FANTASIES OF CITIZENSHIP: ADOLESCENCE AND TEMPORALITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

BY

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Abstract

This project examines how the figure of the adolescent is represented, constructed, and disciplined as a potential citizen in young adult (YA) literature at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Engaging the field of children’s and YA literature through queer and feminist theory, I analyze how the adolescent’s proximity to, but inability to fully inhabit, normative adulthood disrupts totalizing narratives of development and citizenship.

Queer theory has recently attended to the question of childhood through highbrow and adult literature and culture, perhaps most notably in Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child* (2009). Conversely, childhood studies and children’s literature have engaged feminist and queer theory, but have not yet attended fully to the potential of adolescence for theorizing alternatives to what José Muñoz calls “straight time,” the orderly procession of marriage and reproduction dictated by the norms of white middle-class respectability. Drawing on Muñoz’s work on utopia and Stockton on queer childhood, I complicate recent conversations on queer temporality, community, and the queerness or anti-queerness of the child. My archive of popular and acclaimed YA fantasy literature of the last three decades engages the growing pervasiveness of powerful young women protagonists to explore the complexities of community, belonging, and coming of age in literature for and about young people. As a locus of especially visible resistance to normative constructions of gender, race, and adult citizenship, the figure of the girl highlights the potential of adolescence for theorizing alternatives to hegemonic discourses of self and community. The project as a whole argues that recent YA literature imagines the adolescent as a figure for utopian possibility and critical citizenship—what I argue is a kind of transformative citizenship—engaged in
interrogating normalizing discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and community. Challenging the notion that children’s and YA literature functions to inculcate young readers into normative citizenship, I show how even mainstream literature for young people is engaged in rethinking citizenship practices in communities and collectivities not defined by the nation-state.

Chapter One examines the intersections of adolescence, temporality, and citizenship in Avi’s Newbery Honor novel *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (1990). Set aboard a sailing ship in 1832, the novel chronicles 13-year-old Charlotte’s coming of age over the course of her journey from England to Providence, Rhode Island. Her discovery of a planned mutiny forces Charlotte to confront her complicity with the systemic violence that underlies her privileged world, and eventually to reject not only the limited model of American citizenship dictated for her by her gender, race, and class, but also the imperative to transition out of the liminal space of adolescence. Charlotte thus becomes the paradigmatic image of the adolescent suspended in transition that animates my analysis: Removed from the orderly, linear conceptions of time defined by capital and the developmental imperative of what she calls her destiny, to become “a lady,” Charlotte finds axes of movement previously unavailable to her and chooses to remain in a suspended, unpredictable, and cyclical temporality that reveals how adolescence disrupts naturalized racial, classed, and gendered imperatives of adulthood and citizenship.

Turning from historical fiction to medievalist fantasy, Chapter Two argues that the developmental period of adolescence and the historical period of the Middle Ages are analogous temporal “middles,” bracketed off but with a tendency to trouble the boundaries between past and future, fantasy and reality, the archaic and the modern, and the primitive and the civilized. Analyzing Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness Quartet (1983-1988), an early exemplar of recent trends in YA fantasy directed at girls, I argue that medievalist fantasy is especially
Chapter Three focuses on the relationships among the protagonists of the three loosely-connected novels of Kristin Cashore’s Seven Kingdom’s Trilogy (2008-2012) to theorize the potential of transformative citizenship as a source of community and worldmaking that transcends political, geographic, and even temporal boundaries. The protagonists of this YA fantasy series all possess extraordinary powers that mark them as dangerous to their communities and make them vulnerable to dehumanization and exploitation by those in power. Through their contacts with one another, they form an alternative kinship network that allows them to reimagine themselves as healers and protectors. Offered alternative avenues of growth from the monstrosities prescribed by their societies, their metamorphoses transform the world around them.

In contrast to the utopian visions in Cashore’s trilogy, Chapter Four examines the limits of transformative citizenship in an analysis of Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games Trilogy. Katniss Everdeen lacks even the limited the privilege and access that allows the protagonists of Cashore and Pierce’s novels to bring about change in their respective homes. I engage the temporal disruptions of personal and historical trauma—a thread throughout this dissertation—to understand the impossibility of complete liberation from histories of violence and exploitation. Finally, I consider the utopic longings of Collins’s dystopia, even as it disappoints expectations.
of both the revolutionaries in the text and many readers who desire Katniss’s unequivocal triumph. Collins’s trilogy provides glimpses of utopia even in the midst of horror, offering a dynamic vision of a utopia that is always in process.

Contributing to queer theory, children’s literature, and American literary studies, “Fantasies of Citizenship” shows how YA literature offers dynamic alternatives to stagnating visions of normative adulthood, citizenship, and futurity. Both no longer and not yet, the adolescent’s unstable temporality emerges as a generative site from which to engage processes of citizen formation, collectivity, and worldmaking.
At its core, this project is about community; it never would have come to fruition without the personal and intellectual support of the many people who make up mine.

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To the kids in my life: Maya, Audra, Jackson, and Jaina, this is for you, and the worlds you’ll create that we haven’t even imagined yet.
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In June 2011, an essay ran in the *Wall Street Journal*’s book review section decrying popular literature for young adults. “Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence and depravity,” the subtitle read; “Why is this considered a good idea?” “Dark” teen novels, *WSJ* book reviewer Meghan Cox Gurdon argued, normalize pathological behaviors and teach teenagers that the world is a terrible place. Though, she acknowledged, “reading about homicide doesn't turn a man into a murderer; . . . the calculus that many parents make is less crude than that: It has to do with a child's happiness, moral development and tenderness of heart.”

I begin with Gurdon not for her argument—readers and writers of young adult (YA) literature took her to task thoroughly and eloquently in the days and weeks following the appearance of her essay—but because of her curious collapsing of the adolescent into the child. The texts she discusses are aimed at readers ages 12-18: readers who have their own agency to choose and acquire their reading material without the intervention of parents who may be concerned with their “happiness, moral development and tenderness of heart.” Gurdon’s hand-wringing over increasingly “lurid” and “grotesque” young adult fiction—nothing new, to be sure—is symptomatic of a particularly intense anxiety surrounding the adolescent’s imminent transition from “child” to “adult,” and the indeterminacy of the period in between. That indeterminacy is evident in Gurdon’s apparent difficulty in categorizing the readers of the books she discusses. Though she knows their purported age range, she refers to them sometimes as “children,” other times as “teens” or “young people.” More interesting to me, however, is her simultaneous characterization of adolescence as sacred—a “brief” time that “comes to us only
once”—and her dismissal of its importance in her follow-up essay. Responding to readers and writers of YA literature who pointed out that abuse, violence, poverty, and sexuality are part of the everyday experiences of many young people, Gurdon writes, “Adolescence can be a turbulent time, but it doesn’t last forever and often—leaving aside the saddest cases—it feels more dramatic at the time than it will in retrospect.” Precious, fleeting, and inconsequential: the underlying desire of these characterizations is for a childhood that one can slough off when adolescent drama is past.

*Fantasies of Citizenship: Adolescence and Temporality in Young Adult Literature* interrogates the anxieties that surround the transitional developmental period we call “adolescence.” I argue that these anxieties center on the adolescent’s proximity to, but inability to inhabit, normative adulthood, and its resulting ability to disrupt it. Focusing on popular and award-winning YA literature of the last thirty years, I maintain that we, as adult scholars and thinkers, must rethink our understanding of YA literature and its young readers, as, on the one hand, delicate innocents who must be sheltered; or, on the other, as a “troubled, troubling, and dangerous” demographic from whom adult society must be protected. This dissertation intervenes in scholarly conversations about childhood, citizenship, and futurity in queer and feminist theory and childhood studies to extend and rethink theorizations of childhood with a focus on adolescence. Engaging the field of children’s and young adult (YA) literature through queer and feminist theory, my project brings these approaches to bear on a set of texts often dismissed as too simple or unsophisticated for serious scholarly consideration. Although queer theory has recently attended to the question of childhood, it has done so through highbrow and adult literature and culture. Conversely, although childhood studies and children’s literature have engaged feminist and queer theory, there is still a great deal of work to do in the field.¹
*Fantasies of Citizenship* argues that YA literature at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first constitutes a complex body of theory that imagines the adolescent as a figure for utopian possibility and critical citizenship.

In an essay titled “Why the Best Kids’ Books are Written in Blood,” Sherman Alexie exposes the fallacies at the heart of Gurdon’s *WSJ* essay, wondering, “Does Ms. Gurdon honestly believe that a sexually explicit YA novel might somehow traumatize a teen mother? Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?” Recalling his own experiences as a survivor of childhood abuse, Alexie reflects on the power of YA literature to acknowledge and validate the lived experiences of children and young adults in opposition to an adult culture that wishes to protect them from reading about rape and murder, but is conspicuously absent when horrific realities invade the lives of young people, particularly young people of color and young queer people.

The YA novels that I analyze participate neither in escapism nor in the traditional pedagogical impulse of children’s literature to indoctrinate young readers into normative adulthood. Rather, they are interested in strategies of resistance. In fantastical narratives, they imagine alternative citizenship practices for young protagonists at the margins of their societies. Arguing for what I call transformative citizenship, I focus on works of fantasy, a genre that I contend offers remarkable (and often ignored) mobility and possibility for depictions of adolescence and citizenship. As a genre disproportionately represented in children’s and YA literature I investigate what makes fantasy so attractive and so generative a frame in which to explore and potentially subvert the regulatory fictions of childhood and adolescence. I build on Kathryn Bond Stockton’s theorization of childhood as a “moving suspension” in which one
might “grow sideways” before growing up to explore the resonance of temporal deferral as a visualization of adolescence (Queer Child 13). The novels in my archive play with normative notions of time to imagine the intersections of past, present, and future in the figure of the adolescent.

José Muñoz argues that queerness is essentially about temporality: it is “about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Cruising Utopia 1). That other, better world is often embodied in the figure of the child—a political move that Lee Edelman roundly critiques as irredeemably entrenched in what he calls “reproductive futurism,” the linear developmental imperatives of heterosexuality that will produce a new generation to replicate the (conservative) political investments of the last (2).

With Muñoz, I respond to Edelman “by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity” that is not necessarily defined by heterosexual kinship. I further follow Muñoz’s argument that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope,” a futurity that does not accede to reproductive futurity’s violent erasure of queerness (Cruising Utopia 11). Indeed, “the child,” while certainly a political resource for the Right to imagine the destructiveness of the queer, also offers a rich resource for theorizing other temporal orders that do not rely on “the future” at the expense of the present.

Stockton argues that “there are other ways to circumvent ‘the child’” in the sense that Edelman means, that are not synonymous with Edelman’s embrace of the death drive (13). For Edelman, “queerness names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ . . . the place of the social order’s death drive” (3, original emphasis). Rejecting “the Child as the emblem of futurity’s unquestioned value,” Edelman rejects, among other things, “history as linear narrative (the poor man’s teleology) in which meaning succeeds in revealing itself—as itself—through
time. Far from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning’s eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (4, original emphasis). Edelman thus sees in queerness the opposite of what Muñoz does: queerness is radically negative and negating, resisting compulsory reproductive futurity by figuring the death drive, “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). Edelman’s argument works on the logic of growth as (inevitable) progress. Seeking to “prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up,” Stockton argues that “growth is a matter of extension, vigor, and volume as well as verticality. . . . Hence, ‘growing up’ may be a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth, one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved” (11). I build on Stockton’s theory of sideways growth by turning from the queer or protogay child of her analysis of literature for adults to portrayals of adolescence in texts for adolescents. These texts, I argue, engage the concept of sideways growth to suggest alternatives to reproductive futurism for their young protagonists. They offer alternative narratives of development, citizenship, community, and kinship for their young protagonists.

These alternative narratives of development enable what I call transformative citizenship. A mode of citizenship in which coming of age—and coming into citizenship—transforms the collective as well as the self, transformative citizenship attends to the intersection of “citizenship” and “adulthood.” It resists dominant constructions of youth citizenship as “a story about young people as passive recipients of civic education” in order to become “the right kinds of active participants in their civic and political worlds” (Harris 144). Instead of working to inculcate readers as “proper” citizens, the YA texts I analyze offer models of critical utopia and
potential resistance for those children and adolescents beyond the margins of the normative potential citizen. As figures both in the middle and on the margins, the protagonists of the novels that I study are crucial to the transformation of their collectives, but resist being fully folded into them as newly-normal citizens.

With this in mind, I approach my texts with two major critical investments. The first is in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “reparative reading.” Seeing “an unintentionally stultifying side effect” in “the very productive critical habits . . . Paul Ricoeur memorably called the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’” Sedgwick seeks an alternative to the paranoid reading practices that “may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (124). “To be other than paranoid,” Sedgwick argues, “does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression” (127-28). The problem with paranoid reading is that it sees no alternative to its negative affect of anticipating and exposing violence in order to avert it “as the only and inevitable mode, motive, content, and proof of true knowledge” (137). Seeing paranoia as a critical practice and position instead of an immobile ideology, Sedgwick offers an alternative in reparative reading, asking, “What makes pleasure and amelioration so ‘mere’?” (144). She argues for a critical practice that “surrender[s] the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (146). I approach the texts in my archive from a reparative position that sees violence but does not accede to its negative affect, instead seeking transformative citizenship practices in the temporality of adolescence in which to imagine and create critical utopias.
The central affect of reparative reading is hope, the second key critical investment of this project. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz describes what he calls a “methodology of hope,” which “can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (4). Sedgwick similarly describes hope as an affect that is entangled in both past and future:

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did (146).

This turn to the past will become especially important in chapters 2 and 3, where I analyze two medievalist fantasy series, Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness Quartet* (1983-88) and Kristin Cashore’s *Seven Kingdoms* trilogy (2008-2012). In all four chapters, the overlapping temporality of hope complements my analysis of adolescence as temporally indeterminate, characterized by the overlapping pasts and futures of childhood and adulthood, and with the potential to productively disrupt both.

In the following sections, I expand on three clusters of key terms/concepts that structure my analyses in this dissertation. First, I explore the overlapping constructions of adolescence and the linear temporality of normative development that adolescence has the potential to disrupt. I then look at the relationship between citizenship and queer kinship, which I show in each of my chapters is central to transformative citizenship practices. Finally, I discuss the transformative potential of fantasy as a genre that is particularly imbricated in Muñoz’s methodology of hope.
and Sedgwick’s reparative reading practices, but that often is dismissed as “merely” hopeful or escapist.

1. Adolescence, Development, and Temporality

In his 1904 Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education, the earliest and arguably most influential theorist of American adolescence for the twentieth century, G. Stanley Hall famously borrowed from Goethe to describe adolescence as a period of Sturm und Drang, or “storm and stress”—a period characterized by rapid physical, sexual, and psychological changes that constitute “a new birth, for the higher and more completely human traits are now born. . . . Development is less gradual and more saltatory, suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained” (quoted in Baxter 63). Hall’s theory of adolescence, rooted in late-nineteenth century notions of social Darwinism and the theory of recapitulation—the idea that individual development rehearses the evolution of the species—is dated by any standards, but the broad outlines of his theory remain persistent, even as the biological determinism of his argument has faded to the background. One article in a retrospective issue of the History of Psychology on the centennial of the publication of Adolescence observes “the durability of many of his insights and observations on adolescence,” including “the prevalence of depressed mood in adolescence; adolescence as a time when crime rates peak; adolescence as a time of high sensation seeking; susceptibility to media influences in adolescence; characteristics of peer relations in adolescence; and biological development during puberty” (Arnett 186-87). The ease with which this author lists these characteristics (without
citations) indicates the broad acceptance of Hall’s characterization of adolescence in modern psychology.

This list of similarities between Hall’s work and contemporary beliefs about adolescence ably illustrates Kent Baxter’s analysis of the emergence of American adolescence at the turn of the twentieth century. Baxter persuasively argues that anxieties about modernity at the turn of the twentieth century in America were displaced onto the emerging demographic of the adolescent: the no-longer-child, not-yet-adult made newly visible by child labor laws, mandatory public education, and urbanization. The emergence of the adolescent came as “a result of changes in American society that are synonymous with modernity . . . [and] at the turn of the century, this new age category came to represent all that was threatening about ‘modern life.’” Thus, in Baxter’s analysis, “Adolescence, as a concept, came into being because it fulfilled specific cultural needs,” not only defining “a new and quickly expanding segment of the population, but also, it became a vehicle for expressing many concerns associated with the movement into a new era” (3). Sarah E. Chinn similarly argues that the emergence of adolescents as a visible and much-agonized-about demographic originated in anxieties about growing numbers of immigrants and their American-born children in America’s urban centers in the early twentieth century. According to Chinn:

Concerns that writers at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries explicitly linked to the young people of immigrant communities—the explosion of commercial sites of leisure (amusement parks, dance halls, theaters, and beer gardens, for example), a loosening of controls on premarital sexuality, rebellion against parents and other authority figures—became the defining characteristics for teen culture more generally as the twentieth century progressed (4).
A century later, adolescence is a firmly entrenched developmental category that remains as anxiously visible as at the turn of the twentieth century, portrayed in popular media as a “troubled, troubling, and dangerous” demographic from whom adult society must be protected. A large body of research from the last decade finds persistent negative representations of adolescents in the media despite data that “unanimously contradict these unrelenting and dire media representations” (Bernier 159). The persistence of this notion of “storm and stress” in characterizations of depression, criminality, “sensation seeking” and unbridled sexuality reifies adolescents as a demographic that needs to be managed, for their protection and for everyone else’s.

“Adolescence” is, by all accounts, somewhat inchoate in what it describes. Drawing on Grace Palladino’s 1996 *Teenagers*, Chinn describes “[t]he conventional definition of teenagers as not just as people over twelve and under twenty, but rather as young people suffused with the ‘determination to establish separate identities and to demonstrate their independence, one way or another, from their parents’ world [that] often brands teenagers as potential troublemakers in the public mind’” (6). But, “in the early days of this new identity, formed around the coconstituting phenomena of teenage labor and commercial leisure, adolescence began later than we now imagine it, usually around fourteen, and could last into the early twenties” (Chinn 8). Hall considered adolescence to cover ages 14-24 (Arnett 187). According to Baxter, beginning with Hall, theorists of adolescence:

rely upon some very basic physical parameters of adolescence: the developmental stage is rooted in the onset of puberty and ends with the individual’s assimilation into the adult world . . . usually marked by some cultural event, such as a marriage or the assumption of an adult role. In terms of age, adolescence runs roughly through the period of the teens.
This period is marked by a tremendous amount of growth and the beginnings of active sexual desire (61).

More to the point, “[i]ts volatility is essentialized as its most characteristic trait” (15). The *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* defines adolescence as:

> a time of growing up, of moving from the immaturity of childhood into the maturity of adulthood. . . . There is no single event or boundary line that denotes the end of childhood or the beginning of adolescence. Rather, experts think of the passage from childhood into and through adolescence as composed of a set of transitions that unfold gradually and that touch upon many aspects of the individual's behavior, development, and relationships. These transitions are biological, cognitive, social, and emotional (11).

In all of these definitions, the borders of adolescence are porous. Its age boundaries are “roughly the teen years” but it may begin as late as fourteen and last into the early 20s. The June 2015 feature in *Scientific American*, “The Amazing Teen Brain,” reported that, while “puberty seems to be starting earlier,” recent neuroscience shows that “the maturation of networks in the prefrontal cortex, which occurs later and promotes sound judgment and the control of impulses . . . continues to change prominently until well into a person's 20s” (Giedd 34). Adolescence is marked by rapid and uneven physical and psychological development (according to *Scientific American*, the emotional regulatory limbic system “becomes turbo-boosted in puberty” [34]). It isn’t marked by any single event, and it ends when the individual reaches “adulthood” as it is socially and/or biologically defined. All this vagueness makes adolescence a frustrating object of definition but an analytically productive concept with which to approach an understanding of the transition from childhood to adulthood, and, more specifically for this project, to imagine alternatives to normative adulthood as it is envisioned by Hall and his successors. Thus, though
the protagonists of the novels I analyze are adolescents by the conventional definition, ranging in age from 11 to 18, in this project I define adolescence not in terms of a specific age range or developmental characteristics, but as a figure for the space in between childhood and adulthood, where “child” and “adult” collide, and past and future collapse into the present. This indeterminate period of transition, suspended between childhood and adulthood, offers a space to queer the linear conventional narratives of development through adolescence to normative adulthood. The adolescent protagonists of the texts that I analyze in this dissertation refuse, in various ways, the linear developmental narratives defined for them by their social and political worlds.

The title character of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* in Chapter One is the prototype of this temporally suspended adolescent. Set aboard a sailing ship in 1832, the novel chronicles 13-year-old Charlotte’s coming of age over the course of her journey from England to Providence, Rhode Island. Her discovery of a planned mutiny forces Charlotte to confront her complicity with the systemic violence that underlies her privileged world, and eventually to reject not only the limited model of American citizenship dictated for her by her gender, race, and class, but also the imperative to transition out of the liminal space of adolescence. Charlotte thus becomes the paradigmatic image of the adolescent suspended in transition that animates my analysis. Removed from the orderly, linear conceptions of time defined by capital and the developmental imperative of what she calls her destiny, to become “a lady,” Charlotte finds axes of movement previously unavailable to her and chooses to remain in a suspended, unpredictable, and cyclical temporality that reveals how adolescence disrupts naturalized racialized, classed, and gendered imperatives of adulthood and citizenship.
This liminal adolescent temporality is a queer temporality. According to J. Halberstam, queerness “has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” that are not defined by normative expectations of development structured by heterosexuality; the alternative temporalities of queerness construct “futures . . . according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Halberstam imagines queer temporality as a kind of “stretched-out adolescence” (153) that challenges the imperative to develop into a respectable adult out of “the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation” in Western cultures (4). Distinguishing queer adolescence from the “Jackass subjectivity” of “young white manhood” that “tends to be accompanied by high degrees of misogyny and homophobia,” Halberstam argues for “the extended adolescence of nonreproductive queer subcultural participants that facilitates community formation and offers alternative life narratives” (175). Halberstam’s extended queer adolescence emerges out of participation in club cultures or queer sex cultures, activities associated with adolescence and often classified as a “stage” that one leaves behind with youth. Queer subjects, though, “lacking the pacing and schedules that inhere to family life and reproduction, might visit clubs and participate in sex cultures well into their forties or fifties on a regular basis” and make subcultural involvement “a lifelong commitment” rather than a stage” (174). I am interested in the way that “[t]he notion of a stretched-out adolescence . . . challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood” (153), but in this project I seek to extend the idea of adolescence beyond Halberstam’s limiting association of it with activities, if not the chronological ages, culturally associated with what psychology calls “sensation seeking.” If queerness and adolescence open up possibilities for alternative communities that are not
structured by the chronological expectations of heterosexual development, in what other ways is adolescence available as a productive lens through which to theorize queer temporalities that do not map so cleanly onto the narrative of adolescent “storm and stress”?

To Elizabeth Freeman, queer time is “living aslant” to and “out of synch with state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming,” a description that dovetails with the temporal instability of adolescence in relation to normalizing (“state-sponsored”) narratives of adulthood and citizenship. Queer time “prevaricate[s], inventing possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpenetrating the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense” (xv). In Chapter Two, I explore this aspect of queer time in relation to an imagined medievalist past in Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness Quartet, a “glance backward,” in Muñoz’s terms, that places the ambiguous developmental “middle” of adolescence in conversation with the temporal “middle” of the Middle Ages, a period bracketed off by its supposed chaos, violence, and unknowability from the more “enlightened” Classical period and the Renaissance. In Pierce’s text, as in the other medievalist fantasy novels I read in Chapter Three, both adolescence and the imagined past offer ways to imagine alternative futures that are structured by nonlinear temporal orders and structures of belonging that are not defined by the heterosexual family. For Freeman, “queer time elongates and twists chronologically” within conventional narrative time, so that “within the lost moments of official history, queer time generates a discontinuous history of its own” (x-xi). In Chapter Four, I engage this idea using Muñoz’s analysis of gesture as a performative act that both preserves queer memory against “the demand for official evidence and facts” and evokes a queer utopian future glimmering on the horizon in my analysis of the ways that Katniss Everdeen and the revolutionaries of Panem imagine and create critical utopias—if fragmentary and
ephemeral—from within the dystopian future of Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games trilogy (Cruising Utopia 72).

Angus Gordon warns against “[t]he theoretical tendency to treat adolescence as the utopian site of a free-floating ‘liminal’ exploration of myriad nonbinding identifications and desires” (6). But Gordon’s analysis of backward-looking narratives of queer adolescence suggests the potential of adolescence as a concept at the same time as he argues that it reifies a linear process of identity formation. For Gordon, “the generic logic of adolescence entails an imperative to describe same-sex desires, acts, and identifications as detours or ‘snares’ in an overarching heterosexual narrative” (6-7). These snares and detours take on a more enabling form in Stockton’s concept of sideways growth, or growth inside delay: “Children grow sideways as well as up . . . in part because they cannot, according to our concepts, advance to adulthood until we say it’s time” (Queer Child 6). The lateral movements of sideways growth reveal:

[the] short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth” in the phrase “growing up,” “one that oddly would imply an end to growth when full stature (or reproduction) is achieved. By contrast, ‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives and their motions, may pertain at any age, bring ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts (11)

One of those ‘lateral contacts,’ I argue in this project, occurs in the space of adolescence, which embodies both delay—it is no longer childhood, but not yet adulthood—and “snares and detours” that interrupt a straightforward narrative of development toward normative heterosexual kinship structures and citizenship practices in its propensity for experimentation, “sensation seeking,” and criminality. Focusing on this collision point between childhood and adulthood, I
explore the ways that alternate narratives of growth may extend beyond childhood and enable subjects marginalized by age, race, gender, or sexuality to imagine and create utopias in opposition to systems that seek to erase all other possible worlds.

2. Citizenship and Kinship

Queer kinship and citizenship practices intersect at the center of these queer utopias. In Chapter Three I distinguish kinship *networks*, which I see as organic and malleable, from Gayle Rubin’s kinship *systems*, which “are and do many things. But they are made up of, and reproduce concrete forms of socially organized sexuality” that have as their foundation the exchange of women and goods (41). But Rubin’s foundational articulation of kinship as constructed of “categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships” is the basis on which queer kinship networks can grow. Kath Weston describes such alternative kinships as “chosen families” which “do not directly oppose genealogical modes of reckoning kinship. Instead, they undercut procreation’s status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations” (quoted in Rodríguez 167). “Chosen family” doesn’t quite capture the queer kinship networks that grow up (and sideways) in the texts in this dissertation, which go beyond alternative family formations that may still be legible as “like” the heterosexual family unit.

Freeman critiques Weston’s notion of “chosen family” as:

a peculiarly queer-unfriendly model, however friendly it may be to bourgeois lesbians and gays. For it presumes a range of economic, racial, gender, and national privileges to which many sexual dissidents do not have access—often by virtue of their sexual
dissidence itself—and it does not acknowledge what I have referred to as the centrality of bodily dependence and renewal to kinship (“Queer Belongings” 304).

In the texts in this dissertation, kinship emerges across race, age, and class (The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, in Chapter One); across cultures and within colonialist relations between nations (The Song of the Lioness Quartet, in Chapter Two); across time and geographical borders (the Seven Kingdoms Trilogy, in Chapter Three); and in opposition to regimes that mobilize the normative family as a unit of coercive state control (The Hunger Games Trilogy, in Chapter Four). Kinship in my texts resists normalizing heterosexual narratives: relationships among women and queer men tend to take priority, but even when characters enter into heterosexual partnerships, they do so in ways that subvert the normative family form.

Normative kinship relies on linear temporalities structured by genealogical and social inheritance; indeed, as Freeman argues, “kin relations themselves are an important form through which time itself is comprehended as linear: the domestic photograph . . . and the conventionally genealogical kin diagram are two interdependent genres that materialize temporal difference and organize this difference into sequentiality” (38). If queerness is “a force that distorts or undermines the logic of sequence” (Freeman, Time Binds, 27), then queer kinship offers ways of thinking kin relations across time and space without requiring its organization into sequence or reliance on reifying narratives of causality. Michel Foucault articulates queer kinship through the lens of friendship as a basis for “the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force” that threaten normative kinship formations (137). Alternative/queer kinship networks offer a way into queer temporalities and visions of community that are not structured by heteropatriarchy or necessarily sanctioned by the state.
Following Judith Butler, I understand kinship as “a kind of doing, one that does not reflect a prior structure, but that can only be understood as an enacted practice” that may best be defined as “no more or less than the intensification of community ties . . . that are irreducible to family” (“Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” 123, 127). Focusing on gay marriage and adoption debates in France in 1999, Butler explores “the foreclosure of the possible” produced by a myopic focus on dyadic sexual relations and family structures that mimic the normative heterosexual family. “The desire for state recognition,” writes Butler, “is a desire to become universal, to become interchangeable in one’s universality, to vacate the lonely particularity of the nonratified relation, and perhaps above all, to gain both place and sanctification in that imagined relation to the state” (111). The problem with gay marriage is its accession to and replication of exclusive social structures, as Freeman notes: “the state acknowledges particular people, entitling them to privileges and benefits, insofar as they are able to claim their humanity on this basis: not as a ‘special interest’ group but as heretofore misrecognized or unrecognized members of a people, a public, a citizenry, the human race”—statuses not accessible to many (if not most) queer subjects (“Queer Belongings” 304). The flip side, according to Butler, is “[t]he sense of delegitimation [that] can make it harder to sustain a bond, a bond that is not real anyway, a bond that does not ‘exist,’ that never had a chance to exist, that was never meant to exist. if you’re not real, it can be hard to sustain yourselves over time” (114). Understanding queer kinship as practice removes (or at least temporarily sidelines) the power of state recognition to make kinship “real.”

The kinship networks that I explore in this dissertation give way to citizenship practices that rail against the state; they are “cultural or social forms that are in excess of [the state’s] own rationality and whose rationale is other to its own,” as David Lloyd has written of nationalistic
forms that persist beyond and often in opposition to the formation of a state (191). Both these kinship networks and citizenship practices take place in what Sedgwick calls “the middle ranges of agency” (13). In much critical discourse, Sedgwick writes, Foucault’s “analysis of the pseudodichotomy between repression and liberation has led . . . to its conceptual reimposition in the even more abstractly reified form of the hegemonic and the subversive. . . . one’s choices narrow to accepting or refusing” (12-13). In either case, the status quo is reified, either through resistance or acceptance. In his analysis of transgender citizenship practices, Isaac West places the same argument in terms closely related to my project. West defines citizenship as a set of performative practices in relation to the law; it is “the communicative negotiation of the actual or perceived rights, obligations, and privileges among members of a collective” (6). Demanding entry into that collective, West writes, must not be read as simply “unreflecting adoptions of assimilationist attitudes. . . . Citizenship is performatively reproduced from innumerable points in contingent situations by individuals with unique motivations and understandings of what being and acting like a citizen means” (8). Thus “[c]itizenship . . . is a fluid and dynamic discursive resource available for rearticulation, and . . . practices of citizenship may be more complex than complicity with or rejection of normativities” (35). In other words, transformative citizenship practices take place in “the middle ranges of agency,” where one may seek acceptance at the same time as one subverts normative assumptions of what a citizen should be, do, and/or look like. In Sedgwick’s terms, “it is only the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity and change” (13, my emphasis). It is from here that transformative citizenship emerges.

Transformative citizenship is rooted in community and kinship as practices and processes. The notion of community or collective that I am working with is related to Benedict
Anderson’s imagined communities, but not reducible to nation—they often transcend nation or form outside or in excess of the limits of national borders, literally (as in *Charlotte Doyle*, which takes place aboard a ship sailing across the Atlantic) or figuratively (as in the Seven Kingdoms novels, where a kinship network emerges among the central characters before they meet or even know of one another’s existence). In Chapter One, I explore these connections in terms of nineteenth century notions of sympathy, “expressed as emotional, psychological, or biological attachment,” which Elizabeth Barnes has shown is represented in 18th- and nineteenth-century American literature “as the basis of democracy” (3). Glancing back to this historical formation in my analysis of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, which takes place in the nineteenth century (but was published in 1990), I engage in my own out-of-joint, queer temporality in a reading that is deliberately anachronistic. But I also suggest the persistence of sympathy as a mechanism of potentially queer kinship and transformative citizenship practices. Indeed, in exploring and “cultivat[ing] points of identification within and outside of these [LGBT] communities,” West demonstrates the persistence of sympathetic identification as a (partial) modality for justice when he “emphasize[s] . . . a different model of identification, one premised on the logics of ‘not not me.’ Accordingly, others are not figured as threats to one’s sense of self, but as implicated in one’s sense of self, and as humans worthy of acceptance, compassion, and justice” (5). But where nineteenth century sympathetic identification typically worked as a one-way transmission of virtue from a white (female) child to a racialized other, *Charlotte Doyle* renders sympathetic identification as an exchange that ultimately transforms Charlotte by her sympathetic identification with racialized and classed others who become her surrogate family and her new community, opening up other possibilities for growth and agency.
In emphasizing citizenship practices that are not delimited by the state, I draw on Toby Miller’s conception of cultural citizenship as “the right to know and speak” (35). Citizenship, Miller argues, “has always been cultural” (51):

The model liberal citizen is a clear-headed, cool subject who knows when to set aside individual and sectarian preferences in search of the greater good. This sounds acultural and neutral, even neutered. But historically, it has frequently corresponded, in both rhetorical and legal terms, to male, property-owning subjects protecting their interests from the general population by requiring the public renunciation of other loyalties, an unquestioning embrace of national ideologies, and an apparent self-control over personal desire. This has caused the U.S. government, a putatively culture-free zone, to have profoundly cultural qualifications for citizenship (52).

Miller shows that cultural citizenship is inseparable from political and economic citizenship: “The freedom to participate in culture is contingent on both freedom from prohibition and freedom to act via political, economic, and media capacities.” At stake in cultural citizenship is the question of “who speaks for whom” (73). Who speaks, and who has the capacity to speak, when “belonging” is restricted to particular individuals (white, male, heterosexual, moneyed)?

The texts in my archive seek to give voice to figures on the margins, particularly women, as they negotiate the competing demands of “maintaining identity and exercising ‘full membership’ in the wider community” (Miller 67)—often in part by creating their own communities (kinship networks) that transcend or overlay established state or national formations. This aspect of cultural citizenship becomes critical in Chapter Three, as the Seven Kingdoms novels all explore the consequences of the central antagonist’s power over knowledge. The magic power to make others believe and obey, a power that is described in the novels as a contagion that attaches to his
words, parallels the spread of misinformation and outright lies in our own political media system. Rendering and amplifying this dynamic in a fantasy setting, the series, particularly the third novel, *Bitterblue*, explores possibilities for knowing and speaking when “truth” remains fundamentally inaccessible. In the practice of storytelling, the text finds what Halberstam terms “alternative methods of alliance” available in the “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” of queerness (1). Transformative citizenship thus emerges from practices of knowledge production rooted in queer kinship (“alternative methods of alliance”) that overlay and transform the more normative formations (heterosexual family, nation-state) from which they arise.

3. Why fantasy?

One of the key assumptions that underlies this dissertation is that fantasy, a genre that is often infantilized along with its readers, offers a particularly rich (and often neglected) site for theorizing adolescence, temporality, and citizenship. It is no surprise to anyone who has walked into a bookstore or library, gone to the movies, or watched television in the last decade that fantasy is ascendent in all of these categories, and has especially exploded in YA literature since the late 1990s. In my analyses of fantasy texts from the 1980s to the present, I am beginning to gesture toward a genealogy of a subset of YA fantasy that has been marketed to young women readers and features young women protagonists. I contend that the imagined worlds of fantasy are crucial to its ability to offer enabling narratives of citizenship and belonging through its construction of what J.R.R. Tolkien called “secondary worlds.”
The relationship of the reader to the secondary world of the fantastic is at the center of Farah Mendlesohn’s taxonomy of fantasy in her study *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Defining fantasy as “an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic between author and reader for the construction of a sense of wonder,” Mendlesohn explores the rhetorical tools that fantasy uses to create “a fiction of consensual construction of belief” (xiii). She identifies four categories of fantasy “determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world” (xiv). Of her four categories, I am most interested in the portal-quest fantasy, in which the reader and protagonist enter into fantasy through a(n often literal) portal, as in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*; and the immersive fantasy, where “we are allowed no escape” (xiv).³

Immersive and portal-quest fantasies work in tension with one another. In the immersive mode, the fantastic is presented “without comment, as the norm for both the protagonist and the reader” (xx). The reader must decode through context; depth is built “through the creation of a vocabulary that claims meaning but reveals itself, if at all, only through context, which builds the sense of story and world behind what we actually see” (83). According to Mendlesohn, “We do not enter into the immersive fantasy, we are assumed to be of it: our cognitive estrangement is both entire and negated” (xx). Most crucially, the secondary world of the immersive fantasy is not fully knowable: “In a fully immersive fantasy, the actors must be able to engage with their world; they must be able to scrape its surface and discover something deeper than a stage set” (63). The protagonist of the immersive fantasy has an antagonistic position to his or her world. In the immersive fantasy, “knowledge [is] argued out of the world, by breaking it open” (65). The ability of both character and reader to question the built world of the text, to “[break] it open” *without* destroying the coherence of the world, leaves the reader in a position to continue questioning beyond or after the text, making it a particularly appropriate mode of fantasy for
adolescent literature. It produces an openness that remains even when the text itself asserts closure in its events, an openness that remains available outside the secondary world.

The immersive fantasy contrasts the portal-quest fantasy, in which the protagonist and reader (as “companion-audience” [1]) “[move] through the action and the world stage, embedding an assumption of unchangingness.” (9, original emphasis). The portal-quest fantasy “flattens” the fantasy world and “by its very nature needs to deny the possibility of a polysemic discourse. . . . There can be only one understanding of the world” (12-13). The portal-quest constructs a “sealed” narrative with an absolute, and absolutely knowable, history, usually articulated by a guide figure in what John Clute calls a “club narrative,” “a tale or tales recounted orally to a group of listeners foregathered in a venue safe from interruption” (quoted in Mendlesohn 5). The club story is self-contained, unquestionable, and complete: “the storyteller . . . is uninterruptible and incontestable; and the narrative as it is downloaded is essentially closed” (7). Thus, “Fantasyland [in the portal-quest fantasy] is constructed, in part, through the insistence on a received truth” (7). Mendlesohn cites Gandalf and Aragorn’s explanations of the history of Middle Earth and the One Ring in The Lord of the Rings as emblematic of many of the characteristics of club narrative: “impervious and protected by the reputation of the teller, and reinforced by the isolation in which the story is told” (33). Such a closed narrative denies the possibility of questioning the world without undermining its integrity as a whole: Mendlesohn writes, “In making the past ‘storyable,’ the rhetorical demands of the portal-quest fantasy deny the notion of ‘history as argument’ . . . and recruit cartography to provide a fixed narrative, in a palpable failure to understand the fictive and imaginative nature of history” (14). These texts—emblematized for Mendlesohn by The Lord of the Rings and C.S. Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia—construct a relation to the world in which, it would seem, many adults would like
adolescents to remain: a position of subordination, receiving knowledge about the world as absolute without the possibility of questioning it. The arguable world of the immersive fantasy, in which knowledge is limited and shaped by point of view, is thus subtly subversive: it removes power from all-knowing guide figures and places it in the hands and minds of the protagonist and reader.

Although the texts in this dissertation are not all readily identifiable as fantasy, they all operate in the immersive mode; that is, each text places its protagonist(s) in an antagonistic relation to her world and demands she argue a better world into being. In Chapter One, Charlotte embarks on a journey that looks on its face very much like a portal-quest, if her departure from Liverpool on the ship that will take her to Providence might be interpreted as an entry into a fantasy land of sorts. But rather than receiving a single, closed narrative of the world she has entered—the relationship between captain and a crew on the brink of mutiny—she receives conflicting accounts that she must interpret for herself. Ultimately, entering the world of the ship explodes everything Charlotte thought she knew about her world—knowledge received in the sheltered upper-class environs of her family home and all-girls boarding school—and demands she develop a new understanding of her place in her world and what she is capable of doing in it.

The immersive fantasy of the Song of the Lioness books in Chapter Two is more obvious, as the reader is dropped into the imaginary kingdom of Tortall, where the novels’ protagonist is subverting the gendered expectations that limit her possibilities by cross-dressing as a boy in order to achieve her dream of becoming a knight. Cashore’s Seven Kingdoms Trilogy in Chapter Three is more self-conscious in its creation of an “arguable world” and engagement with the power of knowledge. The chief antagonist of the series, King Leck of Monsea, possesses a magic power in his voice that can make anyone he speaks to believe and obey him. As each of the
protagonists in the three loosely-connected novels contends with Leck, the novels explore the nature and power of truth and knowledge, asking how one might argue a better world into existence in the face of persistent and convincing lies whose destructive power long outlive their originator. The Hunger Games trilogy analyzed in Chapter Four also engage the importance of knowledge, but challenging the narratives handed down by those in power—either the Capitol or the rebels—has profound costs for Katniss, who does not have the same power and access as the protagonists of Cashore’s and Pierce’s novels. The text explores multiple strategies for subverting the closed narratives of institutions of power, and the negotiations necessary to survive in a world hostile to your very being. Examining all these texts through the lens of fantasy is particularly enabling from the point of view of exploring citizenship, as they make visible the often-invisible relationships of individuals to their worlds, and imagine possibilities for change in this one.

Fantasy is often derided as “escapist,” but its ability in its secondary worlds to illuminate other possibilities—other narratives, other temporalities—in our own, it has the utopian potential (not always realized) that Muñoz calls “queer world-making.” Tolkien gestures toward this potential when he responds to the charge of escapism in fantasy, asking, “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it” (60). He goes on to argue that the escapism of fantasy has an important political efficacy. The escapist, in preferring “more permanent and fundamental things to talk about,” such as “Lightning” over “electric street-lamps of mass-produced pattern,” may not stop at simply talking about other things: “he might rouse men to pull down the street-lamps” (61-62). Fantasy, for Tolkien and others who have succeeded him,
confers the ability to imagine another, better world, and the power to return and make that world. If the world of electric street lamps is a prison, fantasy offers not only a temporary escape but also provides the resources to tear down the prison walls. Ursula K. Le Guin similarly argues, “In reinventing the world of intense, unreproducible, local knowledge, seemingly by a denial or evasion of current reality, fantasists are perhaps trying to assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves.” For Le Guin as for Tolkien, fantasy offers a map to escape from prison: “The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives and therefore offers hope” (366).

Le Guin’s invocation of nostalgia circles back to my opening discussion of Muñoz’s “methodology of hope,” the “backward glance that enacts a future vision” (4). Discussing Tolkien’s Middle-Earth and her own Earthsea, Le Guin writes, “The feeling-tone indeed is less nostalgia than bereavement, the grief of those exiled from dear community, tears by the waters of Babylon . . . . They do not so much lament, perhaps, as remind” (363-64). Le Guin’s correction of course on the so-called nostalgia of fantasy echoes Muñoz when he describes “the rich resonance of remembrance, distinct pleasures felt in the past” that “stave off the affective perils of the present while they enable a desire that is queer futurity’s core” (26). It is at this level of desire that fantasy dovetails with queer utopianism. Again I turn to Tolkien, for whom the possible is beside the point of fantasy; fantasy is a literature, instead, of desire for another world. Recalling himself as a young reader, he writes, “The dragon had the trade-mark Of Faërie written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faerie. I desired dragons with a profound desire” (41). This desire for dragons is not merely a childish desire for excitement or
novelty. Indeed, he argues that “fairy-stories should not be specially associated with children”; to do so is a result of “erroneous sentiment about children” (42, original emphasis). Fantasy relies on “humility and innocence,” but these “do not necessarily imply an uncritical wonder, nor indeed an uncritical tenderness” (43). “Let us not divide the human race into Eloi and Morlocks: pretty children . . . with their fairytales (carefully pruned), and dark Morlocks tending their machines. If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults” as well as children (45). The very function of fantasy is reparative; it restores a sense of wonder in the mundane, a function Tolkien calls “Recovery . . . regaining of a clear view”: “We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves” (57). Tolkienian recovery is thus not a simple matter of donning rose-colored glasses; it also reveals “peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death” (45). The secondary worlds of fantasy, then, offer up a vision of our own, made strange and perhaps more clearly rendered through the lens of the fantastic.

Wonder is at the center of both fantasy and utopia. Muñoz draws on the work of Ernst Bloch to expand on “hope’s methodology . . . in what Bloch described as a form of ‘astonished contemplation’” (Cruising Utopia 5) a modality that, in Tolkien’s terms, offers “a fleeting glimpse of Joy . . . beyond the walls of the world” (68) According to Muñoz, “[a]stonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (5). Thus, both fantasy and queer utopianism enter into an alternative temporality that lies at the heart of my project, a forward-looking temporality that is not yoked to normative developmental narratives or the relentless progress of modernity. Muñoz argues, “Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. . . . Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world” (25).
Attebery argues that much of genre fantasy’s “narrative conventionality” similarly implies “that everyday language lies, that coherent characters are the inventions of the observer, and especially that orderliness and chronology properly belong to the realm of the imagination” (54). Thus, “[r]ather than pretending to represent some sort of ‘real time,’ . . . fantasy allows for a number of different, even contradictory conceptions of the nature and meaning of time, no one of which is privileged above the others” (61). Fantasy’s play with time and space enables a queer utopian performance: “an acknowledgement of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a ‘world making,’ in the face of that lack” (Cruising Utopia 118).

Engaging the utopian rhetoric of fantasy, in the following chapters I show how my archive of YA texts are engaging and reordering time in their developmental narratives, imagining alternative modes of kinship and citizenship, and eliciting a kind of wonder that invites “astonished contemplation” of not only the fantastic, but also our mundane world, offering “the possibility to map a world where one is allowed to cast pictures of utopia and to include such pictures in any map of the social” (Cruising Utopia 40). In this way, I contend that all of the texts in Fantasies of Citizenship reside in what Attebery has called the “fuzzy set” of fantasy, a way of categorizing the genre that is defined by its center rather than its borders. Attebery appropriates the mathematical term “fuzzy set” to suggest “a more flexible means of categorization” for describing genre. As he explains, “fuzzy set theory proposes that a category such as ‘bird’ consists of central, prototypical examples like ‘robin,’ surrounded at greater or lesser distance by more problematic instances . . . These latter members of the set are described in ordinary language by various hedging terms: they are ‘technically birds,’ ‘birds, loosely speaking,’ or even ‘birdlike’” (12). Organizing a definition of fantasy based on a central set of tropes and characteristics offers a more mobile conception of the genre and what may be
included under the rubric of “fantasy,” depending on where one locates its center. The center of my “fuzzy set” is not Tolkien (for all I’ve relied upon him here), but, I would say, “wonder”—a mode of seeing that opens up possibilities for change in our world by imagining utopias in others. In each chapter that follows, I explore how fantasy may hold up a queer lens to our own world, imagining transformative citizenship practices that allow us to glimpse utopia in fleeting moments in our own time and place.
There are, of course, notable exceptions. Jacqueline Rose’s Lacanian study *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (1984) is widely considered to have opened up lines of thought between critical theory and children’s literature at a time when the field was more squarely located in library science and education than in literary studies. Arguing that “the child” is constructed by children’s literature, Rose explores the valences of the construction of the child, and its relation to adults and adult desire for an innocent other. Like Lee Edelman in *No Future*, Rose focuses on the child as a construct, evacuating from her text actual children who may read and interact with the texts she discusses. A 2010 themed issue of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* (35:3) explores Rose’s contributions to children’s literature studies 25 years after *The Case of Peter Pan*’s publication. Recent notable work bringing queer, feminist, and critical race theory to children’s literature studies (by no means an exhaustive list) include Kenneth Kidd’s *Freud in Oz* (2011); Eric Tribunella’s *Melancholia and Maturation* (2010); Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence* (2011); Michelle Abate’s *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (2011); Victoria Flanagan’s *Into the Closet* (2008); Kathryn James’s *Death, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (2009); and Tison Pugh’s *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children’s Literature* (2010).

Freeman references Habermas here on the ideal family and the public and the private: “It is part of a liberal discourse that privileges subjects unfettered by various forms of difference and dependency: since the eighteenth century, the Anglo-European, heteronormative family itself has consisted of what Jürgen Habermas calls ‘a private autonomy denying its economic origins.’ Within the ideology of family, the humanity cultivated within the bourgeois household supposedly provides the grounds for transcending social conflict and stratification. The ideal family is then embodied in the democratic polis whose participants relate to one another as ‘purely human’ beings divested of special interests” (304).

The other two categories are the intrusion fantasy, in which the fantastic invades and brings chaos to the world; and the liminal fantasy, characterized by an ironic and often anxious treatment of fantastic elements that are “formally recognized as out of place, but…[their] very existence, [their] 'reality' is taken for granted" (193).
At first glance, Avi’s 1990 Newbery Honor historical novel The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle seems to be a straightforward coming-of-age story: Charlotte, the young protagonist, boards the ship Seahawk in Liverpool as “an ordinary girl of parents in good standing” (Avi 2), and disembarks two months later in Providence, RI with greater awareness of herself, her desires, and the consequences of her actions to others. The lone passenger aboard the ship, Charlotte begins the novel with a strong sense of class propriety that governs her actions. She aligns herself with the ship’s captain, the only other person aboard the ship recognizably of her class, and disregards the warnings of the crewmen about the captain’s cruelty. But the violent consequences of her discovery of a planned mutiny—the captain kills the leader and beats a sailor who had befriended Charlotte nearly to death—force her to reevaluate the allegiances that had blinded her to the violence that she was complicit in. She chooses to ally herself with the crew, discarding her privileged position to take the place of the sailor the captain had killed, and finds new possibilities for growth opened up to her. The Atlantic crossing becomes a metaphor for Charlotte’s coming of age; the actual storms the ship encounters figure the “storm and stress” that “[m]ore than any other characterization of adolescence, . . . resurface[s] in descriptions of this developmental stage throughout the twentieth century” (Baxter 52-53). But I argue in this chapter that, while The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle is a coming-of-age novel, it is not quite so straightforward; for Charlotte’s disembarkation in Providence is not the end of her story. In the final pages of the novel, Charlotte runs away from her upper class home to return to the Seahawk and her position on the crew, thereby refusing to complete the crossing she began at the
beginning of the novel. Instead, Charlotte sails back out to sea, opting to remain in the space of “storm and stress” that informed her transformation.

In this chapter, I use Charlotte’s refusal of the developmental telos demanded by her gender, race, and class to extend and rethink what Kathryn Stockton calls sideways growth and to begin to theorize what I call transformative citizenship, a mode of citizenship in which coming of age—and coming into citizenship—transforms one’s community as well as the self. For Stockton, “‘growing up’ may be a short-sighted, limited rendering of human growth,” whereas “‘growing sideways’ suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (11). In one sense, Charlotte’s return to the Seahawk at the end of the novel is an almost perfect visualization of sideways growth: Charlotte steps outside the developmental imperatives of “growing up” to “grow to the side of cultural ideals” (13) by refusing what she calls her “destiny,” “to be a lady” (Avi 1, original emphasis). But Charlotte, at thirteen, is no longer really a child, even though she is not yet an adult. As an adolescent, Charlotte—and the other characters I look at in this dissertation—is a figure in flux, characterized by being both no-longer and not-yet.

An inchoate developmental category roughly defined by age (the teen years), physical development, and social status that overlaps with both “child” and “adult,” “adolescence” disrupts notions of stable, absolute time that moves relentlessly forward on the clock, atomized in discrete segments that naturalize the socially constructed processes of development and sociality that Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Time Binds 3). In The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, Charlotte does not step outside the stable, forward-driving time
of chrononormative development to reenter it; at the end of the novel, she refuses it utterly. Instead, she chooses the “child’s play” of climbing down the trellis outside her bedroom window and returns to the *Seahawk* (Avi 225). In doing so, Charlotte invents and inhabits her own temporality, where she is not constricted by the unidirectional imperative to grow up under the dictates of capital and patriarchy.

In my reading of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* I adopt an anachronistic methodology, glancing back in my analysis to the sentimental literature that its nineteenth-century bourgeois heroine reads. Engaging the conventions of nineteenth-century literature that this twentieth-century century text invokes, I explore the possibilities of sympathetic identification as a foundation for potentially queer connections across race, class, age, and gender. I extend Elizabeth Barnes’s argument that nineteenth-century American literature imagined “sympathy as the basis of a democratic republic” to show that sympathy remains a powerful tool for imagining citizenship and community within and beyond the nation. Jennifer A. Williamson argues that, despite the popular narrative of sentimentalism’s decline by the early twentieth century, “narrative claims to feeling—particularly those based in common and recognizable forms of suffering—have remained popular throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries”; these texts “continue the nineteenth-century project of arguing for their [subjects’] inclusion in American culture and connecting them to American sentimental ideologies of the ‘national family’” (1). Beginning my exploration of alternative citizenship practices in relation to nineteenth-century sentimental ideology, I examine the ways that the texts in my archive expand possibilities for affective connection across national, familial, and identitarian borders, connections I term alternative kinship networks. These bonds are rooted in
sympathy, even as sympathy alone proves in *Charlotte Doyle* to ultimately be insufficient to transcend difference.

As narrator, Charlotte makes clear that she understands herself as a sentimental heroine: the moral center of her sheltered world, whose “extreme vulnerability and . . . inherent moral qualities” bestows upon her the “ability to guide others to religious and moral righteousness”—a role that Charlotte is eager to play (Williamson 3). Narrating as an adult, Charlotte recalls her thirteen-year-old self as:

very much a girl, having not yet begun to take the shape, much less the heart, of a woman. Still, my family dressed me as a young woman, bonnet covering my beautiful hair, full skirts, high button shoes, and you may be sure, white gloves. I certainly wanted to be a *lady*. It was not just my ambition; it was my destiny. I embraced it wholly, gladly, with not an untoward thought of anything else (1-2)

Charlotte’s costume as “a young woman” anticipates her taking her place as “the angel in the house” and presiding over a pristine home in clothing designed to hide the labor required to maintain it—especially the white gloves that would show the slightest hint of dirt. Indeed, Charlotte’s clothing announces that she has already arrived at her destination: dressed as the adult woman she will become, she need only to wait to assume her role in the domestic space that is the domain of white bourgeois women and children. Thus, at the same time as Charlotte’s developmental trajectory is decided for her, in a narrow progression from girl to “angel in the house,” Charlotte is already in stasis in the “timeless” space of the home, a position she does not question until well into her journey on the *Seahawk*. As the sole passenger aboard the ship for the two-month journey from England to America, Charlotte is isolated and thrust into situations that force her to confront the violence that undergirds her comfortable world and
reveals the indeterminacy of her position in the temporal order outside the regulatory structures of school and home. Like Charlotte, the ship itself is in flux, a space of unruly temporality that can be fully encompassed by neither domesticity nor industry.

Echoing the conventions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century didactic and sentimental novels in its structure and title, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* opens with a prefatory “Important Warning” that assures the reader of the text’s veracity. In her framing note, Charlotte advises that her reader “Be warned . . . this is no *Story of a Bad Boy*, no *What Katy Did*. If strong ideas and action offend you, read no more. Find another companion to share your idle hours. For my part I intend to tell the truth as I lived it” (1). Even to a reader unfamiliar with the titles she mentions—popular among young readers in the late-nineteenth century, but unknown, at least to this reader, in the early 1990s—the implication is clear: this is no mere sensationalization of a child’s petty transgressions. This is a tale of “strong ideas and action,” not empty sentimentalism. Thus Charlotte places her tale in opposition to the sentimental literature that ostensibly functioned, on both sides of the Atlantic, to instruct girls and women in their proper roles. She rejects two oppositely-gendered didactic narratives: a rebellious young girl who discovers her goodness and purity when she is bedridden with a long-term illness, in *What Katy Did* (1872); and the mischievous boy whose harmless childhood pranks do not exclude him from entry into adult (capitalist) society, in *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1870). The novel nonetheless draws on the conventions of sentimentality, particularly the power of sympathy, to enact a reversal of these coming-of-age stories as Charlotte sheds her layers of petticoats and her certainty of her “destiny” to instead grow sideways into a temporal order that is defined by neither heterosexuality nor commerce.
1. Ship’s Time

Even before Charlotte begins her journey aboard the Seahawk, time is of the essence. In the novel’s opening pages, Charlotte addresses the reader to explain her parents’ decision for her to travel alone during the summer holidays, rather than with the rest of the family: “My father, an ardent believer in regularity and order, decided it would be better if I finished out my school term rather than break it off midyear . . . by my remaining a boarder at the Barrington School for Better Girls (Miss Weed, eminent and most proper headmistress) I would lose no school time” (2). The captain of the Seahawk, like Charlotte’s father, is also “an ardent believer in regularity and order”; he has “a reputation . . . for quick and profitable Atlantic crossings” (2-3). When Charlotte asks in desperation on the first day of the voyage to be returned to Liverpool, believing she is “where no proper young lady should be,” her request elicits a laugh from the captain—rather villainously named Captain Jaggery—who tells her, “Out of the question. Time, as they say, is money. And nowhere is this truer than on board a ship” (27, 33). Time is thus linked to money, order to profit, and Jaggery, with his love of both, to Charlotte’s father, a partner in the company that owns the Seahawk. But the ship is an unruly space, as Jaggery well knows. Despite its associations with the orderly world of commerce, Jaggery must work hard to keep that order in place aboard the Seahawk. He warns Charlotte that he may sometimes seem cruel in his treatment of the crew, but that it is necessary because “[t]hey don’t understand kindness. Instead, they see it as weakness. Instead, they demand a strong hand, a touch of the whip, like dumb beasts who require a little bullying. I must do what is best . . . for them. I am a punctilious man, Miss Doyle. Without order there is chaos. Chaos on shipboard is sailing without
a rudder” (47, original emphasis). He laments over an elegant tea service in his finely appointed
cabin, “I fear a crew such as mine has little liking for good taste or, alas, order. It offends them.
But then, you and I—people of our class—we understand the better things of life, don’t we?”
(44). Charlotte is flattered by Jaggery’s attentions, but the events of the voyage force her to
confront the fragile order that allows her to enjoy “the better things of life” and her part in
perpetuating the violence that undergirds it.

Jaggery’s punctiliousness and his distaste for “chaos” maintains chrononormativity
aboard the ship, enforcing the strict order demanded by the ship’s commercial function. Freeman
explains, “Chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional
forces come to seem like somatic facts. Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches
inculcate what the sociologist Evitar Zerubavel calls ‘hidden rhythms,’ forms of temporal
experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege” (3). On the Seahawk, the artificiality
of chrononormative order is made visible in the effort Jaggery expends to maintain the temporal
order defined by commerce: the demands of a speedy crossing that will not ultimately accede to
the whims of the sea. Indeed, the futility of his attempts to regulate time and maintain order is
foreshadowed on Charlotte’s first morning aboard the Seahawk, when she observes “a bell set up
at the head of the quarterdeck in a kind of gallows” (28). An appendix entitled “Ship’s Time”
explains the marking of time on a ship, where the bell is rung every half hour in four-hour cycles
to mark the shifts, or watches, that each team of sailors works. But this strict division of time is
subject to larger forces, as the appendix explains: “A typical day would have a sailor working
alternate watches. . . Of course if there was need, such as a general resetting or overhaul of the
sails—or a storm—all hands could be called, and they would report even if it was not their
watch” (230-31). The first is dependent on the whims of captain, who might call all hands to
decide to reset the sails, as, indeed, Jaggery does early in the voyage in “a grand show” that one sailor calls “to no account. Mocking us” (56, 58). But a storm—offset in the text by em dashes, distinguishing it from the circumstances in the captain’s control and Jaggery’s empty displays—heeds no temporal regulation. The position of the bell “in a kind of gallows,” suggests death and disorder.

The presence of the bell in the gallows not only foreshadows the disorder that will take the ship as the journey progresses, but also the association between disorder and the very thing that is meant to keep order. Early in the novel, Charlotte overhears, but does not understand, a conversation between Jaggery and Keetch, the traitorous second mate. Keetch explains that Charlotte is the only passenger he could keep on the ship, the others having been put off by the rest of the crew. Jaggery responds, “If there has to be only one, she’s the trump. With her as witness, they’ll not dare to move. I’m well satisfied” (26). Jaggery’s assessment of Charlotte turns out to be far off; his attempts to use her to keep order on the ship prove as futile as the ringing of a bell trying to keep order in a hurricane. Though she at first fulfills her role as a spy for the captain, Charlotte’s horror at the result of her actions causes her to abandon the class allegiance that had yoked her to Jaggery at the outset of the journey. The threat posed by her abandonment is visualized in the evidence of the planned mutiny that Charlotte reports to Jaggery, a round robin: a written agreement signed by the mutineers inside two concentric circles, so that no one’s name is on the top or bottom. Jaggery tells Charlotte that such a thing is born of cowardice, in order to avoid “accept[ing] responsibility for their own wayward actions” (49). But the circular list of signatures is more dangerous: Jaggery hates and fears not only for the physical danger to himself such a thing would represent, but also because the round robin itself undermines the notions of strict order on which he relies. When Charlotte chooses to ally
herself with the crew over Jaggery, she abandons her place at the top of the hierarchy and enters a more egalitarian world, where the sailors accept her as one of their own.

Charlotte’s entry into the forecastle signals an acknowledgement of what had been implicit in the divisions of space aboard the ship. Though itself an icon of commercial space and time as a trade ship, the Seahawk is not a straightforwardly commercial space. The small space of the ship packs in living quarters for the sailors as well as passenger cabins, and “a small kitchen complete with cabinets, wood stove, even a table and a little stool” (23). The captain’s cabin is outfitted as a quiet retreat from the activity of the ship, “a world apart” with plush furnishings, “richly paneled [walls] hung with miniatures and pretty pastoral prints of dear England,” a chessboard, and “a silver service for tea.” The first time she enters his cabin, Jaggery himself “completes [the] elegant picture . . . sat upon one of a pair of armchairs in fine full dress, an open book on his knee. It was, in fact, the Bible. When I came in he rose to his feet and made an elegant bow” (43). His presentation convinces Charlotte—herself an icon of the domesticity that Jaggery performs in this scene—that she has not entirely left behind the world she knew at the Barrington School for Better Girls. She does not see, however, that she has entered a world where the boundaries between the “the marketplace—a space filled, in the sentimental domestic imagination, with a promiscuous, unstable, and unpredictable temporality in which the future, dependent on speculation, was always a gamble” and the “timeless” refuge of the home are not so clear cut (Luciano 121). Where nineteenth-century separate spheres ideology posits a domestic space whose “repetitions and routines . . . supposedly restored working men to their status as human beings responding to a ‘natural’ environment, renewing their bodies for reentry into the time of mechanized production and collective national destiny” (Freeman, Time Binds 5), the ship scrambles industrial (forward driving) time and domestic (cyclical) time(lessness),
revealing the machinery that drives both and opening up possibilities for their disruption. The ship’s spatial and temporal (dis)order unravels both the domestic haven and any assurance of “mechanized production” in its dialectical opposite. This breaching is displayed on Charlotte’s first visit to Jaggery’s retreat, where in addition to his fine tea service and miniatures of “dear old England,” he keeps a locked cabinet of loaded muskets, whose key is hidden in a framed portrait of his daughter, too “delicate” to live aboard the ship with him (45).

If the role of sentimental heroine is to become “the heart of the home,” as the protagonist of What Katy Did is instructed, the scrambled domestic-commercial space of the ship renders such a role impossible for Charlotte to maintain. Much as Charlotte recognizes Jaggery “from his fine coat, from his tall beaver hat, from his glossy black boots, from his clean, chiseled countenance” that mark him as “a gentleman, the kind of man I was used to. A man to be trusted,” Jaggery recognizes in Charlotte a potential ally in his adversarial relationship with his crew (29). He flatters her, confiding over tea on the first day of the voyage, “I don’t think you will find the crew to your liking, of course, but . . . The truth is, you will do them a world of good” (45). He urges her to “Show them a little softness. Read to them from your moral books. Preach the gospel if you have a mind”—that is, to become the heart of the ship (46). Jaggery’s intent, though, is not to have Charlotte improve the crew by contact with her ladylike softness, but to have her spy for him; or rather, in recruiting Charlotte to spy for him, he reveals the regulatory role of the sentimental girl who “radiates daintiness and delight” (Sanders 46). Comfortable in her knowledge of right and wrong and her proper place, and frightened by his insinuations of unrest among the men, Charlotte agrees readily; but it soon becomes apparent that the boundaries Charlotte has relied upon to know her proper place are rather more fragile than she had realized.
2. Stories and Sympathy

Before the sight of Jaggery on deck makes her “heart leap joyously with recognition and relief,” Charlotte receives another—and rather more unsettling—offer of friendship, in circumstances that foreshadow the difficulty she will have maintaining the boundaries that have defined her world until now (29). Arriving in Liverpool to discover that the families who were meant to chaperon her on the long journey to America have canceled their passage, Charlotte has no recourse to remedy the situation that leaves her as the sole passenger aboard the ship. To add insult to injury, the sailor who escorts her to her tiny, dingy cabin offers little sympathy for her horror at seeing a roach skitter across her pillow. He leaves her alone in the dark room, too restricted by her skirts too even sit on the narrow shelf that serves as a bed and needing to relieve herself but not knowing where to go. Alone, crying, fearful and humiliated, Charlotte is hardly comforted when another sailor, “an old black man who, in the light of the little lantern he was holding, looked like the very imp of death in search of souls,” appears at her door (21-22). But the sailor, Zachariah, speaks in “a surprisingly soft, sweet voice,” offering her comfort in the form of directions to the head and a cup of tea from his personal store (22). He observes, “It may well be . . . that Miss Doyle will have use for a friend” (24). Charlotte balks at this, finding the suggestion inappropriate due to their differences in race, class, and age. They have the following exchange:

I looked elsewhere. “I don’t need a friend,” I said.

“One always needs a final friend.”

“Final friend?”
“Someone to sew the hammock,” he returned.

“I do not understand you.”

“When a sailor dies on voyage, miss, he goes to his resting place in the sea with his hammock sewn about him by a friend” (24-25).

Understandably horrified, Charlotte quickly makes her escape, but not before Zachariah offers her a dagger and insists she take it, because, “Miss Doyle doesn’t know what might happen” (25).

Jaggery’s offer—or rather assertion—of friendship over tea in his cabin is thus not the only, or even the first, overture Charlotte receives about the Seahawk. Zachariah’s offers of friendship leave Charlotte both grateful and ashamed. When he first seeks her out in her cabin, he immediately directs her to the head without needing to be asked, anticipating a bodily need that Charlotte is ashamed of. Where Jaggery flatters Charlotte’s sense of herself as a proper young lady, Zachariah violates all sense of propriety by warning Charlotte of the gentlemen captain. He tells her of another voyage on the Seahawk when “one poor sailor came under the captain’s ire, the captain’s judgment, the captain’s rage.” For his failure to tie a knot to the captain’s “particular pleasure,” “Captain Jaggery said Mr. Cranick’s laboring arm was his by rights. Miss Doyle, Mr. Cranick has but one arm now. He was that much beaten by Captain Jaggery, who, as he said himself, took the arm. I was first surgeon, then carpenter to Mr. Cranick.” Charlotte, rather predictably at this point in the novel, reacts with horror and repeats an aphorism of her father’s: “Justice is poorly served when you speak ill of your betters” (39).

Zachariah speaks to her as no one ever has, and although he is respectful, even deferential in his manner, she interprets his frankness as rudeness: “Never had I met with such impertinence! That this Zachariah, my inferior, a cook, should tell such a slanderous tale of violence and cruelty
regarding Captain Jaggery to me—as though it were a confidence—was deeply mortifying. I
would not, could not believe it!” (42). Her meeting with Captain Jaggery shortly thereafter places
her on reassuringly familiar footing. She finds Zachariah’s accusations against Jaggery
“unpleasant” and so, like his overtures of friendship, she chooses to ignore them, and later, the
mounting evidence that Zachariah spoke the truth about Jaggery (24).

It is clear to the reader from early on that Zachariah will be the better friend to Charlotte,
despite—or perhaps because of—the discomfort that his overtures elicit. His offer of friendship
makes Charlotte uneasy not only because of their difference in gender, race, class, and age, but
also because of Zachariah’s rather terrifying attempt to persuade her by telling her that she needs
a “final friend”—a radical suggestion for someone like Charlotte, who at this point wishes only
to return to her school where, “with Miss Weed, I would be safe. She would make the necessary
decisions” (27). In analyzing Charlotte’s friendship with Zachariah I draw on Michel Foucault’s
notion that the desire for friendship is “a desire-in-uneasiness” that may enable a liberatory queer
politics, placing Foucault’s notion of queer friendship in conversation with the sympathetic
identification at the center of sentimental literature. In a 1981 interview entitled “Friendship as a
Way of Life,” Foucault suggests that “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and
companionship [are] things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without
fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force” (136).
Stockton’s theory of sideways growth recalls Foucault when she writes, “‘growing sideways’
suggests that the width of a person’s experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may
pertain at any age, bringing ‘adults’ and ‘children’ into lateral contact of surprising sorts” (Queer
Child 11). The friendship that grows between Charlotte, the young, white, wealthy passenger,
and Zachariah, the elderly black sailor, is one of those “surprising” lateral contacts. It is enabled
by both Charlotte and Zachariah’s sideways growth and Charlotte’s sympathetic identification, which goes rather awry from the nineteenth-century “sentimental scheme of sympathy” in which “others are made real—and thus cared for—to the extent that they can be shown in relation to the reader” (Barnes 4). According to Barnes, sympathetic identification in the nineteenth century functions to confirm “our own subjectivities. Rooted as it is in our projections of the other, sympathy ultimately brings us back to ourselves” (7). Charlotte’s friendship with Zachariah, initially legible as a sympathetic attachment that follows the logic of the sentimental encounter with the other that Barnes describes, comes to disrupt the strict hierarchical and temporal order on which her world has been built in favor of what Foucault would term “new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.” Their interracial, intergenerational, and cross-class friendship is a key element in the novel’s ability to resist dominant codes of gendered and racialized coming of age and citizenship figured in the metaphor of the ocean crossing.

Charlotte initially embraces the role that Jaggery set out for her as keeper of order aboard the ship, but it is a prospect that proves more difficult in practice than she anticipates or even fully understands in the moment. Despite her belief that to spend too much time with the crew would be improper, Charlotte’s social nature and curiosity push her toward more and more interaction with them. As the voyage continues, she “mingle[s] more often with them on deck. In time I even tried my hand and climbed—granted neither very high nor very far—into the rigging.” As her familiarity grows, Charlotte “[becomes] something of a ‘ship’s boy,’ increasingly willing—and able—to run their minor errands” (69). The result of her “mingling” is a shift in both her perception of the sailors, who on the first day of the voyage looked to her “like men recruited from the doormat of Hell,” and of herself (29). Her initial descriptions of “shockingly decrepit” “wretched sailors hunched in apelike postures” who make up “as sorry a
group of men as [she] had ever seen” give way to more particular observations that foreground strength and character over poverty and decrepitude (19, 17, 29). The most striking shift is in Charlotte’s description of Morgan, who she describes initially as “a short, stocky, squinty-eyed monkey of a man” and later as “a gangly, long-limbed, muscular fellow, with a fierce mustache and long hair” (73, 83). Underlying this shift in Charlotte’s perception of the sailors, is a shift in the way she perceives herself, a marked departure from the directional pull of sentimental representation “to reinvent others in one’s own image” (Barnes 2). Instead, Charlotte reinvents herself in theirs.

As Charlotte comes to see the sailors more clearly, she is forced to face the violence that underlies her genteel world, as the violence Jaggery employs to maintain order cannot be hidden. In spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, Jaggery’s flattery and chivalrous behavior toward Charlotte is enough, at first, to convince her of “his true goodness” (46). She rationalizes the behavior she witnesses, observing, as the voyage gets underway, that “It was just as he [Jaggery] had warned me: the crew was prone to laxness. But—since he had the responsibility of the ship, not they—he was forced, with constant surveillance and commands, to bring discipline to their work” (71-2). But soon, even Charlotte begins to perceive the excess in Jaggery’s enforcement of order aboard the ship: “much to my surprise, I saw him strike [a sailor] . . . with a belaying pin, one of the heavy wood dowels used to secure a rigging rope. . . The fellow was tardy about reefing a sail, the captain said, and went on to catalog further likely threats: Confinement in the brig. Salary docking. No meals. Lashings. Duckings in the cold sea or even keelhauling” (73). Jaggery’s threats and violent action suggest the truth behind the story that Zachariah told Charlotte about Mr. Cranick, the sailor whose “laboring arm” Jaggery “took,” a story she had dismissed in horror, unable to believe a gentleman such as Jaggery could commit such violence.
The exchange of stories plays a key role in Charlotte’s growing engagement with the crew. Her growing perception of the sailors as individuals and her increased mingling in their world is accompanied by further, and freer, exchange of stories. As the captain had suggested to her, she reads “uplifting sections to them from [her] books,” and in turn becomes an eager listener for their stories: “I hardly knew nor cared which were true and which were not. Tales of castaways on Pacific atolls never failed to move me. Solemn accounts of angels and ghosts appearing miraculously in the rigging were, by turns, thrilling and terrifying” (68-9). She reads to one sailor from “one of my favorite books, _Blind Barbara Ann: A Tale of Loving Poverty_”—a fictional title that functions as a reminder of Charlotte’s aspirations to, if not “loving poverty,” then the sympathetic power that comes with it—but she also remarks that she is fascinated by his “shocking tattoo of a mermaid upon his arm” and “his Aberdeen sweetheart, about whom he loved to talk . . . I rather fancied sweetheart and mermaid were one” (76). Jaggery had encouraged Charlotte’s interaction with the crew by promising that they would “fill [her] pretty head with the most fantastical notions,” but instead she “learn[s] the men’s language, their ways, their dreams” (46, 69). Their exchange of stories—Charlotte’s reading, the sailors’ yarns, and even Zachariah’s tale of Jaggery’s villainy—is “[i]n keeping with the principles of sentimental pedagogy, [in which] stories become vehicles through which individuals are made familiar to each other” (Barnes 87). Narrating as an adult, Charlotte reflects, “Above all, I cherished the notion that my contact with the crew improved them. As to what it did to me—I hardly guessed” (69, original emphasis).

What it does to her is awaken her sympathy—but it does so in a reversal of the racial logic of sympathetic identification in the nineteenth century. Caroline Levander argues that the sentimental (white) child in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction “not only builds bridges
between white characters and racial others, but, as importantly, reinforces the sharp racial differences that make such bridges necessary” (108). The sentimental child’s whiteness is central to their ability to “‘fill every heart with tenderest sympathy’ and thereby achieve immense influence” over others (95). Charlotte’s role aboard the ship as keeper of order is to invite the sympathy of the sailors and prevent them from acting on their plan to mutiny. Instead, she finds her own sympathy awoken in such a way as to reverse the narrative that Levander analyzes in nineteenth-century sentimental novels, in which “indigent child protagonists either gradually ‘become’ white or use their whiteness to bring initially resistant individuals into the national order” (90). When Charlotte leaves the protection of her class privilege to she becomes racialized as well: her younger siblings giggle upon seeing her when she disembarks, deeply tanned, that she looks like “an Indian” (217). Rather than progressing in her sanctioned development toward becoming a lady, Charlotte regresses, becoming more like the “savage” child that recapitulation theory—the idea that individual development rehearses the evolution of the race, from childhood “savagery” to adult “civilization,” sought to suppress through education. Her cross-class mingling further removes her from the chrononormativity of her education and upbringing, as Freeman explains: “We might think of class as an embodied synchronic and diachronic organization. In its dominant forms, class enables its bearers what looks like ‘natural’ control over their body and its effects, or the diachronic means of sexual and social reproduction. In turn, failures or refusals to inhabit middle- and upper-middle-class habitus appear as, precisely, asynchrony, or time out of joint” (Freeman 19). Her mingling and free exchange of stories with the sailors take her “out of joint,” signaling immaturity, as she rejects her destiny as a lady, but also opens up possibilities for what J. Halberstam, echoing Foucault, terms “alternative methods of alliance” across class and racial boundaries (1). “Alliance” is, indeed, an apt term for
Charlotte’s relationship with the sailors, as it is increasingly characterized in relation to the adversarial relationship between gentleman captain and indigent crew. Charlotte cannot, as she resolves at the beginning of the novel, “be everybody’s friend” (64).

The turning point occurs when Charlotte discovers the crew’s plans to mutiny and reports her discovery to Captain Jaggery—an act spurred equally by blind terror and blind obedience to authority and custom: “[W]hat was I to do with my discovery? To ask the question was to have the answer: Captain Jaggery. It was to him I owed my allegiance—by custom—by habit—by law. To him I must speak” (82). Charlotte likens her decision to report her discovery to Jaggery to an incident from her childhood, “when my much-loved brother broke a rare vase, and I, out of a high sense of duty told on him despite what I knew would be my father’s certain fury” (85). Jaggery’s fury is rather more terrifying, and forces Charlotte to face her own knowledge of the violence that her “high sense of duty” would provoke. Jaggery shoots and kills the leader, a stowaway and former crewman—the man Jaggery had beaten so badly he lost his arm—and asks Charlotte to choose who will take the punishment for the crew. “Come, come,” he coaxes her, “Not so shy. You must have some favorite” (95). He echoes Charlotte’s earlier description of Zachariah, who is simultaneously “the butt of much cruel humor” on account of his race, and “a great favorite” of the crew’s, as well as Charlotte’s friend (69-70). Knowing of their friendship, Jaggery chooses Zachariah, when she refuses. Charlotte intervenes physically to stop the mate from administering the lashes: “In a surge of tears and agonized guilt, I hurled myself at Hollybrass, who, hardly expecting an attack, twisted, then tumbled to the deck.” She attempts to throw the whip overboard, but instead, in an effort to defend herself from Jaggery, she raises her arm “and so doing flicked the whip through the air, inflicting a cut across the captain’s face.” Jaggery’s rage is deadly: “[H]e swore a savage oath, jumped forward and tore the whip from my
hand, whirled about and began beating Zachariah with such fury as I had never seen” (102). He beats Zachariah to unconsciousness, and later Charlotte witnesses what she believes is his funeral, as the men commit a laden hammock to the sea.

The novel reveals sympathy, in itself, to be insufficient. Charlotte’s outpouring of emotion, her “surge of tears and agonized guilt,” overwhelms the sentimental narrative’s impetus toward “right feeling” with Charlotte’s realization of her failure as a sentimental heroine, overcoming “the inertia that can be created . . . when feeling feels like enough” (Williamson 199). She did not improve the crew by her contact with them, as she had fantasized; instead, she causes the death of the most vulnerable of sailors, whose “good opinion of [her] gained [her]—in the crew’s world—license to be liked” (70). Zachariah’s funeral recalls his initial overture of friendship to Charlotte, his offer to be her “final friend” who will “sew the hammock” about her in the event of her death—the implication being, of course, that she would do the same for him. Coming upon the funeral on deck after the mutiny, Charlotte is forced to confront her complicity in Zachariah’s death, for which “I could hardly blame anyone but myself . . . It was I—despite clear warnings—who had refused to see Captain Jaggery as the villainous man he was, I who had fired his terrible wrath” (108-9). After she informs on the crew, Charlotte is faced for the first time in her life with a situation in which all of her training and education cannot provide reliable codes of behavior or authority figures to whom to appeal. Even at this stage, she admits in the narrative, “all my thoughts were of finding some way to appease the captain and regain his favor.” She even attempts to apologize to Captain Jaggery, who sends her away, calling her “a sniffling, self-centered, ugly, contemptible girl . . . who deserves a horsewhipping!” (105). She searches for answers by trying, “desperately, to imagine what my father, even what my mother or Miss Weed, might want me to do, but I could find no answer” (106). Left to herself, she
arrives at a solution that is at once strictly in line with her education “to the belief that when I was wrong—and how often had my patient father found me at fault—it was my responsibility—mine alone—to admit my fault and make amends,” and a radical departure from the gendered and classed codes of behavior to which she has been inculcated: Charlotte puts on the set of sailor’s clothes that Zachariah had given to her as a gift, and asks to take his place on the crew.

Taking Zachariah’s place is the culmination of Charlotte’s increasing (improper) mingling with the crew over the course of the voyage, but it is also her mingling that creates the conditions for her to inform on them in the first place. Charlotte discovers the round robin when she enters the crew’s quarters in the forecastle on behalf of Ewing, “a young, blond Scot—handsome, I thought,” to whom she had been reading while he mended a hole in his jacket (76). Knowing his exhaustion from his morning’s work, when his sewing needle breaks, Charlotte offers to get him another from his trunk in the forecastle “[w]ithout much thought other than that I wished to do the man a kindness.” Charlotte sees a pistol on her errand—contraband for the sailors, as Jaggery had earlier boasted to her that the only guns aboard the ship were locked in his cabin—and a round robin, the mutineers’ pact that Jaggery had warned her of. This first entry into the forecastle—“the one place on the Seahawk that the sailors called their own. Not even Captain Jaggery ventured there”—signals a breach of her station from which she will not recover (77).
3. Sympathetic Bodies

Throughout the novel, the text insistently links Charlotte with Zachariah, though Charlotte initially resists their connection. When she first meets him, Zachariah suggests, much to Charlotte’s horror, that the two of them have much in common: “Miss Doyle is so young! I am so old! Surely there is something similar in that. And you, the sole girl, and I, the one black, are special on this ship. In short, we begin with two things in common, enough to begin a friendship.” Rejecting the notion out of hand that the two of them can have anything in common, Charlotte tells him stiffly, “I can assure you . . . that the captain will have made arrangements for my social needs” (24). Charlotte identifies herself with the captain, as only other person recognizably of her class: the first time she sees him, she feels “recognition and relief,” along with a certainty that “[she] had not been abandoned. [Her] perception of Captain Jaggery made [her] certain that [her] world was regained” (29, 33). But although Charlotte herself is certain of her proper place, the text insistently aligns her with Zachariah, his blackness, and his vulnerability to slavery. The daughter of an American businessman, “engaged in the manufacture of cotton goods,” Charlotte is a beneficiary of slavery; but traveling on her own, Charlotte finds herself—as a girl and as a child—with no agency to determine for herself where she goes (2). Indeed, the text explicitly identifies her with the product of slavery: when she protests to her chaperon before boarding the ship that she thinks she should not travel on her own, he dismisses her concerns, telling her, “[M]y orders were clear and allow for no other construction. I met you. I brought you here. I had you placed under the protection of this man, who . . . fulfilled his obligation by signing a receipt for you.” Charlotte observes to herself, “I might have been a bale of cotton” (17). This link to the product of slavery, rather than (just) its beneficiary, highlights
the lack of agency Charlotte has as a young girl, even an inarguably privileged one, and underscores the kinship Zachariah sees between them, but that Charlotte initially rejects.

I build on Stockton here by considering how both Charlotte and Zachariah disrupt normative constructions of development and adulthood. Vanessa Joosen notes that just as childhood and children’s literature studies have highlighted the culturally constructed and shifting nature of “childhood,” age studies has sought to denaturalize and contextualize the narrative of decline in which “growing old is depicted as an unpleasant ride downhill, with death looming at the bottom” (126). Where Charlotte refuses the class-, race-, and gender-specific path to adulthood set out for her, Zachariah refuses the corresponding narrative of decline in old age. Though he appears frail, with “arms and legs . . . thin as marlinspikes” and skin “as wrinkled as a crumpled napkin,” he is surprisingly strong (22). He not only survives Jaggery’s beating and hides in the belly of the ship with a plan to sneak ashore in Providence to report Jaggery to the authorities, but also goes aloft during a hurricane after his “death,” where he comes upon Charlotte hanging from a spar with her grip slipping. Thinking him a ghost or an angel, she takes his proffered hand, “grabbed it, clung to it, as it clung to me, its fingers encircling my wrist in an iron grip. For a moment I was hanging by that one hand. Then I was yanked upward onto the spar” (146). He thus not only refuses decline but also death, in defiance of the strict order that Jaggery, with his reputation for “quick and profitable Atlantic crossings,” and all that represents, attempts to impose (3).

When Jaggery beats Zachariah, he does so specifically to punish Charlotte. Zachariah becomes in this sequence a proxy for Charlotte. According to Jaggery, it is Charlotte who “deserves a horsewhipping!” but her race and social class protect her, where Zachariah’s make him more available for Jaggery’s wrath. But while this incident highlights, on one hand, the
unbridgeable distance between them, Charlotte’s response to it highlights the possibility for reaching across that gap to find the things they share, in a move that extends beyond her earlier sympathy for Zachariah to a performative claiming of kinship with him and the rest of the crew. I draw here on Judith Butler’s argument that kinship is “a kind of doing, one that does not reflect a prior structure, but that can only be understood as an enacted practice”—here of putting on the clothes that Zachariah made for her (“Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” 123). Embracing kinship with Zachariah allows Charlotte to make amends with the crew in a way that was earlier denied her when she attempted to apologize for informing on the crew, an apology rejected because her actions overwhelmed her intent, as one of the crewmen explains: “Gentlefolk like you never mean, Miss Doyle. But what you do. . .” (112). Stepping out of her position as “gentlefolk,” Charlotte’s request to join the crew enacts what Freeman terms “the flip side of understanding kinship in terms of dependency . . . as a practice, kinship can also be viewed as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time” in both heteropatriarchal and queer social structures. As a practice of renewal, queer kinship “grants a future, but one with an uninevitable form” (“Queer Belongings” 298-99). Once Charlotte gains acceptance on the crew by climbing to the top of the mainmast, she sheds her status as the passenger “Miss Doyle” and becomes simply “Charlotte,” to the crew, who induct her into their ranks “with a sacred oath” and declare that they “would be my brothers” (131). Thus Charlotte’s repudiation of the normative kinship structure represented by Jaggery as a proxy for her father paves the way for her entry into a more egalitarian world with the crew, where she becomes a younger sister rather than a daughter, mother, or wife.
When Charlotte puts on the set of sailor’s clothes that Zachariah gave her, she not only gains the positive aspects of kinship with the crew; she also assumes their vulnerability to violence, especially Zachariah’s. She takes on the wounds that Jaggery inflicted on him in order to punish her. Clothing, writes Stockton, can carry wounds, physical and psychic; the surfaces of clothing are associated with skin, and the physical and psychic wounds that it can carry. Skin and cloth “lend associations to each other . . . as they track along their own specific logics” (*Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* 40). The novel makes this association explicit: when Charlotte puts on the sailor’s clothing that Zachariah made for her, “The trousers and shirt felt stiff, heavy, like some skin not my own” (113). This change of clothing precipitates more permanent changes to Charlotte’s skin, which “turned pink, then red, then brown. The flesh upon my hands broke first into oozing, running sores, then metamorphosed into a new rough hide” (131). Charlotte’s turning “brown” is consistent with what Michelle Abate argues is characteristic of descriptions of tomboys in American literature, “Characterized with ‘brown’ skin tones, associated with ‘dark’ features and affiliated with other nonwhite racial and ethnic minorities, these figures were not only distanced from, but even seemed to have disavowed, their purported racial heritage,” a state that requires “taming” when the tomboy reaches puberty and must become a proper white, bourgeois lady (xxv).5 The changes in Charlotte’s clothing and skin are a reversal of the pattern of “tomboy taming” that Abate discusses, as well as the racial logic of sentimentalism that Levander analyzes, in which sympathetic identification with the white child “teach[es] readers to desire, and illustrate how they might acquire—whiteness, regardless of their racial identity, as a signature trait of national incorporation and affiliation” (90). Rather than extend the traits of whiteness to the sailors—who Charlotte initially racialized as “apelike”—Charlotte becomes “brown” herself. In opposition to the sentimental child, in the second half of the novel Charlotte
highlights the violence that underlies the racial logic of her world and places herself in a position to be able to undermine it with her ability to pass. Like the sentimental child, she is the one to make connections across class and racial boundaries, but once she makes deep connections, she is unable to maintain the integrity of her whiteness.

When Charlotte puts on the sailor’s garments, she takes on Zachariah’s physical wounds, inflicted by Jaggery, and the social wounds of his race and class position; but she also reveals her own wounds. In contrast to her complicated layers of petticoats, dress, stockings, gloves, and bonnet, the “crude shape and mean design” of the sailor’s clothes emphasizes her exposure, revealing the “wound” of femininity her dresses and petticoats simultaneously reveal and conceal (Stockton 43); her “bare toes [curl] upon the wooden floor” (113). Though inarguably privileged, Charlotte was hardly free when she boarded the ship, confined as she was both by clothing and social custom. Charlotte herself hints at this confinement—and it’s breakdown—early on, when she explains her daily preparations to leave her cabin properly attired: “Unfortunately my starched clothing had gone everlastingly limp and became increasingly soiled. . . . those white gloves of mine had turned the color of slate.” She brushes her long hair “for a full twenty minutes. . . wanting it smoothly drawn—anything to keep it from its natural and to me obnoxious wildness” (67). As the voyage continues, it becomes increasingly difficult for Charlotte to maintain her appearance as “a proper young gentlewoman” (66). The order of “punctilious” men like Jaggery and Charlotte’s father is revealed to be highly artificial. The “obnoxious wildness” of Charlotte’s hair metonymically represents the wildness in Charlotte herself. As they travel farther from the orderly shorebound world of school and commerce, it becomes increasingly difficult to control. The sailor’s clothing exposes Charlotte’s wild, wounded skin, and glories in it, finding freedom in it. Her wild hair itself becomes an emblem of her old life, not only
weighing her down but becoming a hazard in Charlotte’s work as a sailor. When she tries to climb into the rigging in a storm, her hair, “like a horse’s tail, kept whipping across my face. I might have been blindfolded” (142). Charlotte hacks it off: “With a shake of my head my thirteen year’s growth of hair fell away. Feeling much lighter, I . . . once more began to climb” (143).

Ironically, inhabiting Zachariah’s skin frees Charlotte. In her new role on the crew, Charlotte feels “joyous, new-made, liberated from a prison I’d thought was my proper place!” (132). The sailor’s garb allows Charlotte greater freedom of movement, and in it she is thrust out of the narrow trajectory of development dictated for her by her race and class. Indeed, when Zachariah first gives Charlotte the sailor’s clothes, “for modesty and safety’s sake” after he observes her “scampering about” on deck, she takes it “as a warning that I had been forgetting my station. . . Later on, I admit—I tried the garments on, finding them surprisingly comfortable until, shocked, I remembered myself. Hurriedly, I took them off, resolving not to stoop so low again” (71). Putting them on the second time—deliberately stooping—opens up avenues of movement and growth not previously available to her. Her action not only opens up Stockton’s sideways growth, but also a growth that extends backward in time, toward Zachariah in what Freeman, reading Derrida, describes as “an ethics of responsibility toward the other across time—toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given historical moment, each understood as calls for a different future to which we cannot but answer with imperfect and incomplete reparations” (Time Binds 9). For Charlotte, putting on the sailors’ clothes and taking Zachariah’s place on the crew after his “death” is her “imperfect and incomplete reparations,” even as Zachariah himself haunts the ship after his death, appearing to Charlotte in a storm and saving her from a fall. For Freeman, the “stubborn lingering of pastness” manifested in part as
ghosts or haunting “is a hallmark of queer affect: a ‘revolution’ in the old sense of the word, as a turning back” (8). Charlotte reaches back in time toward Zachariah, even in the end mirroring his actions when she runs away from home to rejoin the crew of the Seahawk, as Zachariah told Charlotte he had done himself when he was young.⁶

The defining moment of Charlotte’s transition from young lady passenger to sailor is in the test the crew set for her, to climb to the top of the royal yard, the highest sail on the mainmast. In The Queer Child, Stockton defines her notion of sideways growth against the commonsense notion of “growing up,” suggesting alternate narratives of “growing that don’t bespeak continuance” (13). Upward movement is the central metaphor of Charlotte’s transformation, but it nonetheless powerfully visualizes sideways growth and the alternative temporal order that Charlotte enters when she leaves her “proper place.” On her climb up to the royal yard, Charlotte—against the advice given to her—looks down: “The Seahawk was like a wooden toy. The sea looked greater still.” Atop the topgallant spar—still twenty-five feet below the royal yard—“[w]hat seemed like little movement on deck became, up high, wild swings and turns through treacherous air.” As she climbs the final distance, Charlotte feels the sideways, rolling motion of the ship increase: “Even when not moving myself, I was flying through the air in wild, wide gyrations. The horizon kept shifting, tilting, dropping” (125). Climbing up emphasizes the ship’s dizzying lateral movement, and exposes its smallness in the expansiveness of the Atlantic Ocean. Climbing to the topmost sail on the mainmast, Charlotte sees and is subject to the forces against which her father, Jaggery, and the classed dictates of her life have attempted to shelter her by dictating a narrow developmental path toward her becoming a proper lady. This climb explodes what Charlotte had believed to be—and accepted as—her destiny, and reveals other possibilities and directions for movement and growth.
4. (Un)natural Order

Charlotte’s climb up the mainmast exposes the futility of Jaggery’s attempts to enforce strict order on the Seahawk. Her abandonment of her privileged position exposes the artificiality of the hierarchy and denaturalizes the distinctions that upheld her and Jaggery’s privilege. After she joins the crew, her crewmates tell Charlotte that she is “the cause of the captain’s every move”: “He’s always watching you . . . And there’s nothing but hatred in his eye,” one sailor observes. At Charlotte’s bafflement, he explains, “Look here, Charlotte, you boxed him in. . . . Jaggery didn’t know what to do. He gave way. Not a thing he likes, you know. So now I say he’s waiting for a mistake on your part to set himself back up” (134). In the absence of such a mistake, Jaggery manufactures one. During the hurricane that dismasts the ship, Jaggery murders the first mate and frames Charlotte for the crime—an easy feat, given his position on ship as “Sheriff. Judge and jury. . . . and hangman too if it comes to that” (38). Her trial reveals what’s at stake in her refusal to accede to the “natural” distinctions of gender, race, and class, an order upon which Jaggery relies for his power.

Jaggery charges Charlotte with “the unnatural murder of Samuel Hollybrass” (171). His line of argument is to brand Charlotte herself “unnatural” by crafting a distorted narrative of the events that led to Charlotte’s joining the crew, repeatedly leading the other sailors, and Charlotte herself, to agree that her actions are “unnatural.” He concludes,

So what we have here is a girl who admits she owns the weapon that murdered Mr. Hollybrass. A girl who lied about where she got it. A girl who was taught to use a blade, and learned to use it, as Mr. Grimes would have it, “uncommon” well. A girl who, all agree, is unnatural in every way she acts. Gentleman, do we not, as natural men, need to
take heed? Is it not our duty, our **obligation**, to protect the natural order of the world?

(178)

Here, Jaggery aligns himself with the sailors, as “natural men,” against Charlotte, an “unnatural” girl. Charlotte’s most egregious violations, however, are not at the boundaries of gender but of class propriety. When she announces her intention to join the crew, Jaggery orders that Charlotte “take her place in the forecastle with the crew. Put her down as *Mister* Doyle and list *Miss* Doyle in the log as lost. From this point on I expect to see that he works with the rest” (129). But Charlotte cross-dresses not as a boy but as a common sailor. Jaggery’s shift in gendered address is also a potent marker of **class** position: Charlotte will now be listed among, and addressed as, a member of the crew. Further, the shift in class markers carries over to her interactions the crew, but not the shift in gendered markers. The other sailors no longer call her the deferential “Miss Doyle,” but address her by her first name, and, as Charlotte explains, “bade me take my place along with them, swearing to give me the utmost privacy they could provide. They would be my brothers” (131). Thus the issue of Charlotte’s gendered difference is acknowledged and resolved with relative ease by the narrative and the crew, and only brought up by Jaggery in order to bring the men to his side. Although he brands Charlotte an “unnatural girl,” he is far more interested in punishing these class violations—both of which undermine the sentimental girlhood he had attempted to take advantage of. Gender is merely a convenient way for him to address them, and position the crew on his side, as “natural *men.*” Youth and gender are intertwined here in a way that is liberating for Charlotte and deeply threatening to Jaggery; her androgynous body highlights the artificiality of the boundaries the captain wishes to mark.

Jaggery himself acknowledges as much when Charlotte breaks into his cabin before she is to be executed, planning to steal his guns and lead another mutiny. He is waiting for her, and
explains the problem of her difference: “Look at the way you acted! The way you’ve dressed! It doesn’t matter that you are different, Miss Doyle. Don’t flatter yourself. The difficulty is that your difference encourages them to question their places. And mine. The order of things” (201-2). Such order is essential, even as it is revealed to be artificial. In the dark, Jaggery’s cabin looks as Charlotte remembers it from early in the voyage, “its fine furnishings—even the chessboard with its pieces—exactly as I recollected them from my first visit” (199). Candlelight reveals “that much of the furniture was cracked. Many legs had splints. Upholstery was water stained. . . . The tea service on the table was dented and tarnished, but arranged and presented as whole. The chess pieces were, I now realized, no more than salt and pepper shakers, broken cups, bent candlesticks.” Jaggery explains, “I have spent considerable time in setting the room to rights. Have I not done well? . . . Take away the light and . . . You see—it’s hard to notice the difference. Everything appears in order” (203). Charlotte tells Jaggery here that he’s mad, linking madness to this kind of artificial “order.” But according to the rest of the world, Jaggery is perfectly sane, highlighting the contingent nature of this social order that she herself had been a part of. The captain’s orderly cabin had, after all, provided Charlotte with an image of the familiar world she had left behind on shore. For Jaggery, and by extension the world that Charlotte comes from, the appearance of order is paramount. In this scene, Jaggery exhorts Charlotte to “[r]esume your place and station. Publicly renounce your ways, beg me for mercy before the crew, and I—you have my word—I will grant it. All will be restored to its proper balance. Like my cabin furnishings. A little dented and torn perhaps, but in the diminished light no one need know. All reputations saved.” Tellingly, the way for Charlotte do to this is to change her clothes: “White dress. Stockings. Shoes. Gloves. Bonnet. All in perfect order” (Avi, 1990, 204). Again, it is not her gender that is emphasized here, but Charlotte’s “place and station,” with
the dress’s whiteness placing an implicit emphasis on race, suggesting she may still recuperate her whiteness.

Charlotte does, eventually, put those clothes on—but not at Jaggery’s behest. She rejects the choice that Jaggery offers her, to hang or to “resume [her] place and station,” and instead confronts him on the ship’s deck, with the crew looking on but unwilling to intervene. Facing the certainty of her death if she does not succeed in overthrowing him, Charlotte’s liminality, her failure to fit into condoned social categories—unlike her “brothers” on the crew—allows her to confront him as they cannot. Where Charlotte was the agent of the first mutiny’s failure, she becomes the only member of the crew who can be the agent of this one’s success—though in the end it is the ship itself, with its scrambled temporality, that seems to take the final step of rejecting Jaggery’s madness and artificial order. Jaggery pursues Charlotte with his pistol as she, “reacting with more panic than reason, scramble[s] down onto the bowsprit” where he loses his footing. Charlotte attempts to save him, reaching out instinctively to catch his hand, but only holds on “for a brief moment.” He clings to “the foaming beak of the figurehead. Then, as if tossing him off, the Seahawk leaped, and Captain Jaggery dropped into the roaring foam and passed beneath the ship, not to be seen again” (208). Where neither Charlotte nor the crewmen can act decisively, it is the ship itself that resolves the impasse, “toss[ing] him off” to his death, as if rejecting his notions of order and hierarchy and affirming the ship as a space of unruly, sideways growth that has broken Charlotte’s connection with the order that Jaggery represents.

In entering the forecastle, Charlotte leaves the orderly time of the school year, capitalism, and normative development, and enters another temporal order, governed by ship’s time: not the artificial marking of the watches, but the unruly, unstable time of the sea, governed by mercurial cycles of wind, calm, and storms that scramble the measured temporalities of the domestic and
commercial spheres. Jaggery attempts to harness these forces, to disastrous ends. The Seahawk is outside the temporal homogenization of industrial time synchronization of this period; it belongs to another temporal order, despite Jaggery’s insistence on a quick crossing to maintain the ship’s place in the capitalist temporal order of production. Despite the importance of “the accurate planning of the transport of goods, and the tracking of their movement” for “the spread of time synchronization,” the ship’s relation to industrial time while at sea finds a better analogue in Einstein’s theory of relativity, which “concluded that there is no objective time which can be measured by a time-keeping instrument, but that time is a product of the act of measuring determined by its position and speed relative to other devices’ positions and speeds” (West-Pavlov, 23, 40-41). The ship, in Charlotte Doyle, inhabits a temporality outside of the linear/capitalist/productive time as it moves between landmasses on its own time, and offers another way of measuring time for Charlotte herself. She travels during the summer holidays in order to maintain her progress forward in school (and in her trajectory toward becoming “a lady”), but the movement of the ship disrupts that progress and suggests alternate ways of growing, visualized in Charlotte’s movements—climbing the royal yard, moving from her private cabin to the forecastle, replacing her confining corset with the sailors’ clothing that allows greater freedom of movement, and cutting the hair that obscures her vision and weighs her down.

Land, for Charlotte, becomes a space of confining childhood, opposed to the freedom of play she invokes when she climbs down the trellis outside her bedroom in the final pages of the novel. When Charlotte puts on her old clothes to go home, she feels “so much pinched and confined I found it difficult to breathe.” The dress itself bears its own wounds, traces of the voyage that altered its wearer irrevocably: “Full if somewhat ragged skirts. Shoes rather less than
intact. Gloves more gray than white” (213). Like Jaggery’s cabin after the storm, Charlotte in her tattered clothes bears only a passing resemblance to the “ordinary girl of parents in good standing” who boarded the Seahawk in Liverpool. Her father’s house in Providence, where Charlotte had expected a hero’s welcome and eager listeners for her exploits during the voyage turns out to be a space of rigid rules and expectations, which Charlotte inadvertently transgresses from the moment she comes ashore. He failure as a sentimental heroine, to become “the heart of the house,” is acute, beginning with the lies that she rehearsed to explain her shorn hair and calloused hands, which she attributes to lice and the need to do her own laundry, respectively.

Her explanations make visible the domestic labor—performed in her wealthy home by servants—meant to remain invisible, concealed behind white gloves and pristine clothes. They provoke horrified gasps from her mother, who exclaims, “Dear Charlotte, I am so frightfully sorry” (216). Charlotte further transgresses the spatial-temporal boundaries of her bourgeois home when she offers to get butter for the table after the family sits down to breakfast, rather than letting the maid fetch it. Her action prompts her father to “bark” at her to sit, and he sends her younger siblings away from the table in order to shield them from Charlotte’s talk of the work to be done aboard ship. Coming ashore, Charlotte brings the disorder of the ship’s scrambled domestic/commercial time to her father’s orderly house, meant to be a timeless haven from the swift time of the marketplace, and becomes an insensible object of her mother’s sympathy, from whom she “receive[s] little comfort but many tears” (223). Where Charlotte had anticipated a hero’s welcome and eager listeners for stories of her exploits during the voyage, she instead finds herself silenced and her experiences discounted as the wild imaginings of an undisciplined child.
Charlotte’s father aligns himself with Jaggery when he tells her, as he burns the journal she kept at his behest. He tells her:

When I sent you to the Barrington School for Better Girls, I had been, I believed, reliably informed that it would provide you with an education consistent with your station in life, to say nothing of your expectations and ours for you. I was deceived. Somehow your teachers there filled your mind with the unfortunate capacity to invent the most outlandish, not to say unnatural tales. . . . Justice, Charlotte, is poorly served when you speak ill if your betters such as poor Captain Jaggery. More to the point, Charlotte, your spelling is an absolute disgrace. Never have I seen such abominations. And the grammar . . . it is beyond belief! (222, original emphasis)

Where Charlotte had earlier compared Jaggery to her father as an affirmation of the captain’s goodness, the text aligns Charlotte’s father, at the end of the novel, with Jaggery, when he echoes the captain’s accusations of unnaturalness. His lecture echoes the attitudes that Charlotte had parroted early on, heedless of the violence that underlay them, particularly with the aphorism, “Justice is poorly served when you speak ill of your betters”—a platitude that led Charlotte to disregard Zachariah’s warnings about Captain Jaggery, and led directly to Cranick’s death and Zachariah’s beating. That her father turns his focus away from the substance of Charlotte’s experiences and Jaggery’s actions, discounting them as “outlandish, not to say unnatural tales,” and focuses instead on the “abominations” of Charlotte’s spelling and grammar, further recalls Jaggery’s focus on appearances, of everything being in its proper place. As Charlotte had seen her father reflected in Jaggery at the beginning of the novel, upon reuniting with her family, she sees, to her horror, Jaggery reflected in her father—a realization that seems to leave her with only one choice.
Her father’s rejection of Charlotte’s tale reflects a failure of sympathy, as Charlotte’s narrative—like her actions—overwhelms the boundaries that sympathetic identification equally reaches across and shores up. Charlotte, as a listener to the sailors’ yarns, “neither knew nor cared which were true and which were not”; she cares about the affective truths that link her to the crew, creating an alternative family for her aboard the ship (69). In the text’s reversal of the sentimental narrative, Charlotte finds that her sympathetic identification with the sailors has changed her; she grows (perhaps sideways) out of the role of sentimental heroine and into something more capacious. Zachariah calls her “the very soul of justice,” a phrase that seems to be at home in a sentimental novel (paired with “the heart of the house, perhaps?), but that Charlotte cannot fully embody until she gives up her position of privilege and takes on both the risks and rewards of lateral movement beyond the race, class, and gendered allegiances that ordered her life before her journey (111).

At the end of the novel Charlotte has learned her lesson well: she takes the importance of appearances to heart and performs the dutiful daughter. Confined to her room and forbidden from speaking to her young siblings, for fear she might contaminate them, she makes a show of studying the books her father sends, titles “deemed suitable for [her] reclamation.” Instead, she “use[s] the books, the blank pages, the margins, even the mostly empty title pages, to set down secretly what had happened during the voyage. It was my way of fixing all the details in my mind forever,” thus continuing to subvert her education into her “proper place” (223). (One can assume her spelling remains abominable.) Meanwhile, she bribes her maid to bring her newspapers and combs the ship departure listings until she finds the Seahawk. Having regained her parents’ trust, it is “child’s play” for Charlotte to escape by climbing down the trellis outside
her bedroom window and return to the ship, where she chooses the freedom of the winds that, as Zachariah had told her, “have a mind of their own” (225-6).

In this chapter, I have positioned Charlotte as the paradigmatic figure of the adolescent whose sideways growth illuminates possibilities for alternative kinship structures and transformative citizenship practices. Charlotte’s refusal of the developmental imperatives dictated by her race, class, and gender suggests the potential of the adolescent to disrupt hegemonic constructions of adulthood and citizenship under heteropatriarchy. Notably absent from this chapter are the imperatives of heterosexual romance that typically structure the girl’s *Bildungsroman*, as Catherine Driscoll explains: “a novel about girls’ development tends to be romance fiction, a novel about how she grows up and into love, is made by love” (51). The absence of a heterosexual romance in this text sets the tone for my approach to the romances that play key roles in the following chapters. In these texts, even when heterosexual romance is central, it is rejected as a primary or limiting force. The young women protagonists of Tamora Pierce’s *Song of the Lioness* series, Kristin Cashore’s *Seven Kingdoms Trilogy*, and Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* Trilogy all insist, in various ways, on their own self-determination before they enter into heterosexual relationships. In doing so, they forge alternate kin networks that include, but are not subsumed by, heterosexuality; a move that in turn imagines more expansive possibilities for community and citizenship.
Notes

1 I see this methodological move as an enactment of José Muñoz’s “approach to hope as a critical methodology . . . best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (*Cruising Utopia* 4).

2 Dana Luciano elaborates on the transition of girls into women, evoking Stockton when she points to the “lateral movement” of girls: “The lateral pedagogy of mother-daughter connection introduces temporal difference into the affective implantation by means of a spatial distinction: the mother whose image must be interiorized by the boy-child as a tutelary seraph remains consistently in front of the daughter’s eyes, lessening, in the course of an ordinary childhood, the distance she will travel from the mother’s body: a spatial closeness that also corresponds to a lesser difference in time, as the daughter becomes the mother’s ‘associate’ and ‘friend.’” Thus, while “boys seek to move beyond the home, . . . women, retained longer within the homespace, will eventually desire marriage and children of their own,” remaining where they have always been, in the realm of women and children (*Arranging Grief* 133).

3 Joe Sutliff Sanders argues that *What Katy Did* draws on the sentimental model to explore the power that sentimental girl heroines might derive from sympathetic relationships by placing themselves at “the heart of the home,” where their sympathetic power can influence “the powerful [to] become humble, charitable, kind, industrious, joyful, or whatever other characteristic now defines the girl at the heart of the home” (46).

4 The successful navigation of this transition was far from guaranteed, as Levander notes: Nineteenth-century social commentators “are keenly aware that this stage [of ‘savage’ childhood] is all too often unsuccessfully repressed in adult citizens who subsequently fail to fulfill the nation’s evolutionary promise” (87). Baxter argues that “the invention of adolescence [at the turn of the twentieth century] can be seen as a reaction to nineteenth-century notions of the savage child; adolescence, as a concept and methodology, served as a path by which such children could become adults” (9).

5 According to Abate, *What Katy Did* establishes a paradigm for “tomboy taming” through “life-threatening illness or injury”—another opposition to the text the novel positions itself against. (xx)

6 In Freeman’s analysis: “*Specters of Marx*, then, contributes to queer theory the idea that time can produce new social relations and even new forms of justice that counter the chrononormative and chronobiopolitical” (*Time Binds* 10). But, for Derrida, “the ghost can only be, at best, a prosthetic body” (10).

7 Russell West-Pavlov notes the importance of “the accurate planning of the transport of goods, and the tracking of their movement, was the driving force in the spread of time synchronization” (23). Though he refers specifically to train timetables, the ship plays a similar—if less easily regulated—role in industrial time keeping.

8 See Barnes and Levander for further discussion of this function of sympathetic identification and sentimentalism.
Chapter 2: Transforming Citizenship “in the Middle”: Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness Quartet

Charlotte Doyle finds a twin in Alanna Trebond, the cross-dressing protagonist of Tamora Pierce’s first young adult fantasy series, the Song of the Lioness Quartet (1983-1987). In one of the foundational texts of the current explosion of girl-centered YA fantasy, the Song of the Lioness follows Alanna as she disguises herself as a boy in order to become a knight in the fantasy kingdom of Tortall. This was a story that captivated me as a young reader in the mid-1990s, but when I revisited the novels as an adult, Alanna’s subversiveness fell woefully short of what I remembered. I was surprised and dismayed by the text’s policing Alanna’s normative femininity. She is plagued with self-doubt in the early volumes because she is a girl, has a habit of pushing herself too far with her magic and passing out, is emphatically heterosexual, and is nearly always romantically attached. Although Alanna herself insists repeatedly that she has no interest in marriage and children, the text relentlessly emphasizes marriage as an endpoint and purpose, concluding not with Alanna’s defeat of her nemesis, but with her agreeing to marry her friend George.\(^1\) Mixed in with Alanna’s story of self-determination is an accession to the power structures that limit her in the first place—and while Alanna breaks down the barriers that would keep her from her vocation as a knight, she does so for herself, not for anyone else. Ultimately, it seems, Alanna’s transgressions only prove her exceptionalism, reinforcing the masculinism\(^2\) of the institution of knighthood and of Tortall’s gendered strictures and norms more generally.

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But despite its disappointing investments in Alanna’s heteronormativity, The Song of the Lioness challenges the often contradictory imperatives of gendered development as Alanna seeks a way to reject limiting gender norms without rejecting what she values and desires from her femininity. In covering the entire swath of Alanna’s adolescence—the series begins when she is eleven and ends in her early twenties—the Song of the Lioness explores and negotiates aspects of her coming of age as a gender nonconforming girl that *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* sidesteps with its more contained time frame. While *Charlotte Doyle* is deeply concerned with issues of embodiment, the Song of the Lioness is concerned with feminine embodiment in particular, as Alanna negotiates the material realities of her female body and attempts to define herself as a knight and, increasingly, as a young woman. The text treats such issues as menstruation, sexuality, and birth control almost casually, and certainly affirmatively—for example, contraception is dispensed with in only a sentence or two, and Alanna is happily sexually active by her mid-teens—but it is also profoundly anxious about Alanna’s gender in a way that it seems able to resolve only by Alanna’s marriage. But though it maintains the narrative arc toward marriage, the text also allows Alanna to delay and ultimately avoid growing into a proper noblewoman when she chooses to marry George, who is not only a commoner but a criminal, over Prince Jonathan, the heir to the throne of Tortall with whom she has a stable relationship for several years. Alanna thus circumvents (some aspects of) normative feminine development even as she appears to accede to it.

Underlying the Song of the Lioness is a dialectical desire to subvert certain gender norms while maintaining a clear boundary between female and male, femininity and masculinity—a boundary that, as Alanna comes of age and moves through her world, proves to align with East and West, childhood and adulthood, innocence and experience, and past and
present. The layered possibilities and limitations of Alanna’s resistance become particularly clear in the third novel of the series, *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* (1984), when, having earned her knight’s shield and revealed her gender to the court, Alanna leaves the capital city seeking adventure. She becomes involved with a tribe of the desert-dwelling Bazhir people who live under Tortall’s colonial rule in a semi-annexed territory to the kingdom’s south. After killing the tribe’s shaman in self-defense, Alanna finds herself appointed his successor, and must stay with them until she trains a new shaman to take her place. She proceeds to upend Bazhir traditions, training two young outcast women to use magic and succeed her as shamans, where women had been forbidden both; establishing an intertribal school for magic; and paving the way for Prince Jonathan—an outsider and heir to the colonial government—to become the Voice of the Tribes, the mystical leader who unites all Bazhir. In the process, Alanna herself matures, assuming greater responsibility for and comfort with both the mundane and magical powers that she possesses.

It isn’t difficult to read the Orientalism here: Alanna leaves her quasi-mediieval European home for the temporally “backward,” colonized space of the desert tribes, where she gains new insights into herself and works to incorporate the Bazhir and herself into the “modern” world. Her journey maps neatly onto Edward Said’s analysis of Western literary Orientalism that constructs “the Orient [as] a place of pilgrimage” where “one could remake and restore not only the Orient but also oneself” (168, 166). However, even as it makes significant concessions to normative structures of time, space, and power, this plot arc highlights the links between gendered and colonial oppression and explores the possibilities for and limitations of resistance. The temporal otherness of the medieval fantasy setting layers onto the temporal otherness of the Bazhir’s tribal society, exposing the artificiality of both “pasts” and equally suggesting their
potential as spaces of resistance. Further, even where it accedes to the power structures that it seeks to subvert, the series’s form and genre create an openness in the text that invites the reader to engage its feminist and postcolonial potential, continuing to ask questions where the text leaves off.

1. (Post)Colonial Girl

Roderick McGillis calls children “the most colonialized persons on the globe,” and children’s literature itself is deeply implicated in both colonial and postcolonial projects (“Postcolonialism” 7). As Perry Nodelman has observed, the discourse of Orientalism bears many parallels to “our most common assumptions about childhood and children’s literature. . . . [Edward] Said’s words force us to face the uncomfortable conclusion that our attempting to speak for and about children . . . will always confirm their difference from, and presumably, inferiority to, ourselves as [adult] thinkers and speakers” (29). Donnarae MacCann further argues that “children’s literature has a special connection with imperialist policies, since the ideal imperial strategy is to impel the young to colonize and marginalize themselves,” a project for which the didactic function of children’s literature is a powerful tool (2). These arguments echo Jacqueline Rose in their suggestion that children have no oppositional voice—or any voice at all—in children’s literature, because the literature constructs the child “for its own purposes”—which are, Rose adds, “often perverse and mostly dishonest” (10). Calling children and children’s literature postcolonial, then, is inherently paradoxical: if “the postcolonial voice is a voice speaking its own authority and identity in confidence of that authority and identity, then children can only express a postcolonial voice after they have ceased to be children” (McGillis,
“Postcolonialism,” 8). The discourse that colonizes the child is the inverse of the discourse that infantilizes the native, both of whom, according to Western narratives of individual development, must mature into sanctioned categories of normative—that is, white, masculine, and heterosexual—adulthood. Until they do, both child and native remain in a “primitive” past characterized as innocent at best and savage at worst.

Just as many scholars of childhood have noted the colonialism of adult discourse about children and childhood, scholars of medieval literature and history have noted the similarities between Western constructions of “the Oriental” and modern constructions of “the medieval.” Indeed, as Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul argue, the ideas of “the medieval” and “the Oriental” are closely related as colonizing discourses of both time and space: “to an important degree the idea of the Middle Ages issued from the same colonial imaginary that subsumed territory and time to the sphere of its real and desired control” in the name of progress and civilization (2). In the colonial imaginary, the East is temporally as well as geographically distant, “an Old World to which one returned, as to Eden or Paradise, and a wholly new place to which one came . . . to set up a New World” (Said 58). Similarly, “The Middle Ages” are themselves a construction of later European thinkers of the Renaissance who wanted to bracket off the historical period they imagined as a dark age between themselves and the classical period. Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Wiesl write that the term “by definition encodes a kind of magical thinking, in which both cultural difference and continuity can be cordoned off from prior and subsequent eras” (1). Set in a fantasy kingdom with the trappings of medieval Europe, The Song of the Lioness is thus implicated in discourses that remove their Others not only in space but also in time, supporting narratives of social and individual development that privilege the West as both a location and as a temporal construct, with its notions of progress and modernity.
The Song of the Lioness works on both of these axes: East/West as well as past/present. Layering them together, the series complicates their narratives of spatial and temporal otherness. The medievalist fantasy setting functions as a “safe” space associated with childhood, and removes subversive questioning of the status quo to a safe distance from the reader’s present, much as Alanna’s removal to the Bazhir Desert puts her subversiveness at a safe distance from Tortall proper. Pugh and Wiesl suggest as much when they describe the Middle Ages in children’s literature “as a potent fantasy, whether of a simpler time of clearer values; a violent, dangerous era of tribal conflict and familial strife; or a place of potential, where the lack of central authority and traditional restraints on adolescent life . . . permits various types of exploration” (52). Maria Nikolajeva similarly argues that children’s fantasy “can interrogate the existing power relationships, including those between child and adult, without necessarily shattering the real order of the world” (61). The medievalist fantasy world becomes a setting where the conflicts of the developmental “middle” of adolescence can be safely negotiated in the ambiguous temporal “middle” of the Middle Ages.

Medievalism does more than simply isolate the conflict of adolescence, however; it “accept[s] both the alterity of the Middle Ages and its multivalent use as a time and place that embraces change and multiple points of view” (Pugh and Wiesl 61). Rather than a clean removal of alterity to “the past,” medievalist fantasy offers something messier in its engagement with the present—an opportunity for counternarratives of dominant discourses of power, especially when it operates in what Farah Mendlesohn calls the immersive mode of fantasy. According to Mendlesohn, immersive fantasy is characterized by an “arguable world” in which “the emphasis is placed on the relationship of people to the world and to their societies, and the way people argue the world into being” (65). The protagonists of an immersive fantasy, “are antagonists
within their world. . . . [They] make their worlds by continually arguing ‘it doesn’t have to be this way’” (66-7). Immersive fantasy contrasts the portal-quest fantasy, emblematized by The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings. In the portal-quest, the journey “serves to divorce the protagonists from the world, and place them in a context within which they cannot question the primary narration” (7). The portal-quest fantasy “by its very nature needs to deny the possibility of a polysemic discourse. . . . There can be only one understanding of the world” (12-13). The immersive fantasy invites and even demands the opposite. Making room for characters and readers to question the built world of the text, immersive fantasies place the reader in a position to continue to “argue the world into being.”

The Song of the Lioness quickly establishes itself in the immersive mode when, in the opening pages of Alanna: The First Adventure (1983), Alanna questions her world in a way that no one else around her does. Where her guardian Coram merely wishes that Alanna were a boy, since she far exceeds her twin brother in masculine pursuits such as archery and swordplay, she argues for her place as a knight-in-training. She secures Coram’s complicity in her plan to take her brother’s place, pointing out, “Thom can’t shoot for beans, and I can. Thom wouldn’t be a credit to you. I will, I think” (14). Alanna’s questioning produces an openness that remains even when the text itself asserts closure in its events—an openness that remains available outside the secondary world. Even when she fails to raise questions the reader remains in a position to argue, “it doesn’t have to be this way.”

McGillis offers postcolonialism as an alternative way of conceiving the relationship between childhood, children’s literature, and colonialism that echoes Mendlesohn’s “arguable world” when he contends, “children and their literature are always postcolonial, if by postcolonial we mean that which stands outside and in opposition to tradition and power.
Although children and their literature are not inevitably outside a Eurocentric vision of things, they do represent a challenge to the traditions of mainstream culture” (8). Thus, the dynamic between adult author and child or adolescent reader does not necessarily evacuate the text of any oppositional voice, as Rose would have it. Instead, I argue, the outsider status of children and their literature (even mainstream ones) represents an opportunity to argue a better world into being. I approach Pierce’s text with McGillis’s definition of postcolonialism in mind, in particular his assertion that “Postcolonialism is a manifestation of the desire for the acceptance and understanding of otherness, and as such it has a logical affinity with children who seem to strive for recognition” (15). Alanna’s quest for recognition is an attempt to argue meaning and change out of her world as a colonized figure—a child and a girl. Her association with the Bazhir occurs at the intersection of gendered, racial, and colonial power and oppression, where Alanna herself is both complicit with and subjugated by normalizing discourses of whiteness and masculinity.

2. Striving for Recognition

Like Alanna, the Bazhir exist on the margins of Tortall, incorporated into the kingdom on precarious ground. Alanna’s history teacher explains, “You see, the Old King is said to have conquered all this country . . . [but h]e never actually conquered this desert—it’s far too big. Instead he worked out treaties with some Bazhir and slaughtered a few others.” Some tribes accept the colonial government, while “others are called renegade.” Focalized through Alanna, the narrative exoticizes the Bazhir as an inscrutable people, “hard riders and relentless fighters. They hid their women in goatskin tents. But all, men and women . . . watched the strangers
through proud black eyes” (Alanna 182). Deirdre Baker argues that, despite the popularity of her “she-roses,” “what Pierce doesn’t give her readers, whether male or female, is a way to conceive power and power structures differently, beyond the gendered norm” (“What We Found,” 247). While I agree that Pierce’s text does, on the surface, reinforce normative power structures, I argue here that Alanna’s time with the Bazhir offers openings for, and invitations to, resistant and reparative readings. Though the space of the desert and the Bazhir themselves facilitate Alanna’s maturation, Pierce does not treat them simply as a backdrop to Alanna’s self-realization, but as a complex society under threat from its imperial neighbor. It is during her time with them that Alanna begins to more thoroughly negotiate the aspects of femininity that she earlier rejected in order to succeed in the masculine institution of knighthood, and to explore and better understand the relationship between gendered and colonial oppression.

Despite their reputation for being a closed society hostile to women, Alanna finds a sense of ease and acceptance among the Bazhir. The space of the desert and her encounters with the Bazhir people facilitate Alanna’s self-recognition—as well as others’ recognition of her on her own terms—as a woman and a warrior. Alanna’s adoption into the Bloody Hawk tribe at the beginning of The Woman Who Rides Like a Man constitutes a second moment of recognition by the Bazhir. The first comes at the end of Alanna, the first novel of the series, when she and Jonathan are lured to the haunted Black City and defeat the Ysandir, demons who had terrorized the Bazhir for centuries. When she journeys to the desert again as a young knight, a member of the tribe recognizes her as “the Burning-Brightly One!” and recalls, “She came with the Blue-Eyed Prince, the Night One, and they freed us from the Black City! . . . I let them through the gate that morning!” (Woman Who Rides 10). This moment of recognition after the fact positions Alanna and Jonathan as white saviors, who as children could defeat the demons no
Bazhir could, but it notably does not guarantee her acceptance into the tribe, or even her safety in this second encounter.

Alanna’s recognition and self-recognition in the desert are not only, or even primarily, as the white savior of the Bazhir. Alanna meets her recognition as “The Burning-Brightly One” with a shrug, and despite the tribesman who vouches for her, her status remains uncertain until she proves herself in a trial by combat. The text frames her adoption into the Bloody Hawk tribe on Bazhir terms rather than couching it as a consequence of Alanna’s status as “the Burning-Brightly One” or as a representative of the colonial government. When she tries to claim the latter, the tribe’s headman Halef Seif tells her, “We know no king.” Her attempt to push the issue is met with “some amusement among the riders. Only their leader remained grim. ‘Is your king so weak he uses women for warriors? We cannot think well of such a king.’” (9). Her status protects her from a swift execution, but no more. The tribe votes to “[l]et her prove herself worthy as a man, worthy of her weapons and of our friendship” by facing a trial by combat (18). The decision grants Alanna what she has always wanted: the opportunity to prove herself as a warrior, with no further questions asked, even in the face of explicit institutional sexism from her interlocutors. After she does so, the tribe accepts her as “The Woman Who Rides Like a Man” and formally adopts her.

The relative ease of her transition, and Alanna’s sense that she “fits” among the Bazhir, perhaps better than she does in Tortall proper, invite an alternate reading of Alanna’s positionality in relation to the Bazhir. While the power that Alanna acquires and exerts as a knight is patriarchal and colonial power, she also opposes both by resisting full assimilation into the institutions that marginalized and oppressed her to begin with. Alanna’s time with the Bazhir may be read as bringing these institutions—of knighthood, of monarchy, of Western civility—to
the Bazhir, highlighting Alanna herself as an enlightened Western subject and civilizing savior against the desert “savages”; but we may also read her as defining herself apart from these institutions by moving into a marginalized space where she can be recognized, and recognize others, on her and their own terms. To do so requires a certain amount of reading against the grain, or at least below the surface, but I contend that the openness of the immersive text, in focalizing through a character antagonistic to the dominant ideologies of her world, invites such a counter-reading even when Alanna herself does not always follow her arguments to their end. Alanna speaks—sometimes implicitly—with an oppositional voice that highlights her own struggles against patriarchal authority, as well as the Bazhir’s struggles against Tortall’s colonial power.

For Alanna, the significance of defeating the Ysandir is not in having “saved” the Bazhir, but in the self-recognition the demons enforce when they reveal her disguise to Jonathan. Alanna’s major internal conflict up to this point has been her persistent belief that she is less competent and worthy because “[s]he was a girl, and she was a liar” (Alanna 172). The very act of hiding her “true” identity in order to become a knight undermines the institution that she seeks to enter, with its emphasis on honesty, honor, and loyalty. Indeed, as an ideal embodied in (masculine) knighthood, Alanna can never fully claim chivalry as her own—both because of the deception she carries out to gain access to the institution, and because of the body that necessitates that deception. In an attempt to drive a wedge between her and Jonathan, the Ysandir make Alanna’s clothing disappear. They taunt Jonathan as he and Alanna work together to defend themselves, demanding, “How long do you think she will last? . . . She is a girl. She is weak. She will give way, and where will you be?” Their words echo “the same small voice that taunted Alanna from within whenever she faced a taller, stronger, opponent,” but instead of
making her give up, hearing her own doubts voiced by her enemies gives her strength (Alanna 201). She realizes that her female body does not make her weak. She quickly gives up “[trying] to cover herself with her hands” and instead asserts her competence: “I may be a girl, but I can defend—or attack—as well as any boy!” (200). Afterwards, Alanna finds that “[a]ll at once she [feels] different inside her own skin.” She asserts her newfound confidence when Jonathan asks her who he should choose to be his squire: “Me,” she tells him. “You should pick me” (Alanna 215).

In contrast to her sense of being recognized, and being able to recognize herself, among the Bazhir, Alanna’s adoption into the Bloody Hawk is presaged by a moment of misrecognition at home in Tortall. After having lived disguised as a boy for eight years, Alanna’s deception is revealed when she exposes the king’s nephew, Roger, as a traitor. Again, Alanna is unmasked through her clothing when Roger’s attempt to wound her cuts away the corset she wears to bind her breasts. Although she has just unearthed a plot to murder the royal family, the court and the king are considerably more interested in the revelation of Alanna’s feminine body. Her confrontation with Roger grinds to a halt and the king turns his attention to her. Alanna claims her actions strongly here, wondering, “Would you have let me win my shield if I had told the truth? . . . I’ve tried to be honest about everything else. And I can’t regret what I did” (Hand 204-205). She admits her distaste for her lies but refuses to regret telling them in the face of a system that would have limited her to the roles of wife and mother.

However, the conclusion of this scene suggests her greater ambivalence toward her actions and her identity. When she at last stands “swaying over Roger’s body, shaking with rage, fear and exhaustion,” she notices, “[e]veryone in the chamber . . . stared at her with some kind of horror. For a minute she was afraid of herself” (206). Alanna’s fear and horror arise from having
killed Roger, but it is tied up with the revelation of her identity, making the horror of the court, and Alanna’s fear of herself, as much about Alanna’s gender as it is about her killing Roger. The incident prompts her to leave the court, despite her friends’ protests. “I need to get away from Court for a while and just think,” she tells her friends, adding, “I’ve been planning this journey for a long time, and now I have more reason than ever to take it.” She has sensed for some time that she could not “sort out . . . being a lady knight and what I want to do with my life” at a court whose social norms she has flouted; her actions against Roger simply add another layer to her sense that she cannot be recognized—or recognize herself—in Tortall (207). Alanna’s adoption into the Bloody Hawk closes the circle that opens with the Ysandir, not only as a moment of self-recognition, but also as a recognition by others that finally acknowledges Alanna as she presents herself, “The Woman Who Rides Like a Man.”

Alanna’s sense that she has to go the geographic margins of the kingdom in order to “sort out . . . being a lady knight” visualizes her marginality, but moving Alanna out of the “Western” realm of Tortall and into the Bazhir Desert also normalizes her at the expense of the Orientalized Bazhir. When she becomes shaman of the Bloody Hawk tribe, Alanna is in a position to, as Coram puts it, “interfere” with the Bazhir, “settin’ these poor folk on their ears. . . . They haven’t changed in centuries, and we’re forcin’ them to accept things yer own people can’t accept—not easily.” Coram’s description of the Bazhir, “poor folk” who “haven’t changed in centuries,” place them firmly in the past, primitive in relation to Alanna’s Western modernity—despite her own people’s unwillingness to accept her. Further, she does not hesitate to use her white savior status to push for the changes that will allow her to train two outcast young women to be her successors. “To the Bazhir, I’m a legend,” she explains to Coram; “They take things from me they wouldn’t take from anyone else. I don’t ask them to change for stupid reasons” (Woman
Who Rides 94-95). At the same time as Alanna’s ability to be incorporated into the Bazhir opens up possibilities to read her as an oppositional figure, her need to go outside her own institutions in order to “liberate” others also shores up the power structures she wishes to oppose. Although Alanna’s actions open doors for women in Tortall, as Pierce explores in later books, they are self-serving; she cross-dresses so that she can become a knight, not to seek widespread institutional change. But when she joins the Bloody Hawk, she insists that they change according to her ideals of gender equity. Though she seems not to be interested in larger societal changes in Tortall, she insists on “liberating” the Bazhir, who until she came “hid their women in goatskin tents.”

Tellingly, when Alanna is accepted into the tribe after she proves herself in the trial by combat, she is aligned with the men of the tribe. She sits with the men at gender-segregated gatherings, fulfills a masculine role in the tribe as shaman, and does not participate in the “women’s work” of the tribe’s daily life. It is only after Alanna demonstrates her interest in and respect for the skilled work of Bazhir women that she begins to be integrated into the feminine spaces of the tribe as well as the masculine and comes to realize that the Bazhir women may not need her to liberate them. Her interest in weaving attracts the notice of one of the women leaders in the tribe, from whom Alanna learns that Bazhir women are far from the silent, oppressed, veiled women she had believed. Instead, she discovers that “the tribeswomen viewed their men not with fear but with loving disrespect” (Woman Who Rides 98). Alanna’s weaving lessons allow the text to further interrogate gender and power. Her single male apprentice dismisses weaving as “all right if you have nothing better to do.” Alanna rebuts him by pointing both to the practical importance of weaving—“What’s more important than the clothes I wear?”—and its magical applications, demonstrating magic worked by tying and untying knots. Though men use
“thread magic” as well, “women acquire it more easily. I guess that’s because most women know how to weave and spin and sew” (88-89).

Alanna’s articulation of the value of the “women’s work” of weaving reveals her own developing understanding of gendered power and labor. She places the mundane and magical applications of fiber work on equal footing; knowing how to “weave and spin and sew” is no less important than being able to work magic using thread, and indeed, she argues that the mundane skills associated with weaving lend a magic user a familiarity with her medium that allows her to use it for magical purposes. She further compares the process of learning to weave to her training as a knight. Kourrem, her apprentice, tells her, “I really shouldn’t start you weaving right away. We always had to learn to card wool . . . and spin a good thread before we were let near a loom.” Alanna replies, “It’s just like every fighting art I studied . . . We had to learn how to make our weapons before we got to use them” (86). After a disastrous attempt at the small loom Kourrem lends her, Alanna concludes ruefully, “My teachers were right—for real skills, there aren’t any shortcuts” (87-88). She not only places the magical and mundane on an equal footing in their importance, but also affords masculine and feminine skills equal respect as “real skills.”

The weaving lessons parallel Alanna’s other gendered lessons throughout the series. The text often aligns Alanna’s gendered development with the development of her magical abilities and her growing skills in combat. In Alanna, a chapter titled “Womanhood” groups together her first menstruation with her gradual acceptance of herself as a mage—something she had resisted in part because she associates her healing magic with femininity—and her development into a skilled swordswoman. When she discovers her menstrual bleeding, Alanna seeks out a friend in the city, to whom she reveals her secret in a panic. “You’re not used to your body doing things you haven’t asked of it, are you?” her friend observes sympathetically (137). But although she is
frustrated by her inability to control her body in some respects, that lack of control is 
subordinated to the physical and mental mastery she achieves as a swordswoman and a sorcerer. 
The text aligns all three of these developments under the rubric of womanhood. A parallel 
sequence in *In the Hand of the Goddess* (1984) highlights femininity as a set of behaviors to be 
performed, making Alanna’s feminine body as controllable as her masculine disguise. Both 
femininity and masculinity are thus linked to bodily mastery, despite her initial experience of her 
female body as something out of her control. Her weaving lessons in *The Woman Who Rides 
Like a Man* help Alanna further integrate her sense of masculinity and femininity as embodied 
practices of gender and power, rather than as stable, static identities that are grown into over 
time.

3. Cross-Dressing and Compromise

For both Alanna and the Bazhir, survival means compromise as much as resistance, 
which the text visualizes through Alanna’s cross-dressing. For Alanna as for Charlotte, 
cross-dressing allows her to cross borders and forge connections between herself and other 
marginalized individuals and groups; but Alanna’s cross-dressing also interrogates the ways that 
such boundary crossing equally shores up the categories it transgresses. In her exploration of 
cross-dressing in children’s literature, Victoria Flanagan uses Alanna as her prototypical female 
cross-dresser, arguing that female-to-male cross-dressing in children’s and YA literature 
empowers young women. But while Alanna’s cross-dressing is central to her ability to eschew 
the limited roles available to her, it is not strictly liberatory. Her cross-dressing both disrupts and 
shores up the binary categories Alanna seeks to traverse: man and woman, Tortallan and Bazhir,
knight and lady. The text successfully deconstructs gender as performance when Alanna decides to experiment with feminine dress and behavior. Alanna herself shows remarkable awareness of the fact that she performs gender, telling the friend whom she approaches for guidance, “I’m going to have to be a girl someday. Why shouldn’t I start practicing now?” (Hand 123). But at the same time as the text constructs gender, here, as something one *does*, as opposed to something one *is*, it also insists upon Alanna’s essential womanhood. Alanna is never confused about whether she is “really” a girl, nor is anyone else; there is no question, as Jes Battis notes, “that Alanna, rather than being a ‘real’ boy, or a girl passing as a boy, might actually be a queer boy instead.” Alanna’s cross-dressing thus shores up the categories of “boy” and “girl,” by insisting that *dressing* as a boy does not *make* Alanna a boy. Nonetheless, her cross-dressing makes anxiously visible the contingency of these categories, such that “Alanna must constantly be reaffirmed as being a ‘girl on the inside’” in order to maintain the stability of the gender binary she transgresses with her cross-dressing (Battis).

Alanna’s cross-dressing encompasses cultural and class dimensions as well when she decides to start wearing a burnoose after her adoption into the Bloody Hawk, reasoning, “If she was a Bazhir, she might as well dress like one” (*Woman Who Rides* 27). Analogous to her gendered clothes, the burnoose functions both to integrate Alanna into the Bazhir and to distinguish her from them; to liberate her and to constrain. As a gender-nonconforming woman, Alanna’s cultural/racialized cross-dressing also highlights the implications of gender in the colonial relationship between Tortall and the Bazhir. Kanniah Kadiatu explains, “Clothing becomes emblematic of a cultural or racial group; representing a colonial relationship which is both gendered and sexualized” (346). Donning the burnoose gains Alanna entry into Bazhir society and bestows masculine status and privilege on her, but it keeps her separate from the
veiled women “[hidden] . . . in goatskin tents,” whom she feels compelled to liberate as she has liberated herself. Her Alanna’s cross-dressing highlights the overlapping dynamics of colonial and patriarchal power that clings to clothing: Alanna is able to claim both masculine and Tortallan (white) authority, at the same time as she is subject to both as a woman and as an adopted member of the Bazhir. Her cross-dressing, then, reveals the layered and often contradictory workings of patriarchal and colonial power that she both resists and carries with her.

Alanna’s gendered cross-dressing is a source of deep anxiety in particular for the men with whom she has romantic relationships—not because of her decision to pursue a masculine vocation as a knight, but because of her rejection of marriage and motherhood. While her dress and behavior seem to be acceptable choices to her romantic partners, both men with whom Alanna has serious relationships before her marriage to George reveal the extent of their anxiety about her gender identity when the questions of marriage and motherhood arise. Prince Jonathan, with whom she shares a stable relationship for several years, takes for granted that she will accept his marriage proposal. Alanna, though, sees marrying Jonathan as “a great responsibility” that would require her to give up the life of a wandering knight she desires. Jonathan responds to her concerns with amusement: “Be serious. After all these years, I’d think your answer is plain.”

His exhortation of her to “be serious” reveals the extent to which he construes Alanna’s masculine behavior as a game, something that she may easily give up when it is time for her to “grow up” and become a “real” woman—despite his having undergone the same grueling training as Alanna to earn his knight’s shield. As their argument escalates, Jonathan compares her to the other women at court, who are “[a]t least . . . women, Lady Alanna! . . . And they know how to act like women!” (Woman Who Rides 161-162). Calling her “Lady Alanna” instead of
her proper title of “Sir Alanna,” Jonathan uses her womanhood as an insult and her failure to properly inhabit it as a measure of her inadequacy in an attempt to shore up his own masculine authority.

Alanna, of course, does know how to act like a woman; the fact that she does not always choose to do so provokes anger in Jonathan and confusion and scorn in Liam, the warrior with whom she has a relationship in the fourth novel of the series, Lioness Rampant (1988). Liam questions her assertion that marrying and having children would require that she “give up [her] shield” and “spend [her] time at court or on [her] husband’s lands.” He responds, mildly, “I just wondered why you feel you have to be all warrior or all woman. Can’t you be both?” (55-6). But he reveals his uneasiness with her attempt to straddle the boundaries of masculine and feminine identity when Alanna chooses to wear a dress one evening while they are staying at an inn. In disgust, he surmises, “I suppose you’ll want earbobs next, and bracelets and other frippery. What comes then? A noble-born husband and court intrigues?” Liam’s response reveals the extent to which dress dictates behavior and uncovers an essential(ly masculine or feminine) self. He assumes that the desire to be a wife and mother are intrinsic to all women, and wonders why Alanna should reject them. But he also supposes that when she puts on a dress, Alanna is conceding that “a knight-errant’s life isn’t as glorious as [she] expected” and is ready to give it up for the ease of a lady’s life at court (109). Alanna desires to be both woman and warrior, but not in the ways that Liam thinks she should: she rejects the “essential” aspects of her womanhood and embraces (sometimes) feminine dress and behavior. The ease with which she can move back and forth between masculine and feminine behaviors is what is most threatening to Liam and Jonathan; they can rely on her neither to act like other women, nor to act like a man.
The introduction of the burnoose after Alanna’s adoption into the Bloody Hawk tribe builds on and complicates her gendered cross-dressing. Clothing, with its changeability, signals the shifting nature of Alanna’s multiple identities, but it also signals her commitments to them. Rather than gendered or cultural drag, Alanna’s cross-dressing—as a boy, knight, lady, and Bazhir—announce that all of these are fundamental aspects of her self. Kathryn Bond Stockton identifies clothing as “an unexamined switch point between . . . nonelective skins and what are for some queer women and men the highly preferred, habitually chosen, strongly valued, almost sewn-to-the-bone cloth skins that we call clothes” (Beautiful Bottom 39). In Stockton’s analysis, the impermanent surface of clothing may carry as much meaning and authentic identity as the permanent, unchosen surface of (racialized and/or gendered) skin. Alanna’s disguise as “Alan” during her training is not simply a means to an end, but also a part of her self with which she continues to identify—as she insists when her friends tell her that they feel they don’t know her: “This ‘Sir Alanna’ you keep talking about is just Alan with the truth being told. . . . I haven’t changed” (Hand 208). Though she gives up her disguise and adopts her given name, “Sir Alanna” looks and acts just like Alan; it is her friends’ perceptions that change when they must square the idea that a young woman can be as competent and brave a knight as any of them. In this way, Alanna’s cross-dressing functions similarly to Charlotte’s in Chapter One: it both conceals and reveals her truth, in what Stockton calls “a centrifugal force.” Clothing is a form of “social holding,” a phrase which vividly illustrates Alanna’s acts of cross-dressing as proud assertions of self: “In the act of clothing, one is thrown outward, body and skin, into cloth arms (the arms of one’s clothes), caught and held as a public gesture, in the social field” (43). Despite others’ attempts to pin a static identity on Alanna, she, and the text, resist the colonizing discourses that would inscribe her as statically feminine or masculine, Tortallan or Bazhir,
woman or warrior. Concealed and revealed by her clothes, Alanna finds (self-)recognition and kinship the social fields at the margins of Tortall with all of her multiple identities.

In her disguise as Alan, Alanna uses clothing to conceal her body and reveal the self that she wishes to be—not a boy per se, but a knight-in-training, which she can only be as a boy. With her masculine clothing, Alanna writes a new self onto her body, but she must also contend with the female body that others will inevitably read no matter what she does and the aspects of her femininity that she eventually chooses to embrace. Her cultural cross-dressing is inscribed on her body in similarly contradictory ways. Alanna joins the Bazhir in a ceremony of embodied magic marked by an exchange of blood with Halef Seif, the tribe’s headman. The ceremony makes her “truly [a member] of the Bazhir, tied by blood and magic to the desertmen” (*Woman Who Rides* 26). The burnoose both conceals and reveals the scar it leaves behind on her arm, announcing her embodied connection to—her kinship with—the tribe through her choice of dress. The scar is connected to her female body, signaling both permanence and malleability, intrinsic and chosen identity. While her Bazhir title, “The Woman Who Rides Like a Man,” seems to reinforce the gender binary by suggesting she is an exceptional woman who does masculine things, it, too, offers her a way to integrate the two selves she has struggled with. While she “rides like a man,” taking on masculine roles both among the Bazhir and at home, Alanna also identifies strongly with her feminine self, the woman of her Bazhir title. Her ability to be a “woman who rides like a man” among the Bazhir allows her to integrate the masculine and feminine selves she struggled with while living as Alan.

This integration, however, demands compromise. Though Alanna can perform masculinity, the narrative arc of the marriage plot demands that she accede to the developmental imperatives of her essential womanhood by accepting marriage and motherhood. As much as
Bazhir desert is a space in which Alanna can exist more comfortably on the margins, it is also a fragile space where she cannot remain secure in her difference. Alanna comes to understand this when she learns that Ali Mukhtab, the current Voice of the Tribes, intends to make Jonathan his heir. He tells Alanna that conquest is inevitable, but that by initiating Jonathan as the Voice, they can influence the shape of that conquest. He explains to her, “Conquered, my people—our people, now—would be riven from the desert that is mother and father to us. . . . The tribes would be scattered; we would be no more” (45). But if Jonathan becomes the Voice, he will be “a Bazhir King. . . . The tribes you call ‘renegade’ would make peace, for none may war against the Voice of the Tribes. . . . We must accept the King in the North; there is no other way. But we can do it so that we never forget who we are” (46). Alanna faces the same challenge: to find a way to “accept the King in the North” in a way that will not elide the complexities of her liminal and shifting identities. When the Bazhir incorporate Jonathan as the Voice, they demand he become more like them, rather than acceding to the demand that they become more Tortallan.

The power of the Voice is not simply symbolic, but a potent magical connection to the Bazhir people and the land in which they live; it alters Jonathan physically and psychologically, molding him as both an individual and a monarch. Like Alanna’s adoption ceremony, Jonathan’s initiation as the Voice involves an exchange of blood and magic. The magic of the Voice imbues him with the memories and knowledge of each of his predecessors, making him the embodiment of everyone who came before: “I lived all the lives of all the Voices,” he tells Alanna after; “I was a chain. All my links were pulling apart. I lost Jonathan for a while; I was everyone but Jonathan” (156-7). The rite leaves behind a trace on Jonathan’s body, a “blue scar [that] was warm to the touch” (155). Like Alanna’s, Jonathan’s scar inscribes a connection to the Bazhir not only on his body but on a deep ontological level; the exchange of blood is the vehicle for a
transformation that subsumes Jonathan’s individuality and makes him a link on a longer chain of history and cultural identity. Becoming the Voice further alters the nature of Jonathan’s power as a monarch, as the Voice unites the disparate tribes by serving as a central node in a network. As “priest, father, and judge to the Bazhir,” the Voice executes his role not by speaking, as his title would suggest, but by listening: each day “[a]t sunset we gather at our fires and join with [the Voice]—each man and woman among the Bazhir. Thus he knows our thoughts, our wishes. . . . He judges with complete knowledge of our hearts and our minds” (149, 38). The colonized Bazhir in a sense colonize Jonathan with their history, their “hearts and [their] minds,” making him “a Bazhir King” who will value the voices of all his people. Imbuing Jonathan with Bazhir magic and history that leaves its trace on his body in the form of the blue scar, the Bazhir enact a reversal of the power that has oppressed them in order to claim a measure of it back.

Alanna’s cross-dressing functions as a similar reverse colonization, upending the narrative logic of progress upon which both gendered development and colonialism depend. Disguising herself as a boy in order to gain entry into the institution of knighthood, Alanna concedes to the constructions of gender and power that had excluded her; but by proving herself to be capable as any of her male peers, she also transforms the institution, paving the way for girls to train openly to become knights.9 Alanna’s exceptionalism as a knight has the contradictory effect of reinforcing the rules and codes of chivalry at the same time as it undermines them. Her confrontation with Roger immediately after her induction into knighthood highlights the paradox at the heart of her exceptionalism. As a knight, Alanna “[is] bound to uphold the law” and “may not look away from wrongdoing”; however, these imperatives are not always compatible (Hand 178). In order to confront Roger for his treason, Alanna must break into his rooms to find evidence, a transgression justified by the revelation of Roger’s greater
crimes—though both are nearly overshadowed by the revelation of her gender. Alanna seeks a way into the institution that excludes her because of her gender by proving she can not only meet but exceed its demands; she does not seek any fundamental change to it. Instead, she must master her (feminine) self in order to enter the institution and embody its ideals. Her excellence compensates for her transgressions, much as her exposure of Roger’s crimes compensates for the violation of searching his rooms.

Despite her excellence as a knight, however, Alanna’s survival, and indeed her success, demand concessions to the oppressive power structures of her world. Ali Mukhtab’s acceptance of one kind of conquest in order to avoid wholesale destruction articulates a central theme of Alanna’s coming-of-age story: while her instinct to fight often serves her well, she also must learn when not to fight. Two key moments in the series show Alanna the importance of making these distinctions. Early in her training as a knight, Alanna explores the ruins of a castle where a magic force attacks her. Her own magic has no effect against it; exhausted, “For the first time in her life, Alanna stopped fighting. . . . she was dying. With an inner sigh—almost one of relief—she accepted that fact” (Alanna 153). Her acceptance of her imminent death activates the magic in a sword she found in the ruins, saving her. This sequence anticipates Alanna’s final confrontation with Duke Roger in Lioness Rampant, where she once again must not fight in order to survive and defeat her opponent. When Roger uses his more powerful magic to try to steal the magic sword, Alanna struggles to hold onto it until “[t]he cold part of herself that stood aloof from everything whispered, He expects you to fight. So—stop fighting.” Rather than trying to keep the sword from him, Alanna lets go of it: “Roger didn’t break his calling spell. He didn’t even seem to know what she’d done until [the sword] buried itself in his chest” (293). The emphasis on not fighting seems to suggest an imperative to surrender; however, the contrast
between these two moments reveals Alanna’s changing understanding of power and resistance. In the first, Alanna stops fighting only when “She had used up all her air, all her strength, all her magic” (Alanna 153); in the second, she makes a conscious choice to use Roger’s expectation against him. Alanna does not surrender to Roger; rather, at the conclusion of the series, she better understands how to fight him. Not fighting emerges as its own resistance, acceptance as a kind of mastery.

Although the marriage plot feels like a disappointing concession to heteropatriarchy, Alanna’s choice to marry her friend George Cooper, a commoner and a thief, is another moment of acceptance as mastery. Alanna refuses Jonathan’s proposal because of all it would require her to give up; in marrying George, Alanna changes her mind about marriage without fully acceding to the social structures that would restrict her to the role of a mother and manager of her husband’s estate. As Anastasia Salter argues, “When Alanna chooses [George] as a life companion, it is with full agency in the decision and no sacrifice of the position she has earned. She compromises none of her male or female identity to choose her desires.” Alanna’s marriage to George is not, however, “an apolitical choice,” as Salter characterizes it (169). Indeed, Alanna’s marriage is highly political, adding class crossing to Alanna’s gendered and cultural boundary crossing. George himself is a kind of cross-dresser, “clever and unorthodox, someone who could venture among all classes without trouble” (Lioness Rampant 243). For much of the series, he runs the underworld of Tortall’s capital city as King of the Thieves, appropriating court forms to maintain order among criminals. Once he gives that up and turns “respectable,” as he puts it, he remains a liminal figure, putting his skills to use as a spy for Jonathan (307). Rather than move her out of her liminal, marginal spaces and roles, Alanna’s marriage to George
reinforces them—right down to geography: Jonathan gives George and Alanna the barony of Pirate’s Swoop, whose remote keep is built into a cliff on the coastal border of Tortall.

Like the other concessions to power structures in the series, Alanna’s marriage is unorthodox and maintains her liminality, both because of her association with George and his activities, and because of her refusal to adhere to either strictly masculine or feminine roles and codes. After her final confrontation with Roger, her magic sword remains embedded in the stone floor of the catacombs where she fought him. Although the sword may be what Battis calls “the representation of her phallic power, the most important piece of artifice in her performance as a male knight,” giving it up does not mean Alanna surrenders her power or her role as a knight. Rather, the loss of the sword opens up possibilities for a more expansive understanding of what it means to perform knighthood and chivalry that isn’t defined by masculinity. Battis rightly points out the text’s missed opportunities to explore non-normative gender identities, but we can nonetheless read in Alanna a nascent queerness in her negotiation of masculine and feminine roles and gender performance. She embraces the markers of femininity in her fondness for beautiful clothing while subverting the association of feminine beauty with weakness, a transformation that slowly takes hold in Tortall in Pierce’s subsequent novels. Much as the Bazhir transform Jonathan and the kingdom for which he metonymically stands in giving him the power of the Voice, Alanna transforms the institutions she enters even when she must accede to their parameters.

4. Reading in the Middle
I began by asking what it might mean to read Alanna as a postcolonial subject, resistant to colonial power even as she carries it from the metropole to the Bazhir Desert. As much as the series is implicated in the colonizing discourses of Orientalism and medievalism, I have argued that The Song of the Lioness also engages in a complex interrogation of patriarchal and colonial power structures in its imagined world. The novels raise questions about the institutions and ideologies that Alanna enters, accepts, resists, and transforms, inviting readers to interrogate analogous ideologies in our own world. To conclude, I ask the same question of the text’s setting: How might we read the medievalist fantasy setting as a productive site of resistance for contemporary subjects, despite associations of the medieval with a backward, violent, and ignorant past—or, less extremely, as a more innocent time?

Noting the parallels between Orientalist constructions of the East—located in the past—and contemporary constructions of the “exotic” Middle Ages, Catherine Brown offers an alternative reading of the medieval(ist) past when she argues, “For all its ‘common-sense’ resonance, ‘the past is a foreign country’ may not be a helpful model . . . If the past is a foreign country, what are we who spend so much time in it? Anthropologists? Archaeologists? Tourists? Colonists? Orientalists? Go-betweens?” (4). As modern readers, she argues, we might learn from medieval readers to “embrace[s] coevalness” between reader and text, and read “in that in-between state where polarities (subject/object, self/Other, now/then) are confused, where simultaneous, apparently conflicting truths can be equally in effect, where things really begin to live” (13). Dinshaw points similarly to “the noncontemporaneous contemporaneity of the moment of reading, or the spectral asynchronies of the present,” arguing for “an approach to . . . medieval texts that acknowledges the heterogeneity of times in the present” (29, 77). Though both of these critics focus on contemporary readers engaging with medieval texts, their approaches to
reading as asynchronous and temporally slippery are instructive for understanding the relationship between adolescence and the medieval as analogous, enabling middles. Helen Dell describes the “medieval otherworlds presented in fantasy fiction” as “more real than reality, sites of plenitude and presence for which the heart longs,” suggesting the layered potentialities of Pierce’s imagined world, and medievalist fantasy otherworlds more generally (173). I read this “plenitude and presence” in the unruly temporality of the “middles” encoded in the “Middle Ages” and its analogous middle in adolescence. The indeterminacy of these middles, at once “dark ages” to be bracketed off and magical times to be reclaimed in the present—suggests alternatives to the orderly procession of linear development, from child to adolescent to adult. The plenitude of these middles extends outward, taking in past and future as well as the present, opening up the potential for what José Muñoz calls “queer world-making” (Cruising Utopia 37).

Applying Brown and Dinshaw’s theories of medieval reading to Pierce’s medievalist fantasy series draws a connection between our modern fantasies of the Middle Ages as an exotic, Other time, and the historical practices with which that fantasy engages, however obliquely. Pugh and Weisl also engage Brown to explore how medievalist YA texts help readers “make sense of themselves in the alien world of the present through a fantasy vision of the past” (62). I build on their analysis by considering how Brown’s ideas enable a resistant politics to ideologies that abject their Others in both space and time. Engaging the coevalness of medieval reading allows the text to talk back as something more than an Orientalist/medievalist fantasy, a “girl power” story, or a fictional manifesto of 1980s feminism. Instead of an escapist fantasy that safely isolates the questioning of a status quo in an Other time and place, it becomes a text “where polarities . . . are confused, where simultaneous, apparently conflicting truths can be equally in effect.” Reading becomes a process of mutual transformation between reader and text,
which Brown expands on in relation to the food metaphors that are prevalent in medieval accounts of reading and interpretation: “The text resists; you take it into you, but it is not ‘you’; you break it open, suck it, chew it; you change it, and it will change you, so that, ultimately, you and it, subject and object, then and now, are not easily distinguishable” (15). The Song of the Lioness visualizes this process in Alanna’s cross-dressing, as her multiple selves—masculine, feminine, knight, lady, Tortallan, Bazhir—become coeval, “not easily distinguishable” from one another. The text itself similarly enacts a kind of cross-dressing in its constructed medievalist past, which is coeval with our own present.10 Pierce’s texts are at once radically removed from the reader’s context and deeply entrenched in it. Young readers recognize Alanna’s struggles to overcome the masculinist biases of her society, even as her interventions seem far different from anything a child or teenager of the late twentieth- or early twenty-first-centuries might undertake.

The Song of the Lioness invites the reader to step out of her skin to identify with Alanna in a moment of imaginative cross-dressing. For me, revisiting the text as an adult, the identification was provisional, as I recognized all the problems with the novels’ feminism and multiculturalism. On second and third (and fourth, and fifth) readings, my engagement with Alanna became what queer theorist José Muñoz would call disidentification, a provisional, partial identification that responds to and interrogates dominant ideology.11 Disidentification refuses to sanitize its object, but rather acknowledges its limits without dismissing what it has to offer, in “an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics” (7). Muñoz theorizes disidentification as both a reading practice—related to the theories of medieval reading above—and “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Alanna, then, also
disidentifies. She neither fully assimilates nor openly opposes the masculine ideologies associated with knighthood and chivalry; but by entering the institution of knighthood, she “read[s] [herself] . . . in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’” with her as a feminine subject (12). Alanna reads herself “in the middle”—between assimilation and resistance; past, present, and future; masculine and feminine. The reader finds herself in the middle as well, between fantasy and reality, imagined otherworld and heterogeneous present.

Fantasy stories, Pierce wrote in 1993, “appear to have little to do with reality, but they do provide readers with the impetus to challenge the way things are, something YAs respond to wholeheartedly” (50). Readers of fantasy are particularly tuned in to the relationship between these stories and their own realities, Pierce continues: “Some youngsters will always say, ‘But that only happens in books,’ but fantasy readers seem to know that what happens in books can be carried over, that the idea of change is universal, and that willpower and work are formidable forces, wherever they are applied” (51). The “safe” Otherness of the medievalist, Orientalist, fantasy setting masks its potentially subversive questioning of the “real” world—even when the text’s subversiveness is limited. These texts help us imagine self and other, past and present, power and subordination as coeval, in ambiguous and shifting relation to one another. Though their answers may not always be satisfactory, these texts empower readers by prompting them to interrogate discourses of power within the text’s imagined world, and to keep asking questions about our own.
Notes

1 Alanna is thus disciplined by the text every time she uses too much (magic) power—something we never see her brother Thom do, despite his misuse of his own magic—and, for all her resistance, still yoked to normative femininity through what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix, “a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender . . . that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (208n.6).

2 I choose “masculinism” here over “patriarchal” or “phallocentric”—both also accurate descriptions—to emphasize that Tortallan knighthood, before and after Alanna, values men and masculinity over women and feminity. Alanna challenges the equation of chivalry and masculinity by proving herself the exception, that she can be a knight despite her gender, rather than engaging her gender as a potential strength. Later installments of the Tortall books, notably the Protector of the Small sequence (1999-2002), more expansively challenge the institution’s equation of masculinity with strength and chivalric virtue.

3 In The Modern Age, Kent Baxter explores this dynamic in some detail in his chapters on British and American youth scouting and Native American boarding schools.


5 In Recasting the Past: The Middle Ages in Young Adult Literature, and The Middle Ages in Literature for Youth, Rebecca Barnhouse gives a useful overview of medievalist YA fiction, but focuses on historical fiction and retellings of medieval legends (e.g. Robin Hood and Arthurian cycles), rather than on fantasy that takes place in imagined “medieval” settings. Helen Dell notes “a perception, shared by authors and readers, that fantasy and the medieval have a privileged link or are even interchangeable,” whether “Medieval allusions . . . may be only fleeting or indeterminate or they may be explicit and saturate the story at every level” (172). Carolyn Dinshaw also suggests the expansiveness of medievalist tropes beyond the trappings of knighthood and courtly love in How Soon is Now?

6 Articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak with the statement, “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (296), the white savior complex is a widespread trope in fantasy literature across audience age groups, and in children’s and YA literature across genres. Yulisa Amadu Maddy and Donnarae MacCann critique Isabel Allende’s YA novel Forest of the Pygmies (2005) for its portrayal of “the ‘Pygmy’ population . . . so backward that survival depends upon guidance from a newcomer in Africa: an American teenager” (63). China Miéville’s Un Lun Dun (2007) subverts the trope when the “tall and striking” blonde Zanna is sidelined early in the novel and her “shorter and rounder and messier,” dark-haired friend Deeba Resham takes over her role as “Schwazzy” to save an alternate London (4,7). As Baker suggests in “What We Found on Our Journey Through Fantasy Land,” fantasy often relies on racist tropes to “type” Good and Evil along the lines of light/dark or civilized/savage (which she also discusses in her essay “Musings on Diverse Worlds”). Despite a rise in fantasy writers of color in the 1990s who have worked to interrogate and subvert these tropes (see Okorafor, “Writers of Colour”), children’s and YA fantasy has lagged behind in meaningful portrayals of characters of color. A 2003 survey of YA genre texts reviewed in VOYA and School Library Journal between
1992 and 2001 found “only about 62 (6 percent) of the 976 reviews of youth fantasy novels featured a protagonist or secondary character of color” (Agosto 268). See also Dharmadikari, “Surviving Fantasy Through Postcolonialism”; McGillis, ed., Voices of the Other; Leonard, ed., Into Darkness Peering”; Stewart, “Beyond Borders”; and Woo, “Toward a Poetics of Asian American Fantasy.”

Though she provides a useful framework for thinking about cross-dressing in children’s literature, Flanagan’s analysis does not attend to the class, racial, and cultural dimensions that complicate Alanna’s cross-dressing.

This sequence is somewhat prescient, appearing several years before Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble canonized the notion that gender is not natural or essential, but constructed through a reiterative process of performance.

Pierce explores the ramifications of Alanna’s success for Tortall in her follow-up series, Protector of the Small (1999-2002), in which she also offers an interesting counterpoint to Alanna in the androgynous Kel. Where Alanna’s experience of her female body and her exploration of feminine dress and behavior are often fraught with doubt, when Kel decides to perform femininity it is a grim assertion of self. After a group of pages attempts to drive her off by vandalizing her room, she resolves not to let those who think she has no place as a knight-in-training forget who and what she is: “She was a girl; she had nothing to be ashamed of, and they [the other pages] had better learn that first thing. The best way to remind them was to dress at least part of the time as a girl” (First Test 32). Her attitude toward her gender identity is not neutral, either, but positive. When the knight in charge of training the young pages later tells her, “I would you had been born a boy,” Kel’s only response is to think to herself, “But I like being a girl” (Page 246).

My thanks to Deborah Stevenson for suggesting this connection.

Muñoz expands on Judith Butler, who asks, “What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?” (quoted in Muñoz 12).
In Chapter Two, I argued that Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lioness series thematizes transformative citizenship through Alanna’s personal transformations that, in turn, transform the institutions she enters: Tortallan knighthood, the Bazhir priesthood, and more broadly, both Tortallan and Bazhir societies as she challenges the normative beliefs of the worlds she moves within and between. Alanna’s story, however, is highly individualistic. At the same time as it affirms the importance and value of community and connection with others, Alanna’s transformation of her world is largely a function of her actions in service to her own desires. She transforms Tortallan knighthood by virtue of becoming a knight herself, not because she sets out to change the institution. (Indeed, as I discuss in the previous chapter, she is deeply invested in the institution as it is, and struggles to negotiate the relationship between the masculinism of knighthood and the aspects of her femininity that she also values.) Thus, Pierce’s Song of the Lioness Quartet privileges an individualism tempered with an acknowledgment of the importance of community, gesturing toward the power of the individual to transform the world around her, which I call transformative citizenship. In this chapter, I turn to Kristin Cashore’s Seven Kingdoms Trilogy (2008-2012) to further explore the potential of transformative citizenship for forging connection and creating community that is not defined by rigid categories of development, kinship, or the nation-state. Like the Song of the Lioness series, Cashore’s novels explore the developing selves of their three young women protagonists, but with a greater emphasis on context and relationality. Where Alanna seeks mastery of skills that will allow her entry into institutions closed to her because of her gender, the protagonists of the Seven
Kingdoms novels must negotiate the meanings of the singular powers that they possess, whether magical or political, that construct them as sometimes-monstrous others. The novels do not only acknowledge the importance of community and interdependence, but insist upon it. None of the protagonists of Cashore’s novels can gain self-understanding without attending to the perspectives of others; however, outside perspective must not be controlling. In order to transform themselves, Katsa, Fire, and Bitterblue must also transform the nations and the world they inhabit. Cashore engages the trope of the exceptional girl and complicates it, transforming both the exceptional girl protagonist and the world she inhabits in the three novels of her trilogy, *Graceling* (2008), *Fire* (2009), and *Bitterblue* (2012).

In keeping with the temporal dislocation of the narratives of development I examine in this project, I begin with *Bitterblue*, the third novel in the trilogy both in publication order and in the novels’ internal chronology. (The first two novels were published out of order of the chronology of the texts: *Fire* is a prequel to *Graceling*.) The plot of *Bitterblue* picks up eight years after the conclusion of the first novel, *Graceling*. Having become queen of Monsea at ten years old at the end of *Graceling*, at the start of the third novel eighteen-year-old Bitterblue is struggling to understand her kingdom and her role in it while her advisers persist in infantilizing her and prevent her from taking meaningful action to repair the damage wrought by her father. Bitterblue’s father Leck was a Graceling, an individual born with a magical power, or Grace; Leck’s Grace lay in his voice, giving him the power to make anyone believe his words, regardless of evidence to the contrary. He used his power first to trick his way onto the throne of Monsea, and then to transform the kingdom in the image of his memories of the distant kingdom of the Dells through a violent campaign of suppression and coercion. The nature of his power, which “fog[s] people’s minds,” leaves behind a morass of confusion and anguish; no one, it
seems, is quite sure of what happened during Leck’s 35-year reign (3). As the novel opens, Bitterblue has become increasingly convinced of the necessity of understanding the past, but is frustrated by her advisers’ control over her and her government. Advocating a policy of “forward-thinkingness,” they discourage her inquiries into the past, admonishing her, “Lady Queen…we’re trying to lift people out of Leck’s spell and help them move on, you understand? Otherwise, people will wallow in their own upsetting stories” (18). While Bitterblue, too, wants to look to the future, she wonders, “how was forgetting possible? Could she forget her own father? Could she forget that her father had murdered her mother? How could she forget the rape of her own mind?” (19).

As the culminating text in Cashore’s trilogy, Bitterblue intertwines its title character’s coming of age with the production and excavation of knowledge of her own past and that of Monsea; and her own well-being with the well-being of the nation that she not only rules, but also embodies. Her understanding of her self, her position as queen, and the past and present of Monsea are inseparable; Bitterblue’s position as a monarch makes her the limit case for Cashore’s exploration of the relationship between self and community, here figured as the nation. In classic young adult form, the Graceling novels are narratives of development and identity; they are also, crucially, narratives of citizenship and kinship, using a fantasy setting to explore and interrogate what it means to be a citizen for young women on the margins when they forge kinship ties across borders of space and time.

If it seems strange to begin a discussion of citizenship on the margins with the story of a young monarch, I do not read the imagined kingdoms in the Graceling novels as metonyms for modern nation-states, nor are they arguments for the institutions they depict. Benedict Anderson notes that monarchy’s “legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are
subjects, not citizens” (19). In theorizing the modern nation, Anderson distinguishes between “subjects” and “citizens,” noting, “In a world of citizens, all . . . are theoretically eligible for the presidency,” (19 n. 21). I would emphasize here the theoretical aspect of such universal eligibility for the position of the head of state. One function of the trope of monarchy in Cashore’s novels is to make visible the limited pool of eligible rulers in order to ask what it might mean for individuals with varying relations to the state (as monarch) to claim citizenship. Further, the trope of monarchy offers a means of exploring and articulating a desire for a more humane world by placing individuals at the center of the state. In doing so, the protagonists of Cashore’s three novels—Katsa (Graceling), Fire and Bitterblue—figure a complex web of affective relationships between nation, state, and self that is sometimes salutary, sometimes painful, and always transformative.

Transformative citizenship is rooted in the notion of cultural citizenship, over political and economic or social citizenship. Toby Miller summarizes these three “zones of citizenship” as, respectively, “the right to know and speak”; “the right to reside and vote”; and “the right to work and prosper;” adding that “the postmodern, cultural guarantee [of citizenship] is access to the technologies of communication” (35). Nick Stevenson similarly emphasizes the circulation of knowledge and representation to argue that cultural citizenship offers a crucial way of understanding citizenship in a globalized world, claiming, “Cultural citizenship. . . asks us to attend to the ways in which civil society becomes encoded by powerful symbolic codes and discourses” (24). While the political, economic, and social are closely intertwined with the cultural, it is “the right to know and speak” that shapes the dynamics of transformative citizenship. Each of the coming-of-age narratives in the Seven Kingdoms Trilogy centers on self-knowledge and self-definition. In Graceling, Katsa goes from understanding herself as
others have defined her—a Graceling killer and thug under the control of her uncle, the King of the Middluns—to redefining her Grace, and redefining herself as a survivor and protector. In *Fire*, the title character, a young woman with the power to read and control the minds of others, goes from fearing the power she inherited from her monstrous father, to using it to provide comfort and healing. Finally, Bitterblue works to takes back knowledge of her self and her kingdom from Leck’s fog, and begins the “difficult—impossible—slow—messy work [sic]” of “reshaping what it meant to be queen,” transforming herself from a figurehead to “a truthseeker” (428, 96). Leck’s power to circulate lies thematizes the centrality of knowledge to the novels’ exploration of self and citizenship. For all three young women, the power to transform their worlds lies in knowledge and transformation of the self, over and against the “knowledge” that circulates around and about them.

Essential to all of their abilities to transform knowledge of themselves are the kinship ties the three women form with one another as part of a broader set of alternative kinship relations that cross national borders and, eventually, the borders of their known worlds. I distinguish here between normative kinship systems defined by official recognition in “social policies that recognize some forms of lived relationality—those extending from the heterosexual couple and the parent-child unit—with financial and other benefits; these policies in turn demand certain responsibilities between recognized relatives” (Freeman, “Queer Belongings” 295) and alternative kinship networks that forge connection outside of normative institutions of heterosexual marriage and descent. This version of kinship is more like what J. Halberstam calls “alternative methods of alliance” opened up by queerness (1) and Foucault’s notion of queer friendship, which creates a space for “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the
formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force” (136). It challenges what Halberstam considers the inherent conservatism of notions of community rooted in “traditional family,” Christianity, and nostalgia in favor of “extrafamilial and oppositional modes of affiliation,” though I emphasize here the enduring nature of those affiliations, over the “transient” affiliations of Halberstam’s subcultures (154). I consider the alternative kinship networks I describe here to be distinct from kinship systems, which Gayle Rubin describes as “a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships” (41). A kinship system is defined more by dominant social mores and institutions—heterosexual marriage, in particular—while a network is more organic and malleable, extending across time and space in multiple directions.

As I note in the introduction, following Judith Butler, I understand kinship as “a kind of doing, one that does not reflect a prior structure, but that can only be understood as an enacted practice” that may best be defined as “no more or less than the intensification of community ties . . . that are irreducible to family” (“Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” 123, 127). I further draw on Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of queer kinship’s ability to forge connections across time by conceiving of kinship as practice, which she articulates through Pierre Bourdieu’s use of habitus to “[provide] a way of thinking about queer belongings in a temporal as well as a spatial sense: as modes of duration not only for otherwise mortal bodies, but between bodies otherwise separated in time” (“Queer Belongings” 305). Freeman explains, “Many queer bodily schemas seem to ‘channel’ archaic or futuristic ways of being in the world . . . forms of alliance with and inheritance from bygone or not-yet eras and discarded bodily dispositions. They mark our dependencies on those we will not meet because they are dead, or cannot meet because they are not born—and their capacity to renew us anyway” (311). This is especially important for
understanding the kinship ties between all three protagonists that preexists their meeting one another, or even knowing of each other’s existence—especially Fire, whose home in the Dells is on the other side of a mountain range thought impassable by Katsa and Bitterblue’s societies for most of the series. The three women only come together briefly at the end of Bitterblue.

As their common antagonist, Leck is the connective tissue among Katsa, Fire, and Bitterblue, who form a version of what Gayatri Chakavorty Spivak has called “cocksisters” to describe the relationship between women who have slept with the same man (Gallop 151). But though they are connected through their encounters with Leck, their kinship lies in their repudiation of his violation of their minds and as a symbolic figure of patriarchal power. All three women reject patriarchal dictates of possessive marriage and compulsory reproduction, opting instead for kinship relations that are more expansive and reciprocal. In the next section I begin with Bitterblue as she struggles to recreate a community out of the ruins of Leck’s lies and violence to examine the salutary potential of alternative kinship ties, even when they originate in violence and trauma. I then turn to analyses of Fire and Graceling to further explore the kinship networks that facilitate the action of transformative citizenship.

1. Truthseeker: Bitterblue

   Early in Bitterblue, Bitterblue stumbles upon a strange sculpture tucked away in an alcove in the royal library: “A child, five or six, perhaps, whose skirts were metamorphosing into rows of brick, for the child was turning into a castle.” Fascinated, Bitterblue stares at the sculpture, “overtaken suddenly by a most peculiar sense of recognition. . . . She knew the stubborn mouth and the small, pointy chin of the sculpture child; she knew those big, calm eyes.
She was looking into her own face” (160). But at the same time as she recognizes herself in the sculpture, Bitterblue experiences a profound disjuncture between the “defiant” image of her child self and the young woman she has become. She is “amazed that a sculptor had been able to imagine her that way once: so strong and certain, so steady on the earth. She knew she wasn’t those things” (161). On the contrary, Bitterblue feels lost and overwhelmed; she is barely in control of her own life, let alone of her kingdom. Her advisers, appointed by her grandfather (king of a neighboring kingdom) when she assumed the throne as a child, have “a single-mindedness that [leaves] her behind sometimes.” When they begin discussing the possibility of her marriage early in the novel, Bitterblue finds herself deeply frightened, because “Things that started out as mere talk among them seemed to become real institutions, suddenly, forcefully, before she’d ever managed to comprehend them or form an opinion” (18). Though the matter of her marriage is passed by in this moment, her resistance to marriage suggests the larger implications of Bitterblue’s resistance to the policy of “forward-thinkingness” that “too often involved avoiding any kind of thought at all—especially about things that might benefit from a great deal of thinking” (108). If marriage is a point on a linear narrative of female development—what Freeman might term a chrononormative telos of development—then Bitterblue’s resistance to her advisers’ proposed arranged marriage (to her queer cousin, no less) undergirds her larger resistance to the “forward-thinkingness” that demands she “help people to forget” her father even as the damage wrought by his power leaves “a sickness that lingers” in her people’s minds (19). Bitterblue seeks a way forward for herself and her people, but one that is only possible by way of the past; attempting to forget only continues the cycle of violence and suppression that Leck began.
José Muñoz argues in *Cruising Utopia* for “hope as a critical methodology [that] can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (3). Such a move is, for Muñoz, essentially queer: the temporality of queerness is futurity, “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). In my reading of *Bitterblue*, I consider the impact of a traumatic past on the potential of this future-oriented queer time and its ability to image a utopic future. For Muñoz, the past is a repository of “rich resonance of remembrance, distinct pleasures felt in the past” that “stave off the affective perils of the present while they enable a desire that is queer futurity’s core” (26). Rather than seeking to recoup past pleasures that have been demonized or erased, as Muñoz does throughout *Cruising Utopia*, the traumatic past in *Bitterblue* continually invades the present unbidden, as Bitterblue’s advisor Thiel reflects: “one of Leck’s cruelest legacies is that he left us unable to remember some things and unable to forget others. We are not masters of our minds” (390). Indeed, Leck’s actions—not only the violence he committed himself, but his penchant for using his power to force others to torture his victims—makes the act of trying to recover the past seem “unpardonably cruel” (201). Thus, Bitterblue’s advisors have pushed her to issue blanket pardons for all crimes committed under Leck’s rule, an “acknowledgment of the impossibility of our ever knowing the truth about anything” (123). More than acknowledging of the impossibility of knowing the truth, though, her advisors continue Leck’s own campaign of terror and suppression when they take action in Bitterblue’s name to prevent those who seek to recover what truth they can from the confusion of Leck’s reign.

Bitterblue discovers what her advisors are doing when, frustrated at how little she knows about the city in which she lives and is supposed to rule, she takes to sneaking out of the palace in disguise. Outside the palace, Bitterblue discovers in her city a culture of knowledge-building
through storytelling. People gather clandestinely in “story rooms,” guarded taverns tucked away in alleys and under bridges, to tell, and to hear, stories of Leck’s reign. Listening to the true, but exaggerated, stories of her father, Bitterblue observes the “gory tastes” of “[t]hese late-night story audiences,” but another pattern stands out to her even more starkly:

In the spaces between the blood, Bitterblue noticed another kind of recurring, bloodless story. This kind always began in the usual way of stories—perhaps two people falling in love, or a clever child trying to solve a mystery. But just as you thought you knew where the story was going, it would end abruptly, when the lovers or the child vanished with no explanation, never to be seen again.

Hearing these “[a]borted stories,” Bitterblue wonders, “Why did people come out to hear them? Why would they choose to listen to the same thing over and over, crashing up against the same unanswerable question every time?” Her discovery of the story rooms leads Bitterblue to a more focused determination to find the endings to the “aborted stories” she hears. What began as frustration with her lack of access to her city and its people gives way to an identification with both: “Suddenly it wasn’t enough for Bitterblue to know [the people in the stories] were gone. She wanted to know the rest about them, because the people in these story places were her people, and it was clear that they wanted to know. She wanted to know so that she could tell them” (45). Claiming “the people in these story places” as “her people,” Bitterblue does not simply affirm her status as monarch; rather, she claims kinship with them, a kinship that she seeks to bring out of the hidden story rooms and into the open. While her advisers have made her the unwitting face of their campaign of suppression, she finds in the people who come to the story rooms the same frustration she feels at her inability to uncover the truths behind her
father’s reign. She does not take over the quest for knowledge from them, as one might expect of an absolute monarch, but rather joins it.

The “aborted stories” that Bitterblue listens to in the story rooms are a form of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “affective histories, “narratives of human belonging where life forms, although porous to one another, do not seem exchangeable through a third term of equivalence such as abstract labor” (quoted in Freeman, *Time Binds* xx). Freeman elaborates, “[Affective histories] are not only or even primarily narratives but also practices of knowing, physical as well as mental, erotic as well as loving ‘grasps’ of detail that do not accede to existing theories and lexicons but come into unpredictable contact with them” (xx-xxi). At issue in Monsea is the attempt by those in power—at the moment, not Bitterblue herself—to replace knowledge about Leck’s reign with a false sense of optimism produced by effacing the past. When Bitterblue discovers the extent of their deceit and confronts her advisers, they confirm Bitterblue’s conclusion that “[f]orward-thinkingness actually meant suppression of the past. . . . Push the past under the rug and pretend it’s possible to make a fresh start. The blanket pardons for all crimes committed in Leck’s time too. The lack of education in the schools, because it’s easier to control what’s known when people can’t read.” They also confess to “flooding [Bitterblue] with paper so that [she’d] stay in [her] tower and be too overwhelmed to be curious” (485). Knowledge of Leck’s reign is crucial to Bitterblue’s ability to assume her role as queen and help her nation recover, but the nature of Leck’s power, and the subsequent actions of Bitterblue’s advisers and their conspirators to suppress the past, makes such knowledge singularly difficult and painful to access.

The affective histories constructed in the story rooms, incomplete “remembrances and their ritualized retellings . . . [have] world-making potentialities,” as Bitterblue argues when she
learns to her surprise, that before her father’s reign it was Monsean custom to bury, rather than
burn, the dead (Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 35). When she asks her advisers why they have not
worked to change the practice, they demur, saying, “It barely matters. Why remind people of
their grief? Why give them reason to feel that perhaps they’ve been honoring their dead
wrongly?” Bitterblue thinks, “It is not a small thing. . . . It has to do to with tradition and respect,
and with recovering what it means to be Monsean” (106). It is significant that Bitterblue does not
voice her disagreement; here, as in much of the first half of the novel, Bitterblue struggles to be a
voice in her own government, to claim the right for herself “to know and speak” in order that she
might also confer it on her people. Keeping her in the dark, her advisers maintain their control
over her and over the Monsean government. In order to take ownership of her position and her
power, she must uncover the painful truths that her advisers, and much of her court, work hard to
conceal. Although the storytellers and their listeners do not find much (if any) pleasure in the
past, they seek healing there in the hope that the stories will be resolved and they can recover
“what it means to be Monsean.”

Those who do seek knowledge of the past call themselves “truthseekers,” a mantle
Bitterblue takes on for herself as well, after she learns of them. Truthseekers are “people whose
families were in the resistance and who place the highest value on knowing the truth of things. . .
. trying to help people figure out what happened, sometimes reassemble memories. Return what
Leck stole, and, when they can, undo what Leck did, through thievery, through
education—however they can” (207). Bitterblue’s friend Saf, who she meets on her first outing
to the story rooms, explains the danger that truthseekers face: “Everyone wants silence.
Everyone is happy forgetting Leck ever hurt anyone and pretending Monsea was born, fully
formed, eight years ago” (208). Nearly a decade after Leck’s death, Bitterblue discovers the
ongoing need to participate in the resistance that she practiced as a child with her mother, who taught her to use arithmetic and, later, ciphers and puzzles, to help her resist Leck’s power over her mind. “[N]umbers are an anchor,” her mother told her; “Clear your mind of everything but the numbers. . . . Pretend you’re alone with the numbers in an empty room” (2). The numbers her mother gives her to work through as a child “touch [Bitterblue’s] memory and build a story,” helping her recall truths about her life: her parents’ ages, the circumstances of their marriage, her mother’s home and family (2-3). The young Bitterblue links the numbers in her arithmetic problems to stories, but like the aborted stories she hears in the story rooms and the knowledge the truthseekers try to reassemble, these are unequal to the task of fully clearing Leck’s fog: “the numbers are clear but other things in [her] mind are muddled” (3). The lingering influence of Leck’s power, and the crimes that others are willing to commit to suppress the memory of their own crimes committed under his influence, mean that Bitterblue, as queen, must continue to “be in the resistance,” fighting equally to claim her father’s memory and to disavow him.

Bitterblue’s search for truth takes her to her library, where she embarks on a project of rereading the books Leck chose for her to read as a child in the hope that “she could find missing pieces by starting with herself” (169). Her search for her own personal history is inextricably linked to the history of her people and her kingdom. Her research gives way quickly from rereading the books Leck had selected for her, to reading books that Leck had attempted to alter or destroy: “Books about Monsean customs and traditions, Monsean holidays, recent Monsean history pre-Leck. Books by philosophers who argued the merits of monarchy versus republic. Books about medicine” (193). The manuscripts, quietly rescued and reassembled by Bitterblue’s librarian, reveal that Leck sought to fundamentally alter Monsea, suppressing recent history, changing place names, and changing customs; but they offer little insight into the madness
manifest in his strange renovations to the palace, the bizarre sculptures he commissioned, and the gruesome “experiments” he conducted on animals and people in what he called his “hospital.” Even the discovery of Leck’s journals, which Bitterblue hopes “will tell me what he did to leave my kingdom so broken,” do little to illuminate the purpose behind his actions (397).

Much of what Bitterblue discovers is in the form of ciphers. But while studying ciphers and puzzles with her mother had been a source of clarity for her in the midst of Leck’s fog, the coded messages she discovers in the course of her investigation leave her with more questions than answers. As a child, Bitterblue had assumed her mother’s embroidery was evidence of Leck’s hold over her; she sees the “cheerful little rows of embroidered stars, moons, castles; cheerful, colorful flowers and keys and candles” as “a lie of happiness that Father convinces her is true” (4). But the embroidery proves to be the opposite, a cipher alphabet Ashen used “to create a record she could read to remember what was real” (277). Ashen recorded some events, but more questions, wondering how to protect her daughter and spare Leck’s victims his tortures: “Should I kill them when I know he’s marked them for death? Would that be merciful or mad?” (276). The ciphered embroidery repeats itself, “sometimes filling up an entire sheet [with the same words and phrases]. He lies. He lies. Blood. I can’t remember. I must remember. I must kill him. I must get Bitterblue away” (278). The cipher haunts her with “bright little pictures on sheets that revealed too little that was helpful, and too much pain” (279). Leck’s journals are similarly opaque and painful. When she first discovers them, hidden in a concealed closet in Leck’s rooms, which themselves have been sealed off from the rest of the palace, Bitterblue thinks with relief, “If no one Leck hurt is left to tell me what he did, if no one will tell me the secrets everyone’s trying to hide, the secrets that trap everyone inside pain, perhaps it doesn’t matter. For Leck can tell me himself. His secrets will tell me what he did to leave my kingdom
so broken. And finally, I’ll understand” (397). The journals, however, prove indecipherable. Although “ciphers, of various kinds, were part of her daily life” (181), Bitterblue discovers that the task of decoding without a key is more difficult than she imagined: “She’d ciphered messages using the most complicated ciphers she could imagine, and enjoyed the neatness of it, the rapid calculations of her own mind. But deciphering was an entire other beast. She understood the basic principles of decipherment, but when she tried to transfer that understanding to Leck’s symbols, everything kept falling apart” (410). The task of deciphering Leck’s journals reveals the problems inherent in Bitterblue’s belief that she can understand the recent past by solving the right puzzles. The ciphers Bitterblue knows and uses are complicated but neat, and reveal clear messages. Uncovering what Leck left behind in his fog of lies is anything but neat; and Leck’s writings, when she does decode them, prove too painful for Bitterblue to read.

Bitterblue’s decoding projects produce a shift in her understanding of truth and its knowability. In every code, key, and story she reads, the truth remains inaccessible, impossible to fully recover from the past. Indeed, after working through some of Leck’s journals, Bitterblue wonders if she, and Monsea, need the details of Leck’s brutality. When she expresses her doubts to her librarian, he objects that “it’s history,” to which Bitterblue replies, “Not really, not yet. In a hundred years it will be history. Now it’s our own story.” The result of reading Leck’s version of her story is devastating; it leaves “holes in her ability to feel. Great, blank spaces where something existed that she couldn’t process, because to process it would make her know too much” (440). It gives her a greater understanding of her advisers’ desire to suppress the knowledge she seeks, but she also understands—and rejects—the greater cycle of violence and loss that they fuel. Judith Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, “If we are interested in arresting
cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war” (xii). *Bitterblue* explores this question in its fictional world, though the text offers no easy answers. The way out of the cycle of violence begun by Leck requires confronting “a primary human vulnerability to other humans . . . exposed [by violence] in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another” (Butler 28). Leck’s power is doubly terrifying, making others vulnerable to his will not only as victims of his violence, but as agents of it, as Bitterblue’s adviser Thiel reveals before his suicide: “[Leck is] the one who watched. We’re the ones who cut them and raped them. Children! . . . I was his favorite . . . I felt the pleasure when he told me to.” Despite Bitterblue’s protest that Leck “stole who you were,” for Thiel, the violation is too great to face (467). As one of the architects of the suppression of the Truthseekers, he “tried to make the memory end . . . but all of it only gets bigger and more impossible to control.” He confesses to Bitterblue, “I never meant it to grow so big. I never meant to tell so many lies. It was supposed to end. It never ends!” Unable to see a way out of the cycle of violence in which he is so closely bound, Thiel takes his own life, as do several others who Leck abused in the same way.

The discovery of a “reef of bones” downriver from Monsea’s capital city, the remains of Leck’s victims, powerfully visualizes the partial, fragmented, and affective nature of knowledge in the novel (385). The first hint of what lies at the bottom of the river comes from a section of her mother’s coded embroidery, which reads, “His hospital is at bottom of river. River is his graveyard of bones” (340). A search of the river turns up “upward of five thousand bones, and few answers.” As Bitterblue’s healers set about the project of reassembling the skeletons of “hundreds of people” recovered from the bottom of the river, fragmented endings to the “aborted
stories” that set Bitterblue to searching for knowledge in the first place, Bitterblue begins to find that fragments of knowledge may be enough. “[T]he work of articulating skeletons” taking place in the castle infirmary in this section of the novel offer a source of comfort to Bitterblue. She reflects, “These bones were the truth of something Leck had done, and Madlen was trying to return them to themselves. It felt, to Bitterblue, like a way of showing respect” (427-8). Holding one of the recovered bones, Bitterblue observes, “There was power in touching things. Holding this once-broken bone, she felt the pain its person had felt when it broke. She felt the sadness of a life that had ended too soon, and of a body that had been dumped as if it meant nothing; she felt her own death, which would happen someday” (428). In the same sequence, Bitterblue kneads bread to build strength in her own broken arm, a task that “connect[s] Bitterblue’s feet to the earth” (426). Touch in these scenes creates connection to both life and death, associated with both the memory of the pain and the creation of nourishment. As Bitterblue works in the kitchen, “pushing and shaping [the dough] into an elastic thing,” she determines to “reshape what it meant to be queen, and reshaping what it meant to be queen would reshape the kingdom” (428).

The bones, the evidence of Leck’s crimes, the remains of the people he disappeared, also function as a foundation of strength and affective connection for Bitterblue and her people.

The elasticity of the dough Bitterblue kneads contrasts the brittleness she sees in her advisers, whose victimization at Leck’s hands keep them from being the foundation that Bitterblue needs. Placing these moments side-by-side, Bitterblue’s connection to the bones of Leck’s victims and the bread she kneads to build strength, underscores the interconnectedness of past and future, trauma and mourning, that seem to offer two ways forward. One is the way her advisers choose, becoming increasingly violent in their attempts to suppress knowledge of Leck’s crimes. Bitterblue seeks another way forward when she establishes a “Ministry of Stories
and Truth” to collect the stories of Leck’s reign for those who wish to tell them. The new ministry makes a space for speech but does not demand it; Bitterblue sees it as a way to help her kingdom “balance knowing with healing” (537).

Her ministry is a version of Muñoz’s methodology of hope, the “backward glance that enacts a future vision,” but its utopic vision is only visible through a backward glance toward trauma that nonetheless left behind beauty, as Bitterblue tells Fire:

Leck was—what he was. But he did manage, somehow, to make this castle beautiful and strange, and I’d be sorry to change some things about it. He accidentally filled it with art that tells the truth, . . . And I’ve even begun to appreciate the folly of these bridges. They have little reason to exist, except as a monument to the truth of all that’s happened, and because they’re beautiful (522).

While loss and violence fuel one another, Butler argues that loss can also “[furnish] a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility” (22). Indeed, violence and loss are what constitute Monsea as a nation in the aftermath of Leck’s rule. The sense of community that Bitterblue experiences in the story room at the beginning of the novel is rooted in a shared experience of loss. Where Bitterblue began the novel believing that her role is to learn the truth of what happened during her father’s reign so that she can tell the people listening to the stories in the story rooms, in the end she realizes that the truth encoded in the many ciphers left behind from those three decades will never be fully decoded. Instead, she concludes, “My kingdom’s challenge . . . is to balance knowing with healing” (537). Her Ministry of Stories and Truth moves the violent past out of the back alley story rooms, to be recorded as part of Monsea’s history. “Truth” emerges as fragmented,
multivalent, and multivocal—not contained in any one account of the past but in its many stories that, in their telling, help reestablish a sense of communal identity for Bitterblue and her people.

2. Imagining Kinship: Fire

As ruminations on citizenship and power, it is significant that the Seven Kingdoms novels center on three young women. Katsa, Bitterblue, and Fire’s struggles against the violent legacies and actions of powerful men suggests a gendered vision of power that seeks alternatives to violence. Underlying and enabling Bitterblue’s transformation of her self and her kingdom is the kinship among her, Katsa, and Fire. The first is visible at the level of the text, as Katsa played a key role in rescuing Bitterblue from Leck at the end of Graceling. The second is implicit until the end of Bitterblue, when Fire comes to Monsea; but for the reader who has read the novels in their published order, Bitterblue’s relationship to Fire is clear from the novel’s opening pages. Fire’s father Cansrel was very much like Leck. He, too, possessed a magic power that allowed him to control others, and he “was a terror . . . He used his power to destroy people” (Bitterblue 521). Fire struggles with the legacy of the power she inherited from him. When they finally meet at the end of Bitterblue, Fire, now an old woman, tells Bitterblue that she made the difficult journey to Monsea for her, because “when I heard about you, . . . my heart burst open. I felt that I knew what you’d faced and what you’re facing” (521). Set fifty years before the events of Graceling and Bitterblue, Fire is connected to the other two novels in the trilogy partly by the story of Leck’s origins, but more significantly by Fire’s parallels to Katsa and Bitterblue, as she struggles to define her self and her role in her world in relation to the powers she possesses and those who would use her. Fire’s coming of age and entry into full citizenship is set against the
backdrop of a kingdom on the brink of civil war—instability that is directly linked the destructive influence her father exerted as friend and adviser to the previous king. As the novel opens, it has fallen to the young King Nash and his siblings to try to bring peace and stability to the Dells. Though Fire has vowed to use the powers she inherited from Cansrel—to read and manipulate others’ thoughts and emotions—only for self-defense, at Nash’s request she reluctantly goes to King’s City to help question captured spies. As she is drawn out of her self-imposed isolation and into the inner circle of the royal family, she must weigh her own unwillingness to use her powers against the needs of her kingdom, whose history is intertwined with her own.

Like Bitterblue, Fire occupies the unstable intersection of past and future for her kingdom, though in a different register. Where Bitterblue seeks knowledge of the past in order to heal her people in the present and shape the future, Fire already knows the details of her father’s crimes and seeks to absent herself from the world, fearing her own power and the hatred of those who her father had hurt. Fire’s first appearance in the novel positions her not only on the margins of the nation but of humanity, as well: a hunter mistakes her, in her brown clothing and head covering, for a deer, and shoots her. In the Dells, any species can be a monster; they all have the powers to influence others that Fire and her father possess: “It was their unusual coloring that identified them as monsters, because in every other physical particular they were like normal . . . animals. . . . A dappled gray horse in the Dells was a horse. A sunset orange horse was a monster” (Fire 11). Fire sees herself as an outsider, and a dangerous one at that; more akin to the raptor monsters that hunt humans and animals alike than any human beings. While Cansrel gloried in his monster power and his ability to influence others, Fire sees a profound flaw in her own: “As often as the power of her beauty made one man easy to control, it
made another man uncontrollable and mad. A monster drew out all that was vile, especially a female monster, because of the desire, and the endless perverted channels for the expression of malice” (145). The man who shoots Fire at the beginning of the novel surprises her, not because he shot her, but because he hadn’t intended to. Her history of being hunted is written on her body in scars: “She had a dagger scar on one forearm, another on her belly. An arrow gouge from years ago on her back. It was a thing that happened now and then. For every peaceful man, there was a man who wanted to hurt her, even kill her, because she was a gorgeous thing he could not have, or because he’d despised her father” (30-31). She is used to being hated, and hunted.

As a monster, Fire visibly embodies her father’s crimes in a way that Bitterblue does not, though both women struggle to break away from the legacies of cruelty that they fear they have inherited. The first half of the novel concerns Fire’s internal conflict over whether, and how, to use her powers in the service of the nation. Even after she agrees to travel to King’s City to help question a spy, she struggles over whether and how to do so. At first, Fire refuses to use her power as the king and his advisers would like, telling Prince Garan and Princess Clara, the King’s half-siblings and spymasters, “I only use my mental power in self-defense” (183). “It would be self-defense,” Clara insists. “The self-defense of this kingdom. Not that I don’t understand your resistance . . . , Lady, but we need you” (184). The novel links Fire strongly to the nation; indeed, her belief that she bears a responsibility to the Dells is what prompts her to leave her home on the kingdom’s northern border and travel to the capital city. “She burn[s] hot with the shame of her father’s legacy” (70) and takes reckless action to distance herself from it. She places herself in mortal danger to protect Prince Brigan, the king’s brother and commander of the army, and his troops as they ride to the aid of a village under attack. She considers her action “[a]n apology for the life of her father, who’d created a world of lawlessness where towns
like Gray Haven fell under the attack of looters” (101). Fire wants badly to change the “world of lawlessness” that her father had created with King Nax; nonetheless, “her heart and her mind…positively forbid” her to use her powers in the way King Nash would like. She cannot separate the use of her power from the destruction wrought by Cansrel; “The matter plagued her at night when she couldn’t sleep. She had bad dreams of what it meant to trick people and hurt people, nightmares of Cansrel making [a man] grovel in imagined pain” (205). She tells Brigan, “Taking someone’s very mind and changing it is a trespass. A violence. Can I ever use such a thing without overstepping my right? How will I know if I’m going too far? I’m capable of so many horrors” (218). Fire’s struggle, then, like Katsa’s and Bitterblue’s, is to come to terms with what she is capable of and to decide how she can exist in her world—as part of her world, rather than in the self-imposed isolation she begins the novel in—with that power.

In contrast to her father, Fire uses her power to build up those around her. She refuses to use her power unless her life is in danger, and insists that her friends and allies make themselves strong enough to resist her power over them. Her insistence on others’ strength plays out powerfully in her relationship with King Nash. The first time she meets him, he accosts her in a corridor when she is returning from a late-night walk: “His eyes glazed over when he saw her . . . he came at her suddenly, flattened her against the wall, and tried to kiss her” (84). His drunkenness makes it easy for Fire to exert her influence on him in order to escape, but sober, Nash proves more difficult for her to handle, “too weak and too strong in all the wrong places. The harder she took hold of his consciousness, the harder he pulled at her to keep taking, so that her control turned somehow into his control and his taking” (177). When he assaults her again, for refusing to use her power to interrogate a prisoner, she tells him, “I hate bullies. . . . This is the last time I’ll ever appear before you, until you’ve learned to guard yourself against me”
Fire’s insistence that Nash learn self-control in her presence signals Fire’s refusal to occupy the position of subject; she insists on citizenship and the agency that comes with it. Her refusal to allow Nash to bully her parallels Katsa’s refusal of Randa’s bullying, but instead of taking herself away from the king, here, Fire insists that the king change, by changing “the part [of himself] that wants to be taken by [her] power.” When he protests that he can’t, she tells him, “You can. If you’re too strong for me to control, then you’re strong enough to control yourself. . . You don’t want to give up the feeling of me, and that is your problem” (185). Unlike her father and Leck, who used their power to exploit weakness and control those around them, Fire works to cultivate strength in the people she encounters by refusing to take responsibility for their actions. Locating the problem in Nash’s desire, she insists that he take responsibility for his particularly gendered response to her power: the desire to possess and control her. Her refusal to take responsibility for the violence, particularly from men, that her very person tends to provoke, is in a broader sense a rejection of the kinship structures defined by the exchange of women in heterosexual marriage that Gayle Rubin identifies at the center of classical anthropological notions of kinship.

Gradually, as Nash learns to take control of himself in her presence, genuine affection emerges between them, informed by both of their love for Nash’s brother Brigan. Nash tells her later, “I love you. . . even knowing you’ll never have me. . . . You can’t help whom you love, Lady.” But the intensity of his emotion has mellowed; when Fire tells him in anguish, “I’m not so good at love. I’m like a barbed creature. I push everyone I love away,” Nash responds with a shrug, “I don’t mind you pushing me away if it means you love me, little sister” (412-13). Nash’s shift from sexual desire—manifest as a desire to possess her—to calling her “sister” suggests an alternative kinship tie not defined by its relation to heterosexual marriage and
reproduction, but rather to choice and affective attachment. Fire’s affection for Nash as an individual underscores her growing sense of being a part of the Dells, not only as a kingdom but as an imagined community founded on a sense of belonging and affection. At the beginning of the novel, she feels compelled to try to use her powers to bring peace and stability to the kingdom because of her father’s role in the political chaos Nash’s father left behind. As she grows closer to the royal family, especially Brigan, she begins to see herself more clearly distinct from her father. Her growing understanding of Brigan’s struggle with his father’s legacy helps her see other possibilities for herself and her power. She realizes that, as the commander of the king’s army, “Brigan did terrible things. . . . He had enormous destructive power, just as his father had had—but he didn’t use that power the way his father had done. Truly, he would rather not use it at all. But he chose to, so that he might stop other people from using power in even worse ways” (221). As Fire comes to realize the similarity in their positions—and that Cansrel was not the only person in the Dells like her—she also comes to realize her own ability to choose how she uses her power: “[S]he wasn’t Cansrel—she wasn’t anyone but herself. She had no one’s path to follow; her path was her own to choose” (222). Even more than defense of the nation as defense of the self, Fire’s epiphany defines self-healing in relation to her place in the Dells. Her own self-healing—her separation from the past, from Cansrel’s violence and the trauma of the violence she herself committed—these only happen by incorporating herself into the larger community that Cansrel damaged, beginning with her affective attachment to the royal family and extending to the people of the Dells as her power allows her to take in their pain.

Woven throughout Fire’s negotiations with her self and others regarding the use of her powers is the slow revelation that she has, in fact, used her powers to do violence: she killed her father. Nightmares of Cansrel’s life and death plague Fire throughout most of the novel, but it is
not until nearly two-thirds of the way through that her role in her father’s apparent suicide is more than hinted at, when Archer, Fire’s former lover, reveals her secret in a jealous outburst. “I killed Cansrel to stop him from killing Brigan,” she explains later; “And, oh, for other reasons. I doubt I need to explain . . . why it was best for him to die” (303). Still, despite her certainty that killing him was the right thing to do, Fire is haunted by the implications of his murder. Her role in Cansrel’s death makes it both harder and easier for her to see the relationship between self and community. She killed Cansrel both for herself and for the Dells, because after Nax’s death she had begun to see “a kingdom that stood on the verge of several permutations of possibility. A kingdom, suddenly, that could change” (148). She acts in a moment of queer temporality, of indeterminacy when the shape of the future is suddenly undefined. Still, she is deeply ambivalent about her actions. She keeps them a secret, finding no pleasure in having killed him and no desire to be recognized for it. When others express admiration for her, Fire “couldn’t explain that the admiration was part of the reason that she hadn’t told. It was not rewarding to be the hero of other people’s hatred for Cansrel. She had not killed him out of hatred” (310-11). When her friends find out, Fire thinks, “she was very lucky in her life’s people, that they should not mind the company of a monster so unnatural that she’d murdered her only family” (301). But killing her father, who she both loved and hated, offers an alternative to Fire’s notion of family and her sense of herself as inevitably more like than unlike her father. Dissolving her blood tie with him with his murder, Fire acquires an adoptive father who sees and nurtures her innate kindness, and wonders that Cansrel could not see that his daughter was “built from a different mold entirely” from him.

What Fire had accepted as inevitable—her status as outsider, as noncitizen, as not-quite-human—proves, in the course of her involvement with the government of the Dells, to
be malleable. For the people of the Dells, she becomes an increasingly important figure for hope and healing. When spying and politicking escalate to war, Fire finds her place, and a new use for her powers, easing the pain of wounded and dying soldiers. She discovers an unexpected peace in comforting the wounded and the dying, which in turn soothes her own grief at her friend Archer’s death and her worry over Brigan. She reflects:

She had thought she’d already reached her capacity for pain and had no room inside her for more. But she remembered having told Archer once that you could not measure love on a scale of degrees, and now she understood that it was the same with pain. Pain might escalate upward and, just when you thought you’d reached your limit, begin to spread sideways and spill out, and touch other people, and mix with their pain. And grow larger, but somehow less oppressive. She had thought herself trapped in a place outside the ordinary feeling lives of people; she had not noticed how may other people were trapped in that place with her (402-3).

Fire’s capacity to share pain and take it into herself changes her from a monster outsider to something different. It makes her a different kind of outsider, from one capable of undermining and destroying, to one who takes others into herself and connects them not only to her, but to each other. She thus becomes the central node in a network that has grown to include her because of, rather than despite, her connection to the traumatic past. This newfound expansiveness is most visible when a battlefield parlay breaks down into violence; “She felt the very moment when the two armies met, an explosion taking place within her own being. So much fear and pain, and so many minds fading away” (440). From being seen as (and considering herself) a threat to individual agency and the stability of the nation, Fire has incorporated the people of the Dells into “her own being.” The conflict between them takes place within her, and she also holds
within her the capacity to heal. Later, Nash tells her, “You have a reputation among the soldiers. . . . Did you know? They’re saying the beauty of you is so powerful, and the mind of you so warm and insistent and strong, that you can call people back from death” (431). And later Garan tells her that people are calling her “The monster life-giver” and “monster protector of the Dells” (452).

Paradoxically, in the process of becoming a “life-giver” for her larger community, Fire gives up her reproductive capacity. Fire loves children and imagines “what it would be like if her own body were a garden of brown soil sheltering a seed. . . . how ferociously she would love that dot, even after it left her body, and grew away from her, and chose the way it would wield an enormous power” (291-2). Knowing that she would pass on her monster power to any child she has, and fearing the potential of such power, she decides to sterilize herself. Her decision is an enormous personal sacrifice, one that makes her feel “her heart was small and shivering, and it seemed that she couldn’t stop crying” (297). It also, however, frees her to define herself outside of maternity and “potential reproduction” (Driscoll 112), becoming a figure for hope and healing, even embedded as she is in past violence. Her choice allows her to become a figure for the future outside the logic of heteropatriarchy. Indeed, even as she is grieving her own loss, her relationship with Brigan’s daughter Hanna grows closer. When she tells Brigan of her decision, he tells her, “You must live where many people are having babies, and adopt them all” (297). Her sacrifice closes off one path, but it opens an alternate one, in which she is connected to the past and future through chosen, affective ties that allow her to become a builder and healer, “live-giver” and “protector” of all those whom she loves, and not only those connected to her by blood.
3. Transformative Citizenship: *Graceling*

Working backwards through the trilogy’s out-of-sequence chronology, I turn in this last section to its first published novel and the first in its internal narrative sequence, *Graceling*. Cashore’s series begins not with a figure who stands above and comes to embrace her community, but with a subject on the margins who becomes a shadow figure who moves across borders on her own terms. Katsa, like Leck, is a Graceling, a person who possesses a magical skill, or Grace. Marked by bicolored eyes, Gracelings may be gifted artists, singers, or cooks; they may be acrobats, storytellers, fighters, or mind-readers. Katsa’s Grace first manifested itself when she was eight and a distant cousin visited court, a man who made Katsa wary with “his heavy perfume, the way he leered at the girls who served him, . . . the way he touched them when he thought no one was watching.” When he tried to touch Katsa, “her hand had flown out and smashed him in the face. So hard and so fast that she’d pushed the bones of his nose into his brain” (*Graceling* 9). Gracelings are property of the king in the Middluns, and Katsa’s uncle, King Randa, puts his niece, with her “killing Grace,” to use. She develops a bloody reputation throughout the Seven Kingdoms, shaped by Randa despite her resistance. Katsa is ten the first time Randa sends her to execute someone for him; he orders her “to kill him, in public, using [her] bare hands.” Knowing that “Randa wanted a bloody, anguished spectacle,” Katsa refuses to give it to him. When she arrives with her escort, “Katsa instructed the soldiers to make the man kneel. In one motion she snapped his neck. There was no blood; there was no more than an instant’s pain.” Randa counters by making his orders specific: “blood and pain, for this or that length of time. There was no way around what he wanted.” As Randa’s agent, “[Katsa’s] reputation spread like a cancer. Everyone knew what came to those who crossed King Randa of
the Middluns” (28-9). Katsa resists Randa, but she does so quietly, and within the parameters that he and others have set out for her.

But at the same time as Katsa sees no way out of the persona that Randa has crafted for her, she also sees a possibility for occupying a different place in her world. Although as a child she wonders that her Grace can do any good, she soon begins to suspect that she can use her power to do violence to help those at the mercy of “the mindlessness of the kings” (27). Hearing of “[y]oung girls who had disappeared from an Estillan village and reappeared weeks later in a Westeran whorehouse. . . . A tax that the King of Wester[’s] . . . soldiers saw fit to collect by slaying . . . villagers and emptying their pockets,” Katsa starts to wonder, “What might she be capable of—if she acted of her own volition and outside Randa’s domain?” (30). The novel opens with her doing just that, helping to rescue the kidnapped grandfather of the King of Lienid, an island nation to the south, with a secret organization of dissidents that she created and leads. She starts her Council envisioning “herself, alone,” and builds a network of spies, safehouses, and friends throughout the Seven Kingdoms, carrying out missions with and without her (Graceling 27). Still, no one—least of all Katsa herself—questions that Katsa’s Grace is for killing. Her Grace is defined for her by those who see her act. People whisper, “Watch out for the blue-eyed, green-eyed one. . . She killed her cousin, with one strike. Because he complimented her eyes.” But, as Katsa tells one of her few friends after the incident: “I never meant to kill him . . . I felt like I was in danger. So I hit him” (10). Still, the accidental nature of the cousin’s death does not seem to suggest even to Katsa’s friends and confidants that there might be another way to understand her Grace. They see only that she killed a man, not that she did it to protect herself. Katsa herself needs prompting to recall that it had been an accident. She later reflects, “She hadn’t lashed out to kill him; she’d only lashed out to protect herself, to
protect herself from his touch. She’d forgotten this, somewhere along the line, when the people of the court had begun to shy away from her and Randa had begun to use her skill for his own purposes, and call her his child killer” (253). Indeed, it is no surprise that Katsa sees her Grace as others do—as a killing Grace. She’s only eight when she kills her cousin, already considered property of the king because of her Grace, even not yet knowing what it is. She is primed to let others define her Grace (and her), and to use it and her. She hates and fears her own violence, but sees no way to understand herself and her Grace differently, even as she acts in defiance of the characterization of “killer.”

Katsa’s realization that “killer” is not the only possible definition for her self and her skills is a key turning point both in her personal development and in the narrative of the text, prompting her to reject Randa’s claim on her and make the Council’s work her sole pursuit. Importantly, Katsa’s epiphany is not only the result of an inward turn toward self-examination, but also a result of her growing friendship with Prince Po of Lienid, who offers an important perspective on Katsa’s abilities, as well as her inner self. Katsa first meets Po on her rescue mission at the beginning of the novel, when he is conducting his own investigation into his grandfather’s kidnapping. Po has a mind-reading Grace. The night they met, though Katsa did not reveal her mission to him, Po had told her, with seeming impulsiveness, that he trusted her. He tells her later, “When I met you . . . I don’t know how to explain it, but you felt trustworthy to me” (Graceling 154-5). Gradually, Po’s ability to see her, and see into her, helps Katsa begin to see herself differently. That Po plays such a key role in Katsa’s self-realization thematizes the text’s exploration of alternative kinship networks. While the views of the court in its prejudice against Gracelings and assumptions about the actions of a frightened eight-year-old girl who did not know her own strength trap Katsa in her identity as a killer, Po’s perspective, offered in
friendship and love, helps her create the space within herself to define her nature differently. Indeed, it is Po’s prompting that reminds Katsa that she did not mean to kill her cousin, only to protect herself. In so doing, he enables Muñoz’s “backward glance that enacts a future vision” when Katsa reevaluates the way her Grace has manifested and what it means.

Katsa’s Grace has always defined her, from the moment she killed her cousin to protect herself when she was a child, and she fears it deeply. She imagines herself as “the arrow, and [Randa] the archer whose skill drove her home. No, not an arrow—that didn’t quite capture it. A dog. To Randa she was a savage dog he’s broken and trained” (72). She tells Po, “If I don’t do what he says, he’ll become angry. When he becomes angry, I’ll become angry. And then I’ll want to kill him.” Randa has crafted a careful prison for her, using her own fear and anger and cultivating the fears of others to control her. Katsa later reflects, “Randa was clever. . . . He knew the words to make her feel stupid and brutish and turn her into a dog” (167). Po is the first person to suggest otherwise, partly because of his ability to see into her, and partly because of his perspective coming from a nation where Gracelings are free, and partly because of his growing love for her. Po argues that Katsa gives Randa power over her, telling her, “He’s not the one who makes you savage. You make yourself savage, when you bend yourself to his will” (Graceling 120-121). Her conversation with Po leads her to reflect on the contradictions she sees in herself. She imagines herself as “a blue-eyed, green-eyed monster, wolflike and snarling. A vicious beast that struck out at friends in uncontrollable anger, a killer that offered itself as the vessel of the king’s fury.” But she also thinks of herself as “a strange monster, for beneath its exterior it was frightened and sickened by its own violence. . . . A monster that refused, sometimes, to behave like a monster. When a monster stopped behaving like a monster, did it stop being a monster? Did it become something else?” (137). When Katsa rejects Randa’s power
over her, she also rejects the monster he has made her, opening the door instead to become something different—or to redefine what it means to be a monster, as Fire does in the second novel of the trilogy.

Monsters, in Cashore’s trilogy, are not all monstrous. When Fire meets Bitterblue, she tells the young queen that she sought her out because Fire’s father was a monster like Leck. Their conversation highlights the split meaning of “monster”. Cansrel “was a beautiful man with silver hair and a powerful mind,” Fire explains; “But he was a monster the way you normally use the word here as well. He was a terror, like your father” (Bitterblue 521). The word rendered as “monster” throughout the novels is revealed, in Bitterblue, to more closely mean “Aberration, mutant”—a marker of otherness that implies danger, to be sure, but a definition that also opens up both Katsa and Fire’s monstrosity to more fertile possibilities for understanding and embodying difference (429). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster, as a “harbinger of category crisis,” is “A mixed category [that] . . . resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration” (7). Thus “monstrosity” is not only the horror of Leck’s Grace (and, more particularly, his use of it); it is a mobile field of difference that can undo rigid categories of self and other, inside and outside. It is especially interesting in Cashore’s text that monsters are beautiful. Indeed, for Fire and Katsa their power manifests in and around the feminine beauty that makes them vulnerable. Fire’s ultrafeminine allure makes her vulnerable to the violent desire of men who wish to possess and use her. Katsa’s “killing Grace” first asserted itself when an older relative attempted to molest her, a response that is later construed by those around her as an overreaction to a compliment. The linkage of monstrosity to beauty, and feminine beauty in particular, emphasizes the way that
notions of otherness attach to surfaces (Fire’s extraordinary hair, Katsa’s bicolored eyes) and become an occasion for the powerful to police acceptable difference, as Cohen explains: "The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (12). At the same time, Fire and Katsa’s struggles with their supposed monstrosity reveal the instability of the category of “monster” as “a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). Away from Randa, who created the “cancer” of her reputation as a thug and killer, Katsa is free to reimagine what the “blue-eyed, green-eyed monster” she imagines herself to be will do with her power.

Away from public scrutiny, Katsa begins to consider the possibility that her Grace is something other than killing. Again, Po’s perspective is crucial. He observes, “[A] killing Grace can’t account for all the things you can do. The way you never tire. Or suffer from the cold, or from hunger. . . . The knack you have with fire in a rainstorm.” Katsa reflects, “She fought and rode and ran and tumbled, but her skin rarely bruised or broke. She’d never broken a bone. And she didn’t suffer from pain the way other people did. . . . If she was being honest, she’d have to admit that she didn’t quite understand what other people meant when they complained of pain” (251). Further, Katsa has always avoided killing when she could. On her rescue mission in the novel’s opening sequence, where Katsa’s role was to neutralize the guards, she insists they not be killed. She tells the Council when they try to argue, “If you want them killed, you can send someone else” (7). Even at this stage, when she believes her Grace to be killing, she works hard to define and control it by refusing to kill unless she has to. Encouraged by Po to reconsider her abilities, Katsa realizes, “The physical needs that limited other people did not limit her. The
things from which other people suffered did not touch her. She knew instinctively how to live and thrive in the wilderness. . . . Her Grace was not killing. Her Grace was survival” (252-3).

Katsa’s epiphany causes her to redefine her Grace in relation to others as well as herself. Considering her newfound knowledge, she tells Po with bemusement, “it’s like saying my Grace is life. . . . It’s absurd.” Po counters, “Is it? I don’t think so,” pointing out, “it’s not just your own life . . . you’ve saved many lives with your Grace” (254). Drawing attention to the lives Katsa has saved with her Grace, Po reinforces Katsa’s idea that her Grace for survival is not about her, alone—any more than the Council was, an organization that functions as the trilogy’s originary alternative kinship network.

Katsa’s changing sense of her Grace, from killing to survival, or death to life, lies at the root of all three novels’ engagement with citizenship, power, and gender. When Katsa rejects her position in Randa’s court as the king’s enforcer, it marks the beginning of a process of transforming the way that she understands her power. What Katsa rejects in Randa is superficially the vision of herself as a weapon, but it is also a rejection of the conventionally masculine mode of power that her uncle embodies, emblematized in the way that Randa presents himself to her when he tries to punish her for her for resisting him: In full court regalia, Randa “[sits] high on his throne, blue robes and bright blue eyes. . . . An archer to either side of him. . . . The king’s guard lined the carpet on either side [of her], three men deep, swords drawn and held at their sides” and ready to subdue her (165). Facing him, Katsa recognizes that her skill and strength as a fighter would enable her to escape, but she also recognizes that she has the power to escape without hurting anyone. She also comes to understand more fully her feelings toward Randa; she “breathe[s] around a thing that she now recognized as hatred. She hated this king” (168). And yet, she also sees Randa’s terror; she thinks, “Mercy was more frightening than
murder, because it was harder, and Randa didn’t deserve it. . . . [S]he didn’t think she had the
courage for it.” Katsa’s decision to be merciful in this moment marks a double repudiation: when
she rejects Randa’s claim on her, she rejects the power Randa embodies, a power that relies on
her violence. She also rejects the kinship system that allows Randa to claim her, both as her king
and as her uncle and only living relative. Instead of acceding to a kinship structure (and a
structure of state power) built around patriarchal possession of women, Katsa chooses the
network she has built with the council and her relationship with Po.

As their friendship develops into romance, it offers Katsa an alternative to being
possessed and controlled. When Katsa first realizes she is falling in love with Po, she is
heartbroken, seeing only one option. She thinks:

She couldn’t have him, and there was no mistaking it. She could never be his wife. She
could not steal herself back from Randa only to give herself away again—belong to
another person, be answerable to another person, build her very being around another
person. No matter how she loved him. . . . [She] understood three truths. She loved Po.
She wanted Po. And she could never be anyone’s but her own (232).

If she marries him, “Her freedom would not be her own; it would be Po’s to give or to withhold.
That he never would withhold it made no difference. If it did not come from her, it was not really
hers” (237). Po, again, insists that they have control and choice where Katsa sees none. “I’ll give
myself to you however you’ll take me,” he tells her. “I don’t know [where it would lead]. But I
trust you” (233). Po’s offer stands in stark contrast to Alanna’s romantic relationships with men
who insist on possessing her: Po offers himself, rather than demanding Katsa, and he makes his
trust explicit. Where Jonathan, George, and Liam all assume that Alanna will eventually desire
marriage and children and are rewarded when Alanna agrees to marry George, both Po, and
importantly, the text, take Katsa’s desires seriously. The Song of the Lioness assumes Alanna’s rejection of marriage is childish, and does not see any possibility for Alanna to have love outside of marriage. As the text’s superego, Alanna’s talking cat Faithful continually reinforces Alanna’s misguidedness in her desire to remain unmarried, until Alanna eventually accedes. But while other characters in Graceling worry that “it’s dangerous for [Katsa and Po] to leave each other so much freedom and make these vague plans to travel together in the future, . . . with no promises,” Katsa and Po agree, “Other people don’t have to understand” (469). The text neither demands that Katsa and Po accede to the demands of their social world, nor does it require them to make others understand their decision. Instead, it allows them to find fulfillment on their own terms, without ceding or demanding control.

Where Randa and the other nobles in his court—even Katsa’s friends and allies—define and limit her Grace for her, Po offers a suggestion without trying to tell Katsa who or what she is. Their relationship is marked by a reciprocity and interdependence that is lacking in Alanna’s romantic relationships in Song of the Lioness. Both Po and Katsa reject the notion that they might possess one another. At a stop at an inn, they encounter a group of merchants who try to sell them false information. Already hostile toward them because of their behavior toward the innkeeper’s daughter, Katsa nearly attacks them when they allude to assaulting the girl. Po physically blocks Katsa, telling her to “Stop. . . . Think. Breathe.” When the men, leering, congratulate Po for “keep[ing] that wildcat on a leash,” he loses his temper: “He was furious; [Katsa] saw this, and she thought he was going to strike the man who had spoken; and for a panicky moment she didn’t know whether to stop him or help him.” She stops him, repeating his words back to him: “Po. Stop. Think” (214). Katsa and Po don’t attempt to control one another; rather, they help each other find self-control. It is significant that both of their anger comes in
response to the merchants’ assertions of control over others: for Katsa, the young woman who
she had protected earlier in the dining room; for Po, it is Katsa, who the merchants have
suggested is “on [Po’s] leash.”

The reciprocity of their relationship, here and elsewhere, emblematizes the kinship
networks that grow across the three novels. Kinship is lateral and reciprocal, as illustrated by the
characters’ insistence that their friends and allies work to become better versions of themselves
rather than imposing from without or above what they believe is best. Leck, with his ability to
impose his desires on others through the power of his Grace, embodies the danger of such
impositions. Not only is his power terrifying and violent, it is also strangely impotent. He
complains in his journal:

I tell [my artists] what they want to do and half of them lose their talent completely . . .

The other half cannot work at all and go mad, becoming useless to me. And then there are
those very few, those one, those two who do the literal of what I instruct, but imbue it
with some genius, some terrible truth, so that it is more beautiful than what I asked for or
imagined, and undermines me” (Bitterblue 432-33).

Despite the potency of his power, Leck cannot control everything he wishes or everything that is
a danger to him and his power. Prior to the revelations of Leck’s journals, Katsa’s responses to
him illustrate the limits of his power. When she and Po first encounter Leck, chasing after his
fleeing wife with “an army of men on galloping horses,” she is vulnerable to his power, though
Po is protected by his mind-reading Grace (Graceling 268). Though she sees Leck shoot his wife
with an arrow, Leck’s cry of “Oh, what an accident!” confuses her, convincing her that what she
saw was, indeed, an accident. She is bewildered when Po urges her to shoot Leck as they had
planned, “shocked at his words, at the wildness in his eyes” (269). Instead, they flee and hide in
the forest, where Katsa slowly recalls what she had seen: “Ashen, terrified, fleeing from her husband and his army; Leck shooting Ashen in the back. Leck crying out in pretended grief, his words fogging Katsa’s mind, transforming the murder her eyes had seen into a tragic accident she couldn’t remember” (273). When she encounters Leck for the second time, Katsa succeeds in resisting his power, enough to kill him before he can do more damage. Though Katsa later reflects on Leck’s threat as one to her own self-control, her reason for killing him when she does is much simpler: he was threatening both Po and Bitterblue.

In the events between her first confrontation with Leck, when he confuses her with his lies, and her second, when she kills him, Katsa’s survival Grace reveals itself to be at its most potent when others depend on her. After they escape Leck, Katsa and Po and find his young daughter, Bitterblue, hiding in the forest. Having failed to save her mother, they resolve to protect her from her father. Taking Bitterblue out of Monsea through Grella’s Pass, a mountain route left unguarded because no one has survived an attempt to cross it, pushes Katsa’s skills and endurance to their limit. It also pushes Katsa to consider her actions and her motives more carefully than she is accustomed to. She crosses the mountains alone with Bitterblue, reluctantly leaving Po hiding in the mountains to recover from an injury that left him dizzy, weak, and unable to travel at the pace needed to take Bitterblue to safety. At first Katsa resists Po’s insistence that he remain behind, until Po points out, “Katsa. This isn’t about you or me. This is about Bitterblue.” Katsa acknowledges it with difficulty; “the strength knocked out of her legs. For it was about Bitterblue. They’d come all this way for Bitterblue, and she was Bitterblue’s only hope” to escape her father (316). Instead of rendering her resentful of Bitterblue, Po’s insistence that he remain behind strengthens Katsa’s resolve, “For this child’s protection was her charge, and she must think of everything. Her care of Bitterblue must be worthy of Po’s
sacrifice” (318). Po’s insistence that he remain behind makes it clear to Katsa how much relies on her: not only Bitterblue’s immediate safety, but the larger responsibility of stopping Leck, as one of the few people who knows the truth of his power.

To hold Leck responsible is to intervene in a larger field of relations, not only between herself and the monarch, as with Katsa’s rejection of Randa; but among Po and his family; Leck, Monsea, and Bitterblue; and, indeed, all of the Seven Kingdoms that make up Katsa’s known world. But for Katsa, in the final evaluation it is the threats Leck poses to the individuals she cares deeply about that cuts through his lies. Katsa kills Leck when she does out of a profound, if half-understood, need to protect Po and Bitterblue. Graced with the taboo ability to read minds, Po has spent his entire life concealing his true Grace from all but a few with the pretense that he is Graced with fighting skills. Katsa kills Leck “[n]ot because she remembered Leck must die. Not because she remembered the truth of Po’s Grace. But because she remembered that Po did have a secret, a terrible secret, the revelation of which would hurt him in some horrible way she felt deeply but couldn’t remember—and here this man sat, the secret on the tip of his tongue” (417). Katsa kills him because the one thing she can remember in this moment is that she must protect Po, in hiding while he recovers from the injuries he sustained when he tried to kill Leck; her focus is not only on her own self-preservation, but on protecting those she loves.

I have moved backwards through the trilogy in my analysis to emphasize the intimacy of the kinship structures that underlie transformative citizenship. The affective attachments that allow Katsa to reject first Randa’s control and then Leck’s are at the center of her ability to move through and change her world. Though I began by suggesting that Leck forms the connective tissue among the three novels, as a common antagonist and the only character who appears in all three books in the series, I want to conclude by arguing that it is Katsa who connects them more
profoundly. With her friends and allies in the Council, she moves freely around the Seven Kingdoms, “[stirring] up trouble on a serious scale—bribery, coercion, sabotage, organized rebellion—all directed at stopping the worst behavior of the world’s most seriously corrupt kings” (Bitterblue 21). It is Katsa’s freedom of movement, and her Grace for survival, that allows her to make connections among people, creating an alternate kinship network that is not beholden to heterosexuality or reproductive futurity, but instead expands laterally. Eventually she is the one to cross the border of her known world, making contact with Fire’s home of the Dells on the far side of a mountain range thought to be impassable. Thus, while Leck draws the narrative connection between the three women, and informs (some of) their common experiences, it is Katsa who finally brings them together.

Kinship emerges in the Seven Kingdoms novels in opposition to powerful regimes that seek to define and use Bitterblue, Fire, and Katsa to their own ends, ultimately paving the way for transformative citizenship practices. Bitterblue’s growing sense of connection to her people not only as their monarch but as a fellow “truthseeker” trying to come to terms with her father’s violent legacy allows her to “reshape what it mean[s] to be queen” (428). Fire’s realization that she can use her magical abilities to comfort and heal gives her a newfound sense of expansiveness that places her both at the center of the Dells and at their edge, as protector and “life-giver.” And Katsa, in redefining her abilities in terms of life instead of death, becomes the thread that connects Bitterblue, Fire, and herself across spatial and temporal borders, finally drawing together the plotlines of Graceling and its prequel Fire at the end of Bitterblue to look toward a future that has room for a traumatic past without being defined by it. Kinship is equally important as a practice of resistance to oppression in my analysis of Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games Trilogy in the next chapter. In the dystopian world of Panem, however, resistance does
not prove to be as transformative as it does in the other novels I discuss in this dissertation. In this last chapter I explore the limitations of utopia and the possibilities for queer world-making even in the midst of dystopia.
This chapter explores the limits of transformative citizenship in an analysis of Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games Trilogy. Unlike the protagonists of Kristin Cashore and Tamora Pierce’s novels, Katniss Everdeen lacks the privilege and access—albeit limited—that allow Alanna, Katsa, Fire, and Bitterblue to bring about change in their respective homes; and Charlotte, in Chapter One, to liberate herself from the developmental dictates of her race, class, and gender. I engage the temporal disruptions of personal and historical trauma, which have been a thread throughout this dissertation, to explore how alternative kinship formations are enabled by trauma and exploitation and offer resources for resistance to the state’s coopting of family to its own purposes of domination. As in the previous chapters, I use Judith Butler’s notion of kinship as a practice that does not have to be structured by heterosexual relations and the exchange of women. Drawing once again on the concept of disidentification, this chapter considers the possibilities and limitations of utopian thinking in Collins’s dystopian world. I argue that Collins’s trilogy provides glimpses of utopia even in the midst of horror, offering a dynamic vision of a utopia that is always in process.

It may seem strange to come at a vision of utopia through a dystopian world where the central government controls the populace with an annual “reaping” of children from each of the nation’s districts to compete in a battle to the death on national television, but I argue that seeking utopia in Collins’s dystopian Panem is an urgent project. It is not difficult to find the utopias that Cashore’s protagonists seek, whatever their hardships of bringing them to fruition. Katsa, Fire, and Bitterblue all wield considerable power and influence to effect change in their world. Pierce’s Alanna, in Chapter Two, struggles against oppressive regimes of power, but
ultimately has allies in those institutions to help her achieve her own goals and pave the way for others. The utopic vision of Chapter One is predicated on Charlotte’s ability to physically escape from the regimes that seek to control her, an option not available to most. This chapter is about the limitations of opposition to oppressive state power and violence, and thus explores the limits of the utopian visions of the medievalist fantasies discussed in chapters 2 and 3. The setting of a dystopian future North America shifts the temporal terms of the imagined worlds I have been exploring, from an engagement with an imagined (and nostalgic) past to a potential future in world still recognizable as our own. The Hunger Games Trilogy interrogates the dynamics of state power in its everyday intrusions into the lives of its most marginalized, and thus most heavily regulated, subjects. To imagine utopia in a dystopia—fleeting, insubstantial, there-and-gone-again but always, as José Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia*, on the horizon—is an act of utmost resistance to those regimes of real power that would have us believe there is nothing outside what they can imagine.

Although Collins’s dystopia may be more comfortably categorized under the rubric of science fiction, in this chapter I align it with the mode of the fantastic as Brian Attebery defines it in his landmark *Strategies of Fantasy* as “a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it” (2). For Attebery, “Fantasy . . . is directed primarily toward a kind of response we call wonder. Wonder is connected with seeing things not so much as they are but as they might be or ought to be” (128). Wonder in The Hunger Games is glimpsed in things like flowers and songs, symbols are both transient and persistent, fragile but not easily eradicated. Ursula K. Le Guin makes a similar argument about the function and value of fantasy to “assert and explore a larger reality than we now allow ourselves. . . . The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a
world large enough to contain alternatives and therefore offers hope” (366). I build on Attebery and Le Guin in this chapter by exploring the nature and limitations of those alternatives in the context of Collins’s dystopian world. In doing so, I engage with and depart from Muñoz’s notion of queer utopia, which “We may never touch . . . but we can feel . . . as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” Like fantasy, “Queerness is a structuring and educating mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1). Where I depart from Muñoz is in the temporal location of utopia: the glimpses of utopia in The Hunger Games show that it exists not only on the horizon, but also in the “quagmire of the present” as a resource for survival under the stultifying power of the “here and now.”

The nation of Panem, risen from the ashes of a post-apocalyptic North America, regulates its citizens in all the familiar and expected ways: surveillance, propaganda, police violence, and the control of knowledge. Residents of the wealthy central Capitol are lulled by abundance and Dionysian excess—*panem et circensis*—while those in the 12 outlying districts scrape by as they labor to provide the Capitol with the goods they are too poor to purchase themselves. Each year, on the day of the reaping—a perverse holiday marked by a ceremonial reading of the official history of Panem, with mandatory attendance by everyone in the district dressed in their best clothes—a representative of the Capitol draws the name of one boy and one girl from each district to compete in the Hunger Games. The 24 “tributes” fight one another and navigate the various hazards the Gamemakers dream up until only one remains, all on live, 24-hour television. The Games themselves are ubiquitous throughout the year. Clips run continuously on television, and the most recent victor is paraded through the districts on an annual Victory Tour at the halfway mark between one Games and the next—a practice that Katniss describes as, “the Capitol’s way of keeping the horror fresh and immediate. Not only are we in the districts forced
to remember the iron grip of the Capitol’s power each year, we are forced to celebrate it” (Catching Fire 4). The Capitol performs its power in these displays, and demands performances of compliance from its subjects in return.

The protagonist and narrator of the series, Katniss becomes a central player in the Capitol’s displays of power when she volunteers to take her younger sister’s place as a tribute in the Hunger Games in the opening pages of the eponymous first novel. Living under the Capitol’s “iron grip” and pervasive surveillance, she has learned from a young age that the Capitol’s gaze is everywhere. She recalls, “When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out about District 12, about the people who rule our country, Panem, from the far-off city called the Capitol. Eventually I understood this would only lead us to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so no one could ever read my thoughts” (Hunger Games 6). But when her younger sister Prim is chosen for the Games on reaping day, Katniss does not hold her tongue. As she will do again and again throughout the trilogy, Katniss acts on impulse and inadvertently subverts the Capitol’s power. Volunteering to take her sister’s place is a radical act “in District 12, where the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse” (22). When her fellow tribute, Peeta Mellark, is announced, Katniss is unsurprised that neither of his brothers volunteers to take his place: “This is standard. Family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing” (26). Katniss’s gesture is, on one hand, a performance of compliance with the Capitol’s power; but in the poverty-stricken District 12, it is also a radical departure from the resignation that characterizes life under the Capitol’s power. It is powerful enough to elicit from the people of District 12 “the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence” (24). Volunteering to take
her sister’s place, Katniss disidentifies with the Capitol’s instruments of power, a gesture that foments first dissent, and then rebellion, across the districts of Panem.

In this chapter, I revisit the potential and limits of disidentification as a strategy of resistance through an analysis of Katniss’s performances as a tribute in the Hunger Games and an icon for the rebels who seek to overthrow the Capitol. Volunteering to take Prim’s place, Katniss conjures up a moment of resistance in the midst of a ritual designed to quell all possibility of rebellion. A memorial of sorts, the Capitol mandated the Games after a failed revolt a quarter century earlier “as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated”—or, as Katniss interprets the official account, “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen” (18-19). When she takes Prim’s place, Katniss disidentifies with the logic of the Hunger Games not only by displaying her devotion to her sister, but also by refusing the Capitol’s narrative of the Games as a celebration of victory and the current regime as one of peace and prosperity. In the more privileged districts, where “winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives,” most tributes are volunteers. Known to the poorer districts as “Careers” because they have trained from a young age for the “honor” of competing in the Games, they shore up the Capitol’s power, playing the Games according to the script that the Capitol has given them. But for Katniss, volunteering is an assertion of her refusal to see the Games as anything other than the brutal sacrifice of children to cow the populace. She takes “the code of a majority…as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz, Disidentifications 31). In her refusal, Katniss performs an alternative, a world where family devotion is not fatal on any day. She also asserts a kinship claim that rails against
the state’s claim to the children of the districts. Whether construed as an honor or a death sentence, the Games provide the Capitol with a mechanism for dissolving family ties that would undermine its power by urging its people to give up their children either with enthusiasm or resignation. When Katniss declares that she will win the Games for Prim, she does so in defiance of the Capitol, even if at other times her acts of self-preservation seem to accede to the Capitol’s logic of selfishness (129).

Katniss disidentifies with the Capitol’s narrative of the Games, but, as Muñoz writes, the disidentifying subject “is not a flier who escapes the atmospheric force field of ideology. Neither is she a trickster figure who can effortlessly come out on top every time. Sometimes disidentification is insufficient” (Disidentifications 161-2). Resistance has devastating consequences in Panem, and even when the revolution succeeds, it is incomplete and unsatisfying. I engage Muñoz’s analysis of gesture to explore both the potential and limits of this and other moments of performative resistance throughout the series. In Cruising Utopia, Muñoz considers the gesture as a particularly rich source of queer knowledge against the grain of official history. The gesture “tell[s] tales of historical becoming. Gestures transmit ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within a phobic majoritarian public culture” (67).

Katniss’s radical act of family devotion on reaping day is a moment of disidentification that offers an alternative to the resignation that makes “tribute” a synonym for “corpse,” and invites a silent answer from her community in the form of a gesture that will echo through the series. The crowd gathered in the square salutes Katniss, “touch[ing] the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and hold[ing] it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love” (Hunger Games 24). The gesture has transformative potential, “summon[ing]
the resources of queer experience and collective identity that have been lost to us because of the demand for official evidence and facts” (*Cruising Utopia* 72). Katniss’s gesture in volunteering to take Prim’s place in the Games, and the silent response of the three-fingered salute, conjures up a latent history and collectivity in District 12. Katniss’s family loyalty takes the form of queer resistance, as she stakes a claim to her kin against the state that would dissolve family ties.

Against the official narrative of Panem’s history, ritually retold on reaping day, Katniss and the citizens of District 12 assert their own history of loss and resilience with gestures that will have far-reaching consequences in Panem. The shared gesture of the three-finger salute catches and holds it for a moment before Katniss is plunged into the Games and a system that wants to destroy anyone who tries to imagine a different world. In the following sections, I examine how this initial gesture of dissent echoes through the trilogy, focusing on two subsequent moments where Katniss’s disidentification suggests the transformative power of such resistance, but whose aftermath make painfully visible its costs. Though it is fleeting, the gesture possesses the ability to provide a glimpse of a better world not only on the horizon, but in the moment of its expression in an unstable, overlapping temporality that is both “now” and “the future.” Ultimately, I argue that gestures offer a way—perhaps the only way—for Katniss to survive in the aftermath of the Games and their horrors. The world she envisions begins to come to fruition in the closing pages of *Mockingjay*, but it is a world that will only ever exist for Katniss in fleeting glimpses, as she negotiates what it means to survive in the face of trauma.
I. Gesturing Toward Utopia

The gesture of the three-finger salute is repeated in two more crucial moments of the series, each building on the last in ways that reveal to the Capitol its suggestion of resistance and its assertion of an alternate politics of kinship. The first time, in District 12, the implications of the gesture and its silent dissent are lost on the rest of Panem, or at least the Capitol’s television commentators, who in the official broadcast “are not sure what to say about the crowd’s refusal to applaud. The silent salute. One says that District 12 has always been a bit backward but that local customs can be charming” (*Hunger Games* 46). Rendering the crowd’s silent dissent—and by extension, Katniss’s desperate act of resistance—“charming,” the commentators attempt to declaw their actions, but the gesture has resonance beyond anyone’s control, even Katniss’s. Importantly, Katniss’s acts of resistance toward the Capitol are often incidental, especially at first. She rarely intends to subvert the Capitol’s power; she simply wants to survive. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss contrasts herself to her friend Gale, who rails against the Capitol in private. She finds Gale’s anger “pointless . . . It’s not that I don’t agree with him. I do. But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair. It doesn’t fill our stomachs” (14). She focuses on material survival, finding it a waste of energy to be angry at the Capitol. Material survival, however, becomes an expression of resistance. Katniss’s survival of the Games gives teeth to her actions at the reaping and in the Games—many of which have no clear efficacy toward her survival.

Katniss’s choice during the Games to ally herself with Rue, the young tribute from District 11, vividly illustrates the degree to which material survival makes resistance to the Capitol possible. The first time she sees Rue in the television broadcast of the reapings from all
12 districts, Katniss sees in her a haunting echo of Prim’s reaping, “[o]nly when she mounts the stage and they ask for volunteers, all you can hear is the wind whistling through the decrepit buildings around her. There’s no one willing to take her place” (45-46). Katniss sees her sister in Rue’s “size and demeanor” (45) and in her name, which Katniss recognizes as “a small yellow flower that grows in the Meadow. Rue. Primrose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet” (99). When Katniss reaches out to her in the arena, she thinks, “I can almost hear [my mentor] Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she’s a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim” (201). But Katniss also sees herself in the young girl from District 11. During training Katniss observes, “Like me, she’s clever with plants, climbs swiftly, and has good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot” (99). And like Katniss, Rue is the caretaker of her family, “the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a district where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours [in District 12]” (211). Though Katniss frequently compares Rue to Prim, here she describes her own young self after her father’s death plunges her mother into “some dark world of sadness” and leaves Katniss, “[a]t eleven years old, with Prim just seven, [to take] over as head of the family” (27). Rue is an amalgam of Katniss and Prim, and her (inevitable) death in the Games a reminder of the delicate edge all those who might oppose the Capitol walk.

Katniss’s response to Rue’s death reveals—though not in immediately obvious ways—the connections between survival, kinship, and resistance to the Capitol. Surviving in District 12—in any of the poorer districts, for that matter—is itself an act of resistance. Katniss does so by breaking the law: hunting and foraging with Gale outside the District and hiding her mother’s depression so that she can protect Prim from the abuses of state care. Focused as she is
on putting food on the table, she feels Gale’s “ravings against the Capitol” are a distraction from what’s really important. But when Rue dies, Katniss feels “forced . . . to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us. But here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence” (236). Her answer is to linger with Rue’s body instead of leaving her to be collected immediately by a Capitol hovercraft. She covers Rue in flowers, knowing that “even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they’ll have to bring them back . . . and everyone will see her then.” She pays her respects to Rue “to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.” Finally, she “press[es] the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction,” repeating the gesture of her district’s farewell and silent dissent (236-7). Wreathing Rue in flowers and giving the three-finger salute are Katniss’s assertions of self and of her own narrative of loss and survival against the Capitol’s narrative of the Games. Where the Capitol uses the Games to pit the districts against one another in a display of inevitable violence and enmity, Katniss refuses to let her alliance with Rue dissolve with the young girl’s death. Mourning her, she claims her kinship with Rue and rejects the inevitability of her death.

Katniss’s gesture does not go unnoticed by Rue’s community. After she leaves Rue’s body, Katniss receives a gift from outside the arena: “a small loaf of bread . . . made of dark ration grain and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds.” She recognizes the distinct bread from District 11, a gift that “had been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they’d authorized Haymitch to give it to me. . . . For whatever reason, this is a first. A district gift to a tribute who’s not your own.” Distributed to tributes in packages suspended beneath small silver parachutes, such gifts are costly; Katniss recognizes that the residents of
District 11 “would’ve had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf” (238-39). The loaf of bread is a powerful gesture of solidarity with Katniss, and against the Capitol, from the people of District 11. Even isolated as she is in the arena, Katniss is able to forge ties against the will of the Capitol, ties that are reinforced when she and Peeta visit District 11 on their Victory Tour at the beginning of *Catching Fire*. She challenges the enforced animosity among the districts by speaking directly to the families of the District 11 tributes. “I want to give my thanks to the tributes of District 11,” she tells them. Of Thresh, who spared Katniss’s life for Rue’s sake, she says, “I didn’t know him, but I always respected him. For his power. For his refusal to play the Games on anyone’s terms but his own” (60). But Rue, Katniss says, she did know, “and she’ll always be with me. Everything beautiful brings her to mind. I see her in the yellow flowers that grow in the Meadow by my house. I see her in the mockingjays that sing in the trees. But most of all, I see her in my sister, Prim. . . . Thank you for your children. . . . And thank you all for the bread.” After she speaks, the crowd responds “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” (61). Expressing her respect for Thresh and claiming Rue as family, Katniss insists on an alternate narrative of the Games, one that speaks its brutality aloud and asserts an alternate, transgressive kinship between districts—symbolized by the gift of bread and acknowledged with the salute that has taken on new meaning since her defiant act that allowed both her and Peeta to survive the Games.

This moment in District 11 is indicative of how the glimpses of utopia in *The Hunger Games* trilogy work. After Katniss speaks about Rue, “There’s a long pause. Then, from somewhere in the crowd, someone whistles Rue’s four-note mockingjay tune” (61). Rue’s four-note melody is sustained by the birds’ repetition, but like the three-finger salute and the
flowers that Katniss covers her with—the flowers she associates with both Rue and Prim—it is also fleeting. For Katniss and Rue, the melody was a signal they used in the arena to let the other know they were safe. In the districts, it becomes a signal of resistance. Katniss is simultaneously moved and “fill[ed] . . . with dread” when she hears it. She now knows how to read the gesture as more than a poignant farewell, and sees the Capitol’s swift and brutal retaliation. As she and Peeta are hustled off the stage, Katniss sees “a pair of Peacekeepers dragging the old man who whistled [to cue the salute] to the top of the steps. Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head” (62). A gesture both of recognition and of memory, the salute ties together Katniss’s disidentificatory moments of resistance to the Capitol in the first novel—volunteering for Prim; allying with and caring for Rue; and finally, holding out a handful of poison berries to Peeta when they are the last two tributes remaining. In all three instances, Katniss refuses the Capitol’s designs, appropriating them—unintentionally at first—to a politics of resistance. But it is a resistance that never quite succeeds in freeing Katniss from the designs of others, or fully liberates her into the better world that her utopic performance imagines.

2. Nourishing Kinship

At the end of the first novel, Katniss turns the Capitol’s weapon against them in a key moment of resistance that, like the salute, will resonate throughout the remainder of the series as a gesture toward liberation that can never fully free its originator. Midway through the Games, the Gamemakers announce a rule change motivated by Peeta’s public confession of love for Katniss during his pre-Games interview: “both tributes from the same district will be declared winners of they are the last two alive” (Hunger Games 244). The seeming clemency opens up a
new possibility for Katniss. Throughout the Games, she has been preoccupied with two things: her own survival, and her fear that she will be the one to kill Peeta. Indeed, for Katniss, not killing Peeta is as crucial to her survival as staying alive herself. Though she had never spoken to him before they were both chosen as tributes, when they were children Peeta had saved Katniss and her family from starving after her father’s death left her family destitute. When she hears his name called at the reaping, Katniss recalls an afternoon when desperation had driven her to try scavenging for food in the trash bins behind the businesses that serve the wealthy of District 12. Seeing her behind his parents’ bakery, Peeta deliberately burned two loaves of bread—provoking a beating from his mother—and gave them to Katniss under the pretense of following his mother’s order to, “Feed it to the pig, you stupid creature!” (30). After three days of “nothing but boiled water with some old dried mint leaves I’d found in the back of a cupboard,” and no hope of food from any other source, the two loaves of bread are a windfall that means survival for Katniss and her family (28). The next day, Katniss sees Peeta watching her at school; immediately after, she notices “The first dandelion of the year. A bell went off in my head. . . . I thought of the hours spent [foraging and hunting] in the woods with my father and I knew how we were going to survive.” Peeta’s inexplicable kindness to her makes Katniss perceive him as a threat, not only because he saved her (and more importantly to Katniss, her family), but also because “[k]ind people have a way of working their way inside me and rooting there. And I can’t let Peeta do this. Not where we’re going” (49). Where Katniss resists the Capitol by breaking the law to hunt outside the boundary of District 12, Peeta resists by being kind. He refuses the Capitol’s logic of selfishness, instilled in the poverty-stricken districts as well as the Games. From the beginning of the Games, his every move is calculated not to his own survival, but to help Katniss, while Katniss only hopes that someone else will kill Peeta so she doesn’t have to.
The Capitol, of course, has other ideas. When Katniss and Peeta are the only two tributes left (barely) standing, the earlier rule change is revealed to be nothing more than a perverse manipulation “to devise the most dramatic showdown in history.” Another announcement “booms into the arena” to explain, “Closer examination of the rule book has disclosed that only one winner may be allowed . . . Good luck and may the odds be ever in your favor” (342). Already wounded, Peeta tells Katniss to let him bleed to death. “We both know they have to have a victor. It can only be one of us,” he tells her. But as she has been unable to do throughout the Games, Katniss refuses to abide by the Capitol’s rules. Instead of accepting the logic of Peeta’s statement—there has to be a victor, therefore one of them must die—she sees in it a reversal. Banking on the Gamemakers’ unwillingness to let them both die, she gives them a dramatic showdown, but not between herself and Peeta. Instead, she gets out a pouch of poison berries she had collected earlier and gives half to Peeta. They agree to eat them together. The ploy works, barely: at the last second, “the trumpets begin to blare” and the “frantic voice” of the head Gamemaker declares both of them winners (345).

Sharing the handful of poison berries becomes a paradigmatic moment of resistance in the text, a moment that haunts Katniss with its multiple significations. For Katniss herself, the berries are a source of a great deal of ambivalence. She sees in them “the answer to who I am . . . If I held them out to save Peeta because I knew I would be shunned if I came back without him, then I am despicable. If I held them out because I loved him, I am still self-centered, although forgivable. But if I held them out to defy the Capitol, I am someone of worth. The trouble is, I don’t know exactly what was going on inside me at that moment” (Catching Fire 117). As she had been throughout the Games, Katniss was focused, very simply, on survival—not only the preservation of her life, but on weathering what Cathy Caruth describes as “the enigmatic
relation between trauma and survival: the fact that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (9, original emphasis). As Muñoz writes, disidentification is above all about “cultural, material, and psychic survival . . . [it] is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (Disidentifications 161). Katniss protests Peeta’s attempt to kill himself out of recognition of the fact that she will take the trauma of the Games out of the arena with her: “Because if he dies, I’ll never go home, not really. I’ll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out” (Hunger Games 343). Physical and psychic self-preservation, love for Peeta, and resistance to the Capitol are all intertwined. The climactic moment of the Seventy-fourth Hunger Games, the berries become an overdetermined signifier of survival and resistance, a gesture that resists oppositional logics and “becomes the resource for a certain mode of queer utopianism” (Cruising Utopia 13).

Katniss’s gesture of utopian performance does not belong to her; she cannot control it once it is unleashed on the world, any more than she can take it back, though she does try. As she prepares for the Victory Tour that takes place six months after the Games in Catching Fire, President Snow pays her a visit and reveals that, though the people in the Capitol had embraced Katniss’s actions in the arena as the act of a “love-crazed schoolgirl,” in some 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? . . . What is to prevent, say, an uprising?” (21). He tasks her with “turn[ing] things around” on the Victory Tour by convincing everyone that she only held out the berries because she was “crazy with love” (29). But whatever Katniss meant or didn’t mean, it is a fruitless task to try to convince anyone, much less President Snow, that she never
meant to resist the Capitol, because “when the Capitol decrees that only one tribute can live and you have the audacity to challenge it, I guess that’s a rebellion in itself” (18). Indeed, despite her later struggles to understand what she intended with the berries beyond self-preservation, in the moment her reasoning is quite clear: “Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol” (Hunger Games 344). The Games fail as a tool if all the tributes die, because the Capitol displays its “generosity” by showering the victor and his or her home district with money, food and luxury goods until the next Games. Without a victor, the Games are simply the protracted murder of 24 children. The Capitol allow her and Peeta live because, as Katniss reasons soon after, it lets them appear to have maintained control: “the Hunger Games are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it. So now the Capitol will act as if . . . they orchestrated the whole event, right down to the double suicide” (358).

The culmination of Katniss’s disidentificatory performance in the Games, the berries are part of a larger pattern in the novels of signifying kinship relations that both constitute and enable resistance to the Capitol through gifts of food. Katniss’s holding out the handful of berries to Peeta as they stand injured in the arena at the end of the first novel echoes the first scene of the novel, when she and Gale share a meal in the woods outside of District 12 before the reaping. They sit “on a rock ledge overlooking a valley. A thicket of berry bushes protects it from unwanted eyes” (6). Gale tosses a berry into Katniss’s mouth as they mock “the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives [from the Capitol] once a year to read out the names at the reaping,” intoning the Hunger Games slogan in the “affected” Capitol accent: “May the odds be ever in your favor!” (7-8). Her offering of the berries also echoes Katniss’s memory of Peeta giving her the burned loaves that saved her family from starvation. Both of these early moments illustrate
strategies of resistance to the Capitol’s logic of divisiveness and fear. Katniss remarks as she and Gale joke about the reaping, “We have to joke about it because the alternative is to be scared out of your wits” (8). Joking about it while they eat food they have illegally foraged is a way of denying the Capitol power over them by refusing to be afraid and refusing to starve on the meager rations they can purchase. Katniss and Gale’s relationship is built on the latter; they work together to support their families with their hunting and foraging, supplemented by what they can trade for in District 12’s black market. Peeta’s gift of the loaves of bread is more ambiguous, and potentially more dangerous to the Capitol, because he does not benefit from it in any material way. He resists the Capitol by being kind despite the cost to himself—here, a beating from his mother. Together, these two early scenes of sharing food underscore the importance of alternative kinship networks for material and psychological survival in Panem. When Katniss produces the poison berries at the end of the Games, she offers Peeta what he wished for before they entered the arena: “to die as myself . . . to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games” (141-42). The poison berries offer psychological survival, as Peeta’s gift of bread offered material survival. Both articulate kinship as sustenance and nourishment against the Capitol’s dictates of austerity, competition, and violence.

Meals in the Capitol are a stark contrast to these moments of sharing limited resources in the face of scarcity. On the train to the Capitol for the Games, Katniss and Peeta are served meals that consist of course after course of rich food: “A thick carrot soup, green salad, lamb chops and mashed potatoes, cheese and fruit, a chocolate cake. . . . I’m stuffing myself because I’ve never had food like this, so good and so much.” Effie Trinket, the representative from the Capitol who accompanies them, remarks with relief that Katniss and Peeta have “decent manners . . . The pair last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages. It completely upset my
digestion” (44). Effie’s concern with their manners reflects the Capitol’s fixation on appearances over substance (recalling Captain Jaggery’s preoccupation with the appearance of order and Charlotte’s father’s concern with grammar and spelling in Chapter One). Once she arrives in the Capitol, Katniss is subjected to round after round of waxing, manicuring, hairstyling, and makeup for her public appearances before she and the other tributes enter the arena to try to survive one another and whatever hazards the Gamemakers have dreamed up for them. Effie’s comment prompts Katniss to recall, “The pair last year were two kids from the Seam who’d never, not one day of their lives, had enough to eat. And when they did have food, table manners were surely the last thing on their minds. . . . I hate Effie Trinket’s comment so much I make a point of eating the rest of my meal with my fingers. Then I wipe my hands on the tablecloth” (44-45). Once again, through the medium of food, Katniss expresses solidarity with her peers—“savages” like herself—from the poorest part of District 12 and against the Capitol.

At a feast in the Capitol that marks the end of their Victory Tour, Katniss and Peeta see the extreme end of the Capitol’s excess. When Peeta declares that he’s too stuffed to eat any more, he’s offered “tiny stemmed wineglasses filled with clear liquid” that will induce vomiting “so you can keep eating,” one of their stylists explains: “Everyone does it, or else how would you have any fun at a feast?” Katniss is left “speechless, staring at the pretty little glasses and all they imply. Peeta sets his back on the table with such precision you’d think it might detonate” (Catching Fire 79). The implication of the glasses is, on its face, a level of abundance that elides the artificial scarcity in the districts. More than that, though, they reveal the emptiness of the Capitol’s pleasures and the lack of connection between its people. All of Katniss’s close relationships—with Gale, Peeta, Rue, and even her mentor Haymitch—are founded on helping one another survive, almost always signified by exchanging gifts of food. When she teams up
with Rue in the arena, Katniss gains Rue’s trust by offering to share her meal with her, and she
notes that one of Rue’s strengths is that she knows how to find her own food and what it is to go
hungry. Indeed, the strategy the two devise against the Careers is to destroy the food supplies
they’ve hoarded, because, Katniss reasons, “[t]hat the Careers have been better fed growing up is
actually to their disadvantage, because they don’t know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and
I do” (208). Knowing how to be hungry and what it means to share food, recognizing the need
for food as sustenance as well as pleasure, and finding pleasure in its function as sustenance,
creates bonds of kinship opposed to the mindlessness of the Capitol’s consumption and waste.
As in Chapter Three, the kinship that is figured here is reciprocal, predicated on kindness,
self-sacrifice, and solidarity between people the state wants to position as enemies to bolster or
maintain its own power.

3. Mockingjay

The “little trick with the berries” makes Katniss into an icon, a hero for some and a threat
to others. In the Capitol, she is adored for her love for Peeta; in the Districts, Katniss is a hero for
her success at resisting the Capitol, and her continued—again, often incidental—subversion of its
power. To President Snow, she represents a threat to his power and to the stability of Panem,
because “[w]hatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it
released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse”
(Catching Fire 21). Because of the pin she wore in the arena as her personal token, a small gold
bird called a mockingjay, Katniss herself becomes known as the Mockingjay, a title she will take
with her when she joins the descendants of the revolutionaries defeated in the so-called “Dark
Days” of the rebellion in District 13. Like Katniss herself, the mockingjay is a hybrid creature: partly a product of the Capitol, partly a product of its own determination to survive. In the months following the Games, Katniss sees the image proliferate in the Capitol as a fashion statement and, though she doesn’t understand it at first, a covert symbol of rebellion. Its very existence, the result of a failed attempt at using the genetically engineered “mutt” jabberjays to spy on the rebel forces 75 years earlier, signifies political resistance. The symbol—her symbol, as it becomes—is dangerous, Katniss reflects, because mockingjays are “creature[s] the Capitol never intended to exist. They hadn’t counted on the highly controlled jabberjay having the brains to adapt to the wild, to pass on its genetic code, to thrive in a new form. They hadn’t anticipated its will to live” (Catching Fire 92). For Katniss, the mockingjay pin is not just a symbol of survival, but also of memory. When she takes a good look at the pin, she recalls how her father “was particularly fond of mockingjays,” and often whistled and sang to them when he hunted. Katniss finds “something comforting about the little bird [pin]. It’s like having a piece of my father with me, protecting me” (Hunger Games 43-44). It also connects her to Rue, who also has a special kinship with the birds. And Katniss, like the mockingjays that are “something of a slap in the face to the Capitol,” is nothing if not a survivor, against all odds (42).

Life after the Hunger Games presents a new set of challenges for her survival. Katniss and Peeta’s romance, the center of their resistance in the arena, is quickly coopted by the Capitol. When Peeta declared his love for Katniss during his pre-Games interview at the beginning of the first book, it was part of a strategy to undermine the Capitol’s ethics of selfishness: instead of fighting for his own survival, he will fight for hers. The Gamemakers’ attempt to mine their romance for drama by issuing and then revoking the rule change sets the stage for Katniss to subvert the narrative rather spectacularly. Threatening their double suicide, Katniss and Peeta
(temporarily) resist the state’s claim to the narrative of heterosexual love. For that moment, they are both freed from the need to perform their romance for the cameras—a conscious performance on Katniss’s part, a more earnest one from Peeta. Sharing the handful of poison berries, they refuse to accede to the state’s attempt to create a “showdown” between them, made all the more dramatic by their “love affair.” Instead, they assert their kinship through the ethic of care and reciprocity that began with Peeta’s gift of the bread when they were children rather than the telos toward heterosexual marriage and reproduction that will ultimately provide more children for the Capitol to reap for its Games.

At the end of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss looks forward to returning home, where she can “separate out my feelings about Peeta. . . . What I did as part of the Games. As opposed to what I did out of anger at the Capitol. Or because of how it would be viewed back in District 12. Or simply because it was the only decent thing to do. Or what I did because I cared about him”—questions she can only answer when no one is watching (359). But she quickly realizes that she will never really escape the Capitol’s prying eyes and its designs on her. President Snow’s ultimatum to her before the Victory Tour, that she must calm the districts by convincing them that she is nothing more than “crazy with love,” leaves little room for her to sort out her feelings (*Catching Fire* 29). She knows that Peeta’s professed love for her “wasn’t just a strategy,” but, she reflects, “I’m not sure what it [our romance] was for me” (9). Peeta initially gives Katniss the cold shoulder for her admission that she was, to a large extent, acting during the Games, but he eventually acknowledges that Katniss has “nothing . . . to be sorry about. You were just keeping us alive” (51). They both know they have little choice but to continue to play the roles given to them by the Capitol, not only to protect themselves, but also their families and friends. The performance culminates in a public marriage proposal during the Victory Tour, an
acknowledgement on their part that their romance, once a powerful mechanism of resistance, now entirely belongs to the Capitol.

But at the same time as their reentry into the spotlight on the Victory Tour requires a concession to the Capitol’s interests in their relationship, it also reminds both of them of the resources for survival that they have in one another outside of their narrative of romance and rooted in the shared trauma of the Games. While Peeta “froze [Katniss] out after [she] confessed that [her] love for him during Games was something of an act,” he extends an offer of friendship at the beginning of the Victory Tour, telling her, “I don’t want us to go on like this, ignoring each other in real life and falling into the snow every time there’s a camera around” (51). Peeta’s overture allows them to reclaim their relationship, at least partially, from the Capitol. As they travel through the districts, they “manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other’s arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment. Nothing else happens, but our arrangement quickly becomes a subject of gossip on the train” (72). The gossip bolsters the romance narrative they hope to project, but the reality of their relationship is closer to Foucault’s description of queer friendship as “the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force” (136). Katniss hopes the rumors will help convince President Snow, but the overwhelming feeling in the districts is of “something in the air, the rolling boil of a pot about to run over. . . . When they chant my name, it is more of a cry for vengeance than a cheer” (Catching Fire 71). The renewed friendship that allows Katniss and Peeta to survive and to convincingly perform their love for the cameras also reveals the futility of the performance. Even Peeta’s public proposal of marriage at the end of the Victory Tour fails to satisfy President Snow, who, when he arrives to congratulate them, answers Katniss’s unspoken question with “an almost imperceptible shake of his head” (74)
Nonetheless, Snow is quick to exploit their coming wedding for his own purposes. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is sent back into the arena as part of the “Quarter Quell,” “a glorified version of the Games to make fresh the memory of those killed by the districts’ rebellion” that takes place every 25 years (171). The Quell that marks the 75th Hunger Games narrows the pool of potential tributes from the districts to Hunger Games victors, making it inevitable that Katniss, as the only female victor from her district, will once again have to compete in the Hunger Games. Snow orders Katniss to wear the wedding gown chosen for her by the public to her interview before the Games. “I suppose,” Katniss reflects, “since I was the greatest offender, my pain and loss and humiliation would be in the brightest spotlight. This, he thinks, will make that clear. It’s so barbaric, the president turning my bridal gown into my shroud” (248). But, as has been the case throughout the novels up to this point, Snow’s control is limited. Knowing that any chance of placating him has long since passed, Katniss enters the spectacle surrounding the Games determined to show that she is “still defying the Capitol right up to the end, the Capitol will have killed me . . . but not my spirit” (243). In this, she has the support of her stylist Cinna, who protests Snow’s order that Katniss wear the wedding gown by making “some slight alterations,” as he tells Katniss cryptically when he helps her put it on (248). When she twirls to show the dress off to the crowd,

I notice something is rising up around me. Smoke. . . . For a split second I’m gasping, completely engulfed in the strange flames. Then all at once, the fire is gone. . . .

Wonderingly, I lift my long, flowing sleeves into the air, and that’s when I see myself on the television screen. Clothed in black except for the white patches on my sleeves. Or should I say my wings.

Because Cinna has turned me into a mockingjay (252).
Katniss’s personal token from the Games has, in the intervening months, become a symbol of rebellion that Katniss recognizes as such by the time she reaches the Capitol for the Quarter Quell. In creating the transforming dress, she realizes that Cinna has done “[s]omething terribly dangerous. An act of rebellion in itself.” Turning her into a mockingjay, Cinna connects her to the larger rebellion throughout the districts, knowing that “what will be seen as a flashy costume change in the Capitol is resonating in an entirely different way throughout the districts” (253).

Cinna is not alone in expressing his anger at the Capitol before the Games. As she watches her fellow tributes give their interviews, Katniss is surprised to realize “the depth of betrayal felt among the victors and the rage that accompanies it.” Like she will, the other tributes “play their anger to reflect on the government and President Snow in particular,” questioning the legality of the Quell, wondering why Snow doesn’t use his power to change the rules, and expressing their grief for “how much the people in the Capitol must be suffering because they will lose us” (250-51). Peeta drops a final bomb by spinning two lies against the Capitol in his interview: that he eloped with Katniss before the announcement of the Quell, and that she is pregnant—once again reclaiming their romance away from the Capitol and to their own politics of resistance. The interview concludes with an unprecedented show of solidarity among the tributes. When Peeta takes Katniss’s hand while they stand for the national anthem, Katniss “turn[s] spontaneously to Chaff [the tribute from District 11] and offer my hand. I feel my fingers close around the stump that now completes his arm and hold fast. . . . Up and down the row, the victors begin to join hands.” Peeta’s announcement of their marriage and Katniss’s “pregnancy” mobilize the rest of the tributes into this show of unity, exploding the exclusivity of the marriage narrative so that “[b]y the time the anthem plays its final strains, all twenty-four of us stand in one unbroken line in what must be the first public show of unity among the districts.
since the Dark Days” (257-8). The “unbroken line” of tributes is another gesture of resistance and kinship against the divisiveness of the Capitol and the Games—again using the Capitol’s tool against it.

The push and pull of the narrative of Katniss and Peeta’s romance as the state coopts it and they reclaim it again as a politics of resistance plays out a second time when Katniss agrees to take on the role of the Mockingjay for the District 13 rebels. She knows she is as much a pawn to them as she was to the Capitol, and will be similarly perceived as a threat should she prove disloyal to their leader, President Coin. Her relationship to the rebel leadership in District 13 is not dissimilar to her relationship with President Snow: they both demand a performance that Katniss can never quite deliver. Paradoxically, Katniss is both a terrible liar and a deeply compelling performer. Her scripted performances consistently fall flat. When her mentor Haymitch tries to coach her for her pre-Games interview in the first novel, she seems hopeless. “You’ve got about as much charm as a dead slug,” Haymitch tells her, while Katniss seethes, too angry to tell pleasant lies in answer to the practice questions: “All I can think is how unjust the whole thing is, the Hunger Games. Why am I hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people I hate?” (Hunger Games 117). Just as she cannot perform according to the Capitol’s script, her attempt at a scripted propaganda video for the rebels in Mockingjay is a disaster. “I seem to have reached some new low,” Katniss observes to herself while watching it; “Both my voice and body have a jerky, disjointed quality, like a puppet being manipulated by unseen forces” (74). Her resistance to manipulation makes her a liability at the same time as the power of her spontaneous actions make her a crucial part of the rebellion. When the team in charge of the propaganda videos brainstorms the moments when Katniss moved them, they return “again and again [to] when I held out those berries that meant different things to different
people. Love for Peeta. Refusal to give in under impossible odds. Defiance of the Capitol’s inhumanity.” The moments they come up with are moments that, Gale sums up, “were Katniss’s. . . . No one told her what to do or say” (75). Katniss is most appealing as a performer when she is unscripted; more to the point, she is most appealing in the moments when neither she nor anyone else is attempting to manipulate the significance of her actions—even when she doesn’t know herself what she means.

As a symbol of revolution, the mockingjay is a fitting choice for its survival and transformation despite the Capitol’s designs. As a symbol of self for Katniss it is even more fitting in its unruliness and spontaneity. Mockingjays have the ability to “replicate both bird whistles and human melodies . . . whole songs with multiple verses,” but they do so on their own terms—only “if you had the patience to sing [to] them and if they liked your voice” (Hunger Games 43). The rebel leaders’ attempt to coopt the symbol of the mockingjay—and Katniss herself—to their own ends ultimately proves as ineffectual as President Snow’s attempt to manipulate the significance of her “little trick with the berries.” The realization that she cannot be compelling in a scripted studio propo leads the rebels to send her out with a camera crew to film her on the ground in the districts and, later, the Capitol. Where the Capitol and District 13 rebels layer on makeup and costumes to make her in their desired image, Katniss strips herself down, though she holds on to the image of the mockingjay that Cinna helped craft before his death at the hands of the Capitol’s agents. Cinna’s costume makes Katniss recognizable to herself, giving her “a straw to grasp at,” something to hold onto. Before she heads into combat with her camera crew, she washes away the makeup from the studio shoot and once again sees herself in the image of the Mockingjay: “The person in the mirror looks ragged, with her uneven
skin and tired eyes, but she looks like me. I rip the armband off, revealing the ugly scar from the tracker. There. That looks like me, too” (*Mockingjay* 78).

The “ugly scar” that “looks like [her]” reveals the persistence of the damage that both the Capitol and District 13 have wrought in Katniss. Despite the body polishes that disappear her scars—the ones from the Games as well as “those accumulated over years of hunting” and providing for her family—Katniss’s scars emerge as a crucial signifier of the self that the Capitol and District 13 try to obscure or scrub away (*Hunger Games* 351). Katniss’s transformation from bride to mockingjay at her second interview plays out strikingly upon her body at the end of *Mockingjay*, transforming her from Mockingjay to “fire mutt” in the explosion that kills Prim. When the flames engulf her as she tries to reach her sister, Katniss becomes “a creature as unquenchable as the sun. . . . I am Cinna’s bird, ignited, flying frantically to escape something inescapable. The feathers of flame that grow from my body. Beating my wings only fans the blaze. I consume myself, but to no end” (*Mockingjay* 348). The synthetic fire that has lit her since her debut at the opening ceremony of her first Hunger Games has given way to the real thing, which leaves behind “a bizarre patchwork of skin. Parts of my hair were singed off completely; the rest has been chopped off at odd lengths. Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire” (352). The scars the explosion leaves behind inscribes the consequences of being the spark to the rebellion on Katniss’s body, leaving behind damage that no beauty treatments can scrub away.

Katniss’s transformation into a “fire mutt” in the attack prompt her once again to reclaim the image of the mockingjay from the rebels. As she had acceded to President Snow’s orders that she calm the districts in *Catching Fire*, in *Mockingjay* she agrees to be the Mockingjay for the rebels in order to protect her family, and especially Peeta, who was captured and tortured by the
Capitol when the rebels rescued her from the Quarter Quell arena, leaving him violent and irrational. But when she is called upon to fire the symbolic “last shot of the war” by executing President Snow, she lets her arrow fly instead at District 13’s President Coin, who “collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead” (372). Her rejection of both Coin and Snow—both the revolutionaries and the Capitol—continues the push and pull of cooptation and disidentification that has battered her throughout the novels, but here something else shifts, as well. When Coin falls, Snow—in the last stages of long-term illness—laughs, “An awful gurgling cackle accompanied by an eruption of foamy blood when the coughing begins. I see him bend forward, spewing out his life” (373). With both leaders dead, Katniss’s last act of resistance makes room for the possibility of a better leadership, formed in the hope for a better world rather than lust for power and control. Like the mockingjays that “pick up on other birds’ melodies, replicate them and then transform them into something new” (Catching Fire 92), Katniss takes the images that the rebels and the Capitol crafted for her and transforms them into something else—something ragged and scarred and unpolished, but also with the potential for a fragile hope.

4. The Crisis of Survival

As she narrates it, Katniss’s decision to kill Coin seems impulsive, like so many of her other actions throughout the series. She takes aim at Snow, but at the last moment, “[t]he point of my arrow shifts upward. I release the string. And President Coin collapses over the side of the balcony and plunges to the ground. Dead” (Mockingjay 327). Up until this moment, Katniss has not suggested once that killing Coin may be her intention. Where she has narrated her internal
struggles in detail throughout the series, in this scene Katniss becomes suddenly opaque in her decision-making. The passive voice construction suggests the arrow moves of its own accord—as if Katniss makes the decision to let it fly only after the fact. The sentence break after she releases the string disconnects Coin’s death from the action. The three events happen in sequence, but as Katniss narrates them they have a disjointed quality, not fully attached to her intentions or to each other. Nonetheless, it is clear in the moment that Katniss does make a decision—one, indeed, that she has thought through quite thoroughly, though she has not narrated it for the reader. When she arrives at the execution, she takes aim at Snow, but hesitates, “watch[ing] his face. . . . I search his eyes for the slightest sign of anything, fear, remorse, anger. But there’s only the same look of amusement that ended our last conversation. It’s as if he’s speaking the words again. ‘Oh, my dear Miss Everdeen. I thought we had agreed not to lie to each other’” (371-2, original emphasis). A single-line paragraph follows, four words: Katniss thinks, “He’s right. We did.” The short, declarative sentences contrast the more ambiguous passive voice of her action in the next paragraph, but they make the action itself decisive. Knowing that Snow will die regardless of her actions, she chooses his truth over Coin’s manipulative lies.

Snow reminds her of their agreement—made when he first visited her in her home before the Victory Tour in Catching Fire—when Katniss confronts him about the bombs that killed Prim in the last moments of the rebellion. He scoffs at her accusation: “Well, you really didn’t think I gave the order, did you? Forget the obvious fact that if I’d had a working hovercraft at my disposal, I’d have been using it to make an escape. But that aside, what purpose could it have served? We both know that I’m not above killing children, but I’m not wasteful.” In fact, he tells her, “I was just about to issue an official surrender when they released those parachutes”
As the rebels moved to take the Capitol, Snow erected a concrete barricade around his mansion with refugee children penned inside, his human shields. Katniss is working her way toward the mansion—still intent on killing Snow—when “a hovercraft marked with the Capitol’s seal materializes” and releases “scores of silver parachutes.” The children recognize the silver parachutes from the Hunger Games as holding coveted gifts of food and medicine, and “eagerly scoop them up. . . . The Hovercraft vanishes, five seconds pass, and then about twenty parachutes simultaneously explode” (346). Katniss watches in horror as Medics—including Prim—converge on the refugee children, and a second round of bombs explode.

Katniss sees Prim die just before she herself is engulfed in flames, leaving her badly burned and unable to speak, to everyone’s puzzlement. She breaks her traumatized silence for the first time to speak to Snow. “I don’t believe you,” she tells him—but his argument has planted the seeds of doubt in her (358). According to Snow, the only person who would benefit from dropping the bombs is Coin, because “[t]he idea that I was bombing our own helpless children instantly snapped whatever frail allegiance my people still felt to me. There was no real resistance after that” (357). Indeed, Snow’s words remind her of a conversation she had with Gale in District 13, when he shows her the work he has been doing in the Special Weaponry division. “It’s less about the mechanics of the traps than the psychology behind them,” Katniss observes of the designs; “At some point Gale . . . left the wilderness behind and focused on more human impulses. Like compassion” (185-6). Katniss knows that he had designed bombs that worked just like the silver parachutes—a small explosion to lure in aid workers, followed by a larger one to inflict even more damage. She also knows Snow “to be the consummate survivor. It seems hard to believe he didn’t have a retreat somewhere” (360). But most convincing, the more she considers it, is her own position. Katniss knows the threat she poses to Coin; she has never
been unequivocally loyal. If Coin saw her as a threat, Katniss wonders, might she have arranged Prim’s death to “push me completely over the edge? Or, at least, firmly on her side? I wouldn’t even have had to witness it in person. Numerous cameras would be covering the City Circle. Capturing the moment forever” (361).

The realization drives Katniss back into her tortured nightmares, hiding in the back of a wardrobe in the President’s Mansion, where the rebels set up their headquarters after the Capitol’s fall. When she emerges on the day of Snow’s scheduled execution, she finds a confirmation of her suspicions. Before the execution, Coin gathers the remaining victors to vote on whether they will hold a final, symbolic Hunger Games “using the children directly related to those who held the most power [in the Capitol]” (369). As the votes are cast, Katniss wonders, “Was it like this then? Seventy-five years or so ago? Did a group of people sit around and cast their votes on initiating the Hunger Games? Was there dissent?” The vote is as much a test of Katniss’s loyalty as it is an opportunity for the last surviving Hunger Games victors to have their vengeance against the Capitol, and it leaves Katniss in despair. “Nothing has changed,” she realizes; “Nothing will ever change now” (370). Katniss makes a decision here, but, as at the execution that follows, she does not narrate it to the reader. Instead, when it is her turn to vote, she remains opaque: “I weigh my options carefully, think everything through. . . . ‘I vote yes . . . for Prim’” (370).

Seeing the failure of the revolution to bring about a better world—the world she gestured toward so long ago when she tried to save Prim at the reaping—Katniss makes a decision here, but what that decision is kept from the reader. Katniss’s assertion that her vote is for Prim, though, offers a hint. Protecting and caring for her sister has been Katniss’s primary motivation for the entire series. In *The Hunger Games*, she volunteers as tribute in Prim’s place, knowing
her sister will be doomed if she goes to the Games. When Snow threatens her in *Catching Fire*, it is danger to Prim more than herself that motivates Katniss to try to quell the rebellion that she has unwittingly become the face of. And it is the promise of vengeance for Prim—killing Snow—that sustains Katniss as she recovers from her injuries at the end of *Mockingjay*; “when that’s done, nothing will be left” (351). But if Snow didn’t kill Prim, then there is nothing for her even in that act of vengeance. Katniss votes yes “for Prim,” but not, I contend, because she wants the last Games to go forward as retribution for her death. Indeed, her vote and its rationale jars the reader; Prim is the last person who would want any Hunger Games to go forward, even to punish her enemies. She votes yes because Coin’s proposal has shown her who the enemy is, and Katniss knows that if she dissents, she will reveal her hand: that she knows Coin was behind Prim’s death. Snow’s amusement as he stands waiting for her arrow is confirmation of what she already knows.

Katniss’s sudden opacity in these scenes—during and just before the public execution—speaks to her sense that she has no future. Since Prim died she has not looked beyond Snow’s death, but Coin’s call for a vote on a final Hunger Games forces her to face a grim future where she will have to appease Coin in place of Snow in order to assure her own safety. When Katniss chooses to use her arrow—the symbolic “last shot of the war”—to kill President Coin, she describes herself as “inwardly . . . a wasteland” (366). The choice Katniss makes is a radical refusal of any future for herself. After she fires the shot on Coin, Katniss “think[s] of what my brief future as the assassin of Panem’s new president holds. The interrogation, probable torture, certain public execution. Having, yet again, to say my final goodbyes to the handful of people who still maintain a hold on my heart. The prospect of facing my mother, who will now be entirely alone in the world, decides it” (373). Here, too, Cinna has
anticipated her, having included a special pocket in the Mockingjay costume he designed for a nightlock pill, the suicide pills that all the rebels carry in case of capture. But “Cinna’s last gift” falls away and “get[s] crunched under a guard’s boot” when Peeta catches her arm to prevent her from taking the pill (373-74). Left alone while her trial goes ahead without her, Katniss resolves to “give up . . . Just die. . . . I’m a couple of days into the plan, making good progress, when something unexpected happens. I begin to sing” (375-6).

Once again, Katniss describes her act as if she has no control over it; it happens to her, unexpectedly. From the moment she realizes Coin was most likely responsible for killing Prim, Katniss cannot entirely claim her choices. But singing also brings her back into consciousness, into making conscious choices. Faced with the prospect of survival, something else takes over in her. Earlier in the novel, when she was recovering from her injuries after the bombing, she tried to transform herself but only felt “more and more trapped . . . unable to emerge until I have transformed into something of beauty. I squirm, trying to shed my ruined body and unlock the secret to growing flawless wings. Despite enormous effort, I remain a hideous creature, fired into my current form by the blast from the bombs” (363). Here, without her trying, it’s her voice that transforms: “at first rough and breaking on the high notes, [it] warms up into something splendid. A voice that would make the mockingjays fall silent and then tumble over themselves to join in” (376). Though she continues to starve herself, her singing is a turning point, the moment when, unconsciously, she decides to live. Her singing ties her to Peeta, who was rehabilitated by her singing (as she is rehabilitating herself). It connects her to something deeper in herself, and back to the mockingjays and their transformative potential, even if it is fleeting: a song fades away but it also continues, can be sung again, changed, recreated. Back home in District 12, though she no longer has any obstacles to her suicide, she doesn’t take her life; “I seem to be waiting for
something” (381). Once again she isn’t claiming her decisions, but she has begun eating again, if not much else. Even though she “no longer feel[s] any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despise being one myself,” her singing shows her a way out, a way to a better world for her as well as for everyone else. By singing, she connects herself to Rue and to her father, and to Peeta, who throughout the series has been associated with hope, and has always understood that survival means not giving in to the Capitol’s logic of destruction.

If she cannot “[grow] flawless wings,” what does it mean for Katniss to survive? Survival and its implications have always been tied up for her not only with her sister, but with her relationships with Peeta and Gale. Hunting partners and friends, Gale and Katniss worked together for years to help each other provide for their families in District 12, but by the end of the series Katniss cannot find any “sign of the girl and boy who met by chance in the woods five years ago and became inseparable. I’m wondering what would have happened to them if the Hunger Games had not reaped the girl. . . . would the dark, twisted sadness between them have grown up even without the Capitol’s help?” (366). For years, they were held together by a “glue of mutual need” that “[melts] away” when they flee District 12. Later, when they are fleeing through the Capitol, Katniss overhears Gale and Peeta talking about her. In a conversation that seems petty, under the circumstances, the two young men discuss which of them Katniss “really” loves, and who she will choose if all three of them survive. Gale tells Peeta, “Katniss will pick whoever she thinks she can’t survive without” (329). His answer reflects the resentment he has carried since Katniss’s return from her first Hunger Games, where her “romance” with Peeta had been the key to their survival.

Katniss hears in Gale’s assessment an accusation. “Am I really that cold and calculating?” she wonders. “There’s not the least indication that love, or desire, or even
compatibility will sway me. As if in the end, it will be the question of whether a baker or a
hunter will extend my longevity the most” (330). Her interpretation is consistent with her
understanding of what it means to survive throughout the series. In the uncertainty of the night
before they enter the arena for the first time, Katniss and Peeta both ruminate on the possibility
of survival. As they stand on the roof of the tributes’ training center and look out over the
anticipatory celebration in the Capitol, Peeta tells Katniss that his best hope is “to die as myself .
. . I don’t want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not”
(Hunger Games 141). Katniss’s considerations have been more material, and Peeta’s remark
leaves her “feeling inferior. While I’ve been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has
been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self” (142). Peeta’s statement
complicates the notion of survival in the text, suggesting it is not just the material needs that
preoccupy Katniss. Gale is correct that Katniss will choose “whoever she thinks she can’t
survive without,” but it is not a “cold and calculating” decision. The Capitol may have melted
away the “glue of mutual need” that bound Katniss to Gale, but it forged a stronger connection
between her and Peeta, so that when Katniss eventually finds her ability to feel rekindled, she
realizes, “what I need to survive is not Gale’s fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of
fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth
instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can
be good again. And only Peeta can give me that” (Mockingjay 388). “Survival” is not only about
simple longevity, but about her ability to imagine a world worth living in, even if only in fleeting
glimpses.

Nonetheless, Katniss does make a strategic choice, if not such a calculating and unfeeling
one as Gale seems to believe. Gale has, from the start, been associated with violence. When they
say goodbye in the first novel before Katniss leaves for the Games, Gale points out that Katniss has an advantage because she’s killed before. “Not people,” she counters; “‘How different can it be, really?’ says Gale grimly” (Hunger Games 40). When he shows Katniss his work in Special Weaponry in District 13, he tells her his traps are simply “following the same rule book President Snow used when he [tortured] Peeta” (Mockingjay 186). He “never underestimates the cruelty of these we face,” but he is willing, unlike Peeta—and unlike Katniss—to be equally cruel (99). He sees the Capitol’s actions as justification for bloody retaliation, and sees complicity with the Capitol in ordinary civilians who have the good fortune to live in the more favored districts (though he does not seem to see complicity in his own violence). In one of those, Gale favors blowing up the fortress where the district’s remaining people have retreated. For a moment Katniss agrees, when Gale reminds her of the firebombing of District 12: “I want everyone in that mountain dead. Am about to say so. But then . . . I’m also a girl from District 12. Not President Snow. I can’t help it. I can’t condemn someone to the death he’s suggesting” (204-5). Choosing Gale would mean, in some sense, choosing the Capitol. Gale helped design the double exploding bombs that killed Prim, and believed in President Coin—who was, in the end, just like President Snow in her hunger for power. Gale may have sought a better world, but he accepted and used the same logic as the Capitol: he believes in the necessity of destruction in order to create something new. For Katniss, destruction only leads to more destruction; the rebels leave her as scarred and broken as the Capitol ever did, and it is Peeta who helps her see the possibility for survival and hope.

The Hunger Games stages resistance at the same time as it exposes its limits. Unlike the mockingjay who materializes out of the smoke on the stage before the Quarter Quell, Katniss does not emerge triumphantly like a phoenix. The Hunger Games leave her scarred, damaged
beyond repair. The hope that Katniss finds at the end of *Mockingjay* is highly equivocal, as she tries to find a way forward with the knowledge that “[s]ometimes disidentification is insufficient” (Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 162). That way forward is encapsulated in gestures and in the fleeting but persistent and nourishing symbols of utopia scattered throughout the text: songs and flowers and loaves of bread. Such glimpses work in opposition to the Capitol’s stultifying insistence on the repetition of the “Dark Days” through the ritual retellings of its history and the ongoing punishment of its people for the uprising by killing their children. They also oppose a normative developmental telos. These symbols of utopia, here or on the horizon, are not permanent or fixed. They must be cultivated, uncovered, performed, and made over and over again.


Barnhouse, Rebecca. *Recasting the Past: The Middle Ages in Young Adult Literature*.


