporary society (Fitzsimmons 2020). Furthermore, the protagonist is likely to harbour outsider feelings as a consequence of either tragic circumstances or an encounter with an external informed or rebellious individual who is not subject to the ruthless repression, the full control, ruin, corruption, and overwhelming darkness brought about by the dystopian society (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Therefore, as the main character cannot disregard the truth about the injustices and hypocrisies revealed by the outsider, the former's critical perspective fosters the readers' identification with the protagonist "by means of the thoughts and feelings of the characters in that new society who are involved in the daily struggle to build a world of human freedom and self-fulfilment" (Fitting in Fitzsimmons, 2020, p. 6).

2.1.3 Resonance with young readers

In one of his lectures, author Philip Pullman remarks the moral capacity of fiction, from which "[w]e can learn what's good and what's bad, what's generous and unselfish, what's cruel and mean" (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.7). With respect to young adult dystopian texts, this didactic and pedagogical intent is further raised to their ability of performing social critical work that can urge the readers, through their identification with the protagonist, to interrogate the relationships between subjectivity and power (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Specifically, through the representation of negative examples, that is, of strange but familiar worlds whose social structures and hierarchies are "horrifyingly plausible exaggerations of our own" (Campbell, 2019, p. 86), young adult dystopian literature ultimately aims at challenging the blind confidence in the myth of science and technology as instrumental in the achievement of human progress and prosperity (Campbell, 2019). At the same time, the purpose of these books is to shed light on the limits of the institutions (i.e., government, church, school) that readers interact with and

that do nothing but reinforce in these latter abstract social constructions such as race, gender, and sexuality (Fitzsimmons, 2020). In order to inspire its young readers to action, dystopian fiction commits to telling the stories of worlds and characters that can most effectively reflect the uncertainties, fears, and anxieties engendered by the historical and social context of their time, made of wars, economic struggles, lack of job security after college and a degree, and difficulty in finding love and independence (Cart, 2016a). As Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry (2003) emphasise, while childhood tends to be conceptualised in its intended literature as a utopian space in which children are rarely portrayed as suffering, adolescence seems to be collectively perceived as its perfect counterpart as a time of traumatic social and personal awakening. If, stereotypically, teenagers are misunderstood social outcasts and the adult society they live in is an unwaveringly repressive, unjust, and outdated tyrant (Fitzsimmons, 2020), it might be no surprise that young adult readers became so invested in and enthusiastic about dystopian narratives. Hintz and Ostry (2003) proceed in fact to observe:

[D]ystopia can act as a powerful metaphor for adolescence. In adolescence, authority appears oppressive, and perhaps no one feels more under surveillance than the average teenager. The teenager is on the brink of adulthood: close enough to see its privileges but unable to enjoy them. The comforts of childhood fail to satisfy. The adolescent craves more power and control and feels the limits on his or her freedom intensely. (pp. 9-10)

Further, Rosemary Stimola, the agent representing Suzanne Collins, acknowledges as main reason for the latter's dystopian series' popularity and success in the U.S. the fact that young adults usually cannot recall a time when their country was not at war. Through the representation of violence and of great loss, then, dystopian fiction might grant young readers a way to exercise their thoughts and beliefs about the nature of good and evil (Corbett, 2011).

By contrast, in her *New York Times* article, scholar Maria Tatar (2011) criticises the “unprecedented dose of adult reality” in contemporary young adult novels by illustrating how the villains in these latter have nothing to do with those in children's books, that is, traditional, “fabulous monsters with a touch of the absurd [...] [that] walk a fine line between horror and zany eccentricity [...] [and may] frighten young readers, but their juvenile antics strip them of any real authority” (para. 3). As a matter of fact, she observes that authors for young adults seem to favour stories with unforgiving, bleak

villains, no comic relief, and young protagonists that struggle for survival (Tatar, 2011). Similarly, Meghan Cox Gurdon speaks in her *Wall Street Journal* piece, “Darkness Too Visible” (2011), in terms of “depravity” to qualify the depiction of violent circumstances in young adult fiction: “If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is” (para. 5).

As both Tatar and Cox advance these points with reference to the whole body of contemporary young adult literature regardless of genres and subgenres, it may be inferred that their arguments undoubtedly apply to dystopian books as well. In *The Hunger Games* books, violence plays a vital role in the unfolding of the story throughout the series, from the literal ‘fights to the death’ taking place in the arenas during the Games to the harsh punishments of the Peacekeepers in the districts, from the secondary characters being tortured to the gruesome death of others, which all create the perfect breeding ground for the protagonist’s trauma. However, as American writer Sherman Alexie (2011) asserts in his article “Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood”, the harsh realities represented in a (dystopian) young adult novel cannot possibly perturb readers that already inhabit dreadful, nightmarish, even dystopian, societies. Indeed, according to Alexie (2011), young adults read “because they are sad and lonely and enraged [...] because they live in an often-terrible world [...] [and] because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books – especially the dark and dangerous ones – will save them” (para. 25). Another key feature that might further attract the interest of young readers is the ubiquitous and sinister presence of societal surveillance and control that clearly echo the experience of growing up under the attentive and nearly omnipresent adult gaze (Miller, 2010). Recovered from twentieth-century landmark dystopian novels such as *1984* by George Orwell (1949) or *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985) and reintroduced in, for instance, both *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner*, the implementation of surveilling gazes or cameras implies that these stories’ characters are required to move with the knowledge that they are constantly watched and judged by superior institutions (e.g., in this sense, the official Gileadean greeting in Atwood’s novel, “Under His Eye”, may be remarkably telling) (1996, p. 50). Thus, the primary purpose of dystopian government surveillance is to dissuade individuals from any attempt at rebellion and, thus, force them to comply with

the policies imposed by the totalitarian regime they inhabit (Campbell, 2019). Nothing is private, everything is of everyone: as a result, people are reduced to mere objects, roles, or gears of the social mechanism they are obliged to be part of and, therefore, are deprived of any hint of agency that could threaten it (Campbell, 2019).

Scholar Janie Slater argues that teenagers not only want dystopian novels, even more importantly, they *need* them as they often offer “a healthy outlet for exploring socially unacceptable topics within [their] spheres and communities”, they help their young readers see new perspectives than what they are capable of from their own limited experiences as well as “sort out and express feelings and emotions, providing cathartic release and relief”, and, finally, they inspire readers with courageous, defiant and unique characters who manage to overcome barriers and limitations (as cited in Cart, 2016a). It may be claimed that the fourth and last function listed by Slater distinctly marks the main difference between dystopias for adults and those for younger readers, underlined by novelist Moira Young:

These are dark, sometimes bleak stories, but that doesn't mean they are hopeless. Those of us who write for young people are reluctant to leave our readers without hope. It wouldn't be right. We always have to leave a candle burning in the darkness. (as cited in Cart, 2016a, Part 2.8)

If on the one hand, in fact, the narrative closure of the protagonist's defeat and demise seems absolutely crucial to the effectiveness of the admonitory action of the adult dystopian text, on the other hand, young adult dystopian fiction appears to be, to an extent, less didactic than its adult opposite as it always makes room for hope or escape (Miller, 2010). Cadden (2012) explains that this unwillingness to extinguish any potential hope within a story for young readers may stem from the expectation that kids, unlike an adult readership that may not be thought to need a hopeful ending, require reassurance about the protagonist's future. In this regard, Cadden identifies as a relevant literary device that precisely serves this purpose the epilogue, which he defines as a “risky re-immersion” that, even if “aesthetically clumsy”, is “clearly believed to be effective for being affective” (Cadden, 2012, p. 345). By way of illustration, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* might be exemplary in its use of the epilogue to suggest that, despite the terrible war and the subsequent heavy losses, a tenacious spark of hope persists with the departure for Hogwarts of a new generation of witches and wizards, among which there are the children of the beloved protagonists the reader has followed throughout the series. With

specific reference to dystopian texts, it will be later discussed how the epilogue of the third and final instalment of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *Mockingjay*, will also employ children as a way to reassure the reader that a more favourable future awaits the main characters. It cannot, then, be only by instilling dread and fear through worst-case scenarios that writers of young adult dystopian novels manage to effectively call their readers to social action and change. Arguably, what is also necessary is the ultimate admission of the possibility for better days through strategic narrative tools such as the epilogue. Moreover, not only is the presence of such reassurance necessary to encourage teenage readers to take action, but it might also contribute to establishing the value and virtue of young adult dystopian books. As F. Vieira points out, “dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission” (as cited in Fitzsimmons, 2020, p. 6). Thus, dystopian fiction appears to resonate with young readers as it, by portraying extreme versions of adolescent concerns and experiences as well as their resulting feelings of rage, despair, worry, and longing, powerfully reflects their impression of already inhabiting a dystopia in the present time (i.e., the society they live in or, more specifically, high school) while still allowing prospects for improvements.

2.1.4 The crossover phenomenon

Finally, when considering the twenty-first-century trend of dystopian fiction for young adults, it might be important to note that, following in the footsteps of bestselling “blockbuster” series such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, dystopian works as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* become recognisable to the point of exceeding conventional or expected boundaries such as marketing categories (Fitzimmons & Wilson, 2020, p. xii). Simply put, these books have achieved so much success that they may be comfortably included in multiple sections of libraries and bookstores (Fitzimmons & Wilson, 2020, p. xii). From this perspective, Sandra L. Beckett (2017) speaks in terms of “crossover literature”, which “transcends age boundaries, crossing from child to adult or adult to child audiences” (p. 2). Indeed, if in the years preceding the publication of the first *Harry Potter* book, alleged catalyst that made crossover literature a twenty-first-century market trend (Beckett, 2017), the literary crossover occurred predominantly in the from-teenager-to-adult direction as a result of Danielle Steel’s and Stephen King’s

influential works, nowadays the traffic appears to go the opposite way (Corbett, 2011). Thanks to, for instance, the separation of the young adult sections from children's departments or the implementation of packaging strategies that involve the design of gender neutral and non-age specific covers (Corbett, 2011) (e.g., most *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* covers typically feature symbols rather than people), publishers succeeded and still succeed in marketing books as crossover fiction that, through "narratives about loss, suffering and redemption" (Tatar, 2011, para. 13), potentially creates new literary contact zones for adult and teenage readerships.

However, while dystopian trilogies as crossover texts might testify to the vitality and creativity of young adult literature, their frequent intersection with 'unliterary' genres such as science fiction and fantasy may lead critics to dismiss them as undeserving of serious scholarly investigation (Fitzsimmons, 2020). For some, the crossover trend and its consequent popularity is driven by "immature, infantilized" adults (Beckett, 2017, p. 16) who, by engaging with vacuous and shallow stories often narrating the life experiences and concerns of young women, oversimplify the traditional worth of literature and culture. Author Christopher Beha (2014) corroborates this view by asserting that:

Putting down 'Harry Potter' for Henry James is not one of adulthood's obligations, like flossing and mortgage payment; it's one of its rewards, like autonomy and sex. It seems to me not embarrassing or shameful but just self-defeating and a little sad to forego such pleasures in favour of reading a book that might just as easily be enjoyed by a child. (para. 22)

Conversely, Elizabeth Minkel (2014) argues against the belief that adult approaches to young adult (speculative) literature automatically entail a process of 'reading down', by stressing that what is popular in a culture and what is valuable to culture are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To put it differently, the immense success of young adult dystopian trilogies or speculative series with adult audiences should perhaps not be intended as irrefutable evidence of their lack of substance or depth. Minkel (2014), in fact, supports the relevance of these books by claiming that the cultural and literary weight of a text is determined by the power of the story it tells and, thus, the meanings and lessons readers might draw from it. Meg Wolitzer (2014) appears to reiterate Minkel's point in her *New York Times* piece by concluding that, with reference to the long-lasting 'war' over who is supposed to read young adult novels and who is not, "[w]hen you're deep in a good book, you won't even hear the drumbeats" (para. 18). It may be claimed, then, that

the sheer popularity of crossover literature (from-teenager-to-adult), derives from its rare ability to expand the borders of the literary landscape by providing good, insightful stories with three-dimensional protagonists, written with artistic rigor, and featuring wide-ranging themes and moral issues that resonate with and invite to reflect younger and older readers alike (Beckett, 2017).

2.2 Racial and gender representation in young adult dystopian fiction

2.2.1 Character representation in young adult dystopian fiction

With regard to the depiction of characters in a literary text, Cadden distinguishes between two forms of representation. The first, quantifiable, tends to be demographic. In young adult literature, the most significant demographic is the adolescent, whereas further quantitative elements may include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, culture, regional affiliation or location, and other markers that possess tangible, evident qualities that contribute to a given character's dimension and description (Cadden, 2021). The second, qualitative, is typically less visible and concerned with more subjective qualities, such as "a character's reported history or experience, personality, interests, and thoughts" (Cadden, 2021, p. 21). Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative forms of representation, the author may manage to portray rich, well-rounded characters and, thus, foster the reader's identification with them (Cadden, 2021). As Cart (2016b) remarks, the ability to provide readers with the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the pages of young adult books might represent one of the chief values of these latter. Arguably, to follow the story of a character that looks like them or experiences a feeling or event that somehow relates to something they have also experienced in their lives, means to "receive the blessed reassurance that [they are] not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity" (Cart, 2016b, p. 11). Moreover, Cadden (2021) adds that readers' identification with a character can be promoted through either empathy or desire or, in other words, recognition or projection. When the writer presents a character in the story, in fact, readers are likely to gauge its relative position to themselves (Cadden, 2021). In the case of contemporary realistic fiction, the author may design plausible characters that, over the course of the story or series of stories, can come 'closer' to the readers by provoking in them sympathy,

or even empathy (Cadden, 2021). Through quantitative and qualitative characterisation, then, readers can be drawn into the story as they recognise in the characters possible similarities to themselves or people they know (Cadden, 2021). In contrast, the effect and message to the readers appears to be different in contemporary non-realistic fiction, which may depict wizards, vampires, demigods, superheroes, that is, protagonists gifted beyond comprehension and, thus, absolutely unreal in their possession of skills that are available to no human being (Cadden, 2021). As a result, readers' recognition of themselves in these "high mimetic" characters that, as Maria Nikolajeva clarifies, ultimately aim at serving "as models not only for the other characters in the story but for the readers as well" (in Cadden, 2021, pp. 26), does not seem possible. Nonetheless, identification may still occur through readers' projection of themselves on the unreal characters, either heroes or villains (Cadden, 2021). In extreme cases, such wishful thinking is expressed through costume play, that is, with reference to *Harry Potter*, by having a lightning bolt scar drawn on the forehead, by casting spells through pretend magic wands, or by wearing a replica of the Hogwarts student uniform.

As for young adult dystopian literature, it might be inferred that identification is simultaneously encouraged by both readers' recognition and projection. As a matter of fact, it seems obvious that protagonists such as Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Tris in *Divergent*, and Thomas in *The Maze Runner*, must have specific traits and talents that qualify them as the characters that ignite the revolution towards freedom from the oppressive systems they live in. At the end of the first novel, Katniss is brave, shrewd, and audacious enough to rebel against the rules of the Games (and, thus, of the ruling government, the Capitol) that require only one victor, by suggesting she and Peeta, the last two standing competitors (i.e., 'tributes'), act like they are about to eat poisonous berries and, thus, kill themselves. Similarly, both Tris, as apparently the only one that can belong to more than one category within the faction system her society built, and Thomas, as the only living male immune to the virus that brought down the globe, are special compared to all other characters in their respective universes. At the same time, the distant but foreboding realities these protagonists inhabit as well as their behaviours, feelings, and thoughts, make them more real, concrete, and relatable than, for instance, a superhero or a demigod. Furthermore, if Tris and Thomas appear to possess some inherent features that naturally makes them unique, Katniss might be considered a fairly ordinary girl who

had and still has to adapt to the tragic circumstances dictated by the Capitol in order to ensure her own and her family's survival. Consequently, dystopian characters may arouse admiration as much as evoke sympathy or empathy in the reader. However, if the identification with a character is favoured both by qualitative and quantitative means, it should be noted that these latter's unaltered presence in a text might restrict or undermine the possibility for readers to seem themselves in the character. Simply put, with reference to qualitative features, the habit started in the 1990s of centring the story of a homosexual teenager on the coming-out experience and its likely related issues (Cart, 2016a), may be partly responsible for the artificial and stereotypical, rather than authentic, representations of adolescent homosexuality. In the same way, the tendency to portray white and heteronormative protagonists might homogenise the expected readers approaching the text, without taking into account the possible racial and gender diversities that define their identity as human beings. As it will be discussed in the following paragraphs, then, through the problematic iteration of the same quantitative and qualitative elements in young adult dystopian books, authors fail in their mission of inviting certain categories of readers to identify with characters.

2.2.2 Problematic representations of race

With their 2009 study, Koss and Teale attempted to provide a clearer picture of the trends in young adult literature and, specifically, of who was or was not represented in the texts published between 1999 and 2005. The analysis of 59 titles (selected as representative of a 370-texts corpus) revealed a striking dearth of focal multicultural characters: more in detail, while 32 percent of these books were about European Americans, only 5 percent of them portrayed African Americans, whereas none featured Natives, Latinx, Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans (Koss & Teale, 2009). If on the one hand, as the data provided by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison already anticipated at the end of the previous chapter, the number of multicultural books are steadily increasing each year, there seems to remain a dramatic lack of diversity within the young adult genre (Cart, 2016a). As a matter of fact, these same data also reveal that, out of the total of books for children and young adults collected by the CCBC in 2022, only little more than 14 per cent (i.e., 14.22)

included African American content, less than 11 percent (i.e., 10.69) contained Asian American material, less than 7 per cent (i.e., 6.86) was about Latinx, less than 2 per cent (i.e., 1.71) involved Arab Americans, and, finally, not even 0.5 per cent (i.e., 0.41) was related to Pacific Americans (CCBC, Books by and/or about Black, Indigenous and People of Color). More in detail, as authors Cindy Pon and Dhonielle Clayton suggested at the 2017 ALAN Workshop, of the many genres and subgenres of young adult fiction, fantasy and dystopia appeared to be especially slow in responding to calls for more accurate and respectable representations of racially and ethnically diverse characters (Connors & Seelinger Trites, 2021). Indeed, as much as the rejuvenation of dystopian fiction opened the doors to strong young female protagonists, the efforts to break racial and gender conventions seemed not to go further than that. In other words, the progressive picture of young teenage womanhood stays restricted to a view that lacks the representation of diverse human categories. S. R. Toliver (2020) uncovers the probable consequences of such limited innovation by stating that the prevalence of white female characters in powerful lead roles that claim their identities and fight for a more egalitarian and just world, does nothing but “[promote] the idea that white female adolescent protagonists of the future get to experience freedom, equality, and societal progress, while adolescent females of colour get to remain ignored as they continue to struggle for mere existence” (p. 187). When young people of colour *are* included in dystopias, indeed, they are mostly secondary characters that rarely manage to survive the violent overthrow portion of these narratives and, thus, are excluded from the dream of a better, more democratic future (Fitzsimmons, 2020). By referring to research conducted on the development of teenagers of colour, Toliver (2020) also notes that these latter are likely to explore their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities earlier and more frequently than their white counterparts. Further, as they are socialised in a world where the “models, lifestyles, and images of beauty represented by the dominant group [are valued] more highly than those of their own cultural group” (Tatum in Toliver, 2020, p. 188), adolescents of colour may tend to internalise the belief that the dominant culture is in fact better (Toliver, 2020). To put it differently, the constant exposure to distorted, stereotypical, and demeaning depictions of young readers of colour might result in the assimilation of such negative imagery that, in turn, could obstruct their possibilities of personal and social identity formation and development (Toliver, 2020). For all these reasons, it is crucial that authors

of young adult novels offer an extensive and varied body of literature that reflects all human experiences through nuanced and authentic portrayals that give face to diverse populations. With reference to this key purpose, and by taking into account that the truthful depiction of a person of colour in a book does not automatically imply the identification of a reader of colour with it (Toliver, 2020), it is just as relevant to promote the literary production of diverse representations of diverse adolescents. Moreover, it should also be kept in mind that the need for more dignified depictions of diverse characters in young adult fiction does not mean that these should never play secondary or marginal roles. Instead, it implies that, if the constrictive and exclusive representation of diverse characters in dystopian fiction is not widened to the part of protagonist as well, the conceptualisation of the adolescent of colour as oppressed, silent, or even non-existent runs the risk of becoming imprinted in young readers' minds as the only possible trope for diverse teenage men and women (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor in Toliver, 2020). In this respect, it should be noted that the lack of expansion of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity traits beyond the dominant group in young adult dystopian fiction, directly derives from this latter's failure at fulfilling its primary purpose of inspiring readers to focus critical eyes on contemporary social matters. As Jack Zipes emphasises in the foreword to *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Hintz and Ostry (2003), young adult literature needs utopias and dystopias as they allow its audience to critique their contemporary society, with the purpose of sensitising or predisposing it to political action and social change. However, dystopian authors' narrative silence, that is, the lack of acknowledgement of significant and contemporary sociocultural concerns such as race, cannot but contribute to the perpetuation of the hegemonic status quo whereby race does not appear to matter and which, thus, favours the dominant race (Olutola, 2021).

Namely, a popular strategy in young adult dystopian fiction to evade the question of racial tensions and racism, is identified by scholar Elizabeth Anne Leonard: in particular, she illustrates how, in a conscious effort to offer either a model for a future society or a 'politically correct' version of reality which is not interested in race, dystopian authors often deal with racial issues by designing worlds where these latter are non-issues and colour-blindness is the norm (in Couzelis, 2013). Assuming and advancing the belief that racial reconciliation will be reached only once race is ignored and past discrimination

is forgotten, the colour-blind approach to race corresponds to a “predominant white mode of thought”, that is, a white privilege framework (Gilton in Hale 2021, p. 121). In this regard, the notion of white privilege may be understood as the direct opposite of the black oppressed and enslaved individual’s identity, described by American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2007, originally published in 1903). Specifically, he writes:

[T]he Negro is [...] gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

By contrast to this fragmented psyche, while they arbitrarily assign races to all other ethnicities, white people allegedly promote the erasure of race from their own identity by claiming to be whole beings, simply human and, thus, not recognising how the colour of a subject’s skin can effectively determine their life prospects (Couzelis, 2013). Thus, as Sean P. Connors and Roberta Seelinger Trites (2021) point out, white privilege can be essentially defined as “the ability to live un-self-aware as to how whiteness provides economic, social, and political advantage” (p. 86). From this perspective, white privilege represents a subtle form of racism that favours the dominant race (Couzelis, 2013). Further, it may be also argued that, on its surface, the colour-blind ideology can be beneficial or even progressive: for instance, Donna L. Gilton comments how it was largely responsible for the design of an antidiscrimination legislation during the Civil Rights Movement and for abolishing laws that prohibited interracial marriage (in Hale, 2021). Nevertheless, colour-blindness appears to be inherently flawed. Despite purportedly being implemented in literature in order to eliminate racial issues and white domination, colour-blindness does nothing but create false ideas about contemporary race relations, overlook the occurrence and the strictly related consequences of past and present racism, deny the existence of ethnocentrism, and, thus, make people of colour and their concerns non-existent (Gilton in Hale, 2021). Simply put, “[a]t best, colorblindness tends to be ineffective; at worst, it compounds the problem by allowing white privilege to continue to operate beneath conscious radar” (Sullivan in Couzelis, 2013, para. 2).

Consequently, the obfuscation of race carried out through the depiction of a raceless generic idea of difference can result in the overturning of the potential antiracist messages that dystopian authors might have wanted to convey (Hale, 2021).

To better grasp this, it may be worthwhile to briefly consider concrete cases such as *The Giver*, *The Uglies*, and *The Maze Runner*. With reference to the first dystopian novel, it may be stated that Lois Lowry adopts a colour-blind ideology through the story of Jonas, a teenage boy who inhabits a society free of any negative aspect of life (e.g., pain, war, discrimination, starvation, etc.). Indeed, after being chosen as the next 'Receiver of Memory' (i.e., the one that retains and experiences all the painful and joyous memories of the past), Jonas learns that the condition of 'Sameness' his community presently lives in is the result of its people choosing in the past to negate difference and not see any colour. When Jonas begins to distinguish colour, he manages to detect red tones in an apple, her friend's hair, and people's faces. With respect to these latter, an elder called 'the Giver', who is meant to train Jonas in his newly assigned role, explains:

No, flesh isn't red. But it has red tones in it. There was a time, actually – you'll see this in the memories later – when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones. (Lowry, 2002, p. 94)

As Mary J. Couzelis (2013) infers, then, not only does the future seem to lack racial diversity, but whiteness is the selected race. Through the portrayal of a society populated by people who elected to become 'pale' (Lowry, 2002, p. 106) and with 'light eyes' (Lowry, 2002, p. 21), that is, implicitly white, Lowry may imply that people of colour deliberately made the choice to physically assimilate to the white standard (Couzelis, 2013). As a result, *The Giver* appears to reinscribe in the young reader white privilege through the hegemonic confidence that racial minorities want to be white. In the same way, the lack of investigation of the possible reasons behind the election of whiteness as the universal race showcases the habits of white privilege of impeding critical reflection on them and, as a result, allows them to continue to function hidden and undisturbed (Couzelis, 2013). This same purpose is served by the only representation provided throughout the entire story of a different race through images of violence and savagery:

Peering from the place where he stood hidden behind some shrubbery, he was reminded of what The Giver had told him, that there had been a time when flesh had different colors. Two of these men had dark brown

skin; the others were light. Going closer, he watched them hack the tusks from a motionless elephant on the ground and haul them away, spattered with blood. (Lowry, 2002, p. 100)

With reference to this, scholar Susan Louise Stewart notes how dystopian novels' pedagogical objective of invoking their audiences' critical thinking on the pivotal issues of contemporary society, is not achieved by Lowry (in Couzelis, 2013). Rather, the author seems to opt for sidestepping all notions related to racial identity in the futuristic society she invents and, accordingly, normalising the selection of whiteness as the race of the future (Couzelis, 2013). Moreover, by identifying with the protagonist who conceptualises his community's homogeneity solely in terms of lack of choice instead of physical difference (Hale, 2021), the young reader "risks becoming socialized into the institution of white privilege" as well (Couzelis, 2013, para. 2). By doing little to interrogate contemporary racial hierarchies, Westerfeld's *The Uglies* (2005) may also corroborate white privilege ideologies. Indeed, through the main character Tally's rebelliousness in a dystopian world where everyone at the age of sixteen is required to undergo an extreme cosmetic surgery which is supposed to transform citizens from being 'ugly' to 'pretty', Westerfeld's intent appears to be the mere problematisation of detrimental ideologies surrounding beauty (Couzelis, 2013). Analogously to *The Giver*, the logical solution to all human conflict seems to be to make people racially similar. Just as telling as this process of whitewashing and, further, the dismissal of history as a critical tool to question white privilege (Baccolini, 2003), might be the novel's reliance on evolution as a justification for the surgery. Specifically, when Tally sees for the first time his childhood best friend Peris after his surgery, the third-person narrator explains:

There was a certain kind of beauty, a prettiness that everyone could see. Big eyes and full lips like a kid's; smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features; and a thousand other little clues. Somewhere in the backs of their minds, people were always looking for these markers. No one could help seeing them, no matter how they were brought up. A million years of evolution had made it part of the human brain. (Westerfeld 2006, pp. 16-17)

Through the promotion of science as the rationale for beauty, this excerpt may evoke, to an extent, anti-Black racism promoters' and white supremacy's co-optation of the authority of pseudo-scientific practices such as craniometry, that is, the measurement of skulls, to prove white biological superiority over the other races (James in Couzelism, 2013). If on the one hand Westerfeld's novel may not overtly or necessarily encourage

the inherent inferiority of these latter, on the other Couzelis (2013) highlights that by not challenging the science of certain Anglo physical traits being supposedly most attractive and superior, *The Uglies* might prevent any potential exploration of how scientific methods relate to the history of racism. Alternatively, Dashner's *The Maze Runner* series may reinforce the typically white narrative of the white saviour, whereby a white person leads people of colour, passive victims incapable of seeking change on their own, from the social margins to the mainstream with their intelligence and benevolence (Cammarota, 2011). In this regard, the first instalment of the trilogy involves two relevant diverse secondary characters. The first is Alby, described as a "dark-skinned boy" (Dashner, 2014, p. 6), leader of the social community (i.e., 'the Glade') the protagonist Thomas becomes part of at the beginning of the novel. The other is Minho, described as an "Asian kid", (Dashner, 2014, p. 6) leader of the 'Runners', that is, the group charged with the task of figuring a way out of the maze that has kept the community imprisoned for two years. However, it is with the arrival of Thomas, the white male hero, that freedom becomes possible. His exceptional courage and curiosity completely nullify the two-year efforts of his companions, to the point that Minho suggests Thomas replaces him as leader of the Runners:

I've never seen anything like it. he didn't panic. He didn't whine or cry, never seemed scared. Dude, he'd been here for just a few days. Think about what we were all like in the beginning. Huddling in corners, disoriented, crying every hour, not trusting anybody, refusing to do anything. We were all like that, for weeks or months, till we had no choice but to shuck it and live. (Dashner, 2014, pp. 160-161)

In the same way, Alby will sacrifice himself at the end of the first book in the hope of facilitating the escape of his group, by then led by Thomas. It might be also worth mentioning that the imperialist narrative that allowed white people to expiate their crimes against humanity by falsely and subtly transforming them from perpetrators to saviours (Cammarota, 2011), could be detected in the fact that, before joining his companions, Thomas worked for the same flagitious organisation (i.e., 'WICKED') that trapped these latter in the Glade. In particular, through Thomas's subsequent betrayal of WICKED and his teaming up with the boys in the Glade, the novel appears to reinscribe the idea of the white person who falls from his or her position of privilege and, thus, leads the revolution against those in power who cast him or her out. To refer to this white practice, John Rieder (2011) speaks in terms of "sympathetic identification" (p. 47), implying that the issues of

racial minorities can be effectively resolved only once a white person shows up. To sum up, by ostensibly envisioning worlds where racial dimensions have no impact on future identities and societies, all three dystopian novels seem to miss a fundamental component in their stories, which should not be suppressed, ignored, nor minimised. Allegedly, this glaring absence reflects the unrealistic desire of contemporary mainstream culture to devalue race, which according to (mostly) white people still exists only because people of colour keep talking about it (Hentges, 2018). On the contrary, as Sarah Hentges (2018) stresses, “[r]acism continues because it is embedded in our social, cultural, and political institutions” (p. 157). Through the depiction of a social group of people of colour which in the dystopian setting of Panem relives the conditions of slavery (not acknowledged by either character or author), the *Hunger Games* books fail just like Lowry’s, Westerfeld’s, and Dashner’s novels, at advancing alternative, conscious, and positive views of racial diversity that may challenge and problematise those set by dominant, white privilege ideologies.

2.2.3 Problematic representations of gender and sexuality

It was anticipated in the previous subsection that young adult literature, especially twenty-first-century dystopian fiction, appears to give more voice to physically and mentally powerful female teenage protagonists: indeed, they are usually portrayed as fighting, caring for their families, naturally leading revolutions, as well as endowed with empathy, individual intelligence, judgement, and sharp wit. Despite these qualities, in his 2013 essay “Gender and Sexuality in YA”, scholar Antero Garcia asserts that traditional ideologies of femininity as conventionally weak, emotional, jealous, subservient, and submissive, still find significant representation in these texts. The revolutionary nature of the strong female adolescent protagonist, then, appears to be undermined not only by the character’s whiteness, but also by being firmly and hopelessly rooted in the Western highly polarised binary distinction between masculinity and femininity, whereby the latter is defined only in relation to the other, such that what is masculine is not feminine and, in turn, what is feminine is not masculine (Jesse and Jones, 2020). Furthermore, it should be noted that, by showing adolescents what their performance of gender is supposed to look like, the pictures and ideas spread and promoted by media are likely to

easily and rapidly become the primary source that influences and shapes their behaviours and ways of thinking (Jesse and Jones, 2020). In this sense, young adult dystopian novels, particularly those that are also adapted into successful films, can subtly or overtly construct male and female identities (Garcia, 2013). An example may be the characters of Teresa and Brenda in *The Maze Runner* series: both, depicted as fierce, remarkably smart, and brave, arguably lose all their depth as the love interests of Thomas who, faced with the choice between the two girls, is thus given all the power in the gender dynamics within the novels. More in detail, Teresa's final sacrifice to save Thomas's life as well as her last words (i.e., "I only ever ... cared for ...") (Dashner, 2011, p. 317) may devalue the purpose and worth of her character throughout the story as instrumental in the survival of the white, heterosexual, male hero. As with racial diversity, then, the homogenisation of gender depictions that complies with Western thoughts and potentially constricts the female identity as exclusively white, domestic, in love, vulnerable, and with little to no agency, equally risks the reification of social gender hierarchies which, on the contrary, should be questioned (Garcia, 2013).

At the same time, Koss and Teale's aforementioned 2009 research on who often gets to be represented in young adult literature, also showed that only 10 per cent of the surveyed titles involved LGBTQIA characters. With their 2006 analysis *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content: 1969–2004*, Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins testify to Koss and Teale's findings by explaining that, while the space devoted to LGBTQIA depictions has progressively broadened over the decades, LGBTQIA texts remain vastly underpublished within the young adult genre (in Garcia, 2013). As a matter of fact, other than limiting female images in terms of gender norms, a heteronormative stance tends to be standardly employed in young adult texts (Garcia, 2013). It seems evident that the promotion of heterosexual behaviours, attraction, and relationships as standard in young adult novels, just as in popular media, necessarily results in the consolidation of assumptions about "what are *normal* sexual feelings and *normal* ways to associate gender and behavior" (Garcia, 2013, p. 87). With regard to this, Garcia delineates two major ways through which heteronormativity is maintained in young adult literature. Namely, one may be the suppression of LGBTQIA presence, which implies that all characters within a novel are heterosexual and, thus, driven in their actions by their male-female romantic feelings (Garcia, 2013). Through these universally

heterosexual representations, as in the case of the love triangle between Thomas, Teresa, and Brenda, young adult authors seem intent on responding to the interests and tastes of an audience that they voluntarily assume as largely heterosexual (Garcia, 2013). As a consequence of this, the majority of young readers often expects to read about heteronormative characters (Garcia, 2013). Exemplary may be astonishment of Harry Potter fans at J. K. Rowling's revelation during a fan meeting in 2007 that the beloved character of Albus Dumbledore is gay. As *ABC News* reported, "[Rowling] was initially met with a surprised silence but ultimately the audience erupted in cheers for several minutes prompting [her] to add, 'I would have told you earlier if I knew it would make you so happy'" (2009, para. 6). To an extent, such a surprised reaction from fans of a seven-book-series may prove that, when encountered with characters whose sexuality is not outright clarified in a text or series imbued with heteronormativity, readers might presume that these latter are heterosexual as well. A second strategy serving the purpose of fostering heteronormativity in young adult books is the inclusion of pejorative assumptions about LGBTQIA identity or behaviours as essentially abnormal. To support this argument, Garcia refers to a very brief but meaningful excerpt from Cassandra Clare's urban fantasy novel *City of Bones* (2007), where the protagonist Clary asks her best friend Simon, "You're not gay, are you?", to which he replies, "If I were, I would dress better" (in Garcia, 2013, p. 87). The issues with this kind of exchange are mainly two. On the one hand, the discursive structure of Clary's question (completely different from the more neutral 'Are you gay?') that potentially makes it sound almost as an accusation or a tasteless, mean joke, might negatively connote the possibility of Simon actually being gay. Thus, homosexuality appears to be mentioned by Clare only to be castigated as a disgraceful, terrible condition to be afflicted with (Garcia, 2013). On the other hand, Simon's response may be just as harmful by reiterating a widespread LGTBQIA stereotype. With reference to this kind of negative evaluations of non-heterosexual ways of being, Garcia (2013) speaks in terms of 'literary heterosexist assaults' that inevitably favour the internalisation within the reader that LGBTQIA people and relationships are not normal. Additionally, Cart and Jenkins point out that, whenever gender and sexually diverse protagonists do get portrayed, texts appear to selectively render the life experiences of homosexual male adolescents (in Garcia, 2013). Within the young adult genre, then, LGBTQIA novels may grapple with their own internal

representation problems. Not only, in fact, are “the remaining letters in the [LGBTQIA] acronym [...] left without a place at the [young adult] table most of the time” (Garcia, 2013, p. 90), but these texts might paradoxically be deemed as lacking truthful voices by focusing on representing only white homosexual men. Replicating the model established by Donovan’s 1969 novel, centred around a white, upper middle-class, male protagonist, LGBTQIA texts are likely to neglect the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual teenagers of colour (Garcia, 2013). While young adult dystopian novels where LGBTQIA characters are not always white and socioeconomically privileged have been gradually emerging, it is vital to continue to encourage their creation. In this regard, Campbell (2019) highlights the need for conscious and serious representation of diversity in the speculative field by discussing how adolescents, and especially those LGBTQIA, already inhabit a dystopian reality where their rights are trampled daily through macro- and/or micro-aggressions such as, for instance, the so-called conversion therapy, still legal in several U.S. states. Disheartened, he comments: “This is not the plot of some dystopian novel, this is present day. This is happening to a teen right now, somewhere, as you read this sentence” (Campbell, 2019, p. 155). To conclude, as Garcia (2013) infers with respect to the concurrent lack of racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender representations in young adult (dystopian) books actively marketed by publishers and notably well-received by audiences, unless the female teenage reader is white, conventionally beautiful, and heterosexual, she will struggle to find a large number of faces and voices which she can naturally identify with.

2.3 Case Study: *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins

2.3.1 Introduction to the analysis

As discussed, twenty-first-century dystopian novels and series are likely to be defined by the tension between their expected purpose as dystopian texts for young adults and the patterns of visibility and invisibility, of inclusion and denial, of “echoing without naming” (Roszak, 2016, p. 61), around the various systems of inequality that inevitably shape contemporary society. As Hentges (2018) emphasises, this narrow lens on the issues of potential future worlds and, therefore, of the present one, might be the product

of a culture that continues to suffer from segregation, racism, and gender oppression, as well as a population that abides by the constraints imposed by its social and cultural system, as it does not possess the means for developing critical and oppositional forms of consciousness. As a result of this:

who chooses to write, [what and/or who] they choose to write about, what gets written, what gets published, what gets read, what gets critiqued and promoted and shared and awarded, is shaped by a system invested in [...] the white supremacist, imperialist, capitalist, patriarchy. (Hentges, 2018, p. 71)

The stories the young audience is told may be about class and totalitarian state authority through the imagination of futuristic realities organised in ‘uglies’ and ‘pretties’, immunes and infected, factions, districts, blood types, tribes, and so forth. However, while authors and main characters through them are not likely to address the social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality, the reader is shown that these portrayed societies cannot help but be built on them. Despite, then, the dystopian narrative’s failure in its pedagogical intent, readers may still be equipped with appropriate and effective tools that allow them a better understanding of the roles of racial and gender hierarchies within contemporary and future possibilities. In particular, the following analysis aims at going beyond surface discourses that recognise class and nation as the central axes of control, power, and oppression, in order to intersectionally investigate and explore racial and gender inequalities in dystopian systems such as the one of *The Hunger Games*’ Panem.

2.3.2 Dystopian features

It is relevant to consider the main aspects that allow the categorisation of Collins’s series as dystopian. More precisely, *The Hunger Games* takes place in a totalitarian society hundreds of years into the future, in the fictional country of Panem, located within the geographic area of present-day North America. Panem emerges after a series of post-apocalyptic events (“[...] the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained”) (Collins, 2009a, p. 20) with the subdivision of the surviving citizens into thirteen separate districts, controlled by a powerful central government, known as the Capitol. Following the uprising of the districts, the subsequent war, and a failed revolution

against the Capitol that led to the obliteration of District Thirteen (the so-called ‘Dark Days’), the Capitol passed the ‘Treaty of Treason’ to ensure peace, prosperity, and control over the districts after the Dark Days. Among the newly introduced laws, this new social contract entailed the implementation of the ‘Hunger Games’, that is, an annual competition in which twenty-four contestants, two reaped from each district, must fight to the death, the sole standing survivor being the winner. The story centres on Katniss Everdeen, a teenage girl from District Twelve who volunteers to take her sister’s place on the occasion of the seventy-fourth Games. If on the one hand, the natural disasters that brought about Panem as well as the uprising of the Dark Days may qualify the narrative as post-apocalyptic (Burke & Kelly, 2015), the society depicted in the three-volume series might be best described as essentially dystopian. Indeed, the books appear to perfectly comply with Fitzsimmons’ outlining of dystopian trilogies’ plot patterns or phases. In particular, she describes the first phase as focused “on a particular subset of society, the home of the protagonist”, and thus it “allows the reader to become immersed in the world of the dystopian and to understand the rules and realities of the society through the focus of the protagonist” (Fitzsimmons, 2020, p. 8). The subset in *The Hunger Games* is evidently District Twelve, the home of Katniss, which, thanks to the first-person narrator, the reader can immediately access from the very beginning of the series:

Our part of District 12, nicknamed the Seam, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many of whom have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails and the lines of their sunken faces. But today the black cinder streets are empty. Shutters on the squat grey houses are closed. The reaping isn’t until two. May as well sleep in. If you can. (Collins, 2009a, pp. 4-5)

Through her visual and objective descriptions, Katniss is able to vividly render the poverty, unsanitary conditions, hard work, and tension that characterise her miniaturised reality within the dystopian system. Fitzsimmons (2020) adds that this same phase features a “ritualised rite of passage” (p. 8) whose steps are disrupted by the protagonist in the series and, as a result, places him or her in direct conflict with the dystopian regime. By rebelling against the Games’ rules, that is, by pretending together with her friend Peeta to be about to eat poisonous berries so as to force the Capitol to, instead of having only one victor, spare both her and Peeta, Katniss rapidly becomes an enemy of the state. Specifically, President Snow instantly recognises in Katniss’s small teenage

insubordination during the Games a potential extremely dangerous spark for a larger societal rebellion that could eventually bring down the ruling power. When he confronts Katniss after the Games, in fact, President Snow warns her about this possibility:

‘[...] In several of [the districts] [...] people viewed your little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, not an act of love. And if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same?’ he says. ‘What is to prevent, say, an uprising?’ (Collins, 2009b, pp. 23-24)

Fitzsimmons (2020) proceeds by delineating phase two as expanding the dystopia beyond the protagonist’s world to show that this latter’s problems represent only a limited portion of a wider dysfunctional system. As a consequence, the trilogy transforms the fundamental questions driving the rebellion of the adolescent protagonist, initially concerned with the survival of his or her loved ones, into major issues that encompass the dystopian society as a whole (Fitzsimmons, 2020). As it will be explored, by comparing herself to another tribute in the Games, that is, Rue, Katniss will progressively realise throughout the books that her and her own district’s race, gender, class, and even able-bodiedness may offer a relative but previously undetected privilege or security that the citizens of other districts cannot benefit from. Similarly, by witnessing how her teenage rebellion, originally motivated by her desire to return home and provide for her family, will in fact trigger the various districts’ insurrection against the Capitol (as anticipated by President Snow), Katniss will understand that her fight for life against the repressive forces of the government is part of a far greater movement towards freedom that involves all Panem and its citizens. After learning about the first reported uprisings in the districts, her friend Gale stresses this when Katniss informs him about the images she secretly saw of violent mobs rioting in District Eight:

‘[...] You haven’t hurt people – you’ve given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it. There’s already been talk in the mines. People who want to fight. Don’t you see? It’s happening! It’s finally happening! If there is an uprising in District Eight, why not here? Why not everywhere? [...]’. (Collins, 2009b, p. 114)

Finally, Fitzsimmons (2020) clarifies that the second phase concludes by setting up the stakes for the final conflict with the totalitarian state, thus upending them through the introduction of unforeseen participants in the existing power dynamics. With reference to

The Hunger Games, these sudden players are embodied by District Thirteen which, as the reader discovers through Katniss, was not destroyed during the Dark Days seventy-four years earlier, but stayed politically isolated and later became the base for the present rebellion. As allies, other than apparently realigning the power balance within the conflict with the dystopian system, these new forces attempt to demonstrate the functioning of alternative social structures to the oppressive status quo. Nonetheless, just like Katniss comes to acknowledge that the stratocracy led by District Thirteen's own President, Alma Coin, is just as dictatorial and, thus, potentially destructive as the current government, the trilogy's protagonist apprehends that, despite the revolutionary impulse, the replacement form of the dystopian system is not always inherently revolutionary (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Moreover, through the difficult choices the protagonist must make, like Katniss's assassination of President Coin, the reader can observe how the achievement of a more egalitarian, justice-oriented society is likely to be neither peaceful nor graceful, as it usually entails violence, loss, and sacrifice (Fitzsimmons, 2020). Thus, the protagonist can undergo loss (e.g., besides friends such as Rue and Finnick, Katniss eventually loses her younger sister Prim, whose protection sets in motion the series), serious injuries (e.g., during the final battle, Katniss suffers from severe burn wounds, while years after the Games ended, she is still affected by post-traumatic stress disorder), the destruction of home (e.g., during the war Katniss's district is bombed by the Capitol), and at times even death (Fitzsimmons, 2020). At the same time, the emerging state is typically predystopian, that is, a democratic system that closely resembles that of the contemporary U.S. (Fitzsimmons, 2020).

A further key element that qualifies *The Hunger Games* as a twenty-first-century young adult dystopian novel is the quick and brutal violence through which teenagers crusade against, rather than "the fabulous monsters of fairy tales or of Wonderland and Neverland" (Tatar, 2011, para. 7), death. Another crucial aspect is that of societal surveillance, exacerbated in Collins's volumes through the cameras in the Hunger Games arena that make the competitors' experience for the inhabitants of the Capitol a full-fledged reality show, that is, a paramount source of entertainment (rather than of punishment, as for the twelve districts). The intrusive nature of the audience's interest and attention towards the Games dynamics is frequently noted by Katniss throughout the novels. As she thinks while climbing down a tree during the first Games:

While I've been concealed by darkness and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now, though. The minute I hit the ground, I'm guaranteed a close-up. (Collins, 2009a, p. 191)

Thirdly, the epilogue in the third and final instalment of the series, *Mockingjay* (2010), portraying Katniss and Peeta with their two children fifteen years after the end of the trilogy, appears to serve the exact purpose identified by Cadden. Specifically, by stating that one day she will have to explain to her children the traumatic experiences she lived as well as the ways she has been able to gradually find some kind of peace and closure, Katniss ensures the hope that, after more than twenty years from her first participation in the Games, a more promising future and possibilities for healing await her and the other characters. All these features, then, might motivate the series' immense popularity and resonance with the teenage audience, which is provided with an allegory of the contemporary experience of the adolescent as citizen of a society which, if not diverted, seems to be destined to hurtle towards a dystopian outcome eerily similar to Panem.

2.3.3 The reinstatement of slavery

Despite being dystopian, as is the case of the abovementioned novels *The Giver*, *The Uglies*, and *The Maze Runner*, *The Hunger Games* appears to fail in its purpose of urging young adult readers towards a rational and responsible critique of the contemporaneity they inhabit in the hope of social change. On the contrary, Collins seems to imagine an (apparently) post-racial world where race is not a relevant organising agent within the state. However, it is imperative to keep in mind that a literary work, especially a dystopian novel or series, is strictly defined by the time, place, historical, political, social, and cultural context it is produced in. From this perspective, Collins's three volumes address an audience, a time, a place, a historical, political, social, and cultural context that are not post-racial. Therefore, it may be inevitable to read these texts through a racial framework that cannot be deemed unnecessary nor insignificant in blockbuster books such as *The Hunger Games*.

Broadly speaking, from the first descriptions of characters within Katniss's district, it seems clear that the author made the conscious decision to depict some of them as evidently white and others as racially ambiguous. Indeed, the protagonist, with

“[s]traight black hair, olive skin” and “grey eyes” (Collins, 2009a, p. 9), might be purposefully described in contrast to the fair-skinned tone, blonde hair, and blue eyes of her sister Prim, their mother, and Peeta, these two latter both from the wealthier merchant class in District Twelve. Katniss, on the other hand, appears to resemble more her father and Gale, both miners: nonetheless, as she has never worked in the mines and shares the same domestic environment with her sister and mother, her skin tone may be simply inherited. As she shares the same physical features of other non-miner characters such as her mentor Haymitch, it may be inferred that darker skin, hair, and grey eyes are prevalent throughout Katniss’s district. While it does not automatically uncover a sharp racial distinction, the existing difference in appearance may still imply to some degree a class-colour divide within District Twelve. Crucially more telling and striking may be the skin colour of the inhabitants of District Eleven, represented by the first Games’ tributes Rue and Thresh. When Katniss, in fact, sees for the first time the other twenty-two competitors chosen for the Games, she reports to the reader those that particularly ‘stand out’ in her mind:

A monstrous body who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair from District 5. A boy with a crippled foot from District 10. And [...] a twelve-year-old girl from District 11. She has dark brown skin and eyes, [...]. (Collins, 2009a, p. 52)

Among the four young opponents, only the fourth and last, that the reader later learns is called Rue, is characterised by her skin colour. The same applies to Thresh, who “has the same dark skin as Rue” (Collins, 2009a, p. 146). Thus, it may be assumed that, despite not being explicitly introduced as such, as they live in a post-apocalyptic, dystopian society where continents as they are presently known such as Africa and America no longer exist nor hold any meaning, Rue and Thresh are in fact African American (such intuition is also confirmed by the author herself) (Valby, 2011). With respect to Katniss’s physical descriptions of Rue and Thresh throughout the novels, it may be argued that, by only noting their skin colour and not that of other characters, she inadvertently racialises them. In her 2006 discussion *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Shannon Sullivan associates this practice of racialisation, whereby a person’s whiteness is ensured through the affirmation of the oppositional relationship between white and non-white individuals, to the white privilege ideology.

Furthermore, throughout the narrative, the reader is provided with several details that may suggest Collins's reliance on racial history to portray District Eleven and its residents. Namely, this latter, one of the poorest and less powerful districts in Panem together with the Twelfth, is agricultural, specifically based on the harvesting of orchards, grain, and cotton. In this respect, it might be interesting that all characters Katniss encounters from District Eleven bear names that are ascribable to agriculture. Indeed, Rue may be linked to an herb with small yellow flowers, while Thresh may refer to 'threshing', that is, a part of the grain harvesting process (Cambridge, n.d.). Moreover, Dill, the name of the female tribute in the tenth Hunger Games, is an aromatic herb generally used for flavouring (Cambridge, n.d.), whereas Reaper Ash's name, the male tribute in the same Games, may recall 'reaping', that is, another step of grain harvesting (Cambridge, n.d.). Finally, the names of the seventy-fifth Games' tributes, Chaff and Seeder, might derive respectively from the husks of corn (Cambridge n.d.) and the process of planting or sowing seeds (Cambridge, n.d.). With respect to the protagonist's acknowledgment of her condition of privilege or security when faced with dystopian realities beyond her home, it might be useful to note that the prevalence of poverty and hunger in Rue's district exceeds the challenging state of Katniss's mining district, as this latter notes: "Small communities of shacks – by comparison the houses in the Seam are upscale" (Collins, 2009b, p. 63). Just as telling may be Rue's and Thresh's primitiveness hinted at by the author through a series of narrative strategies. Among these, Rue and Thresh are both given animal attributes by Katniss. In particular, when Rue dies, she is thought by the protagonist as "smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting" (Collins, 2009a, p. 275). Analogously, in the third novel, she is imagined by Katniss as "poised on her toes, arms slightly extended, like a bird about to take flight" (Collins, 2010, p. 435). Conversely, when she comes face to face with Thresh, previously described as "built like an ox" (Collins, 2009a, p. 146), Katniss hopes that "[m]aybe if he knows I helped Rue, he won't choose some slow, sadistic end for me" (Collins, 2009a, p. 337). As Donnarae MacCann underlines, depictions of Blacks as "[ranging] from Sambo [...] to brute beast images [...] made a frequent appearance in the propaganda of white supremacy organizations" (as cited in Couzelis, 2013, para. 4). Thus, through the inclusion of dehumanising and racist images that, as in the case of Thresh, might evoke the stereotype whereby white women should fear large black men (Couzelis, 2013), Collins arguably

perpetuates hegemonic racial hierarchies. She does so also through the dialogue between Katniss and Thresh who, dissimilarly from all the other characters in the series, speaks in a simplified and fragmented manner: “Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we’re even then. No more owed. You understand?” (Collins, 2009a, p. 338). Finally, the primitive state of District Eleven as compared to the civilisation of the others is conveyed through Rue’s use of herbs as a healing technique to cure Katniss who, observing how her ally simply chews and grinds them into a paste in her mouth, thinks, “[m]y mother would use other methods” (Collins, 2009a, p. 235). The dichotomy that affirms white privilege anticipated through Katniss’s realisation that poverty in District Eleven is far worse than in District Twelve is reiterated through Rue’s account of the gendarmerie’s, ironically known as Peacekeepers, surveillance in her district:

‘I’d have thought, in District Eleven, you’d have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,’ I say. Rue’s eyes widen. ‘Oh, no, we’re not allowed to eat the crops.’ ‘They arrest you or something?’ I ask. ‘They whip you and make everyone else watch,’ says Rue. [...] I can tell by her expression that it’s not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping’s a rare thing in District 12, [...]. (Collins, 2009a, p. 237)

Katniss’s surprised reaction and realisation that public whipping in District Twelve is not as frequent and routine as in District Eleven, seems to reveal once more a privilege that Rue and her fellow citizens do not get to experience. This difference is further emphasised by a second example of Peacekeepers’ violence provided by Rue when Katniss shows her the night goggles she found among the resources she was able to collect in the arena. Indeed, while Katniss does not understand their purpose, Rue immediately recognises them as they are given to the workers in District Eleven while they harvest at night to better see where the torchlight does not reach. Then, Rue proceeds to explain: “One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid them in his trousers. They killed him on the spot” (Collins, 2009a, p. 239). After adding that everybody knew that the boy “wasn’t right in the head” as he “acted like a three-year-old” (Collins, 2009a, p. 239), hence implying that even a boy with the mental capabilities of a toddler is required to work, Katniss, appalled, restates her privilege: “Hearing this makes me feel like District 12 is some sort of safe haven” (Collins, 2009a, p. 239). Another glaring detail indicating that the condition of slavery in District Eleven may be inspired by the slave tradition in the U.S., is the strategic use of music as a form of communication among the workers during

the harvest. As Isaiah Lavender asserts, “[m]usic is surely a key element in a culture based on slavery because it records an oral history through song” (in Couzelis, 2012, para. 4). In this sense, songs were an effective tool for the resistance of enslaved people to Westerners’ despotic oppression as, while they were thought by white people as merely happy songs or religious hymns that slaves were taught to be Christianised, they contained special meanings that allowed slaves to interact without being noticed by white outsiders (Couzelis, 2013, para. 4). Similarly, in *The Hunger Games*, fictional birds called ‘mockingjays’ mimic human voices. Rue makes use of them in order to communicate with the other workers in her district and, more precisely, to inform them when it is time to stop working:

‘They carry messages for me [...] I’m usually up highest, so I’m the first to see the flag that signals quitting time. There’s a special little song I do [...] And the mockingjays spread it around the orchard. That’s how everyone know to knock off [...]’. (Collins, 2009a, p. 247-248)

When they hear Rue’s tune, the Peacekeepers believe it to be one among many bird songs, when in truth the notes are a remarkably specific way for the workers to subvert the system. Rue suggests that she and Katniss utilise the same four-note song to exchange messages without the other competitors knowing. In this case as well, Katniss admits her privileged status by thinking that in her community, she “[ranks] music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness” (Collins, 2009a, p. 247). By not having to deal with such hostile conditions and control as in District Eleven, music in District Twelve has little to no value.

Therefore, as the characters’ skin colour, their primitive habits and features, the agricultural setting, the heavy patrolling, the punishments, the unprovoked executions, and the employment of music might point towards plantation life, the experience of slavery, the antebellum South, or even sharecropping after the Reconstruction era, it may be claimed that Collins depicts District Eleven through a significant number of distinct, unequivocal, and deliberate analogies to the historical treatment of black people in the U.S. These correlations appear to be substantiated by a further potential element of historical imperialism provided by the fact that the Capitol (historically, white Europeans) governs District Eleven and the rest of Panem (the lands inhabited by non-white communities) from a distance through the Peacekeepers’ (colonial settlers) surveillance. Drawing upon Edward Said’s perspective on the novel as “a narrative form [that] has its

origins in reinforcing colonial frameworks, reaffirming for white, middle-class Western consumers their perception of non-Western geographies and peoples” (in Olutola, 2021, p. 18), it may be concluded that Collins’s futuristic world reinstates the institution of slavery by alluding to it rather than properly name it as such. With reference to this, the echoed but not acknowledged parallel to racial history seems to necessarily enable narrative silence on racial issues and, thus, mirror the systemic racism of the past and present in Western societies.

2.3.4 Risks of ‘echoing without naming’

As Couzelis (2013) stresses, the ability to detect the reinstatement of slavery in the characterisation of District Eleven and Panem throughout the books is strictly connected to the awareness of the young reader about American history. This is made especially clear when considering certain readers’ deplorable reactions to the casting of African American actress Amandla Stenberg as Rue for Gary Ross’s film adaptation (2012). In their 2014 essay “The Revolution Starts With Rue”, Antero Garcia and Marcelle Haddix argue that the social media outrage at and readers’ rejection of Rue’s skin colour as “anything but white” (p. 212), are specifically related to the centrality of her character in the first instalment and, even after her death, the entire trilogy. To put it differently, if she had been marginalised or left in the background as sole evidence that there is diversity in the text, readers would not have been so dramatically upset about Rue being black in the book and portrayed by a black actress in the film (Garcia & Haddix, 2014). Garcia and Haddix also point out that readers’ resistance to the racial diversification of main characters within young adult literature might be better understood if approached in terms of hegemonic culture. Described by Antonio Gramsci as the social structures that develop “consent [...] caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (in Garcia & Haddix, 2014, p. 212), hegemonic culture dictates social expectations and beliefs within young adult dystopian texts as well. Consequently, because of the prevalence of whiteness being depicted in *The Hunger Games*, characters are likely to be presumed white unless the text includes physical descriptions that may contrast this assumption (Garcia, 2013). As regards the notions of quantitative and

qualitative representations of characters, Cadden (2021) adds that the possibility to gloss over details that might contradict presumptions of whiteness such as the descriptions of Rue (Collins, 2009a, pp. 52, 114, 273), and thus to insert one's own racial image of 'sweet white little girl' is determined by superficial and deficient associations of quantitative with qualitative features. In particular, when a quantitative element such as skin colour is so briefly and vaguely mentioned that it may be read as incidental to character, it can not only be missed or quickly forgotten, but even overwritten by white readers that, as they typically perceive race as non-existent (Hale, 2021), may project their own quantifiable objects of preference on the character (Cadden, 2021). Thus, to dismiss race in dystopian novels and series such as Collins's might mean to limit young readers' comprehension of the text and, most importantly, to risk maintaining the hegemonic culture, whereby whiteness is the default standpoint.

2.3.5 Rue is the true Mockingjay

Another point worth exploring is the significance of Rue's death, occurring halfway through the first book. When Katniss and Rue rejoin after completing their plan to destroy the stronger tributes' supplies in the arena, the latter is killed. Her death appears to comply with the young adult dystopian novels' stereotypical trope of diverse characters, included in the plot with the only purpose of assisting through their tragic but necessary sacrifice the revolutionary white hero and, thus, guarantee his triumph at the end of the story (Garcia & Haddix, 2014). While Rue does not die in an attempt to save Katniss, it might be said that her death serves as vehicle for the protagonist's maturation as well as her own and the districts' subsequent rebellion. This may be confirmed by Katniss's immediate reaction to Rue's murder. Indeed, she decorates Rue's body and hair with flowers in order to rebel against the Capitol's and the Games' cruelty and sterility. In addition, Thresh's words to Katniss ("For the little girl") (Collins, 2009a, p. 338) highlight how sparing her is a way for the boy to honour Rue, rather than a mere act of mercy or solidarity towards Katniss. District Eleven's reaction to Katniss's speech paying homage to Rue after the end of the Games may be also strikingly meaningful:

I stand there, feeling broken and small, thousands of eyes trained on me. There's a long pause. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, someone whistles Rue's four-note mockingjay tune. [...] By the end of the tune,

I have wound the whistler, a wizened old man in a faded red shirt and overalls. His eyes meet mine. What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last goodbye I gave Rue in the arena. (Collins, 2009b, pp. 69-70)

The action of the inhabitants of Rue's district is followed by the Peacekeepers' suppression of their silent protest, ending with the public assassination of the old man who started it by whistling first. Rue's revolutionary power and worth is just as apparent when Peeta, during his private session with the Gamemakers, paints a picture of Rue as she looked after Katniss covered her in flowers in order to express his objection to the Games. Furthermore, the epithet 'Mockingjay' used to refer to Katniss throughout the revolution may be to some extent traced back to Rue and her habit of using the birds to mimic her songs and carry specific messages. As a result, Katniss might not be regarded as the revolutionary heroine touted by the resistance movement during the war against the Capitol. Rather, she is a witness of Rue's sacrifice that, as the true Mockingjay, effectively inspires Panem's citizens towards action and sparks social change. In this regard, it may be also important to note the constructive response of the series' readers that engage in challenging hegemonic readings of the volumes as well as the absence of revolutionary depictions of young people of colour. Among the most productive strategies might be fan arts and fan fictions related to Collins' trilogy. Garcia and Haddix (2014) bring attention to the relevance of such tools by citing the 2014 edited collection by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Buss, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, which illustrates six key directions in which fan fictions (and arguably fan arts) can be understood. More in detail, they may represent a readers' own interpretation of the source text, a communal gesture, a sociopolitical argument, a reader's individual engagement and identificatory practice, their peculiar response, or a pedagogical device (in Garcia & Haddix, 2014). Fan arts and fan fictions, then, can be powerfully instrumental in transmitting a young readership's critical thoughts around a text. This may be observed when Katniss is physically portrayed as grey-eyed and olive-skinned, that is, as she is described in the books, rather than blue-eyed and fair-skinned as is the actress who plays her in the films, Jennifer Lawrence. The same applies to fan fictions which diverge from the official (or 'canonical') version of events by imagining what would have happened if Rue had survived and, instead of Katniss, she had been the actual protagonist, rebel, and emblem

of the revolution. As a result, these instances demonstrate that Collins's dystopian trilogy can be something much more valuable than a mere item for consumption (Garcia & Haddix, 2014). *The Hunger Games* series, in fact, can become a site for artistic and literary production (Garcia & Haddix, 2014) that, in turn, allows conscious young readers to reclaim the agency that, as the inferior part of a vertical, top-down relationship with the author, they are often obliged to surrender to the adult counterpart.

2.3.6 Reification of heteronormativity in Panem

In parallel with the racial discourse, the female empowered protagonist, trained in combat, focused on the need to survive, and expert in taking care of herself and her loved ones is, nonetheless, subjected to stereotypical heteronormative constraints renewed by the gendered patterns within many dystopian novels. Judith Butler, with her 1990 seminal *Gender Trouble*, contributes to establish the concept of gender as less an innate feature of the single subject than an effort of this latter to perform aspects of socially constructed gender identities (Jesse & Jones, 2020). In her 1993 follow-up work, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Butler clarifies that the performance of gender is not to be intended as “a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 2). In other words, the individual cannot simply wake up and suddenly decide to “put on” (Jesse & Jones, 2020, p. 111) a gender identity: successful gender performativity requires, in fact, a chain of repeated actions that a given social reality acknowledges as representative of a specific gender identity (Jesse & Jones, 2020). Further, these reiterations seem to function as “citations” (Butler, 1993, p. 13) of the broader social norms that govern present and future performances of gender (Jesse & Jones, 2020). As such norms purportedly derive their power from these citations, the individual experiences enormous pressure to abide by the former so as not to risk becoming an “abject” (Butler, 1993, p. 3) body forced to live on the margins of society (Jesse & Jones, 2020). Katniss's character may be analysed through this special lens of gender performativity provided by Butler. To a certain degree, Katniss appears from the first novel's very first pages as androgynous in demeanour, simultaneously exhibiting feminine and masculine characteristics. The opening section is, in this sense, significant: Katniss awakes in her home, that is, a private

and domestic space arguably conventionally gendered feminine, with her younger sister Prim and her mother still sleeping together in the same bedroom. One page later, Katniss gets up and gets dressed, she wears her hunting boots and, after leaving her house, crawls under the fence enclosing District Twelve, and reaches the woods where she retrieves the bow and sheath of arrows she uses to hunt. As Mary C. Burke and Maura Kelly (2015) point out, going hunting outside the set boundaries of her district may be read as “an act that does not simply challenge norms of femininity but challenges the very laws enforced by the Capitol” (p. 65). The ability to traverse gender seems visible throughout the entire story of Katniss, whose actions and thoughts (even those typically masculine) are frequently motivated by her care for others. As a matter of fact, from the abovementioned introductory scene in which Katniss’s first concern once awake is to know where her sister is (“When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim’s warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress”) (Collins, 2009a, p. 3), the protagonist enacts a traditional feminine maternal behaviour and instinct that she reiterates several times throughout the series, with regard to not only Prim, but also Rue and Katniss’s future lover Peeta. As for Rue, her resemblance in size and attitude to Prim fosters Katniss’s protective impulse towards her, whereas Katniss tends to Peeta when he is almost fatally wounded and prioritises his injuries over hers as a mother might be inclined to do.

Overall, on the one hand, the centrality of gender appears to be downplayed when male and female tributes, regardless of the former being mostly described as physically stronger, larger, and more built than the latter, are required to equally take part in a fight to the death in the arena. However, a considerable number of details in the trilogy emphasise the dystopian society’s reliance on gender as a crucial organising system through which people in Panem are categorised. Other than minor elements reaffirming the gender binary such as the selection of tributes, one male and one female, that in the first book leads to the reaping of Peeta and Katniss, the idea of gendered separation of duties whereby men go mining while women stay home with the children, the lack (with the exception of Effie Trinket and President Coin) of women occupying a position of power in the Capitol, the districts, or the orchestration of the Games, Collins’s series persistently conveys gendered views through major images of long-established femininity. With reference to the clothing habits depicted throughout the texts, it may be

worth considering that, for instance, while Katniss is more comfortable wearing pants and boots during her everyday life and the tributes are all dressed in similar attire while in the arena, once reaped, the protagonist is rapidly forced to adopt an appearance that is more consistent with stereotypical feminine beauty. Evidence of this may be observed when, at the Remake Centre, Katniss's prep team for the Games fixes the "obvious problems" (Collins, 2009a, p. 71) of a ragged girl's body and transforms her in the picture of femininity as a healthy, clean, waxed young woman of the Capitol:

This [process] has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty foam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso, underarms and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. (Collins, 2009a, p. 71)

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity is also evident when Katniss, in the second novel, is made by President Snow to wear for her pre-Games interview a bridal dress. The design and selection of the perfect dress is followed with immense enthusiasm, unmatched by Katniss, by the spectators of the Capitol:

Initially, Cinna designed two dozen wedding gowns. Since then, there's been the process of narrowing down the designs, creating dresses, and choosing accessories. Apparently, in the Capitol, there were opportunities to vote for your favorites at each stage. [...] People screaming and cheering for their favorites, booing the ones they don't like. [...] It's bizarre to watch when I think how I never even bothered to try one on before the cameras arrived. (Collins, 2009b, p. 193)

Thus, in Collins's dystopian reality, where young women are portrayed as constantly valued for their physical and aesthetic qualities as well as their appeal to men, heteronormativity appears to heavily structure social ideas on gender and the plausible relationships between people.

Furthermore, it is interesting that the romantic heterosexual relationship between Katniss and Peeta began in the first novel as a pretence which, according to their mentor Haymitch, serves the purpose of making Katniss look more "desirable" to the Games' audience (Collins, 2009a, p. 158). Although Katniss agrees to go along with this romance narrative as she realises it could help her gain the support of the sponsors in the Capitol, her reluctance, unease, and little interest in romance and physical intimacy remain apparent in the first book. For instance, when during the Games she gingerly kisses Peeta

for the first time while tending to his injury, Haymitch's reward for her move with, instead of real medicine to treat the boy's leg, a mere pot of hot broth, is instantly understood by Katniss as a way for her mentor to express his discontent about her obvious disinclination: "Haymitch couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!'" (Collins, 2009a, p. 305). Analogously, as justification for Katniss's act of defiance at the end of the Games meant to save both her and Peeta's lives, the 'star-crossed lovers' narrative is further reinforced. Indeed, when she is asked during the interview after the Games about the reason behind her extreme gesture with the poisonous berries, Katniss thinks:

I take a long pause before I answer, trying to collect my thoughts. This is the crucial moment where I either challenged the Capitol or went so crazy at the idea of losing Peeta that I can't be held responsible for my actions. It seems to call for a big, dramatic speech, but all I get out is one almost inaudible sentence. 'I don't know, I just ... couldn't bear the thought of ... being without him.' (Collins, 2009a, p. 431)

Therefore, heterosexual romance is relentlessly emphasised as a resource essential to the point that it may be the only one, in the face of possible death, guaranteeing survival. Moreover, Katniss's resistance to heteronormative dynamics during and after the Games validates Adrienne Rich's (1980) argument on the ideology of heterosexual romance as intricately connected to the absence of choice on the female part, which in popular media continues to be a great unrecognised reality. Concurrently, it should be acknowledged that the seemingly empowering and innovative strategy of representing an independent, strong female protagonist who is not interested in romance is not sustained throughout the trilogy. In the first instalment, in fact, due to the generally masculine need to provide for and ensure the survival of her family after her father's death within such an impoverished context as District Twelve, Katniss states that she does not want to have children in the future: "'I never want to have kids,' I say. 'I might. If I didn't live here,' says Gale. 'But you do,' I say, irritated.'" (Collins, 2009a, p. 11). Yet, as the epilogue of the series confirms, Katniss will have children as a result of the love story with Peeta. As both *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay* prove, Katniss will develop genuine romantic and sexual feelings for Peeta. These elements, together with the overmarketed love triangle trope formed between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale (implying an eventual choice by Katniss), seem to suggest that, while to some extent it challenges heteronormativity by initially

portraying heterosexual romance as fabricated, *The Hunger Games* ultimately reestablishes heteroromantic love as natural, inevitable, enticing, and cathartic. Further, the lack of a true radical departure from gender norms and heteronormative patterns is also maintained through the absence or marginalisation of queerness in the novels. While depictions of genetic and bodily modifications, such as Tigris's, a former stylist of the Capitol who underwent so many cosmetic surgeries that she became "a grotesque, semi-feline mask" (Collins, 2010, p. 359), are included, there seems to be no explicit reference to the existence of characters who are not heterosexual and cisgender. The only plausible exception may be Katniss's friend Finnick, who is adored by "the citizens of the Capitol" (Collins, 2009b, p. 236) and whose poem recited before the new Games has "about a hundred people" (Collins, 2009b, p. 282) fainting. The use of gender-neutral nouns may testify to the presence of queerness at least within the Capitol. However, when it is connected to notions of sex slavery and paedophilia later in the series, the potential inclusion of LGBTQIA diversity through Finnick's character appears to be nothing more than a micro-assault to queerness. As a matter of fact, Finnick discloses the evil nature of President Snow by explaining that this latter used to sell the Games' most attractive victors (always underage) as lovers to "[o]ld or young, lovely or plain, rich or very rich" (Collins, 2009b, p. 236) patrons of the Capitol for an exorbitant amount of money. In this case as well, readers' response can be crucial to denounce and question the lack of representation of LGBTQIA characters in a dystopian society such as Panem through artistic and literary production. In this regard, young readers may push against the boundaries of heteronormativity by detecting queer subtexts, by imagining alternate romances for their favourite characters and, thus, by expanding the sexual possibilities for some friendships in the texts. To illustrate, it may be telling that, if the series is centred on the heterosexual romance between Katniss and Peeta or, possibly, Gale, fan arts and fan fictions creators may disrupt the heteroromantic triangle by building LGBTQIA relationships upon the existing friendships between female characters such as Johanna Mason and Katniss, or Madge Undersee and the protagonist (Hentges, 2018). As in the case of racial diversity, then, young readers might manage to regain their agency by exposing and interrogating the overwhelming presence of heteronormativity within the texts and, subsequently, by making room for alternate scenarios where authentic and racially and gender diverse characters are brought to the fore.

2.3.7 Conclusions

Said stresses that, since the colonial period, science fiction has been successfully serving the purpose of producing knowledge “about racialised bodies in service of hegemonic frameworks” (as cited in Olutola, 2021). Based on the abovementioned considerations, it may be concluded that the powerful and influential trilogy of Suzanne Collins, thanks to four Hollywood instalments as well, maintains and, thus, ensures the survival of the long tradition of speculative narratives which, instead of defying racial and gender stereotypes, mirror them. Indeed, when aspects that are clearly related to race are featured in the story, they are not properly addressed and examined as such. Alternatively, when elements of racial or gender diversity are depicted, they are either given little space for development or stifled soon in the trilogy (e.g., both Rue and Thresh are killed off in the first novel, while Katniss’s masculine qualities, her unwillingness to have children as well as to entertain a romantic relationship are all gradually suppressed in the series). Rather, narrative silence around race, gender, and sexuality, that is, the suggestion that in a futuristic world these latter would be no longer relevant (while the reader is constantly shown otherwise), seems to be the largely favoured approach. Nonetheless, these fundamental organising systems in the present-day U.S. evidently persist in the future world of Panem. Collins’s lack of engagement with racial, gender, and sexuality issues, thus, arguably implies a missed opportunity on her part to call readers’ attention to the intersection of inequalities that might be crucial to effectively understand oppression in contemporary society.

CHAPTER 3

Authentic Representation of Racial and Gender Diversity in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

3.1 Case study: *Orleans* by Sherri L. Smith as counterexample

3.1.1 Introduction to the analysis

Toliver's 2020 exploration of young adult dystopian novels featuring prominent diverse female protagonists from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and published concurrently with the popular twenty-first-century dystopian texts about white female protagonists, produced only fifteen books. Evidently, such result exposes the dearth of authorial voices that effectively perceive and address the necessity of tackling in a resolute and daring manner the questions of race, gender, sexuality, and their related issues in their novels. Because of this, and as they are likely to serve as starting points for cultivating critical thinking, experiencing empathy and sympathy, as well as discussing complicated and relevant topics (Hentges, 2018), texts with diverse adolescent women may be crucial to gain a more complete understanding of the most efficient patterns through which readers can be consciously guided towards critical reflections on their contemporary society. In this sense, an examination of these hopeful exceptions within the dystopian subgenre might reveal the ways these latter, by engaging in authentically portraying diversity, are able to offer teenage readers possible answers about who they are in the present, what their lives could be like for them in the future, as well as which paths they might or might not take (Kroger in Toliver, 2020). In other words, dystopian fiction for young adults has the ability (and, arguably, the responsibility) to assist its teenage readers in "trying on" possible selves as they navigate this important time in their lives, helping them to figure out who they are, who they are not, who they want to be, and who they have the potential to become" (Toliver, 2020, p. 199). As Hentges (2018) points out, this possibility may be granted by dystopian authors' effort to, through their novels, envision and represent what race, gender, and sexuality may look like in the future. This approach may imply a further effort to conceive social change through the interruption of popular hegemonic readings of dystopian worlds, that is, through the imagination of how change can occur from an 'other', not strictly white and heteronormative, space (Hentges,

2018). Diverse dystopian stories may involve female protagonists who are strong, clever, empathetic, confident, independent, three-dimensional, and equipped with traits that broaden social identity possibilities beyond stereotypical notions of diverse womanhood (Rubinstein-Avila in Toliver, 2020). Within the futuristic, advanced realities they inhabit, these characters are likely to, instead of taking the world at face value, critique their society, reject the conventional conceptions of race and gender, forge their own path, as well as inspire others to do the same (Toliver, 2020). As a result, racially diverse and/or LGBTQIA young readers, generally unseen unless the perspective centres on stereotypical deficits (Boston and Baxley in Toliver, 2020), are shown that they do not have to remain invisible and, rather, can access new and expanded identity possibilities that transcend societally prescribed stereotypes (Toliver, 2020). The subversion of the limiting narratives reinscribing the traditionally oppressed (by both the systems of race and gender), silent, or non-existent teenage girl of colour in dystopian novels that highlight diverse female characters' existence and life experiences as central to the future of humanity, may be relevant not only for specific racial or gender minority groups, but for all youth. Indeed, it may be claimed that the best, most constructive young adult fiction is able to provide young readers both with mirrors where they can recognise themselves and, just as importantly, windows through which they can observe depictions of others, and not only note their differences but also appreciate the similarities that define all adolescence (Toliver, 2020).

Among the fifteen young adult dystopian novels identified by Toliver (2020), is American writer Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans*, published in 2013. Drawing upon Smith's novel, the following analysis intends to investigate, through an intersectional approach, the distinct ways through which a dystopian author may successfully portray the connection of one form of oppression to another, as well as allow readers to effortlessly detect them in the text and in their present everyday life. More in detail, after viewing the pivotal aspects contributing to the categorisation of Smith's novel as dystopian and for young adults, its representation of racial diversity will be explored through a study of the combination of named, specific, historically, racially, and culturally meaningful places, events, and people (e.g., New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the Ursuline Sisters) with an imagined blood-borne virus that engenders an entirely new system of social stratification. Race and gender dynamics will be also examined through

the characters of Daniel and Fen as individuals as well as, progressively, members of a shared community. Finally, the implications of the new organising social system based on blood types on gender identities will be considered, with particular focus on Fen, Enola, Lydia, and the Ursuline Sisters.

3.1.2 Dystopian features

When describing the nature of young adult literature, Susan P. Santoli and Mary Elaine Wagner (2004) stress that this latter tends to deal with the same themes and topics that the classics typically contain. Good-quality novels targeted at adolescents, in fact, might include the character archetypes and literary devices generally found in the classics (i.e., character and characterisation, plot, setting, point of view, style, theme, crisis, foreshadowing, flashback, climax, figurative language, etc.) (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). Further, other than the eternal questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where do I fit in?’, young adult novels may feature “alienation from one’s society or group, survival or meeting a challenge; social and/or political concerns about racial and ethnic discrimination; [...] problems resulting from family conflicts; fear of death; and the issue of political injustice” (Santoli & Wagner, 2004, p. 68). As it has been established with the heroines that, through their difficult decisions against conformity to social norms and regulations imposed by totalitarian regimes and institutions, altered the predetermined trajectories of their lives into alternative consciously chosen paths, Santoli and Wagner’s argument may be extended to dystopian fiction for young readers. Even more specifically, the universal themes that characterise the classics, young adult novels, and the dystopian subgenre, are arguably also prominent in dystopian texts that tell the stories of racially diverse protagonists. As Toliver (2020) suggests, the ubiquity of themes commonly relating to all teenagers within dystopian novels about diverse, complex, and agentic characters, is essential to the validation of identities that break the confines fabricated by social and stereotypical expectations, narrative silences, and perpetual oppression. Clearly, this same purpose is achieved through the incorporation of the key images that define young adult dystopian fiction where worlds are portrayed through hegemonic frameworks and, thus, define novels centred on diverse protagonists as dystopian.

With reference to *Orleans*, the setting may be a key starting clue. Indeed, the city of Orleans, set in a future relatively close to contemporaneity (the protagonist's story takes place in 2056), emerges after a series of tropical cyclones. As the timeline provided in the section preceding the actual narrative, entitled "Before", illustrates, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall at the Mississippi River Delta, killing 971 people. With Hurricane Isaiah following in 2014, and then Hurricanes Lorenzo (2015), Olga (2016), Laura and Paloma (both at the end of July 2017), the casualties and survivor counts, respectively, steadily increased and decreased. These storms culminated in 2019 with Hurricane Jesus, of unprecedented size and intensity, which killed an estimated 8,000 people and left fewer than 10,000 survivors in its wake. These latter faced further horrors, such as deadly debris, suicide, heart attacks caused by stress of loss or of rebuilding, lack of basic necessities (e.g., medicines, clean water, food), the growth of no-longer-treatable diseases and violent crime. Then came the Delta Fever, a blood-borne virus that brought about a full-fledged epidemic and, thus, led the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Center for Disease Control to issue in 2020 a Declaration of Quarantine declaring the segregation of the waterlogged and infected areas of the Gulf Coast region from the rest of the population. Five years later, with the Declaration of Separation, the U.S. government withdrew their governance of the affected states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas allegedly to "protect the inalienable rights of the majority, those being the right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness, the foremost of those being Life" (Smith, 2013, p. 12). Simply put, a quarantine is put into effect until a cure is found and the aforementioned states are no longer part of the country. As the transition from the "Before" to the "After" sections indicates, it is after these events that from New Orleans, the dystopian Orleans is born. Fifty-one years after Hurricane Katrina, the reader is introduced to the protagonist, Fen de la Guerre, a sixteen-year-old girl grown up in the Delta and member of an O-Positive tribe. As it manifests in different ways based on an individual's blood type, the Delta Fever divides people by the latter. Like the rest of her tribe and the others of the O-phenotype, Fen is a carrier of the disease but is not affected by it, in contrast to As, Bs, and ABs that contract it and rapidly deteriorate without periodic transfusions of blood from universal donors (i.e., O-positives and O-negatives). Because of this, those that do not have O blood desperately hunt and farm victims to drain them alive. It is, then, this same desperation that populates the everyday dystopian reality

of Orleans with savage, cruel, cut-throat villains which Fen and her tribe must repeatedly and unavoidably confront. Violent and brutal conflicts are depicted from the very beginning of the novel, when the night a powwow between Fen's tribe's leader Lydia and the O-Negatives was supposed to take place, both tribes (including Lydia who, pregnant, dies while giving birth) are attacked and slain by a group of ABs. When Fen, in her struggle to find Lydia and escape, runs into one of the assailants, she immediately takes note of his "crazed eyes", "real wide" grin, the smell of "blood on his breath", the "scars on his arms", "thick" like hers, but "made from needles, tubes, reeds", the "sling in one hand, loaded with a rock", and the "short, ugly club" swung at her (Smith, 2013, p. 38). A similar ruthlessness and immorality is reiterated through the corrupted figures of Mama Gentile, a voodoo priestess co-opting a Christian church to lure the unsuspecting children of freesteaders (i.e., people trying to live independent from tribes) with the purpose of selling them as slaves in the blood market, and Father John, a priest and old friend of Fen's family who betrays her long-lasting trust by attempting to steal Lydia's baby and use her blood to slow down his Fever infection. Depravity is also represented through the blood farm where Fen, kidnapped with Enola, first meets Daniel, imprisoned as well, and explains to the reader that, to blood hunters, "we ain't human" (Smith, 2013, 122). She knows so after being subjected to the dehumanising blood harvesting process while living in Mama Gentile's mansion before she joined Lydia's tribe. In this respect, through the blood and sexual defilement of Fen's body in the story, it will be later considered how these methods of oppression through the illegal and barbarous harvest of blood are intricately connected to the oppression of womanhood. Lastly, the violence, destruction, and decay produced by the storms and the epidemic throughout the years can be observed through the gaze of Daniel, who is aghast when faced with the former New Orleans Superdome, whose seats are entirely occupied by the bones of the Fever's victims. When he enters the facility, he thinks: "Katrina turned the Dome into a refugee camp. Lorenzo turned it into a morgue. Jesus turned it into a tomb" (Smith, 2013, 107). Concurrently, despite the dismal and adverse circumstances in *Orleans*, Smith does not definitely extinguish the flame of hope for a better future for the citizens of the Delta. As a matter of fact, the reader may easily perceive it in the same passage where Daniel walks through the broken and shadowed streets surrounding the Dome and glimpses a group of women, the Ursuline Sisters, who continue to look after the infected inhabitants of Orleans without

discrimination both in life, with their hospital tent, and death, through the attentive preservation of the bones of tens of thousands of victims. Even more apparent might be the hope embodied by the birth of Enola as well as by Fen's protective instinct when she resolves not to abandon her to the blood-hungry dogs and men chasing them after Lydia's death, when she regularly defends her from harm, and when, with a smile on her lips, she sacrifices herself to save Enola's life and grant her a chance for a brighter future in the Outer States. As she is not compromised by the Fever yet, Enola's survival may become a link to the forgotten and dismissed community of Orleans and an emblem of its resilience.

With regard to the Delta Fever, it seems obvious from the first pages of *Orleans* that social hierarchisation depends on, rather than race or gender, blood types. Aside from some exceptions such as freesteaders, the people trapped behind the wall have, in fact, learnt how to survive in tribes based on their blood type. Fen insists multiple times on the idea that no one can survive without a tribe: "Tribe is life", she states (Smith, 2013, pp. 82, 190, 261). In this respect, Connors and Salinger Trites (2021) argue that the concept of neoliberalism, with its focus on individual will and agency, is a fundamental characteristic of dystopian texts. With reference to social stratification based on tribes and David Harvey's widely accepted definition of neoliberalism as a doctrine that "privileges the economic power of the individual over the economic power of collective forces, such as governments, in order to position individual entrepreneurship as the economic engine of the world" (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021, p. 76), it may be argued that on the one hand, group identity in Orleans holds more weight than individualism. Nonetheless, as certain blood types are less susceptible to the contraction of the Fever, subjects with those blood types acquire greater economic value, and individuals must become their own "self-serving blood entrepreneur" (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021, p. 79). As a consequence, the social and political institutions that once safeguarded their citizens' interests and needs no longer exist: in the absence of government regulation, people, reduced to mere commodities in a horrifying free-market system, must compete against one another to ensure their survival. This might be noted when Fen's own tribe is massacred by one of ABs. Similarly, Mama Gentile may perfectly symbolise the corruption of the institution of the Church which, following neoliberal ideologies, conceptualises individuals as a resource (or "human capital") (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021, p. 79) to be utilised and

discarded (Connors and Salinger Trites, 2021). When she enters the church to regain her strength after her escape with Enola from her camp, Fen unconsciously foreshadows Mama Gentile's arrival by thinking, "[t]his church ain't seen God in a long time" (Smith, 2013, p. 76). As she later comes face to face with Mama Gentile and confronts her with her degenerate practices, the latter affirms that "God a business, just like any other. And occasionally there be blessings, you know? Miracles. Like you being here. And your baby" (Smith, 2013, p. 102). The individualism-community binary is further advanced through Fen's distinction between the moral codes guiding the Ursuline Sisters and, on the other hand, the researchers at the Institute for Post-Separation Studies, tasked with the social and medical study of the closed environment of Orleans: "Everyone is supposed to help everyone. That's what Sister Mary Margaret says. It's called the Golden Rule. It's not the same as Dr. Warren's Rules of Blood. Those are different. Those say everyone has to stay apart from everyone else" (Smith, 2013, p. 187). When Fen and Daniel are ready to leave the Institute, the scientist from the Outer States wonders whether they should help Dr. Warren and his colleagues whose survival, without a cure for the Delta Fever, solely depends on the computers and machinery keeping them alive. Indeed, he asks Fen: "What do we do now? Just leave them here?" (Smith, 2013, p. 210). However, Fen's reply to Daniel's moral concern revives the same individualistic logic of Dr. Warren's Rules of Blood: "Why not? They ain't tribe" (Smith, 2013, p. 210). In response to Daniel's bewilderment ("That's insane") (Smith, 2013, p. 210) and possibly condemning neoliberalism's destructiveness (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021), Fen asserts: "That the world they made" (Smith, 2013, p. 210). Smith's dystopia, then, representing a new world order in which neoliberal frameworks are observed to their most detrimental extremes, appears to be in marked contrast to young adult dystopian novels that value a "smart supergirl"'s (Pomerantz & Raby in Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021, p. 76) individualism and entrepreneurship above all her other potential skills, within societies where capitalism is conceived as the most rational and efficient way to maintain social order and, thus, the impact of race and gender as social factors is mitigated (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021).

Referring to Michel Foucault's theory, Connors and Salinger Trites (2021) add that a rationale for social stratification is also provided by the notion of biopolitics, whereby there exists a relationship between biological forces and government control.

Within the borders of Orleans, biopolitics may be relevant with regard to the way people's vulnerability is strictly dependent on their blood type as well as whether they live as members of a tribe or as freesteaders. Indeed, a given blood type determines a person's degree of susceptibility to the Delta Fever and, as mentioned, their economic worth. Based on these aspects, an individual might be preyed on by blood hunters and farmers, who traffic in the blood market, and other tribes that, due to their vulnerability to the virus, must resort to transfusions. However, as they do not rely on the protection of a tribe, freesteaders run the highest risk. Fen effectively hierarchises these castes by clarifying that, "[i]n Orleans, you either a tribe, a religion, a hunter, or a freesteader. Better a tribe than religion, but freesteader be as good as free-deader [...]" (Smith, 2013, p. 82). Moreover, if the relation between Orleans and the other side of the wall, populated by citizens who are not infected with the Fever, is taken into account, it may be worth noting a second layer of biosocial stratification in *Orleans*. After recounting how the U.S. government erected a concrete wall to segregate the people in Orleans from the rest of the population, the novel proceeds to suggest that the state is prepared to put a genocide into action in order to protect its economic interests. Daniel, a military scientist from the Outer States who, in an attempt to create a vaccine that would destroy the Delta Fever, engineered instead a virus that threatens to kill the people in the Delta who have the Fever's pathogens in their blood, guesses the government's intention. His suspicions that this latter, upon learning about Daniel's virus through which "the Delta could be recovered, stripped of Delta Fever and harvested for its natural resources – timber, oil, shipping lanes, and more", "might very well use it" (Smith, 2013, p. 47), is confirmed when Fen understands that the blood tribes are being armed with weapons by the government to expedite their self-annihilation and, thus, ensure the Outer States' capitalisation on the Delta's resources: as Daniel comments, "Genocide in the name of money" (Smith, 2013, p. 47). Thus, as Connors and Salinger Trites (2021) conclude, the Delta Fever offers the federal government a motivation for 'managing' the citizens of Orleans via genocide.

3.1.3 Hurricane Katrina: reliance on history to authentically represent racial diversity

At the heart of Smith's creation of the dystopian Orleans, is the connection of the past to the future through the imagination of Hurricane Katrina as the first in a series of extreme climatic events that gradually lead to the post-apocalyptic scenario Fen grows up in. Contrary to the fictional hurricanes that hit the Delta in the following fourteen years, Hurricane Katrina actually made landfall along the Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005, and, as a historically, culturally, and racially relevant phenomenon, serves as inspiration for the author. Indeed, Smith embeds in her work an event that has a personal meaning as well, as her mother faced a particularly difficult situation while caught in the middle of Hurricane Katrina. As Smith explained in an interview, “[w]hen I saw the news [about Hurricane Katrina], I called my mom and told her that she needed to get out of there, but she said the airports were closed and the freeways were jammed” (Deal, 2017, para. 17). Living alone, Smith's mother managed to endure the storm by staying sheltered in her house in New Orleans but, after failing to drive out of the city because of floodwater, Smith had to contact the Coast Guard:

They sent an ambulance for my mom. They took her downtown where they loaded her on a bus, took her to the airport, took her off the plane and on another bus, and took her to a stadium. The Red Cross was set up there. (Deal, 2017, para. 19)

After arriving to the airport in a taxi, Smith's mother finally reached her daughter in her house in Los Angeles. Sadly, she passed away before the renovations on her home in New Orleans were completed. In this respect, Smith believes that both the stress of the renovations and the aftermath of the hurricane were largely responsible for her mother's death:

People always tell you the body counts of disasters or what happens right then, but they never add the body count of the aftermath, the people whose hearts couldn't take it, the people who that gap of care took them away. (Deal, 2017, para. 21)

In their 2007 article, “Race, Gender and Class Lessons from Hurricane Katrina”, scholars Jean Ait Belkhir and Christiane Charlemaine point out the generally recognised idea that “there is not such thing as a natural disaster” (p. 123). In particular, they claim that “[i]n

every phase and aspect of disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus” (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007, p. 123). In other words, the purported naturalness of a weather event is likely to never be entirely divorced from its social causes and, rather, to be an ideological camouflage for its social dimension (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). This belief may apply to the circumstances surrounding Hurricane Katrina as well. As a matter of fact, the social factors that allegedly contributed to Katrina’s catastrophic consequences on New Orleans in 2005 might be several. The lack of protection given to the city is directly connected to elements such as the diversion of funding for levees to the war in Iraq, the prior deployment of the Louisiana National guard to Baghdad, the slow federal response focusing on securing property over people, the degradation of the environment increasing the hurricane’s frequency and intensity as well as the city’s vulnerability (Caldwell & Dubinsky in Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). In addition, it should be noted that New Orleans is one of those cities within the United States that is most heavily marked by the internal and invisible wall separating wealthy citizens from the ghettoised African Americans (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). As one of the most racially segregated cities in the whole country since its founding, whose cultural tradition and history rest on a legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, only 20 per cent of the New Orleans’s total population in 2004 was white, whereas 67.9 per cent was black (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Further, the poverty rate of 38 per cent may be evidence of the relegation of working-class African American residents to housing built, instead of higher and safer land, on low-lying areas near where flooding and environmental pestilence were most likely to occur (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Another proof of the substantial differentiation of citizens in New Orleans is provided by the evacuation plans which, for upper and middle-income residents were considerably more favourable. These latter, in fact, had access to the financial resources to load their car, withdraw money, make an emergency hotel reservation, or arrange a visit with out-of-town friends or family (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Equipped with cars, supplies, credit cards, bank accounts, and even insurance policies for repairing damages after the disaster, affluent residents were able to leave their houses during the voluntary or mandatory evacuation period in the twenty-four or forty-eight hours before the storm was expected to hit (Belkhir &

Charlemaine, 2007). Entirely different were the evacuation prospects for the low-income residents whose cars and economic resources were far scarcer, making voluntary evacuation costly and logistically difficult (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Thus, Hurricane Katrina's immediate victims are all those invisible people, mostly African American, that, over a century and a half after the Civil War, over fifty years after the Civil Rights movements, and as the great-grandchildren of those who created the wealth of the South, fought for equality in multiple wars and were repeatedly promised full enfranchisement, are still in a desperate condition of poverty and, subsequently, abandoned to their fate (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). In this respect, the storm and its aftermath turned the spotlight on the limits of the Civil Rights movement which, while it put an end to legal racial segregation, left the seclusion of economic classes intact (Zelea in Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Furthermore, Katrina also provided a grim but accurate portrayal of the United States which silences and invisibilises poor black people through the perpetually promoted myth of equal opportunity and the American dream. In this sense, the inclusion of the fictional excerpt from the Declaration of Separation issued in 2025 and preceding the actual story of *Orleans* might be read as an implicit denunciation of the hypocritical nature (exposed by Katrina) of the American Declaration of Independence, professing the universal rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Indeed, while it may be true that natural disasters such as hurricanes do not single out their victims by race, gender, or class, it should also be noted that such calamities do not occur in historical, social, political, or economic vacuums (Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). Simply put, weather events cannot be thought of as if they affect a population in an equal, unbiased manner. Not only, in fact, were the victims' poverty and blackness revealed by Katrina, but gender was shown to be an unfair structure of power as well. As Belkhir and Charlemaine (2007) report, most of the survivors trapped in New Orleans after the storm were young and elderly women (among which, was also Smith's mother) on their own, with children, or disabled. In 2004, women comprised 54 per cent of the city's population, and poor black women made up the highest number of residents who lived below sea level without owning a car (Eisenstein in Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007). The class and racial gaps among victims, then, appear to be strictly linked to their gender gap. Belkhir and Charlemaine (2007) corroborate this view by asserting that "[t]he surviving victims of [Hurricane Katrina] [were] mostly African-American women, and

no doubt the ranks of the dead is also” (p. 139). Hence, Hurricane Katrina and its consequences seemed to replicate and exacerbate the effects of the inequalities that have always characterised (and still do) American history, uncovering the vulnerability of poor black women, children, elderly, and disabled citizens and, thus, displaying the harsh intersection of the social structures of race, gender, and class, dictated and fostered by political institutions, ideologies, and norms (Strolovitch, Warren, & Frymer in Belkhir & Charlemaine, 2007).

By relying on an event with a historical, cultural, and racial meaning especially powerful for the New Orleans of the past, present, and future (as Orleans), Smith exposes her female and black characters to its catastrophic aftermath. By doing this as well as by naming, rather than merely echoing, through her characters’ voices and experiences an episode that reifies the iniquitous differences related to race and gender, Smith automatically invites her readers to observe how these systems of oppression operate in the dystopic Orleans and in their contemporary society. A similar consideration may be made with reference to the Tuskegee Experiment, conducted by the United States Public Health Service (PHS) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) between 1932 and 1972. With the purpose of analysing the natural progression of untreated syphilis, researchers intentionally left forty-hundred African American men infected with the disease in rural Alabama to perish (Connors & Salinger Trites, 2021). In the novel, this study is evoked by Daniel when he learns that the scientists at the Institute for Post-Separation Studies in Orleans, supposedly “willing to dedicate their lives to the cause” (Smith, 2013, p. 74), made no effort to develop a vaccine for the Delta Fever. Instead, they selfishly allowed innocent people to die so that they could pursue their research agenda, that is, investigate whether social constructs such as race and gender would still matter once people were categorised according to blood type: “[I]f people divided along medical lines, would race or gender matter?” (Smith, 2013, p. 74). The inhuman quality of the study is explained by Fen, who clarifies: “They ain’t working on a cure here, [...]. Orleans just a lab to them. We ain’t people, we rats” (Smith, 2013, p. 206). Horrified to discover about the callousness of the team of doctors, researchers, psychologists, and graduate students who, uninterested in the Fever, prioritised their “pet project” (Smith, 2013, p. 210) of “studying tribes” (p. 210), Daniel observes: “Ending racism, [...] For the most part, the rules of blood make race irrelevant. Blood types cross all ethnicities” (p.

210). Fen agrees, commenting: “If folks stop hating each other ’cause of skin color, the only difference be blood type” (Smith, 2013, p. 210). Her reply leads Daniel to compare the group of scientists’ abuse of institutional power to a historical, racially significant, real-life event: “A new form of racism [...]. It’s like Tuskegee all over again. They never wanted a cure” (Smith, 2013, p. 210). The protagonist’s resulting thought seems to imply her distrust of social and political institutions that have consistently failed her, and the rest of the population segregated in Orleans: “I don’t know nothing about Tuskegee, but if it mean folks with power always gonna abuse it, then I got to agree” (Smith, 2013, p. 210). Moreover, it may be interesting to highlight that the analogy between Dr. Warren and his colleagues’ experiment and the Tuskegee study may be understood as a strategy employed by Smith to problematise the construction of race as the original source of contagion in the novel. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned dialogue between Fen and Daniel might indicate that the inhuman project carried out throughout the years by the Institute with the purpose of studying a potentially post-racial society, hindered the research process for a cure for the Delta Fever. In spite of people in Orleans being newly stratified on the basis of their blood type, race appears to be brought into play as leading cause of the spread of the virus and its disastrous effects since the first order of quarantine in the Delta.

As mentioned, in the dystopian future depicted by Smith, the rules of class and race are replaced by those of blood, as Fen’s way of identifying Lydia after her death may demonstrate. In fact, on the final brick of clay she uses to seal Lydia’s body inside a tree, Fen scratches with a knife an X in place of a cross, the number one at the top, an F to the left, an O at the bottom, and a plus sign to the right, meaning, “*One Female O Positive*” (Smith, 2013, p. 65). Nevertheless, racial stratification within Orleans may persist at some levels. Indeed, throughout the narrative, Fen and Daniel refer to the former’s “bare brown arm” (Smith, 2013, p. 13), the “ruddy brown” (p. 35) skin colour of Fen’s tribe’s storyteller, which gives him the name of Cinnamon Jones, a smuggler who is “white, whiter than you see in Orleans anymore, with yellow-blond hair stuck to his forehead with sweat” (pp. 77-78), Mama Gentile’s “long and black” hair (p. 103) and “plump brown arms” (p. 104), a blood hunter with a skin tone “too dark for her blond hair” (p. 123), “a short black man, blacker than anyone Daniel had ever seen” (p. 155), “a small Chinese woman” (p. 155), Dr. Warren’s daughter who is “pale as a fish belly” (p. 185),

“two skinny boys the color of river mud” (p. 230), and the “mahogany face” (p. 249) of Fen’s old friend, Mr. Go. Further, Fen points out that people in Orleans have become “mixed up” (Smith, 2013, p. 78). The sole exceptions to this racial creolisation might be Father John’s “pink” (Smith, 2013, pp. 297, 308, 310) face and the group of Asian Americans who, relatively immune to the Fever, moved along the river when the disease hit Orleans and built their shanty town. Yet, their community also mixes “Koreans and Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese and Filipino. But nothing else. Folks in Orleans all be mutts except for the Asians” (Smith, 2013, p. 144). The cultural representation of Asian Americans who, isolated from the rest of the city, behave as a proper tribe, may be interpreted as evidence of how inevitable racial stratification is in the construction of social groups within the United States of the future. The relevance of race as a major social organising system might be also reinforced by Cinnamon Jones’ short story about the demographic condition of New Orleans before the series of storms begun in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, while singing and dancing, the storyteller illustrates: “Lord, the people. They was black, and white, and yellow, and brown, and pink as a lobster sometimes, too, [...]” (Smith, 2013, p. 35). His tale, together with Fen’s account of a smuggler being “whiter than you see in Orleans anymore” (Smith, 2013, p. 77), seems to suggest that in the once racially diverse New Orleans, white residents are very few. This absence of racial difference may be the result of contrasting evacuation plans, means, and possibilities intended for white and black individuals during Hurricane Katrina (and, possibly, the following storms), adapted into a fictional Orleans that, throughout the years, saw the flight of most white residents. The lack of resources and agency forced black people to remain in New Orleans and live through countless instances of destruction, loss, and death. Lastly, by portraying Asian Americans as a racially defined group of people who is not susceptible to the Delta Fever, it may be evident that, unlike “the rest of us” (Smith, 2013, p. 144) (i.e., all the infected in Orleans, which certainly encompass African American individuals), they are not bound by the same degrees of devastation but, rather, experience more promising conditions. This image may once more validate the idea that, as they do nothing but engender further racial (in addition to class and gender) inequalities, natural disasters are largely social in their dimension.

3.1.4 Racial privilege and oppression in the characters of Daniel and Fen

In *Orleans*, the author uses three distinct narrative levels, two of which correspond to Fen as a younger girl and in the present through a first-person narrator, while the third performs Daniel's point of view through a limited third-person narrator. Connors and Salinger Trites (2021) argue that the employment of multiple shifting narrative levels enables the reader to understand the events in the novel from diversified perspectives that can contribute to the creation of "resistant logics" (p. 88) to major social factors such as privilege, gender dynamics, and racism. In this respect, Daniel's character and his gaze are introduced for the first time in the fifth chapter of the text. Here, the reader learns that Daniel is a college-educated scientist who works for the U.S. military force, and climbs over the wall separating him from Orleans to reach the Institute for Post-Separation Studies and retrieve essential data about the Delta Fever that may lead him to a cure for the disease. From the beginning, Smith depicts Daniel as a white, male, socially empowered, and financially secure military scientist who, due to his blind faith in rationality and technoscience as well as his belief that no problem has no solution, is confident in his ability to work on a vaccine and, thus, save the world once and for all: "The Fever seemed unstoppable, but so was he" (Smith, 2013, p. 46). When he reaches the Institute, Daniel devises his immediate plan by entertaining also the possibility to turn to a military that will respond if he beckons:

First things first: He should find what he came for. And then, who knew? With a cure in hand, maybe he could bargain his way out of the Delta. What tribe would harm the man who could save them? Maybe the Institute still had working radios or other communications equipment. He could signal the States for help, call in the cavalry. [...] there would be no danger of genocide if he contacted the military. He would be a hero. (Smith, 2013, p. 197)

Daniel's final thought seems to strengthen his own perception of himself as effectively a white hero who "[has] a world to save" (Smith, 2013, p. 200), who is in Orleans "to do what's right" (p. 137) and to "serve" (p. 111) just like the Ursuline Sisters have been, and who is "the best hope for Orleans" (p. 197). However, through an objective third-person narrator, the reader is able to instantly detect Daniel's shortcomings, ingenuity, and obliviousness which will be gradually acknowledged by Daniel himself as the story unfolds. A first hint may be the several occasions in which the technological means Daniel

faithfully counts on for his journey fail him. His secret quest heavily depends on maps that, as they refer to the times before the storms, are “hopelessly out of date” (Smith, 2013, p. 73) and, as a result, often get him lost. Similarly, the apparently sophisticated datalink that is supposed to provide Daniel with useful information to safely navigate Orleans is often “acting up” (Smith, 2013, p. 223), thus becoming a mere “useless piece of junk” (p. 223). Further, the high-technology suit that Daniel consistently wears throughout the novel to protect himself from the potentially toxic ecosystem of Orleans, is not resistant to the city’s water, which according to Fen, has higher than average pH levels. Even more telling may be that, by naively relying on scientific methods to bioengineer a cure for the Fever, Daniel inadvertently creates “something much more dangerous” (Smith, 2013, p. 46), that is, “an even deadlier strain of the disease” (p. 46) which, stored in a six-vials case Daniel brought with him in Orleans, puts at significant risk all residents in the city. In addition to his defective devices, Daniel continuously exhibits his lack of experience, awareness, and preparedness throughout the story. This might be clear when, while inside the catacomb the former shelter of the Superdome has become over the years, Daniel begins to realise that he seriously underestimated the destruction in Orleans, which appears to him as “more alien than any place he’d ever been”. As a result of this, after thinking that “[h]e would return to the building with the tree in its center, take his jetskip, and go home” (Smith, 2013, p. 114), he decides to flee. Perhaps even more notable is when, falling through a rooftop, Daniel drops the six vials containing the Delta Fever virus he designed “into the depths of Orleans” (Smith, 2013, p. 227). Therefore, Daniel is forced to progressively concede that he is severely inadequate for the task: “Daniel shook his head, his heart sinking. He had tried to save this unsalvageable place, and he had failed” (Smith, 2013, p. 243).

On the other hand, Fen’s two perspectives, both rendered through the first person and the present tense, and distinguished by the use of italics for the flashbacks of Fen’s childhood, effectively characterise the protagonist who, as socially marginalised, is more conscious, informed, and clear-eyed than Daniel with respect to what she is and is not capable of accomplishing in her dystopian world. Fen’s knowledge comes from her growing up in the Delta region and it may be precisely this awareness that allows her to move through the streets of Orleans and to promptly recognise whether a place might be a safe refuge or not. This ability developed from Fen’s lived experience is emphasised

when Daniel suggests he, Fen, and baby Enola take shelter in a large two-story building standing a quarter block away from them that, seemingly intact, Daniel deems secure enough. Fen then points out that a spacious building in relatively good conditions in Orleans is not likely to remain vacant and, rather, it must have been already claimed. In other words, venturing into it would undoubtedly endanger all three of them. With not-so-subtle sarcasm, Fen in fact comments:

Oh, perfect [...]. It look solid, don't it? You'd think a solid building already be full up of the tribe that live here. But maybe it ain't. and maybe that ain't a spotter on the roof looking at your fool self and thinking he gonna send somebody over for our blood before we come for his. (Smith, 2013, p. 163)

It is only in the wake of Fen's observation that Daniel notices that "[t]here *was* movement on the roof", and wonders, "[h]ow had he missed that, when he was the one with enhanced night vision?" (Smith, 2013, p. 164). In this sense, Smith appears to imply that the highly advanced devices that Daniel utilises, even when perfectly working, are still not sufficient to avoid all danger in Orleans, as Fen may be capable of doing. The same idea might be hinted at later in the novel, when Fen and Daniel are traversing the rooftops and this latter, tired, drops on the ground and sits down, recommending a rest:

"Daniel!" Fen barked. "Listen to me, fool, or I be leaving you behind." Daniel opened his mouth to protest. "Look, I'm following you like you said, staying close, and we're fine, all right? We're—" "We're still being followed," she said quietly. "Now get up before you sink." "What?" Daniel blinked. Followed? Sink? He looked down to see the grass beneath him starting to give way to bubbling mud. Above him, Fen shook her head. (Smith, 2013, p. 224)

Whenever Daniel shows his incompetence in navigating the post-apocalyptic environment of Orleans during his and the protagonist's journey together, Fen is positively stunned to the point of wondering how he survived by himself before meeting her: "That boy be so blind sometimes, I don't know how he make it on his own" (Smith, 2013, p. 243). Moreover, it may be argued that Fen is aware not only as a citizen of Orleans, but also as a tribe member. As previously mentioned, while the novel opens with the loss of her tribe's chief, Lydia, as well as nearly her entire tribe, Fen repeatedly insists on the belief that tribes are the only way of survival within the Delta and, thus, its residents would never endure if "every man [was] for himself" (Smith, 2013, p. 210). In connection to this, Fen seems to challenge the myth of the white saviour, arguably embodied by

Daniel (despite his confidence steadily eroding throughout the story) and further problematised at the end of *Orleans* when Fen, while leaving Daniel and Enola behind to give them a chance of escape over the wall, refers to them as her own tribe. Likewise, the white saviour narrative may be devalued by the fact that Orleans continues to live and will probably save itself in time with no external assistance.

An additional point to consider is that Fen's explanation to Daniel that in the eyes of those in power, she and the other inhabitants of Orleans are nothing more than laboratory rats and, thus, that racism continues undeterred to privilege some individuals over others, might reveal a further level of awareness in Fen as a non-white person. Indeed, the protagonist is immediately introduced in the text as non-white through her skin colour. In this regard, scholar Melanie Marotta (2016) asserts that the appearance of race as simply one of the several physical attributes of Fen may testify to Smith's validation of the speculative fiction's trend of failing to extensively and properly identify a character's ethnicity. On the one hand, it may be true that, other than Fen's "bare brown arms" (Smith, 2013, p. 13) and her hair's thick texture ("braids [...] all wrapped in a topknot on my head to keep out of the way") (Smith, 2013, p. 15), Fen's race is never explicitly stressed in the novel. At the same time, Hentges (2018) refers to Fen in *Orleans* to argue that race in characters is signified not only by their skin tone but, rather, by their ethnic richness, to which their language and culture may considerably contribute. The voice used to tell the stories, made of specific speech patterns, sentence structures, patois elements (e.g., "*Eh la bas*", "*chère*", "*ça va?*") (Smith, 2013, pp. 128, 129) might constitute a first clue about Fen's ethnicity and race. Fen's ethnic character may be further expanded by, for instance, Cinnamon Jones who, as her community's storyteller, is tasked with dancing and, most importantly, singing the stories and legends of the past to the rest of the tribe, gathered around the fire at night. Another enriching element could be Fen's decision to name Enola (who remains unnamed for the most part of the story) only once she is in the presence of a community elder, Mr. Go, and which Marotta (2016) describes as a typically African tradition. This set of regional cues, combined with the context within the novel as well as the cultural framework provided by Katrina, may allow to define Fen de la Guerre as African American.

With further reference to racial representation, certain images included by Smith in her portrayal of the futuristic society of Orleans are traditionally associated with slave

narratives. A case in point may be the aforementioned figure of Cinnamon Jones who appears to recall to some degree the courage and perseverance of black enslaved people who, in order to resist the mental alienation and oppression imposed by the slavery system, used to sit around during the night to tell and exchange stories related to their African cultural baggage. Additionally, Fen's taking over Lydia's role as mother of Enola after her death may be read as a reference to the historical habit in the Antebellum South to remove the children born into slavery from their mothers to have them raised by elderly female slaves (Marotta, 2016). As Frederick Douglass (in Marotta, 2016) illustrates, this occurred as a result of slave masters' desire to suppress slave children's emotional attachment to their mothers. In *Orleans*, the fact that Fen and Enola are probably the only survivors in their community after the massacre led by the ABs tribe, prompts the protagonist to take responsibility for Lydia's child. Strictly connected to this is the idea that, within the dystopian reality she was born into, Enola is objectified just like her mother was and the rest of Orleans' residents are. The child's automatic inheritance of her mother's social status might be a metaphor devised by the author for the *Partus Sequitur Ventrem* doctrine (literally, 'that which is born follows the womb'), whereby the offspring would by law follow the legal condition of their enslaved mother, so that slavery could be further perpetuated (Beaulieu in Marotta, 2016). Simply put, as the children of slaves were destined to become enslaved themselves, Lydia's daughter in the novel is reduced to a mere commodity and exposed to the same dangers and threats her mother had to face while alive. Moreover, Fen's sacrifice might to some extent reiterate the picture of the slave fleeing from slave masters, hunters, or sellers towards freedom (Marotta, 2016). Nonetheless, shaping Daniel's coat as a baby in her arms to draw the soldiers' attention away from the young man and Enola and, thus, offer them a better chance of escape over the wall (a boundary that makes freedom attainable), Fen runs through the moat towards (rather than from) the troop. In this respect, Smith seems to diverge from the conventional structure of the slave narrative by translating Fen's physical freedom into her own version of it, which consists in her deliberate decision to, through her sacrifice, save Enola and, perhaps in the future, Orleans. To conclude, E. A. Beaulieu (in Marotta, 2016) describes the neo-slave narrative as generally centred on developing the protagonist's identity and connection to their own enslaved community. As it has been established, Smith uses Fen's viewpoint to blend two separate stages of her life, one set

in the past and the other in the present time. The first recounts a number of episodes from Fen's childhood, such as her stay at Mama Gentile's mansion or at the research Institute with her parents and Dr. Warren, who affirmed that through the close study of Fen, a cure could be found. Conversely, in the second stage of her life, Fen no longer lives under Mama Gentile's care nor at the Institute. Further, she has lost her parents. However, through her memory of the past, Fen is able to revive in her present the harsh lessons she learnt while growing up at Mama Gentile's or the Institute, as well as the vital teachings her parents shared with her younger self. Exemplary of the value of this knowledge may be Fen's use of it when she finds herself kidnapped and imprisoned in the blood farm together with Enola and Daniel. On the one hand, because of the terrible deeds she witnessed and was a victim of while she lived with Mama Gentile, Fen is perfectly aware, contrary to Daniel, of the risks they are running by being prisoners of blood hunters. At the same time, it is the lessons her parents taught her that help Fen develop her escape plan. Chapter Fourteen, in fact, masterfully links a flashback about her parents with the present scene through Fen's remembrance of these latter's past instructions. After singing one of the songs her own mother used to sing to her to soothe Enola's crying, Fen repeats in her mind the sentences spoken by her father to prepare his daughter for the difficult situations the future may have brought. More in detail, Fen recalls "[t]he first rule of escape: Assess your situation" (Smith, 2013, p. 127), "[t]he second rule of escape: Assess your assets" (p. 128), and "[t]he third rule of escape: Assess your weaknesses" (p. 131). The chapter's conclusion, in which Fen thinks back to her father after devising an escape plan for herself, Enola, and Daniel, might further reinforce the influence of the numerous communities Fen was part of on the formation of her identity.

3.1.5 Fen's performance of femininity

It might be argued that, through her appearance, behaviour, and thoughts, Smith's Fen, like Collins's Katniss, expresses a liminality with respect to her performance of gender. Like the other female protagonists of the most popular twenty-first-century young adult dystopian novels and series, Fen, raised in a nightmarish dystopian Orleans, is depicted as a fully capable, resourceful, intelligent fighter and a strong, independent, empathetic protagonist. The first elements that seem to define Fen's gender are the names

used by trader McCallan to refer to her, such as “sugar” (Smith, 2013, p. 14), “Miss Fen” (p. 15), and “doll” (p. 15). Fen’s femininity is further stereotypically reiterated by McCallan when, as Fen intends to trade her bag of gold not only for blood, but also for formula and a glass bottle to use when Lydia’s baby is born, he wonders: “You’re not knocked up now, are you?” (Smith, 2013, p. 15). Moreover, McCallan’s attempt to disregard his own end of the bargain with Fen, that is, to withhold the blood she requested, may suggest a patriarchal conception of femininity as less powerful, clever, and competent than its male counterpart and, thus, easily deceivable. A key physical feature which may introduce her ability to traverse genders is Fen’s hair, about which she says: “Lydia say I’d pass for a boy, if not for the braids she do for me, all wrapped in a topknot on my head to keep out of the way” (Smith, 2013, p. 15). Fen’s braids, then, appear to mark her femininity which, otherwise, as Lydia observes, would not be necessarily recognised. Other than her physical appearance, since Fen is a sixteen-year-old girl who is still growing and developing, Fen’s behaviour might convey masculine qualities. With reference to her hair, it may be meaningful that she sacrifices her braids (her main feminine markers) to exchange them and save Daniel. In addition, Fen’s masculinity may be detected in her protective attitude towards her tribe’s chief, Lydia, who she assists until her death (and, by looking after her baby Enola, possibly even after): “I stay close to Lydia, arms crossed so I look relaxed, but I can still reach the knife in my belt fast if need be. Lydia be the dreamer, but I be the fighter” (Smith, 2013, p. 34). Fen’s gender liminality can be further observed through her transition from being alone in the Market at the beginning of the novel, to her return to her community. In the first scenario, in fact, Fen navigates the stalls to procure the supplies needed to ensure her leader’s and her baby’s survival and, with her hard looks and assertive replies, Fen exudes confidence and competence. In this respect, Lydia describes Fen to the O-Negative tribe as “Fen de la Guerre, known for her fierceness” (Smith, 2013, p. 33). Nevertheless, once she rejoins her tribe, Fen introduces Lydia to the reader as “beautiful” (Smith, 2013, p. 22) even in the low light of the hospital room where she is tending to an infected AB boy. Observing “her [...] simple dress, made from homespun cotton” and her “hair piled high in black braids on her head”, Fen concludes: “She look like a queen. I be a scarecrow next to her” (Smith, 2013, p. 22). The same concept is advanced in the following chapters, when Lydia, “with those high cheeks and slanted eyes”, looks “regal, like a real leader” (Smith,

2013, p. 30), as well as when, welcoming the O-Negative tribe to their powwow, Lydia is “clear and strong in her beautiful voice” to the point that “[s]he could talk to the trees into walking if she wanted” (Smith, 2013, p. 33). By listing distinctly feminine characteristics such as her physical looks, her dress, her maternal instinct demonstrated by her care for a sick child, as well as her pregnancy (“her belly be eight months big”) (Smith, 2013, p. 22), Fen provides an image of Lydia that is starkly different from her own. Indeed, as a nurturing, sensitive, beautiful leader, Lydia seems to wholly embody in Fen’s mind the essential qualities of womanhood. In Lydia’s presence, Fen perceives herself as her complete opposite: as this latter’s position as tribe’s chief is validated by the regalness of her demeanour, Fen feels, rather than a potential mature and self-assured leader, an inexperienced teenager as well as an ordinary member of her tribe. However, as the story unfolds, the reader is shown that Fen’s self-perception does not reflect reality. Fen’s development and growth as an individual are fostered through the role of mother she feels obliged to assume after Lydia’s death. Perhaps because of her age or the traumatic experiences she had to live through throughout her childhood, Fen does not seem to share Lydia’s maternal instinct at the beginning of her journey with Enola. While fleeing from the blood hounds, in fact, Fen realises that the newborn might jeopardise her escape attempt by drawing attention through her crying: “We might die out here, Lydia’s baby and me. I could make it on my own. I wouldn’t be so stupid if I didn’t have this baby. This little screaming baby that don’t know how alone she really be” (Smith, 2013, p. 117). As a result, for a moment, Fen entertains the idea of abandoning Enola to save herself:

I look down at Baby Girl, snuggled up against me. I want to run so bad, but she so tiny. Too tiny to hold the dogs off me for long. Then I close my eyes and feel hot all over, I’m so ashamed. Lydia ask me to look after her. I ain’t gonna throw her away. (Smith, 2013, p. 118)

Fen’s sense of duty and the promise she made to a dying Lydia prevent the protagonist from giving in to temptation and leave Enola behind and, thus, encourage her to continue to protect Lydia’s baby. Through the several instances in which Fen must defend not only herself and Daniel, but also Enola who, as Daniel’s datalink confirms, is especially precious as she has not contracted the Fever yet, Fen claims her role of caregiver or, even, mother. This might be evidenced when, after learning that Daniel has come to Orleans to find a cure to the disease, Fen elects to help him so that Enola can remain with her: “I be

assessing my situation again, looking at my assets. I got Baby Girl. And I got a chance. ‘You wouldn’t have to leave me,’ I say softly” (Smith, 2013, p. 102). The phrasing Fen uses placing the protagonist in a passive position and Enola in an active one, may be extremely significant as it appears to imply emotional involvement by Fen’s part. Fen’s life choices, then, are no longer influenced by a mere sense of responsibility to the leader who welcomed Fen in her tribe, but by a real attachment to Enola. A similar confirmation can be detected in Fen’s decision to properly name Baby Girl, a task that would normally pertain a parent. Furthermore, Fen’s fight with Davis, the chief of the O-Negative tribe, is an event in which the protagonist publicly asserts her bond with Enola. When Davis inquires whether Enola is Lydia’s, Fen hugs the baby to herself and replies: “She mine, now” (Smith, 2013, p. 281). The possessive pronoun as well as the adverb of time may highlight once again the maturation process Fen undergoes in the novel. Through this confrontation, Fen also affirms her agency which, as Lydia’s right-hand woman or, as Davis degrades her, “pet” (Smith, 2013, p. 282), may have been stifled or erased. On the contrary, by opting to offer herself as payment for the ABs’ massacre’s death instead of Lydia’s newborn, not only does Fen reinforce her heartfelt need to protect Enola but she also showcases her physical and mental strength, confidence, and ability. Thus, by fighting against Davis and allowing him to win for appearance’s sake, and as the true leader of her own little, newly found tribe, Fen manages to save Enola and Daniel from death. Yet, Fen’s sacrifice, that is, her conscious choice to save Enola’s life over her own, might be the protagonist’s ultimate manifestation of motherly instinct and love within *Orleans*. Fen’s farewell to Enola, in fact, skilfully communicates to the reader the deep affection the Fen has come to feel for the baby who, after losing her parents and the closest figure she had to a second mother, she must let go as well:

I look at Baby Girl. She be sleeping in her sling. I fight the urge to wake her, have her look at me one last time. I didn’t know I had any heart left to break ’til she come along. But there ain’t no use in crying on it now. (Smith, 2013, p. 319)

From this perspective, it may be effective to compare Katniss and Fen as mother figures. Besides the motherly care Katniss constantly shows with regard to her younger sister Prim, it is worth noting that, at the end of the series, Katniss embraces her role as mother as the result of an heteroromantic relationship which, while initially not accepted, Katniss has progressively sought and desired. In this sense, Katniss’ offspring is depicted by

Collins as the inevitable product of a heterosexual relationship which the protagonist, once self-sufficient, is involved in throughout the trilogy. On the other hand, Fen is required to bow down to no heteronormative convention. Fen could have deserted Enola (who weighs, cries, screams, needs food and diapers) time and time again throughout the novel and, due to the dystopian context she inhabits, she would be to some extent justified. Yet, she willingly and repeatedly chooses to assume the role of mother. It might be inferred, then, that the lack of heteronormative structures in *Orleans* contributes to Fen's development of agency and capability of making her own decisions within a post-apocalyptic world which generally limits its people's freedom. Thus, baby Enola and the protagonist's performance as a mother figure become critically instrumental to Fen's rejection of the constraints dictated by the Delta Fever as well as of the social and political institutions, and, therefore, to Fen's claim of her own individual emancipation. The final smile she gives to Daniel and, in particular, Enola, as well as the small fists this latter waves at the sky after their successful escape might corroborate Fen's ultimate achievement of maturity, agency, and freedom.

3.1.6 Gender oppression in Orleans

One last aspect to consider is that, despite Fen's possibility for personal emancipation, the social reality built on blood type as the primary organising system appears not only to replicate racist frameworks, but also gender oppression. Specifically, this latter may be visible with respect to motherhood. As in the real-life case of Hurricane Katrina, non-white women of Orleans are exposed to devastation because of their effective or potential role as mother figures. As observed, once she is entrusted with Enola's care after Lydia's death, Fen faces greater risks than she would if she were to navigate the streets, moats, and ruins of Orleans by herself. The protagonist soon realises the life in the Delta is not suited for children, because these latter "don't know how to hide, how to stay quiet" (Smith, 2013, p. 61), that is, they do not possess the basic skills that would help them survive in a post-apocalyptic environment. Perhaps even more powerfully, the danger women of colour are placed in in Orleans seems to be represented through Lydia's own death. As Fen observes, during the attack on their tribe, Lydia is, in fact, "betrayed" by her baby as "it coming right now, whether she ready or not" (Smith,

2013, p. 40). Fen's leader is betrayed by Enola's sudden birth as she is debilitated by it and, thus, she is absolutely incapable to defend herself against possible dangers. Lydia is further made vulnerable when she and Fen do not manage to reach the hospital in time and she is forced to give birth in the forest, with no assistance other than Fen's, completely at the mercy of potential hunters.

Moreover, the blood harvesting women are subjected to seems to be closely associated to rape within the novel. Through the flashback following Mama Gentile's appearance in the present time, Fen illustrates to the reader her experience during her stay at the priestess' mansion, where the protagonist was sold as both a blood and sex slave to the "man in the black hat" (Smith, 2013, p. 92). The whole ninth chapter of *Orleans*, in fact, merges the concepts of blood harvesting and virginity. This connection is evoked by Mama Gentile when she explains to Fen that she has been selected by the man because, at least apparently, she has "never been touched by a needle before" (Smith, 2013, p. 94). This is precisely what the man seeks in Mama Gentile's residence, that is, a "virgin, untouched by needle or knife" (Smith, 2013, p. 95). The link between blood harvesting and sex is highlighted through the long white dress the priestess makes Fen wear to probably emphasise the purity of the young girl's blood and body. When he enters the room Fen has been placed in, the man undresses, shows his myriad scars, and proceeds to "[run] his hands along my knees and thighs and over the insides of my arms" (Smith, 2013, p. 96). As she is female, the man appears to idealise Fen both as a source of blood and an object of sexual desire. First, he takes her blood and, when he deems her no longer able to provide this service to him, he further violates Fen by raping her. It may be interesting to observe Fen's account of her abuse through blood harvesting: "When he enter me, it be through the skin. First a swipe of a cold cotton pad, then a needle, sharp and hot, into the biggest vein of my right arm" (Smith, 2013, p. 96). With regard to her sexual abuse, on the other hand, Fen recalls: "He tie me to the bed again, and when he pierce me, it ain't with a needle, but his own hot flesh" (Smith, 2013, p. 98). Smith's employment of similar vocabulary and syntax within the two descriptions as well as the parallel established by Fen herself in the second sentence, might even more decidedly accentuate the direct relation between the two assaults. Thus, through Fen's doubly traumatic childhood experience, Smith seems intent on demonstrating that, during the aftermath of the devastation initiated by Hurricane Katrina and as an immediate result of

their gender, women are inevitably and disproportionately susceptible to danger and oppression as opposed to their male counterpart.

While womanhood is not free from oppressive structures in Orleans, certain forms of resistance to these latter might persist. In addition to Fen, Lydia, and Enola, in fact, female agency appears to be conveyed through the Ursuline Sisters as well. Their fortitude in the face of the dystopian scene they inhabit is especially celebrated by Smith through Daniel's unbelieving gaze:

Daniel's heart leapt in his chest. His mind staggered, wrestling with what he was seeing. In the heart of a dead, diseased city, here was a group of women and little girls. They bore no weapons, only flowers and candles. They were defenseless, vulnerable. And yet they survived. (Smith, 2013, p. 110)

Driven by their Latin motto, *Serviam*, the Ursuline Sisters arguably attempt to take on the duties forsaken by the social and political institutions by running a school, tending to the sick and infected, and honouring the dead victims. Through the unwavering presence of this community, Smith advances a further counterexample to heteronormative and stereotypical conceptions of womanhood as vulnerable, passive, submissive, and in need of rescue by a male agent, as well as to the individual exceptionalism that seems to be often promoted through the unique and undefeatable heroines of mainstream twenty-first-century young adult dystopias. Moreover, Smith's depictions of female performance through the characters of Fen, Lydia, Enola, and the Ursuline Sisters, are meaningful in their recurring rejection of heteronormative patterns throughout the novel. More in detail, in a world where survival is the protagonist's sole constant concern, there is realistically no space for romance or vanity. Fen's sacrifice of her braids as a way to ensure Daniel's survival testifies to this. Thus, *Orleans* manages to disrupt the conventional heteronormative binary, whereby only a heroine who is physically appealing and in a heterosexual relationship is destined for lifelong success and happiness.

3.1.7 Conclusions

Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* clearly possesses the paramount qualities to be categorised as a dystopian novel. Indeed, the author draws upon historical events to develop a stand-alone text set in a futuristic context, in which people must deal with the

environmental consequences of a series of natural and social disasters as well as an epidemic that rapidly decimates the survived population. The physical fights, the violence, and ruthlessness consistently displayed by the blood hunters, farmers, and sellers throughout the story might be one of the key elements that specifically resonates with young readers living a reality that, due to a recent pandemic and the increasing aggravation of national and international conflicts, looks more dystopian by the minute. Concurrently, through Enola's escape to the Outer States, Smith asserts the necessity underlined by Moira Young to preserve a flicker of hope for the characters' and, thus, the reader's own future. *Orleans'* dystopia is further reiterated through the social stratification of individuals based on their blood type. However, the struggles faced by intersectional identities such as Fen, Lydia, and Enola may effectively challenge the apparent absence of social frameworks of gender and race. In particular, the gradual erosion of the white, male, privileged confidence (embodied by Daniel) gives way to the non-white, female, oppressed experience, knowledge, and agency. Through the portrayal of powerful, authentic, and active women of colour and the direct acknowledgment of the persistence of racial and gender oppression in the dystopian Orleans, it may be claimed that Smith fulfils her duty as dystopian author for young adults to enable her readers to connect the world she created to a social critique of the reality they inhabit. Indeed, adolescence represents the human stage in which new ideas, distinct opinions, and the discovery of personal truths are formed. By demythologising the hegemonic racial and heteronormative structures that engender specific detrimental social standards, as well as by accurately replicating aspects of modern and contemporary society, Smith successfully provides young readers with the proper tools to critically inspect and problematise the facets of Orleans and, as a result, of their present-day world.

3.2 What more can be done: the role of authors, editors, and readers

3.2.1 Authors fostering racial and gender diversity

In a collaborative conversation held by the *ALAN Review* in 2015, New York Times best-selling author Cynthia Leitich Smith pointed out that the (lack of) representation of racially different characters in young adult books depends equally on the “creators and champions of books”, that is, the authors, publishers, and readers (in

Booth et al.). Nonetheless, as it has been discussed, the most popular twenty-first-century young adult dystopian sagas such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, testify to the fact that, as Simon & Schuster editor David Gale noted in 2015 (in Cart, 2016a), publishers (and thus, readers) are considerably limited by what authors offer them. American writer Alaya Dawn Johnson corroborates Gale's point by asserting that:

one of the big problems going on with [young adult literature] is that the vast majority of the writers are white and so the vast majority of the worlds are getting written from that perspective and they are not trying to get outside of it. (in Hentges 2018, p. 158)

As it could be observed through the previous chapter's case study, the futuristic world depicted in *The Hunger Games* seems to accurately reflect a white, privileged, and narrow vision of the crucial issues that underlie contemporary U.S. society. Following the footsteps of Collins, notwithstanding a number of slight variations, Roth and Dashner revisit the same convenient patterns and shortcuts that allowed Collins to sidestep the social issues that, on the contrary, need to be tackled in a straightforward, candid, and bold manner so as to invite young readers to critically approach their contemporaneity. It is evident that such serious conversations can be hardly fostered through fictional societies where the concerns related to race, gender, and sexuality are given no room to be depicted. It might be just as clear that the young, queer reader of colour's identification with a character cannot be promoted by texts where this latter is infallibly beautiful (according to the Western ideals of beauty), persistently white, and perpetually developing romantic feelings for an individual of their opposite sex. These constraints appear to respond to a given author's physical characteristics as well as their particular, possibly limited life experiences. Alternatively, drawing upon Smith's *Orleans*, it may be claimed that a dystopian novel written by a racially (and/or gender) diverse author is the product of certain events this latter directly witnessed or lived. Indeed, Smith creates a dystopian reality based on historical facts that personally involved her, such as Hurricane Katrina and its social implications, specifically experienced by her mother. An analogous level of cognizance with regard to race might be acknowledged in further speculative works for young adults such as Cherie's Dimaline *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and Akwaeke Emezi's *Pet* (2019). Notably, the former has the purpose of raising awareness of the disgraceful history of colonial exploitation of Indigenous individuals through the portrayal of the latter within a post-apocalyptic Canada, in which white people are no

longer able to dream and Natives are hunted for their bone marrow due to its medicinal properties (Diaz, 2017). By urging all youth to never allow a replication of residential schools, intended until 1996 to indoctrinate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian and Christian ways of living, *The Marrow Thieves* apparently results from a Métis (i.e., a Canadian with mixed Indigenous and Euro-American ancestry) writer's own special understanding of these topics (Diaz, 2017). Equally, *Pet* is set in a dystopian American city, Lucille, where the protagonist Jam, a black trans fifteen-year-old girl who is selectively nonverbal, is encouraged to look at a problem straight into its eyes without the support of the people around her. As Emezi confirms (in Bergado, 2019), the story is a representation of their own experience as a Nigerian non-binary author who, after moving from their homeland to the U.S., learnt that American people are unlikely to effectively perceive the social issues surrounding them and that, instead, would require their undivided attention. By relying on real-life events that are relevant to social concerns such as racial and gender oppression, Smith's, Dimaline's and Emezi's novels seem, to a degree, to adhere to the model established by Octavia Butler's seminal *Kindred* in 1979, whose main inspirations were a young black man's disdainful remarks about black history as well as the derogatory comments Butler's own mother was subjected to when the author was little ("Octavia Butler: Persistence", 2000). As Hentges (2018) stresses, it is not a coincidence that these works, focusing on characters of colour whose racial and ethnic features speak to the complexities of race and gender and the possibilities of intersectional identities of the present-day world, are written by authors of colour. Rather, these latter's own experiences are the point of departure for the worlds they imagine.

At the same time, it might be relevant to observe that the dichotomies between white authors and authors of colour, that is, between privileged views and conscious perspectives, do not universally apply to the young adult dystopian subgenre. In this respect, Marie Lu, Chinese-American author of the dystopian *Legend* series (2011-2019), appears to minimise her racial identity to declare instead an American non-racialised one, which she reproduces through her male protagonist Day:

Day is an American who happens to look half-Asian. His race has absolutely no effect on his personality, actions, opinions, and preferences. I'm pretty sure I wrote him like this because I feel like an American who happens to be Asian. (in Hentges 2018, pp. 164-165)

However, Lu's ignorance of racial concerns and their social significance seems to imply her rejection of dystopian authors' responsibility to depict a vision of the future aimed at engendering an increase in young readers' awareness of contemporary racial hierarchies. On the other hand, exceptions to the white erasure or superficial inclusion of race exist. Namely, in her Tankborn trilogy (2011-2014), author Karen Sandler employs the Indian caste system as a reference for a future world in which cyborgs take on some of the same discrimination of the lower castes in the racial hierarchy (Hentges, 2018). Similarly, through the depiction of artificial life and the protagonist Kira Walker's discovery of her racial and ethnic heritage in his *Partials Sequence* series (2012-2014), writer Dan Wells comments on the contemporary U.S. racial system and condemns the signs of racism in the books that recall the readers' present (Hentges, 2018). Moreover, as the CCBC's annual reports showcase (i.e., in 2018, while 407 books of those received by the Wisconsin library were about African American content, only 214 were written by African American authors; while this gap was considerably reduced in 2022, it might still be worth observing), not all young adult books that portray racially diverse characters are written by authors of the same racial, ethnic, and cultural background. Therefore, the variety of authorial voices engaging with serious racial and gender diversity appears to validate that, as argued, thorough and challenging portrayals of racial and gender themes are not necessarily driven by an artist's physical, cultural, and ethnic qualities but, rather, by their consciousness and willingness to problematise existing oppressive forces within their contemporary society.

3.2.2 Publishers promoting racial and gender diversity

With reference to the discrepancy between the low number of racially and gender diverse authors and the higher number of novels dealing with racially and gender diverse characters, Thomas (2021) remarks that questions about who has the right to tell diverse stories might arise. In other words, can an author's imagination be powerful enough to create valid works of fiction about a culture they only observed from the outside? Deborah Taylor (in Cart, 2016a) seems to believe that literary representations offered by authors writing from outside a culture cannot convey meanings with the same ethos and integrity as those writing from within it. To illustrate this, she compares writing about a cultural

reality from outside to “being a family friend and writing about a family. The outsider is bound to miss some of the nuances that the family doesn’t need to speak about” (as cited in Cart, 2016a). On the other hand, author Jane Yolen (in Cart, 2016a) views the texts about a culture produced by authors unrelated to this latter as indispensable. From her perspective, in fact,

[n]ot only does [drawing rigid borders across the world of storytelling] deny the ability of gifted [authors] to re-invigorate the literature with cross-cultural fertilization, but it would [also] mean that no stories at all could be told about some peoples or cultures until such time as a powerful voice from within that culture emerges. (as cited in Cart, 2016a)

However, it is not clear whether with her argument, Yolen keeps into account that the emergence of authors from within a given culture does not solely depend on the actual existence of such powerful voices but, most importantly, it may be the result of the publishers’ failure to properly expand and explore their literary landscapes by welcoming racial and gender diversity among the books they promote. American writer Coe Booth (2015) exposes the effects of such scarce consideration by explaining that, in order to find room within the market, authors of colour have to resort to alternative means. Indeed, she states:

I have so many friends who have completely given up on getting their novels published by a ‘traditional’ publisher. They have either taken to self-publishing, or they have found a different platform altogether – stage plays, screenplays, etc. [...] I wish the publishing world would catch up because we have a lot to say! (Booth et al., 2015, p. 11)

Cart (2016a) indicates that the number of books published by authors of colour is closely related to the quantity of people of colour working in the publishing industry. In 2014, an industry-wide survey conducted by *Publishers Weekly* (in Cart, 2016a) uncovered that the profession is overwhelmingly white: indeed, 90 per cent of the respondents identified as white, while only 3 per cent identified as Asian, 3 per cent as Latinx, and 1 per cent as African American. The data collected by WordsRated in January 2023 reveal a dramatically slow increase over the course of nearly ten years, with 7 per cent of the surveyed publishers identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific islander, South Asian, or Southeast Indian, 6 per cent as Latinx, and 5 per cent as Black, African American, or African Caribbean. These statistics confirm that, despite the growth of small independent

editors committed to publishing diverse young adult literature, there remains “a long way to go before the books being published truly reflect the diversity [of the U.S.]” (Booth et al., 2015, p. 11).

In addition to the necessity to hire more racially diverse editors, as well as to foster the publication of novels by racially diverse authors, the publishing industry may promote accurate representations of a book’s diverse subjects and themes through its cover. As Garcia (2013b) observes, through the cover, a book “caters to its marketed audience long before someone breaks the spine and begins digesting the prose” (p. 38). Thus, as the reader’s first encounter with a text, a cover may be one key element through which racial and gender diversity can be conveyed. Clearly, this purpose is not achieved by the covers of Australian author Justine Larbalestier’s *Liar* (2009), where the African American protagonist with nappy hair is whitewashed, that is, replaced by a white girl with long straight hair, probably to enhance publishing companies’ sales appeal (Cart, 2016a). Similarly, Smith’s *Orleans*’ cover, featuring an ambiguous and silhouetted depiction of Fen from behind, may be the result of an effort to obscure her racial identity. Thirdly, the abstract images or symbols displayed on the covers of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series might be understood as a strategic way to evade the issue of racial representation. As the We Need Diverse Books website (2019) affirms, while the amount of identifiable racial representation in young adult covers has considerably grown between 2014 and 2018, there still a lot to be done for true diversity to be effectively portrayed. The focus on young adult novels’ sales is also linked to their potential for development as a film. Acknowledging that young adult literature’s commercial success goes beyond the publishing world to reach the film industry, editors’ considerations of a book may be driven by its potential popularity as a motion picture. As Gale confirms, “[i]t’s all about movies now” (in Cart, 2016b, p. 9). Publishers’ decision to prioritise a traditionally white, cisgender, and heterosexual audience through the publication of texts about traditionally white, cisgender, and heterosexual characters, written by white, cisgender, and heterosexual authors, featuring whitewashed covers, and abiding by the “blockbuster mentality” (Cart, 2016a), arguably exposes editors’ unwillingness to possibly sacrifice profit margins (de la Peña in Booth et al., 2015). However, as American writer Matt de la Peña highlights, it is “a fact that the face of the consumer is changing” (as cited in Booth et al., 2015, p. 11). In this respect, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that between 2000 and

2020, the Natives between the age of ten and nineteen increased by 51.8 per cent, Asians by 67.4 per cent (representing 5.5 per cent of the total teenage population between ten and nineteen), and Latinx by 76.8 per cent (25 per cent of all adolescents in the U.S.). With regard to these demographic changes, de la Peña (in Booth et al., 2015) foresees that the publication of diverse stories, written by diverse authors, will soon become not only the right, but also the lucrative, goal to pursue. In the meantime, publishers (together with educators, reviewers, booksellers, and librarians) need to “take a leap of faith” (de la Peña in Booth et al., 2015) to encourage new, more authentic, and inclusive directions.

3.2.3 Readers demanding more authentic representations of racial and gender diversity

Lastly, the third agents guiding the book market are necessarily the readers who, as Larbalestier notes, “can do their part to avoid the continued homogenization of output” (as cited in Cart, 2016a). In reply to the question on whether he shares the critique of publishers’ negligence of works by and/or about a diverse array of people, Asian-American cartoonist Gene Luen Yang states:

I do, but we need to remember what the industry is. In books, [...] the relationship between the storyteller and [their] audience is sacrosanct. The entire publishing industry, when it’s at its best, exists to facilitate that relationship. There are certainly visionary publishers, but ultimately the book market is driven by the creators and the readers. If you want more diverse books, buy more diverse books. (as cited in Booth et al., 2015, p. 10)

In this sense, a first meaningful push towards more honest and challenging depictions of diversity could and must begin with the young reader, who cannot merely wish for, but rather needs to start requiring such diverse books to be made available. These demands may be advanced through readers’ creation of fan arts and fan fictions, as well as the opening of blogs and social media sites that can offer fans space for imagination as well as for the problematisation of whitewashed racial and heteronormative portrayals within young adult literature. Young adult readers’ approach to existing diverse books may further mark and make known to publishers and authors the evolution of their expectations, tastes, and interests. As readers, literary critics can also contribute to bringing diverse young adult texts to the forefront. Indeed, through the discussion about

a text's qualities and areas of improvement in relation to broader theoretical frameworks (e.g., cultural studies, post-colonialism, critical race theory, feminist criticism, queer theory, ecocriticism, and critical disability theory), scholars might foster thoughtful and serious attention to the production, marketing, and reading of diverse young adult books. Whether as critics or ordinary individuals, it is readers that are truly in charge of the fate of diverse protagonists within young adult literature. It is precisely from this perspective that Yang addresses readers: "Don't wait for the gatekeepers [...] to have an epiphany. [...] do something about it. On your own, Right now" (in Booth et al., 2015, p. 11).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, due to its immense popularity in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, young adult dystopian literature proves to be especially valuable for the investigation of the degrees of visibility and invisibility of racial and gender diversity that is generally fostered by its authors. In this regard, the approach to the dystopian subgenre is developed in my work as part of a broader starting discourse on young adult literature, which still tends to be dismissed by theorists and critics as not worthy of serious academic consideration. As Hunt (1996) highlighted, the lack of promotion of significant scholarly conversations about young adult texts may be due to several factors. Among these, the relative youth of the Western social concepts of ‘young adult’, ‘adolescent’, ‘teenager’, and, subsequently, of the body of literature targeted at them, reviewers’ and scholars’ assessment of young adult literature as not deep or complex enough, as well as the general struggle to properly define it through fixed parameters might be especially responsible for the absence of academic interest in young adult literature. However, initial remarks about young adult literature may be made with reference to the evolution over time of the social construct of ‘young adult’ within the U.S. which, as a result of the bleak contemporary reality engendered by wars and financial hardships, is increasingly conceived as an individual hopelessly bound between childhood innocence and adult responsibilities. As the development of young adult literature directly mirrors, then, the evolution of the concept of ‘adolescent’, the same may apply for the quality and quantity of portrayals of racial and gender diversity within young adult texts. Thus, this thesis analyses dystopian novels and series from this perspective, that is, to explore how diversity may be improperly or accurately represented within a subgenre which has remerged with vitality in the twenty-first century, and whose main pedagogical purpose is to invite readers to the conscious social critique of their reality, in the hope of constructive change. Following an introduction to the speculative genre and the works that produced the dystopian subgenre’s revival, Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy has been examined as a benchmark for later dystopian series that attempted to replicate its enormous success. *The Hunger Games* is a full-fledged dystopian work whose popularity evidently comes from its resonance with young readers who, to an extent, recognise their own world in the futuristic Panem, characterised by extreme

violence and its spectacularisation, the unrelenting surveillance of adult authority and, at the same time, the preservation of hope through the chance for a more promising and healing future awaiting the series' protagonists. Concurrently, in the wake of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Collins creates an apparently post-racial, colourblind world where race is not an issue. Nonetheless, while reading, an audience with a little knowledge about American history may easily detect in the descriptions and features of District Eleven and its primary representatives a reinstatement of the slavery system. An entire fictional community based on agriculture and populated by mostly black people who are repeatedly associated to animalistic qualities as well as to the employment of music as a form of communication to evade control, the risks of brutal punishments, and cold-blooded executions, inevitably appears to be a deliberate analogy alluding to a real, historical past of slavery. The narrative silence on the clear involvement of racial concerns as well as the reiteration of stereotypical and demeaning images of people of colour necessarily hinder teenage readers' possibilities of social and personal identity formation, reinscribe the systemic racism which individuals of colour are constantly battling against in their everyday lives, and, thus, maintain a white-privilege perspective. Moreover, the progressive negation of Katniss's ability to traverse genders through heteronormative patterns grounded in Western traditional canons of beauty, the figure of the mother, and a heterosexual romance, completely invalidates the revolutionary possibilities of a dystopian series centred on a female protagonist who is initially independent, clever, strong, and agentic. Through the depiction of a white, physically appealing, and heterosexual heroine as the only plausible formula for success and survival, Collins ultimately fails in her task as dystopian writer to equip her readers with the essential tools to challenge the contemporary society they inhabit, founded on the oppressive systems of race and gender's ubiquity. Conversely, Sherri L. Smith offers a dystopian novel where, despite blood type being established as the new primary parameter of social stratification as a consequence to a series of natural disasters, the intersection of racial and gender axes remains notably relevant. The reliance on Hurricane Katrina as well as New Orleans (in the form of the futuristic Orleans) for the development of the story provides a well-defined observation lens on the racial and gender dynamics in the text. Indeed, other than the inclusion of physical attributes that contribute to delineate a world where whiteness is a rarity, the characters' race and ethnicity tend to be conveyed through their experiences

and knowledge. These latter are further emphasised thanks to the representation of the privileged, unaware, inexperienced, opposite view embodied by Daniel, who is rapidly forced to abandon his self-appointed title of white saviour in favour of being consistently rescued by the presumed passive, submissive, weak girl of colour. Racial and gender oppressions intersect through the sexual abuse the protagonist endures when she is younger as well as through the maternal duties Fen assumes throughout the book. Nevertheless, the stereotypical picture of the mother as directly linked to heterosexual romance is rejected by Smith, who makes Fen embrace her mother role solely and exclusively as a result of her own agency. In light of these considerations, it may be concluded that Smith succeeds in portraying a post-apocalyptic reality founded on the subtle workings of racism and gender discrimination and which, thus, calls attention to those eerily similar that define the reader's present-day society. These two case studies, one being the counterexample to the hegemonic frameworks adopted and promoted by the other, evidence the process of evolution of young adult literature with regard to the authentic, truthful, and respectable depiction of racial and gender diversity. As the dystopian subgenre represents a trend within young adult literature that gradually lost its popularity to the renewal of realism, further research may focus on mainstream realistic young adult fiction to determine the ways race, gender, sexuality, and disability have been, are, or could be in the future represented. On the other hand, even more productive, meaningful, and beneficial to be the popularisation of lesser-known works by LGBTQIA, disabled, or racially diverse authors, may be the examination of the ways and extents these latter manage to give voices to their readers who consistently find it harder than their white counterparts to find characters which they can identify with. In this respect, the in-depth-study and scholarly discussion on young adult books, together with recreational reading, educators' incorporation of them into the classroom, as well as the broadened attention given to them by booksellers, librarians, and journalists, are vital to thwart dismissing and negligent perspectives and, instead, support the worth, value, and relevance of young adult texts within the literary scene.

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SUMMARY

La mia tesi tratta del sottogenere distopico della letteratura americana per giovani adulti, con particolare attenzione alla rappresentazione di diversità razziale e di genere in esso promossa. Nello specifico, la tesi analizza la trilogia di *The Hunger Games* di Suzanne Collins e il romanzo *Orleans* di Sherri L. Smith come casi studio per esplorare le modalità attraverso cui l'autore di letteratura distopica può fallire o, al contrario, trionfare nell'impresa di invitare i suoi giovani lettori a osservare con occhio critico e consapevole la società contemporanea in cui vivono, concentrandosi in maniera più o meno efficace e diretta su questioni sociali rilevanti come razza, genere e sessualità.

Il primo capitolo ha lo scopo di introdurre la letteratura per giovani adulti soffermandosi sulla sua ricezione critica che, pur con alcune eccezioni, tende a non riconoscerla come degna di seria conversazione. Facendo riferimento al saggio di Caroline Hunt del 1996, esamino una serie di elementi chiave che possono motivare la marginalizzazione accademica della letteratura per giovani adulti. Inizio quindi discutendo, nonostante alcuni teorici ammettano o promuovano la possibilità di studiare i testi per giovani adulti come una categoria letteraria a sé stante, la generale mancanza di distinzione tra questi ultimi e la letteratura per bambini. In seguito, identificando i possibili romanzi a cui può corrispondere la nascita della letteratura per giovani adulti, metto in luce come la relativa giovinezza di questi testi può ostacolare ulteriormente lo sviluppo di riflessioni critiche su di essi come rappresentanti di una letteratura indipendente. Proseguo esaminando la natura ambigua della letteratura per giovani adulti come risultato della continua evoluzione nel tempo del concetto socioculturale di adolescente, insieme agli interessi, i modi di esprimersi e le abitudini che lo contraddistinguono. Un ultimo aspetto che giustifica la scarsa attenzione accademica ai testi per giovani adulti è la tendenza a valutarli come eccessivamente superficiali per essere approcciati come lavori letterari. A questo proposito, l'articolo di Ruth Graham del 2014 fornisce un'interessante chiave di interpretazione secondo cui la letteratura per giovani adulti non può acquisire altro valore oltre quello meramente commerciale. Osservo in che modo la letteratura per giovani lettori può, invece, offrendo letture uniche, originali e profonde, rivelare la sua complessità. Alla luce di queste considerazioni che sottolineano il carattere instabile associato alla nozione di letteratura per giovani adulti,

la mia tesi si propone di sviluppare una sua definizione più accurata. A questo scopo esploro le trasformazioni nel tempo, nello spazio e di cultura in cultura, del costrutto sociale 'teenager' e delinea le fasi di successo, declino e rinascita della letteratura per giovani adulti. Illustro dunque la crescita improvvisa di testi per giovani adulti registrata nel ventunesimo secolo. Infine, approfondisco come gli autori di testi per giovani adulti si sono progressivamente impegnati, spostandosi da immagini stereotipiche e degradanti a ritratti autentici e innovativi, a dare voce e volto a personaggi con cui i lettori razzialmente diversi, LGBTQIA, e/o con disabilità possono identificarsi.

Sulla base di queste premesse, il secondo capitolo si focalizza sulle rappresentazioni problematiche di razza e genere nei testi distopici contemporanei per giovani adulti. Dopo avere delineato le caratteristiche principali dei romanzi distopici attraverso un'introduzione al genere speculativo di cui fanno parte, sostengo che l'iterazione delle stesse qualità fisiche e caratteriali dei personaggi all'interno di un testo può impedire il processo di identificazione con essi di lettori diversi. Più concretamente, con riferimento ai testi distopici contemporanei, l'operazione rivoluzionaria di mettere in primo piano una protagonista femminile indipendente, dotata di libero arbitrio, emotivamente e fisicamente forte è annullata dal fatto che allo stesso tempo è inevitabilmente bianca, bellissima, ed eterosessuale. Il contrasto tra il suo finale positivo e il destino sfavorevole riservato ai personaggi femminili di colore, suggerisce che la libertà, il progresso e l'uguaglianza sociali possono essere esperiti solo se la protagonista appartiene alle categorie sociali dominanti. La mia tesi procede con l'approfondimento di alcuni passaggi testuali significativi per dimostrare che i testi distopici per giovani adulti che hanno riscontrato più successo negli ultimi anni mantengono un silenzio narrativo su questioni socioculturali cruciali come razza, genere, e sessualità e, di conseguenza, rinforzano nella mente del lettore ideologie egemoniche. La serie di *The Hunger Games* di Collins è approcciata secondo questa prospettiva. A seguito di un'analisi degli aspetti che consentono la categorizzazione della trilogia come distopica, mostro come il ritratto fornito dalle descrizioni del Distretto Undici, una delle comunità all'interno della società totalitaria di Panem, è fondato su una vera e propria reintroduzione della schiavitù. La semplice allusione, invece della esplicita presa di coscienza, al sistema di oppressione razziale da parte dell'autrice non può che consolidare il razzismo sistemico del passato e del presente delle società occidentali. Allo stesso modo, l'immagine tradizionale di

femminilità è avvalorata nella serie attraverso la soppressione delle qualità maschiline e dell'autonomia della protagonista e, dall'altra parte, il suo adempimento agli ideali di bellezza, all'amore eteronormativo e al ruolo convenzionale di madre.

Il terzo e ultimo capitolo della mia tesi è dedicato al romanzo di Smith, *Orleans*, per rilevare alcune modalità utili e opportune in cui gli effetti dei sistemi contemporanei di oppressione sociale possono essere rappresentati in modo costruttivo. In particolare, attraverso una riflessione sull'ambientazione del testo, fondata sulla conglomerazione di disastri fittizi ed eventi, luoghi e persone dal valore storico e culturale reale, metto in rilievo come forme di oppressione legate alla razza e al genere persistono nella realtà distopica creata da Smith. Le conseguenze catastrofiche a cui gli abitanti di Orleans devono fare fronte a seguito di tempeste e un'epidemia, provano che i disastri naturali non sono mai completamente slegati dalle strutture sociali di razza, genere, e classe ma, invece, tendono a esasperarle. Facendo riferimento a diversi passaggi testuali, considero come il razzismo rimane fondamentale nel romanzo in quanto causa principale della diffusione del virus che gli abitanti di Orleans contraggono. Inoltre, i passi testuali permettono anche di intuire che la diversità razziale, prevalente all'interno del romanzo, sia una strategia da parte dell'autrice per condannare le norme di 'privilegio bianco' che hanno assicurato ai residenti bianchi di Orleans la possibilità di fuggire prima che il primo uragano si abbattesse sulla città. Questa maggiore possibilità di sopravvivenza è rappresentata da Daniel che, in quanto scienziato militare bianco che entra in Orleans per trovare una cura, incarna l'arroganza e sicurezza del *white saviour* ('salvatore bianco'). Tuttavia, la graduale presa d'atto dei propri limiti da parte di Daniel e l'esperienza e competenza della protagonista Fen, sgretolano rapidamente la presunzione bianca. Allo stesso tempo, il personaggio di Fen dimostra che la rappresentazione realistica e completa della diversità razziale non solo dipende da una lista di attributi fisici, ma richiede una ricchezza culturale ed etnica. L'attenzione del giovane lettore ai temi socioculturali che continuano a essere rilevanti nella realtà contemporanea americana, è incoraggiata da Smith attraverso l'inclusione e rivisitazione di alcuni motivi tipici della *slave narrative* (racconti autobiografici degli schiavi d'America). L'innovatività dell'autrice rimane evidente per quanto riguarda la rappresentazione di femminilità, basata sul rifiuto di immagini ed etichette stereotipiche che ne ribadiscono la passività e docilità. L'oppressione di genere come risultato immediato della distruzione in Orleans è

raffigurata attraverso i pericoli che le donne corrono costantemente come madri potenziali o effettive e oggetti di abuso sessuale. Infine, la mia tesi desidera enfatizzare l'importanza dell'impegno comune di autori, editori, e lettori per accogliere ed esortare ritratti della diversità razziale e di genere sempre più coraggiose, credibili, e dignitose nella letteratura per giovani adulti.