

# The Youth Lens: Analyzing Adolescence/ts in Literary Texts

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## Abstract

Drawing from interdisciplinary scholarship that re-conceptualizes adolescence as a cultural construct, this article introduces a *Youth Lens*. A *Youth Lens* comprises an approach to textual analysis that examines how ideas about adolescence and youth get formed, circulated, critiqued, and revised. Focused specifically on its application to young adult literature, a genre of writing that explicitly names its audience, this article explores how a *Youth Lens* provides a much needed critical approach to interpreting and teaching young adult literature within literacy education, especially given the problematic representations of youth in many of these literary texts. Specifically, this article a) discusses the central assumptions that govern a *Youth Lens*; b) provides an explanation of the lens, including published and new examples and guiding questions; c) presents an in-depth case of how a *Youth Lens* illuminates new possibilities for understanding *The Hunger Games*; and, d) offers specific implications a *Youth Lens* has for the analysis of young adult and other literary texts, approaches to teaching young adult literature courses for pre-service literacy teachers, and secondary literacy pedagogy involving young adult literature and media texts.

## Keywords

Literary analysis, literature, young adult literature, adolescent literature, critical theory

Alongside its popularity in publishing, young adult literature (YAL) has become a staple of secondary literacy curricula and a major topic of inquiry within recent

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literacy scholarship and pedagogy (Wolf, Coats, Enciso, & Jenkins, 2010). Traditional pedagogies involving YAL include suggestions to utilize YAL as “bridge” texts for students to access more difficult, distal, and/or canonical readings (e.g., Featherston, 2009; Herz & Gallo, 2005; Kelley, Wilson, & Koss, 2012). Scholars also promote using YAL as “mirror” texts that help adolescent students in their search for identity, their place in the (adult) world, and for direction in navigating the natural turmoil of adolescence (e.g., Bowman, 2000; Kaplan, 1999; Kaywell, 2004; Sims, 1982). In addition, critical approaches to analyzing and teaching YAL have more recently emerged in the field of literacy education.

In general, these critical approaches explore how much and how well YAL represents race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other social categories (e.g., Curwood, 2013b; Glenn, 2012; Miller, 2014; Rubinstein-Avila, 2007; Schieble, 2013). Although many scholars rightly attend to these depictions, far fewer attend to representations of age and the package of signifiers tied to *adolescence*<sup>1</sup> as a social category in YAL. In other words, in a field intent on dispelling stereotypes tied to a range of social constructs, very little scholarship explores how YAL represents adolescence specifically as a denaturalized social category.

Although still nondominant within popular and many educational discourses, the reconception of adolescence as a cultural construct has been propounded by scholars from a range of fields. Curriculum theorists (e.g., Lesko, 2012), researchers studying the lives of youth in and out of school contexts (e.g., Patel, 2012), and teacher educators (e.g., Finders, 1998/1999; C. Lewis & Finders, 2002; Petrone & Lewis, 2012), among others, explore how understandings of adolescence/ts are grounded in discursive and performative constructions that apply labels and expectations *to* youth rather than believe that those features of youth exist intrinsically and inevitably *within* young people. Although literacy scholarship has brought this type of attention to problematic conceptions of youth and argued for integrating expanded understandings of adolescence into literacy education (e.g., Alvermann, 2009), literacy scholars have not yet been as deliberate about how understandings of adolescence as a cultural construct circulate in YAL and potentially inform analyses and pedagogies related to YAL.

At the same time, a line of inquiry outside of literacy education but within literary scholarship has taken up issues and questions concerning the relationships between adolescence as a construct and YAL (e.g., Nikolajeva, 2010; Trites, 2000, 2007; Waller, 2009). Much of this work coheres around analyzing how YAL creates and circulates ideas about adolescence/ts and messages to and for youth. This work gives explicit attention to the embedded assumptions about adolescence/ts propagated through YAL by examining issues such as age-based expectations of youth (Nikolajeva, 2010), the “problem” of adolescent sexual desire (Kokkola, 2013), and the ways youth and adolescence are used figuratively (Trites, 2007).

Amid these theoretical, cultural, and pedagogical shifts, we recognize the beginning of a new approach to studying texts. We identify this analytic approach as a *Youth Lens* (YL) and see its interpretive implications as distinct, provocative, and necessary for scholars focused on texts for and about youth. If a feminist lens examines textual representations of gender, a Marxist lens studies depictions of class, and a postcolonial

lens explores issues of race and nationhood, then a YL scrutinizes representations of adolescence and adolescents in texts. Although applicable to a range of literary and cultural texts, in this article we focus on the uses of a YL for YAL, a body of writing whose named and intended audience is youth. Implicit in this approach is a consideration of how YAL participates in shaping and circulating views of adolescence/ts.

The purpose of this article is to describe the YL and to offer its implications for secondary literacy pedagogy and scholarship. To begin, we lay out the key theoretical assumptions of the lens. Drawing on examples from existing literary scholarship as well as our own analyses of YA texts, we move to an explanation of the lens, including guiding questions for using it, and an example of how a YL illuminates new possibilities for understanding Suzanne Collins's (2008) *The Hunger Games*. We close with some implications that a YL has for analysis of young adult and other texts, secondary literacy pedagogy, and literacy teacher education.

## **Theoretical Assumptions of a Youth Lens**

As we detail below, a YL builds on scholars' research on adolescence from a range of fields, including education (e.g., Lesko, 2012; Vadeboncoeur & Patel Stevens, 2005), youth studies (e.g., Lesko & Talburt, 2012), media studies (e.g., Goodman & Rushkoff, 2001), sociology (e.g., Best, 2000), and cultural studies (e.g., Chinn, 2008). Although disparate, this body of scholarship shares an interest in revisiting the ways that adults and youth, institutions, and texts figure adolescence. These varied approaches come together in attempting to avoid reductive, deficit views of young people; and in conceptualizing youth as complex, contradictory individuals, not fully determined by the body. Borrowing from scholars who themselves use postcolonial, feminist, queer, and poststructuralist theory to examine naturalized views of adolescence, a YL folds these assorted critiques into this analytic approach. Therefore, though not following any one named theoretical framework, a YL carries within it the potential to consider representations of youth in texts as they reflect assumptions tied to age as well as how those representations might intersect with conceptions of class, sexuality, race, gender, ability, and other social categories.

What follows is an explanation of several key precepts of a YL, including the idea that adolescence is a construct, that adolescence does not represent a universal experience for all youth, that conceptions of adolescence have material consequences, and that adolescence often functions metaphorically in ideological ways. As can be expected, this list cannot sufficiently cover scholarship articulated in years of research, but it does provide an entry point into ideas that, once considered, require an expansion of the way readers and teachers approach YAL.

### ***Adolescence Is a Construct***

As much as gender, race, class, and sexuality reflect socially constructed categories of accrued, and often problematic meanings, so, too, does adolescence represent a social category of significations currently viewed as "true" but understandable as

constructed. By constructed, we mean that how adolescence and youth are understood is always contingent on and constituted through social arrangements and systems of reasoning available within particular historical moments and contexts. The idea of adolescence as a construct works against essentializing young people as adolescents and against locating young people's experiences as primarily constitutive within biological imperatives or seemingly natural psychological processes. Instead, a YL builds on scholarship that seeks to understand the socially constructed nature of adolescence and how the experiences of young people are always mediated by the discourses, practices, and policies involving them.

### *Adolescence Is Not a Universal Experience*

People's experiences of adolescence vary widely and depend heavily on individuals' positionalities and circumstances. As Graham (2004) illustrates, many young people have radically different experiences of adolescence: some are rebellious, some are compliant, some feel as if their lives are tumultuous and some as though their lives are stable, some have strong peer networks and some do not. Yet, when discourses define adolescence as monolithic and inevitable, such varied experiences and nuanced views of youth get left behind.

The untenable nature of adolescence as a universal experience is apparent through cross-cultural comparisons of youth experiences (Meade, 2001; Rogoff, 2003), experiences of immigrant youth in the United States (Patel, 2012), and the experiences of American youth from nondominant racial and class affiliations (Finders, 1997). For example, educational sociologist, Patel (2012), building on the author Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) idea of the dangers of "the single story," refers to the commonsense idea of adolescence as a universal experience as the "single story of adolescence." She writes,

For youth, the single story [of adolescence] is one of raging hormones, rebelliousness, and defiance of authority. In the context of schooling, assumptions about age, stage, and what is "developmentally appropriate" predominate. As such, a one-size-fits-all perception spurs adults to set limitations that do not always reflect the immediate circumstances accurately. (pp. 68-69)

Particularly concerned with how this single story of adolescence constrains the life experiences of immigrant youth, Patel argues that understanding adolescence as a universal, "natural" experience maintains a focus on individual biology and psychology and strips away context in locating and making sense of people's experiences. Ultimately, she argues, this conceptualization "flattens dynamic people, and their potentials into static stereotypes" (pp. 68-69).

Similar to those of immigrant youth, many of the experiences of working-class youth break up the picture of a universal adolescence. For example, in her examination of middle school girls' literacy practices, Finders (1997) reveals how the prevalent idea that adolescents "naturally" want and need to distance from and rebel against

authority figures such as teachers is a classed belief. Although seen as normal among middle-class parents, teens, and their school culture, this way of reasoning about adolescence is actually antithetical to that of the working-class young women and parents she studied. This contrast put these working-class young women at a disadvantage academically and socially. In general, by exploring the experiences of nonmainstream youth, the particular raced, classed, and gendered norms that undergird contemporary commonsense ideas of adolescence come into sharp relief.

### *Conceptions of Adolescence Have Consequences*

As intimated in the last example, concepts of adolescence and youth carry material effects or consequences. Ideas of adolescence inform how young people are worried over, administered, talked about, advocated for, and arranged in settings, including in public schools and in relation to texts intended for their consumption.

Lesko (2012) explains that one of the consequences of the normalized constructions of adolescence as a time of coming of age into adulthood places young people in an “expectant” temporal mode in which youth are almost always “waiting passively for the future” (p. 123) and unable to “actively master one’s environment and secure [an] ‘identity’” (p. 123). She reveals how the “identity crisis,” which has become known as a natural aspect of being a teenager, can be understood as something that is socially produced. Excluded from and/or denied serious responsibilities, middle-class youth appear to be “stuck in time:” socially confined to a holding cell where they are always in a state of “becoming” and never “being,” which has the potential to create a state of “crisis” in individuals.

Conceptions of adolescence also affect teachers’ ideas about their roles in relation to their students and the function of the school subject English. For instance, the majority of the participants of two studies focused on preservice literacy teachers’ conceptions of their future students conceived of adolescent students as “incomplete people” and adolescence as an “unstable period of time” (M. A. Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Petrone & Lewis, 2012). Consequently, these future literacy teachers conceived their roles as teachers to be “counselors/therapists and sculptors of their ‘naturally’ malleable future students” (Petrone & Lewis, 2012, p. 269). In these ways, particular conceptions of adolescence have very specific effects on young people, including how they will be taught in school.

### *Adolescence as Symbolic Placeholder*

Adolescence often functions as a discourse surrogate for broader social, political, and/or nationalistic agendas and concerns. For example, common discourses of youth as “the hope for the future,” or, alternately, as problems to worry over, exemplify how adolescence takes on symbolic meanings.

Youth may be figured as hopeful figures for a much wider group of people, including an entire nation. Lesko (2012) argues, for instance, that the concept of adolescence in the United States originated in the late 1800s or early 1900s, in large part, to create

a space to deal with anxieties about the diminishing dominance of Whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity amid myriad social and cultural shifts, such as increased immigration and urbanization. Adolescence, she says, became a “useful public problem” whereby these issues could be worried over and solved without having to get addressed explicitly. In this way, the burden of society’s ability to address future changes rested squarely on the shoulders of the newly imagined adolescent.

Even commonsense ideas such as adolescents as “rebellious” may also carry symbolic meanings beyond those tied to individual youth. For example, the rise of the “youth-as-rebel” figure in the United States in the years after World War II also functioned as a proxy for a range of fears and concerns of the time. Medovoi (2005) examines how the rebel figure—whether embodied by James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* (Weisbart & Ray, 1955), Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951), or the rise of the rock-n-roll star—came about to “represent America’s emancipatory character, whether in relation to the Soviet Union, the new nations of the third world, or even its own suburbs” (p. 1). In each of these figurative uses of adolescence, youth are stretched to become a range of emotional space-holders and temporal opportunities for shaping responses to a changing world.

## The Youth Lens

Drawing on theoretical assumptions discussed above, a YL examines how texts, particularly those designated as YAL, represent adolescence/ts. Specifically, a YL explores how texts reinforce and/or disrupt various figurations of adolescence and youth. The following two questions are central to a YL:

- How does the text represent adolescence/ts?
- What role does the text play in reinforcing and/or subverting dominant ideas about adolescence?

With these two questions as a foundation, a YL provides a way for readers to examine representations of youth within texts and a way to explore how these representations function as a part of cultural discourses of adolescence/ts that carry larger ideological messages.

Intent on indicating a significant shift in how representations of youth could be analyzed, we provide interpretations through this distinct approach in three ways. First, in this section, we draw on published works and our own analyses to offer brief examples of interpretive stances and readings distinct to a YL. Second, we offer a set of guiding questions that scaffold how readers new to the YL could build analyses that consider textual representations of youth by first considering literary elements like characterization, setting, plot, theme, and figurative language. Third, we offer a more extensive demonstration of the lens through one reading of a popular YA text, Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, showing how a YL offers an analysis not readily available through other critical approaches.

Given the theoretical framework for a YL, and given our space constraints, in the remainder of this section, we introduce interpretive examples using the lens that offer a sampling of some of the possibilities this approach makes available. The history of adolescence in the West, especially in the United States, is rooted in the meanings attached to a specific age group, as well as to a history steeped in stage-based ideas stemming from developmental psychology. For this reason, we showcase how the lens can be utilized to examine age-based norms represented in YAL (“Adult and Age-Based Normativity” below), as well as to examine how developmentalist assumptions frame many YAL plots and characterizations (“Developmental Paradigms” below). These two entry points show how a YL traces manifestations of conventional views of adolescence through representations of youth in YAL. Yet, our analyses also illustrate how writers who foreground examples of youth who do not follow conventional expectations of adolescence can shift how youth might be understood (“Sociocultural Expectations for Youth” below). Finally, we exhibit how adolescence functions metaphorically as a trope for larger social and national issues (“Youth as Metaphor” below).

Our text selections in this section are writings that most easily permit us to demonstrate interpretive moves that we see as distinct to this critical approach. Furthermore, these texts are emblematic of certain aspects of the genre of YAL, such as romantic encounters, the “problem” novel, and dystopian settings. Finally, these texts present opportunities for interpretations that are particularly provocative for readers and scholars of YAL.

### *Adult and Age-Based Normativity*

A YL helps readers recognize and critique the adult norms and goals anchoring narratives intended for youth. An emphasis on adult and age-based normativity notes how YAL aims toward achievements characterizing adulthood or toward reinforcing the superior and more knowledgeable position of adults in relation to youth. In fact, through her analysis of earlier YAL, Trites (2000) wonders “Is the purpose of YAL to guide youth to stop being adolescents and to become adults” (pp. 82-83)? Thus, a YL draws attention to the idea of adulthood as the norm in relation to which adolescence is an othered, inferior category and YAL a vehicle to help youth arrive at a particular destination.

The import of considering how adult norms circulate in the messages of YAL can be seen in Nikolajeva’s (2010) widely cited theory of aetonnormativity (which utilizes the Latin *aeto*, signifying age, in its moniker), a theory that we see as part of interpretive work we identify as YL. Nikolajeva suggests that behind every disempowered teen narrator is an empowered adult author conveying ideology about the superiority of adult norms. Novels may feature strong protagonists, but when things get especially difficult, it often takes the wisdom or power of an adult to rectify the situation so that an adult-centered normativity marks all writing for and about youth. To illustrate her argument, Nikolajeva describes the use of “retrospective self-narration” in *Jacob Have I Loved* (Paterson, 1980), wherein the story is narrated by the adult Louise remembering being 13 years old. Using narratology to interpret the text, Nikolajeva

argues that this point of view “enables the implied author to pass judgments on the young protagonist as the adult Louise can comment on her own lack of perception, her blunders and shortcomings, her incapacity to evaluate people and events around her” (p. 116). Nikolajeva sees the effect of this narrative strategy as *othering* the protagonist through the adult experiences governing the narrative voice and judgment of the novel. Though in other analyses Nikolajeva does focus on exceptional YA writing that breaks with this pattern of adult-based norms governing stories about youth, her reading of *Jacob Have I Loved* examines conventional representations of youth through age-based norms of adulthood.

Sometimes, YA writings offer grounds for critiquing age-based norms rooted in adult expectations of youth. For example, in Enright’s (2007) graphic short story, “Anxiety,” the mother of a middle school-aged protagonist leaves her son at a psychologist’s office for his first visit. Apparently, he is depressed and his mother hopes that speaking with a psychologist will help him identify the root of his feelings. Although the adults—his mother and the psychologist—have already decided that the boy’s struggles stem from his parents’ impending divorce, the text counters this adult wisdom by including images from the boys’ thoughts of school. In these frames, we see scenes of the youth’s struggles with bullying, teasing, and isolation, as well as examples of his efforts to avoid school by pulling out his braces, vomiting, and thoughts of suicide. Read without a YL perspective, this narrative seems to focus on the natural awkwardness of adolescents and the difficulty of navigating middle school.

Yet, viewed through a YL focused on the role of age-based norms of adulthood as well as through understandings of adolescence as a construct, we see not only that the adults have it wrong with regard to what is causing this youth’s suffering, but that the boy’s pain is amplified by being expected to fit into stereotyped (adult) expectations of youth. The boy’s pain stems from difficulties at school tied to gender, sexuality, and other sources of alienation, all of which are packaged in expectations of heteronormative adolescent masculinity evident in scenes like the one where he is being chased on the playground in what appears to be a game commonly called, “Smear the Queer!” The youth looks to the adult therapist with hope of relief from his pain: Finally someone is taking him seriously rather than seeing his problems as “juvenile.” Therefore, when she offers her own explanation for his suffering—his parents’ divorce—the youth temporarily accepts this answer. In the very next image, however, we see him succumb to even deeper devastation with the realization that this adult response does not begin to ease his suffering. When his mother picks him up and asks him, “Doesn’t it feel good just to let it out?” multiple ironies around adult-youth misunderstandings are exposed. In “Anxiety,” adults do shape the expectations governing youths’ experiences, but in this text, they do so toward middle-class routes of psychotherapy that offer templates for youths’ pains that do *not* fit their suffering. In addition, this text shows that adolescence is something that is not naturally “let out,” but something that is *taken on* through the limited, diminishing discourses circulating about and for youth by the adults and the institutions surrounding them.



## *Developmental Paradigms*

A YL helps readers recognize and critique developmental paradigms that explain adolescent protagonists' experiences, as well as readers' expectations. Although biological and psychological developmental discourses dominate thinking about youth experiences, a YL provides a way to explore how YAL relies on or disrupts such ways of knowing to help denaturalize these dominant discourses and open up other possibilities of knowing youth.

For example, in their analysis of two versions of Wes Moore's memoir—the original written for adults, and an adapted version written specifically for youth—Thein, Sulzer, and Schmidt (2013) reveal how the YA adaptation “reflects common, monolithic, developmental thinking about the needs and desires of adolescents” (p. 52). By analyzing content and structural differences between the texts, the authors show how the passage to adulthood, while depicted in the adult version as “something experienced by individuals as they are positioned by the larger society and dominant discourses within that society,” is stripped of sociocultural context in the adaptation for youth and depicted as an “individual phenomenon” (p. 56). Ultimately, they argue that by relying on developmental paradigms, the adaptation ironically constrains opportunities for youth to “grapple with complex issues in their current and future lives” (p. 52) as the developmental stage framework establishes a rigid set of expectations and a didacticism that is left out of the more complex original text.

In a more extended exploration of YAL, Waller (2009) examines how developmental goals and expectations for youth pervade the genre of “fantastic realism,” and, consequently, renders the genre conservative in its social messages about adolescence/ts. As one example, Waller analyzes the ways that YA time travel narratives must always return protagonists to the contemporary present rather than permit them to remain in the past to which they have traveled. Citing the influence of now-discredited but still-prominent vestiges of recapitulation theory in developmentalist thinking, Waller reminds us of the cultural importance of youth's properly ordered development toward an improved future:

Although recent work in psychology and cultural history has questioned—and mainly discredited—the premises of recapitulation for its assumptions about Western society's innate supremacy as a cultural system, the connections between historical and individual developments are retrievable in works that are still influential. . . . Moving on, moving through time and becoming civilised seem to be key. (p. 36)

Ironically, Waller notes the ways that youths' lives in time travel narratives reflect far more agency when characters are in the past than when they return to the present. Yet, she argues, for youth to remain in what is conceived to be a more “backward” past involves disrupting deeply embedded assumptions of the need for youth to stay on a developmental course that involves risks when stalled—for youth and for their society.

Although she holds out the possibility that newer writing by younger authors may affect this pattern, Waller explains that we should not be surprised about this prevailing norm given that adult authors immersed in conserving views of youth continue to

dominate the writing of YAL. In this example, Waller turns to the history and critique of developmental psychology and the way it shapes expectations of adolescence to craft an interpretation of one genre of YA that exposes its conservative messages to and about youth. The methodology utilized by Waller in her book-length study reflects the kind of interpretation offered through a YL that would be missed without the specific theoretical assumptions tied to the history of adolescence as a construct.

### *Sociocultural Expectations for Youth*

A YL reveals how YAL adolescent protagonists reinscribe and/or reimagine social and cultural norms. Specifically, a YL attends to how characterizations of race, gender, sexuality, and other social constructs interplay with notions of adolescence. Examining social constructs has been a useful entry into analyzing fictional texts, but many of these examinations often foreground race and gender over the age of the protagonists. In other words, the thought and action of characters is often linked to how society and institutions function to bound possible outcomes for certain identity markers, yet these boundaries might be fundamentally different for youth of color or lesbian youth than adults of color or adult lesbians. A YL acutely considers how adolescence as a unique identity marker might take on different meaning when linked to other socially constructed identity markers.

For example, literary critics discuss how most YAL depictions of transgression or resistance to dominant norms tied to sexuality ultimately lead readers to more stable and conservative social messages (e.g., Beauvais, 2012; Trites, 2000; Waller, 2009). In a review of earlier YA writing, for example, Trites (2000) discusses how efforts to depict youth as sexually desirous and experimenting still favor moralizing messages about femininity and sex; how depictions of gay youth refrain from much depiction of sex as narratives remain restrained by foci on homophobia; and how depictions of multifamily, homo- and heterosexual cohabitation, ultimately honor monogamy. For example, in her analysis of Judy Blume's (1975) *Forever*, Trites explains how, though seemingly progressive because of its inclusion of explicit scenes of characters exploring different events related to adolescent sexuality, the novel actually reinforces societal norms that youth should abstain from sexual action and feel guilty about sexual thought.

Similarly, in her recent analysis of adolescent carnality in Anglophone YAL, Kokkola (2013) reviews how most YA texts depict "the calamitous consequences of carnality" by showing the ways that youth are punished when sex leads to too-early parenthood. She writes, "Adolescents are deemed to be non-adult because they do not engage in adult behaviour, but if they do engage in adult behaviour, that behaviour is deemed deviant and therefore non-adult" (p. 37). Ultimately, Kokkola affirms that the most transgressive depictions of sexual youth are some of the oldest writings that she examined, including Klein's (1977) *It's OK If You Don't Love Me* and Chambers's (1978) *Breaktime*, because of how they refrain from didactic, moralizing portrayals of sexually active youth.

Moreover, if age-based and developmentalist expectations delineate conventional timelines for youth, nothing disrupts those timelines like depictions of youth as sexual

beings. To illustrate an example of one such transgressive portrayal of sexual youth, we share our analysis of a text not treated in Kokkola's recent analysis, Johnson's (2003) *The First Part Last*. As we have examined elsewhere (M. A. Lewis & Durand, 2014), the portrayal of Bobby resists conventional narratives of teenage sexuality that solely link adolescent sexual thought and action to negative consequences. After he and his girlfriend, Nia, become pregnant, he willingly takes on the mantle of fatherhood by refusing his girlfriend's parents' pressure to give up his daughter for adoption. Although Nia does have complications with her pregnancy that put her into a coma, the change in her health is actually the catalyst for Bobby's decision to claim his parental rights. Therefore, even though Nia's complications could have made it easier for Bobby to concede to adult wishes, he claims his right to be an adolescent parent despite social and cultural messages that tell him that he will likely fail in raising his daughter due to his age. Bobby faces certain consequences for decisions surrounding his sexuality because he stepped off the course that society has laid out for becoming a responsible sexualized citizen (Rasmussen, 2012), yet he resists this normed course and reimagines his life based on his new life situation. In other words, Bobby defines how to view the outcomes of his sexual thought and action, rather than succumbing to the ways (adult) others characterize his life. This analysis illustrates how a YL supports an interpretive stance that adolescent characters can disrupt societal expectations for youth.

### Youth as Metaphor

Building on the theoretical assumption that adolescence often gets imbued with symbolic meaning for broader cultural concerns, a YL opens up ways to examine how fictional characters and depictions interplay with these cultural discourses. Whether adolescent characters themselves (e.g., Trites, 2007) or ideas of adolescence and youth (e.g., Medovoi, 2005) are seen to function metaphorically, a YL notes how YAL leverages adolescence/ts to serve agendas that extend beyond the interests of youth.

For example, in her examination of the "birth of the adolescent reform novel" in the United States, Trites (2007) argues that adolescent characters (starting with Jo from *Little Women* [Alcott, 1871/1983] and Huck from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [Twain, 1884/1993]) metaphorically embody the potential for the nation to grow in its awareness of social issues. In *Little Women*, Jo represents the possibilities for forging more equitable gender relations in the United States, whereas Huck Finn embodies the potential for more progressive race relations in the United States. She argues that as a transitory and developing figure for these and many subsequent authors, adolescents function as ideal characters because of their broader sociopolitical agendas. In Trites's analyses, adolescence and youth hold hopeful symbolic value and function as models for adults.

M. T. Anderson's (2002) novel, *Feed*, reveals a very different metaphoric embodiment of adolescence, and, therefore, offers an excellent contrast to Trites's analysis. In the novel, adolescence is not bound to youth characters but rather constitutes a way of being in the world. Specifically, adolescence—whether depicted through adult or

youth characters—is characterized by a lack of criticality, a lack of sociopolitical awareness, an aimless consumption, diminished language use, and vanity. Anderson untethers the designation of adolescence from age and thus uses the category of adolescence as a metaphor to capture the ills of a dystopian—and current—world on the brink of collapse. In doing so, Anderson’s depiction of adolescence, unlike Twain’s or Alcott’s, is imbued with warning, despair, and critique. To be “adolescent” in Anderson’s world is to be the problem in need of repair, and a state to be avoided, if possible. But by ensuring that adults are as “adolescent” as most youth, Anderson shows that it is the *category* and not those *biologically categorized* as adolescents that warrants critique, divorcing youth from expected “adolescent” behaviors and opening up the possibility of reading adolescence as a construct. (For additional analysis on *Feed* through a YL, see M. A. Lewis, Petrone, and Sarigianides, in press). By looking across these differing metaphoric uses of adolescence, a YL provides a way to move from textual representations to how the genre of YAL involves broader social, cultural, and ideological preoccupations.

In drawing attention to these four analytic points of a YL—age and adult-based normativity, developmental paradigms, sociocultural expectations for youth, and metaphoric representations of youth—we aim to bring existing published scholarship together with new interpretations of our own to demonstrate some of the possibilities a YL offers for analyzing YAL. By no means do we imagine these categories as exhaustive of a YL. In fact, we see these as starting points on which subsequent work might build, complicate, critique, and extend these premises. In fact, we acknowledge that we are not the first scholars to be working within what we are calling a YL, and we recognize the valuable work begun under the mantle of childhood studies within children’s literary scholarship (e.g., Kokkola, 2013; Waller, 2009). As we will detail in our implications section, however, we do see the import of recognizing the ways that representations of adolescence/ts within texts aimed for youths’ consumption, and especially in educational contexts involving real youth, compel us to name this general approach as distinct and mark it as a vital set of analytic considerations for literacy scholars working with youth.

## Using a Youth Lens

In an attempt to move from these conceptual ideas to pragmatic issues of literary analysis, we offer a concrete approach for applying a YL to texts. Specifically, Table 1 is designed to provide readers a way to move from examining textual representations of adolescence/ts within texts to examining how these representations map onto broader discourses of adolescence.

To orient readers new to this lens, we emphasize literary elements like characterization, plot, and setting to initiate analyses. In the first column of the table, we start with descriptive questions—queries that can be answered whether or not readers are strongly familiar with the tenets and background reading of a YL. In the second column of the table, we present analytic questions intended to explore more deeply how particular literary elements help figure adolescence within the text. Finally, our

**Table 1.** Entry Points for Using a *Youth Lens*.

Literary element	Description	Analysis	Implication
Characterization	What behaviors, desires, and capabilities constitute YAL characters? For any adults in the novel, how are they characterized? How are they characterized in relation to youth in the novel?	How are youth positioned in relation to adults in YAL? What are the linguistic binaries used to position adolescent and adult characters (e.g., mature/immature, responsible/irresponsible, etc.)? What meanings are ascribed to these descriptions?	How much, if at all, does YAL essentialize adolescent identity? Where might readers note examples of “subversive repetitions” (Butler, 1999) of ritualized performances that begin to expose and disrupt representations of youth?
Setting	What are the predominant settings (e.g., physical, social, cultural, domestic, discursive) into and through which youth circulate in the novel?	How are youth positioned in relation to the settings in the novel (i.e., Are they choosing the settings? Are they mandatory for them? How are their bodies/minds being constrained within those settings?)? How does power or agency function for youth within and across these settings?	How do these contexts enable and/or constrain identities available for youth protagonists? What role does context play in constituting youth and/or adolescence?
Plot	What are the conflicts preoccupying young characters in the novel? What incites these conflicts? How are these conflicts resolved? By whom—the adolescent, peers or adults?	What meanings seem to be ascribed to the kinds of conflicts experienced by young characters? (e.g., How do adult characters interpret these adolescent conflicts? How do peers interpret them?) How do characters feel about or interpret the resolution?	Are these normed conflicts? What do these conflicts imply about expectations of adolescence? What (in-) capabilities are explicitly and implicitly ascribed to youth in managing their lives?
Theme	What are the themes of the text?	What values, beliefs, or ideas about youth are conveyed through the themes in the text?	How do these themes norm, complicate, or reimagine youth?
Metaphor	What kinds of metaphors are used to designate adolescence?	How, if at all, does the text utilize ideas about adolescence to comment on something else?	How do metaphors of adolescence function independently of young protagonists to carry larger meanings about society? How do adolescent protagonists get imbued with nationalist agendas and concerns?

implications column points to how the kinds of readings generated about adolescence within YAL could be utilized to critique and revise perspectives about adolescence/ts in society writ large. More specifically, the implication questions put into dialogue the

discourses of youth within the literary texts and those discourses of adolescence beyond the novel to illuminate how literary texts interact with dominant discourses of adolescence/ts.

To showcase how this chart can be operationalized, as well as to provide an example of how a YL renders new readings of YAL, the next section presents one of our own extended analyses of Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. We selected this novel because of its popularity in and out of schools, thereby making the YL reading easier to recognize; and for its particular message about the possible roles and functions of youth in its fictional society.

Our analysis of the novel shows how closely examining the literary element of setting illuminates ways the novel critiques dominant ideas of adolescence. We begin our analysis with basic explorations of setting in the novel as suggested by the first column of the table: What are the different settings in the text? What are the various features of these settings? From this set of questions, we move into the next column of the table and focus on how different settings figure adolescence in the novel. In our analysis below, for instance, we examine how the two basic settings of *The Hunger Games*—District 12 and the Capitol (including the actual hunger games)—position Katniss and other youth characters differently in relation to adults and their environments. Specifically, we examine how within her home and District 12, Katniss acts autonomously and assumes very adult-like responsibilities, whereas in the Capitol, she is very much dependent on adults and assumes roles and behaviors typically reserved for adolescents. From this, we move to the third column of the table and, thus, move our analysis from “within” to “beyond” the text. For example, from our analysis of how different contexts enable and constrain Katniss in particular ways, we explain how *The Hunger Games* portrays conventional adolescence as a strategically performed identity necessary for youths’ survival in public and in political contexts wherein youth must rely on adults in positions of power. Although we will not be explicitly referencing the table and the sets of questions within each column in our analysis in the next section, we want to illustrate how our interpretation emerged from the concrete approach on how to apply a YL to YAL as put forth in the table.

## Reading *The Hunger Games* Through a Youth Lens

Suzanne Collins’s trilogy has become part of a YA triumvirate of fantastical series, adding its name alongside the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* sagas in terms of both trans-generational popularity and box office profits. Scholars in multiple fields (e.g., education, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology) have analyzed *The Hunger Games* from various perspectives (e.g., Dunn & Michaud, 2012; Pharr & Clark, 2012; Wilson, 2011). Although this scholarship delineates specific ways to incorporate *The Hunger Games* in secondary classrooms and uses diverse theoretical and critical lenses to illustrate how the texts represent social and political concerns, it tends to either ignore how the texts represent adolescence/ts, or uncritically reinforces dominant ideas about adolescence.

Educators have lauded the utility of *The Hunger Games* to interest and motivate their students to learn disciplinary-specific content. For instance, Lucey, Lycke, Laney,

and Connelly (2013) explore citizenship education by examining how Katniss must navigate the need to demonstrate loyalty to the Capitol, yet must also subvert government rules and regulations to provide for her family. Curwood (2013a) argues that the popularity of the novel has created digital literacy opportunities for young readers that are multifaceted modes of literature engagement that young people value, thereby extending and enhancing their experiences with literature. Following a “mirror” perspective on reading YAL (cf. Sims, 1982), these (and other) authors ground their reasoning for incorporating *The Hunger Games* in the assumption that secondary students will relate to Katniss and other adolescent characters, thereby building students’ motivation to engage in curricular content. For example, Simmons (2012), prior to explaining how she incorporated *The Hunger Games* in her classroom as a way to help “resensitize” students to violence and injustice as part of her social justice agenda, explains her rationale for selecting the text:

... one reason I find it [*The Hunger Games* series] so compelling is that Katniss Everdeen is the most accurate depiction of a teenager that I have ever encountered in adolescent literature. . . . She is oxymoronic with her uncertain impulsivity and her role as a leader and a pawn. She is strong and brave, features I observe daily in my students, but fragile to the point of breaking. Her black and white sense of right and wrong, betrayal and loyalty, is a trait of youth; as she matures, she is introduced to the ambiguity—the gray—of human nature. Considering her similarities to today’s teens, does Katniss Everdeen, the “girl on fire” (Collins, 2008, p. 147), a description inspired by her opening-ceremony outfit that blazed with flames, have the power to set our classrooms on fire? To make them burn with desire and urgency and even anger? (pp. 22-23)

Simmons’s characterization of Katniss suggests that students will be more willing to embrace her curriculum on social justice issues because they will inherently relate to Katniss because of her authenticity as an adolescent. It is doubtful that a similar interpretation stating how much a character reflects an accurate depiction of an adult would ever be taken seriously or accepted uncritically. As we discussed previously, these approaches illustrate how educators often view YAL’s utility as serving as a bridge and/or mirror for supporting and motivating young readers. Moreover, these examples point to the reliance on dominant discourses of adolescence/ts in educators’ decisions for utilizing YAL.

In literary analyses that draw on critical lenses, scholars use the characters and storylines as platforms for discussing social, political, and philosophical issues and questions present in our larger society, such as the effects of entertainment built on virtual and violent contexts (Beck, 2013; Rosen & Rosen, 2012). Muller (2012) examines the effect of using virtual entertainment in the novel on the ability of readers to maintain critical distance from the reality of the characters’ experiences. Her analysis establishes that the games, as glamorized, televised entertainment, mute their violent and oppressive reality. Literary scholars have also critically examined the texts regarding issues of gender and identity (Lem & Hassel, 2012; Risko, 2012). Mitchell (2012) uses cultural binaries to demonstrate how the text disrupts male/female constructs, particularly how Katniss is able to embrace roles typically male-identified, such as

providing for her family, stoically using violence and setting aside romantic possibilities for personal gain. As well, scholars have explored issues associated with how the Capitol uses surveillance as a means for controlling the populace (Brown & Chalkley, 2012; Wezner, 2012). The analyses referenced here, however, tend to ignore how these characters are represented as adolescents who are also gendered (e.g., girls), and how they are variously positioned in relation to the adults around them.

However, a few scholars have explored how adolescence functions in the text. In particular, Tan (2013) explores the trope of sacrificial children in the story, specifically that Katniss must kill other children to survive. She explains that the Capitol's decision to use children in the games turns the bodies of the tributes into commodities that viewers obsess over, celebrate, purchase, and, eventually, destroy. Through these voyeuristic games, Tan claims that the story maintains the notion of adult pleasure gleaned from the witnessing, and control over, the lives and bodies of youth. She concludes that Collins's trilogy furthers the normed narrative that youth, or the next generation, must save the world. Murphy (2012), in her analysis of how an adult gaze and an adult agenda affects Katniss, concludes that for Katniss to exit adolescence and enter adulthood she must learn that the enemy of violence exists both outside and inside the self: Even though adults in the Capitol instituted violence, Katniss cannot fully evolve until she realizes that she has embraced that violence to overthrow those very adults. Murphy's conclusion, however, remains rooted in common discourses of adolescence that force youth to realize that they cannot maintain their innocence in their "becoming" into adulthood. Even within these analyses that attend to adolescence/ts, these scholars maintain an adult perspective on the portrayal of youth. Tan identifies Katniss as a child, which sets aside any attempt at explaining the Capitol's decision on the age range for eligible tributes, and Murphy focuses on how Katniss evolves out of adolescence, rather than focusing on her current circumstances as an adolescent.

### ***From "Adulthood" to "Adolescence": Examining How Settings Figure Adolescence/ts and Disrupt Normative Ideas of Development in The Hunger Games***

Through a YL, ideas of youth and representations of adolescence/ts become central to an interpretation of *The Hunger Games*. As a way to illustrate the lens and illuminate its distinctness (in this case within scholarship related to *The Hunger Games*), we provide a reading of the first novel in the trilogy that examines how different settings within the novel correspond with distinctly different subject positions for Katniss.

Although the novel shifts settings several times (e.g., the woods, home, the Capitol, the arena), for this analysis, two broad categories of setting will be examined: the local community (i.e., District 12) and the distal and public context (i.e., the Capitol and the arena). In examining these two main settings, it becomes clear how, throughout the novel, Katniss's experiences as an adolescent are less about the intrinsic elements of being a 16-year-old and more about the affordances and constraints of the contexts in which she exists. By exploring how settings and identities are interconnected, this



analysis reveals how physical and sociocultural contexts determine ideas of adolescence far more than age, and that adolescence is not a universal experience based on normative biology and/or psychology. Through a YL, we can see *The Hunger Games* exposing adolescence as more of a performed package of behaviors than a biologically, or psychologically determined stage-based guarantee of acts and experiences.

In her local context in District 12, Katniss assumes responsibilities that many might consider to be adult. As a well-respected business woman, Katniss trades and barter with merchants in town. Within her home, Katniss recognizes how she functions as “the head of the family,” a role she assumed at the age of 11 after her father’s death and her mother’s withdrawal from an active caretaker role. She and Gale, her hunting partner, even talk about their families as “kids.” Katniss explains,

They’re [their siblings] not our kids, of course. But they might as well be . . . And you may as well throw in our mothers, too, because how would they live without us? Who would fill those mouths that are always asking for more? (p. 9)

In addition to her home and the town, the woods provide Katniss a place where she can fulfill her adult, caretaking responsibilities of hunting and providing for her family, as well as a place where she can “be herself” (p. 6), “find herself” (p. 52), sometimes even be “happy” (p. 112). Interestingly, Katniss must access the woods furtively as they have been designated off-limits by government authority, thus setting up a situation whereby the place most liberating for Katniss is also the place most forbidden and dangerous for her to explore.

As Katniss moves from District 12 to the Capitol—from a local and somewhat private context to a more distant and public one—the roles and responsibilities afforded her shift dramatically. Her life, including her physical body, increasingly falls under the control of adults, and in many respects, she transitions *from* adulthood *to* adolescence. Whereas in District 12 Katniss had a great deal of autonomy, within the context of the Capitol and the games, she moves to a state of dependence—on adults, on sponsors, on the crowd. As Effie, the person responsible for overseeing Katniss, reminds her,

You know your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. Haymitch can well be the difference between your life and your death! (pp. 46–47)

To a large extent, to survive in a setting wherein she is dependent on adults, her survival depends on her ability to perform a stereotypical adolescence.

As Katniss, the now adolescent, becomes a spectacle of entertainment, she increasingly falls under the adult “gaze.” When she leaves District 12 to head to the Capitol, she explains how she was “right” not to show her emotions (i.e., to cry), as “the station is swarming with reporters with their insect-like cameras trained directly on my face” (p. 40). Once arriving at the Capitol, adults almost immediately begin manipulating Katniss’s body—her hair, makeup, and clothing—so that she becomes objectified.

Although Cinna proves to be one of the few decent adults Katniss encounters in the Capitol, his very first encounter consists of a thorough examination of her naked body. Katniss describes this moment: “He walks around my naked body, not touching me, but taking in every inch of it with his eyes. I resist the impulse to cross my arms over my chest” (p. 64). The focus on Katniss’s body connects well with Lesko’s (2012) explanation of how when adolescence became understood as a “site to worry over and on which to work on new citizens for a new social order” (p. 42), adolescent bodies became “a terrain in which struggles over what would count as an adult, a woman, a man, rationality, proper sexuality, and orderly development were staged” (p. 42). Increasingly, adolescent bodies became subject to an adult gaze, one especially interested in sexuality.

In large part, Katniss’s survival depends on her performance of normative tropes of adolescent love exemplified in her appearance, in her performed sexuality to the crowd, and especially through her mock love affair with Peeta. Conscious of how she is expected to perform for viewers, while she cares for Peeta in the cave, she thinks to herself, “And in my case—being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12—it’s [continuing to perform her romantic interest in Peeta] an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors” (p. 247). Later, right after kissing Peeta, Katniss thinks, “This is probably long overdue anyway since he’s right, we are supposed to be madly in love” (p. 268). Katniss’s performed romantic love with Peeta stands in sharp contrast to her relationship with Gale from home. Ironically, her performed teen love affair with Peeta finds expression in a physicality, albeit a tame physicality of kissing, that her relationship with Gale never attains. Despite spending hours together alone in the woods, Katniss and Gale never manifest their romantic feelings for each other physically. Thinking through the “confident characterization” of youth governed by “raging hormones” (Lesko, 2012), we expect sexual experimentation and indulgence from youth when they are away from the adult gaze, yet once in front of an adult gaze, we would expect more discipline. In this novel, the performance of youth sexuality is reversed: teen sexuality surfaces in public spaces for the benefit of adults expecting teens to behave this way, whereas in private settings of solitude, teens exercise far more discipline over their bodies.

If the order of development—from adolescence to adulthood—is reversed in this novel, Collins’s text not only exposes adolescence as a donning of a specific discourse but also shows this discourse functioning robustly within specific settings and institutional spaces. In political contexts (e.g., the Capitol) and public spectacles (e.g., the games), adolescents must take up specific roles that maintain “homiletic” discourses (Lesko, 2012) that preserve the place of adults as superior and necessary to youths’ proper development. In contrast, when adolescents inhabit more natural settings (e.g., the woods), or within “classed” familial contexts requiring them to take on responsibilities tied to subsistence or child care (e.g., District 12), their behavior is adult. Naturally, adolescents are adult in a way that public settings preclude.

In short, adolescents can be and often are more adult than adults, especially adolescents whose life circumstances require them to take up such responsibilities earlier than normative storylines suggest, as is the case for Katniss and Gale. Overall, through

examining the literary element of setting, a YL opens up interpretative possibilities to critique developmental paradigms of universal adolescence, the idea of adolescence as a normative, stable category of representation, and even how youth function to meet the needs of adult agendas and desires. What we aim to demonstrate here is how a YL brings a missing and much-needed set of interpretive questions to *The Hunger Games* scholarship, and more generally to YAL.

## Implications of a Youth Lens

As we have pointed out throughout this article, the work we are naming a YL has been going on, in multiple disciplines, for years. What we articulate through this writing is that work occurring in disparate disciplines is distinct and generative in guiding readers' thinking about texts, especially texts produced for an adolescent audience. Even by giving a name to a methodology intent on scrutinizing representations of youth from a specific theoretical vantage grants this focus increased and necessary attention, perhaps on par with inquiries of race, gender, sexuality, and other social categories. Although we acknowledge the ways that constructions of race and gender function differently from age-based designations like adolescence—one grows up and out of adolescence but not out of other marked categories of difference—we also recognize the ways that literacy education at the secondary level, especially, works with young people constrained by these assumptions throughout their time in school. Therefore, in articulating a YL, we aim to help usher in a new body of scholarship and pedagogical approaches meant to significantly impact readers and readings of YAL. With the establishment of this lens, we see our work standing alongside the contributions of scholars (many of whom have been mentioned throughout this article) already affecting understandings about adolescence and continuing to engage in the work of refiguring adolescence.

## Analysis of Adolescence in Young Adult and Other Literature

A YL offers a new line of inquiry for analyzing YAL. Continuing the work of literary scholars like Waller (2009), we see this work as offering the field of literary study focused on YAL a lens of its own, so to speak. Unlike the work of feminist, queer, Marxist, or postcolonial lenses, a YL works in relation to—and develops from—these prior critiques and brings forward ideas distinct to the stage known as adolescence and the youth expected of—or excepted from—this category.

Although we have focused our discussion thus far on how a YL can provide analyses of individual young adult literary texts (e.g., *The Hunger Games*), we also imagine that a YL could be applied to examine YAL as a genre more broadly. A YL could open a line of inquiry that explores what assumptions this genre makes about its readers, and their preoccupations, interests, capabilities, and limitations. For example, the previously discussed work of Thein et al. (2013) illustrates how a YL explores ideological figurations of youth within a particular area of YAL—memoir adaptations. Given the multiple subgenres within YAL (e.g., science fiction, realistic fiction), we imagine

innumerable possibilities for fresh readings from a YL. Another potential domain of analysis could be youth-generated YAL, including fan fiction. These texts could be compared, for instance, to adult-authored YAL to see how depictions of youth by youth compare with adult-authored texts. Given the acceptance of adult norms, however, and their ubiquity, we would not be surprised to find that even most youth-authored texts reflect normalized social expectations for youth.

Beyond analyses of particular YA texts and subgenres, another area of analysis could be the mechanisms that label and define YAL. For instance, scholarship could examine the YAL marketing and publishing industry in terms of how this body of writing names its readership through publishers' websites, the organization of YAL categories in bookstores, the use of teachers and librarians to "sell" novels, or how manuscripts are shaped by publishing agents. Readership could be another aspect of analysis from a YL, particularly given the phenomenon of "crossover novels" (Falconer, 2009). As well, a YL could provide a way to examine the assumptions of adolescence/ts that censors use to justify the banning of young adult books and other texts.

Although this article features the ways a YL aims to engender fresh analyses and questions about adolescence as it is represented in YAL, we see the merits of extending its uses to representations of youth in any texts. Pairing a YL with YAL makes much sense; however, a YL can easily be used to examine portrayals of youth in non-YAL literary texts as well. Just because a literary text is not written specifically for young adults does not mean it does not have adolescent characters or something to say about youth and adolescence. For example, much of the fiction used in traditional secondary curricula includes youth protagonists (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *A Separate Peace*) who convey certain understandings of adolescence, often from particular historical moments, that a YL could reveal. In fact, we could see scholars in literacy education using a YL to provide critiques of how ideas of youth and adolescence are and have been propounded in literacy curricula. Thus, we hope that a YL, while it opens up ways of thinking about specific texts—YAL and others—extends to a range of ways of interrogating how ideas of adolescence circulate.

## Secondary Literacy Education

Much like other critical lenses (e.g., feminism, postcolonialism), a YL provides literacy educators a way to engage secondary students in analyzing literary texts and categories of representation. In fact, we advocate teaching a YL explicitly as an approach to textual interpretation much as others advocate for the explicit teaching of these other critical lenses (e.g., Appleman, 2009). What is unique about a YL is that it helps students examine how texts depict them as adolescents. Here, a YL expands critical literacy scholarship by asking readers to interrogate how the texts they are reading position them to assume certain ideas of adolescence and be particular kinds of youth. In this way, a YL has the potential to help students develop strategies to resist the dominant ways they are positioned in the world. For example, Martin (2013) explains how a YL reframed a group of A.P. Literature students' reading of *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951) from one that emphasized Holden as a typical, whiny adolescent, to

an examination of the ways Holden's angst in the novel might, in fact, be a product of his society's expectations of him as an adolescent male. From their engagement with a YL, these students not only reread the novel to interrogate how it constructed adolescence but also broader cultural understandings of adolescence, including how youth are oftentimes "scapegoats" for society's problems, how schools tend to rely on homogenized conceptions of youth, and how adult expectations for youth inform behaviors and actions.

Trites (2000) agrees that readers need to learn strategies of resistance when reading YAL, especially adolescent readers who may be unaware of the ways that YA fiction conveys messages about needing to grow up and *out* of the category of adolescence. Youth, like adults, sometimes accept, other times resist, and sometimes do both when presented with ideological messages about the ways texts position them as subjects (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Moje & van Helden, 2005). In other words, interpreting YAL through a YL affords educators a perspective that honors how youth already operate in resistant ways in relation to texts, while offering additional means through which such resistance may be effected. Furthermore, a YL may open up avenues for secondary students to construct their own discourses of adolescence for the consumption of adults. Specifically, teachers might create opportunities within curricula for students to (re)write texts that critique dominant ideas of youth (e.g., Finders, 2005). Such a curricular approach honors youth as producers of sociocultural understandings, rather than as passive recipients of circulating images of youth, including those of fictional characters.

Beyond application to individual texts, we envision an emphasis on analyzing representations of adolescence/ts as a thread throughout an entire curriculum. For example, secondary literacy educators and students might interrogate the representations of youth across texts. For classes with a particular national emphasis (e.g., American Literature) and/or courses in cross/multicultural ("world") literature, analysis of representations of youth can be used as an entry point to read and discuss texts. For example, classes in American literature might foreground questions such as the following: How have depictions of youth changed (or not) across different historical time periods? How are different figurations of youth in literary texts connected to broader cultural occurrences and ideas? In what ways do ideas of youth figure into the American cultural imagination? Students might be asked, for instance, to compare how ideas of adolescence and experiences of youth differ between Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, Gene and Phineas from *A Separate Peace* (Knowles, 1959), Junior from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), the characters from *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), the main characters in the graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), Steven from *Monster* (Myers, 1999), and Charlie from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), among many more characters in American literary texts. In their comparative analysis of these novels, students might focus specifically on how different (or similar) representations of adolescence/ts across these texts might be bound in historical time periods, geographical locations, socioeconomics, race and ethnicity, or gender. For instance, students might be asked to explain how social class helps shape the experiences of adolescence for the characters in these, or

other, novels. Multicultural or world literature courses might engage questions such as the following: In what ways do representations of youth differ across cultures? How might different depictions of youth illuminate broader cultural differences? Placing texts such as *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2003), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), and *The Power of One* (Courtenay, 1989) might offer, for example, a way for students to examine how the idea of “coming of age” looks differently within different cultural contexts, which, similar to the approach to an American literature course, could create space to examine adolescence as a situated experience rather than a set of normative behaviors or experiences.

In addition to the exploration of YAL and other literary texts, media texts provide an apposite domain for engaging youth in the application of a YL. Typically, media studies focus on issues of normativity and representations of social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality; a YL offers students a way to examine media texts for how they figure and norm ideas of youth. Although a bit dated at this point in its examples, the PBS documentary, *Merchants of Cool* (Goodman & Rushkoff, 2001) offers a great starting point to open up dialogue with students about the myriad ways media create ideas, images, and perceptions of adolescence/ts. From there, a range of television commercials, magazines, films, print advertisements can become the materials for exploration of how adolescence is a sociocultural construct and the consequences normed perspectives of adolescence have for the lives of youth. Here, too, might be an ideal location for students to create texts for distribution to (adult) audiences.

### *Literacy Teacher Education*

In many secondary teacher preparation programs, literacy teacher candidates are required to take a course in YAL. A YL provides an alternative approach for literacy teacher educators who teach these courses. Rather than introducing these students to this literary genre and offering them pedagogical strategies that focus on improving students’ skills and engagement (e.g., “bridge” and “mirror” approaches), a course on YAL within the context of a literacy teacher education program could cohere around denaturalizing normative ideas of adolescence, examining the interplay between these ideas and YAL, and imagining how these perspectives might shape pedagogies involving YAL (e.g., Sarigianides, 2012). In such a course, a YL provides a way for literacy teacher educators to engage future teachers in an examination of their own often implicit assumptions about their future students as adolescents, as well as the roles that literacy curricula have in constituting these ideas. By starting with these ideas, a YL promises to challenge future teachers to deepen their understandings of how the life stage known as adolescence informs their thinking about their students, their own roles as teachers, and the function of literacy curricula. In these ways, the course on YAL really takes as a central focus the question of who is the “young adult” and how are these ideas developed and circulated through a genre of literature explicitly written for and marketed to them.

To draw attention to and potentially disrupt discourses of adolescence within these courses, teacher educators can engage their students with much of the conceptual and

empirical scholarship that troubles dominant understandings of youth. For instance, in our teaching of YAL courses, we have our students read much of the scholarship highlighted in the theoretical assumptions section of this article, including, for example, Lesko's (2012) seminal *Act Your Age!*. In addition, instructors might engage their students in analysis of a range of media texts and cultural artifacts, including, for example, Peter Tosh's song, "You Can't Blame the Youth," *New Yorker* cartoons that depict adolescence, the *National Geographic* cover story on the "teenage brain," and/or any number of teen films. Placing these texts within a course on YAL has the potential to help students develop their understandings of adolescence as a construct and how media texts and cultural artifacts participate in the process of naming and knowing adolescence/ts.

In addition, literary scholarship focused on exploring ideas of adolescence within YAL can also be integrated into the course. These texts may help move students from their understanding of adolescence as a cultural construct to how these ideas might inform their understanding of a YL and inform their analysis of YAL. For example, students might read Waller's text on fantastic realism while they read literary texts from that genre. Similarly, students might read Thein et al. (2013) and simultaneously read memoir adaptations for youth to examine how the differences across these texts draw from and create distinctions between adulthood/adults and adolescence/ts. By inserting this literary scholarship within this course, students may develop a better sense of both how to operationalize a YL for analysis of texts as well as how young adult texts might be complicit or subversive in constructing ideas of and for adolescence/ts.

Furthermore, within the context of literacy teacher education, a YL can be utilized by literacy educators in their analysis of not only literary and media texts but also pedagogical texts and educational policies. For example, many secondary literacy teacher education programs require students to take linguistics courses in which they learn about the sociopolitical nature of language as well as the tools of discourse analysis. In addition to putting into practice these tools by examining classroom discourse for such things as dialogic instruction (e.g., Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013), literacy teacher educators can create opportunities for their students to conduct discourse analyses of pedagogical texts that focus specifically on the embedded assumptions and ideologies of adolescence/ts contained in them. Although shifting its emphasis from literary texts to pedagogical texts, (and therefore, necessitating a differing set of specific analytic questions), such a practice maintains emphasis on the overarching questions of a YL, which interrogate how a text represents adolescence/ts and how these representations map onto broader discourses of youth. This work may be particularly useful for future and in-service teachers as it can illustrate the links between ideas of adolescence and pedagogical reasoning and practices. In this way, a YL offers educators a way to scrutinize curricular texts and the various practices, discourses, and institutions in which the teaching of those texts take place.

## Conclusion

In naming and establishing a YL, we hope to create space within literacy education for scholars and educators to explore more purposefully how reconceptions of adolescence

as a cultural construct might inform their thinking about and teaching of YAL. As YAL continues to take root in secondary literacy and literacy teacher education, a shift toward critically examining representations of youth within these texts is now imperative. Especially in a field that aims to dispel stereotypes tied to race, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, language, physical ability, and other social categories, we are compelled to revise the dominant and oftentimes detrimental ways we also think about and engage with the youth our pedagogy aims to reach.

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### Note

1. We use the label *adolescence* to refer to what is commonly understood as the distinctive stage of life people experience between the ages of approximately 12 and 18, and we use the labels *youth* and *adolescents* to refer to the people who are supposedly experiencing adolescence. The term *adolescence/ts* is meant to capture both the life stage and the people represented by that stage. It is important to note that though we utilize *adolescence* as a seemingly easy-to-define category throughout this article, we do so while setting out to critique the meanings attached to this term. We recognize that any labels, including the term *adult*, are constraining, and that by using these terms, we may be complicit in reinscribing the very object of study we are attempting to critique. However, we use these labels as part of a process to “queer” these terms, to challenge their existing meanings, and to invest new connotations and perspectives into their uses.

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