The Darker Side of the Sorting Hat: Representations of Educational Testing in Dystopian Young Adult Fiction

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The current public education climate in the United States is dominated by preparing for, administering, and implementing the results of high stakes educational testing. The professed impetus for putting such testing systems in place tends to be efforts at improving academic achievement and producing a more skilled labor force (particularly in areas such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). A high stakes test is “any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013, n.p.). These tests are deemed “high stakes” because the test scores are often used punitively. Low test scores can result in sanctions, loss of funding, and negative publicity for teachers, schools, and districts (Glossary of Education Reform). For students, low test scores can have consequences ranging from placement in lower-track classes and failure to advance to the next grade level, including, in the most extreme cases, the inability to graduate from high school.

In recent decades, there has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the viability, effectiveness, and fairness of such tests. Proponents argue that they hold schools and teachers accountable for student learning, supply data on student performance that can be used to improve instruction, provide a standard, equitable means of assessing student achievement, and motivate students to improve their academic skills. Opponents contend that such tests can have a negative impact on the quality of instruction (e.g., faculty adopting a “teach to the test” approach) as well as teacher and student morale, and that a standardized test is an ineffective means of capturing the nuances and complexities of students’ knowledge and abilities.

With standardized testing occupying such a prominent place in contemporary educational contexts, it is not surprising that various manifestations of high stakes testing have made their way into popular fiction for young adults. Representations of testing range from relatively benign depictions, such as the sorting hat in the Harry Potter series that determines the housing assignment for new arrivals at Hogwarts, all the way to more sinister manifestations, such as the life or death trials in dystopian titles such as the Hunger Games. Given that young adult titles
such as these are arguably the fastest-growing market for publishers (CBS Evening News, Publisher's Weekly), and given how the popularity of YA fiction generally has been a driving force in promoting young people’s interest in reading and engaging with literary texts, we wonder how such books might reflect—and shape—readers’ thinking about high-stakes testing.

In his review of recent research on YA texts, “Why Literacy (and Young Adult Literature) Matters,” Jeffrey Kaplan notes that, “All in all, these studies indicate that adolescents do read—when given something worthwhile to read—and that even in the age of competing conflicts (the lure of technology and the bane of high-stakes testing), young people are still drawn to good stories for the same reasons as adolescents before them; they want to read for fun, for meaning, and for the joy of language itself” (72). While Kaplan characterizes the reading of YA fiction and high-stakes testing as potentially “competing” interests, we actually wonder if one of the attractions of YA fiction for many young people is the way in which such books often figure the role of testing as prominent, even determinant, in characters’ lives. Indeed, a significant number of texts in this genre feature some sort of high stakes testing process as part of the protagonist’s “coming of age” process. Many of these books are also dystopias, such as the Hunger Games, Divergent, and Testing series, in which the testing stakes are life or death. Do such accounts of testing, however hyperbolic, resonate with young people’s experiences today? What might the focus on high-stakes testing in dystopic YA fiction tell us about current cultural values and norms around testing?

In this article, we look closely at representations of educational testing in dystopian young adult fiction published between 2004 and 2014. Our analysis is focused on understanding how testing and its repercussions are represented in these novels, and what such might say about the contemporary cultural value placed on testing. At the same time, given that testing is a prominent feature of dystopias, we attend to what the conflation of testing with dystopic political structures might be saying critically about high-stakes testing.

**Testing Dystopias**

Dystopian fiction, or fiction that generally describes futuristic, nonexistent societal scenarios that are “intended to be read as ‘considerably worse’ than the reader’s own” (Sargeant qtd. in Basu, Broad, & Hintz
2), comprises a significant share of the contemporary children’s and young adult publishing market. While dystopic YA isn’t new (earlier iterations include Lois Lowry’s _The Giver_ from 1993, for instance), the success of titles such as _The Hunger Games_ and _Divergent_ and their motion picture counterparts is a clear illustration of the genre’s current popularity with adolescents and adults. Dystopian novels generally present dire futuristic scenarios; however, these fantastical scenarios are clearly grounded in “pressing global concerns” from contemporary society, such as “liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self” (Basu, Broad & Hintz 1). In their book exploring contemporary dystopian fiction for young adults, Basu, Broad & Hintz suggest that the genre is clearly didactic, intended to teach explicit lessons about such pressing global concerns using “prescriptive qualities and unveiled moral messages” (5). The authors go on to argue that this “blatant didacticism signals to readers the problems with society while offering something like a training manual on how to overcome the dilemma, reverse the damage, and start anew” (5). In this view of the genre, the dire circumstances presented in the dystopian worlds have not yet come to pass, but remain latent warnings of impending catastrophe.

Other critics, drawing on Marxist theories, argue that utopic and dystopic fictions are less “training manuals” than opportunities for critique of existing structures. Ernst Bloch wrote powerfully that the “essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present. If we had not already gone beyond the barriers, we could not even perceive them as barriers” (_Utopian Function_ 12). More recently, Frederic Jameson refines Bloch’s understanding of utopia as critique to emphasize how our interest and investment in both utopic and dystopic representations are themselves forms of potential critique:

My modest recommendation was simply that we use the Utopian visions we are capable of projecting today in order to explore the structural limits of such imaginings, in order to get a better sense of what it is about the future that we are unwilling or unable to imagine. (76)

As such, utopias and dystopias are less blueprints to embrace or to avoid as they are opportunities to interrogate how we understand and imagine our present. As Alcena Rogan summarizes Jameson’s point, “Utopia . . . is the expression of or collective yearning for that which cannot be
fulfilled—in other words, it is a desire, so its representation is always highly contingent and its realization necessarily possible” (314). Utopic and dystopic works allow us insight into the structures of thought that make certain futures imaginable while foreclosing on others. Along such lines, Graham Murphy argues that dystopias in particular might embody utopianism by kicking the darkness until it bleeds daylight and to critique timely political issues while also locating hope in perhaps unexpected places: sites of resistance both within the narrative and, perhaps more importantly, within those readers who heed its warnings. (477)

As we approach these dystopias about high-stakes testing, we explore how our current cultures of educational testing might be structuring our imagination of both the present and future.

Indeed, a recent *New Yorker* article offers the following view on young adult dystopias, positing that the genre is actually reflective of current challenges and dilemmas facing today’s young people.

Dystopian fiction may be the only genre written for children that’s routinely less didactic than its adult counterpart. It’s not about persuading the reader to stop something terrible from happening—it’s about what’s happening, right this minute, in the stormy psyche of the adolescent reader. “The success of ‘Uglies,’” Westerfeld once wrote in his blog, “is partly thanks to high school being a dystopia.” (Miller n.p.)

This notion of high school and the worlds that young people inhabit as modern-day dystopias is also taken up by some contemporary critical theorists. Giroux argues that “Students, in particular, now find themselves in a world in which heightened expectations have been replaced by dashed hopes” (107). Rather than the replacement of heightened expectations with dashed hopes put forth by Giroux, we instead see what is almost a coupling of the two. Students today are being held to increasingly complex and demanding academic and extracurricular standards (e.g., unpaid internships, enrichment experiences) just to be eligible for admission to top tier universities. However, one bad testing day can be enough to dash students’ hopes of getting into their preferred institutions of higher education. Moreover, the college admissions process is increasingly competitive, so even meeting and exceeding expectations is not a guarantee of admission. As a major component of this culture of high expectations, high stakes testing is
a noteworthy feature of the dystopia of contemporary high school and higher education settings.

For this article, we first chose dystopian titles that were cross-referenced on the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature and the Young Adult Library Services Association lists between the years of 2004 and 2014. We then narrowed our focus to titles that contained representations of some form of testing or sorting. We garnered additional titles from Amazon.com’s suggestions (“customers who bought this, also bought this”), based on the assumption that these suggestions would include texts with similar foci and themes, and selected only those titles with representations of testing and sorting. This yielded 4 trilogies, *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2010), *Divergent* (Roth, 2012), *Legend* (Lu, 2011), and *The Testing* (Charbonneau, 2013), in which testing featured prominently in the narrative structure.

Our readings suggest one powerful conceptual thread that overlaps with all of the other themes we trace in these novels and discuss below. This thread, that of social control, was present across all four series and was conceptually connected to all of the other themes that emerged in the data. For example, the types of learning that took place leading up to testing, as well as the types of questions and challenges that made up the test themselves, were all aimed at constructing and winnowing out certain types of knowledge and people. The types of people, forms of learning, and skills and strategies being cultivated are clear indicators of the cultural values of the governments represented in these novels. Interestingly, many of these cultural values bear a strong resemblance to the type of skills-based instruction and workforce-focused topics that dominate contemporary educational rhetoric. Additionally, across the four series, the young protagonists are all engaged in some form of struggle against allowing themselves and others to be defined by these oppressive systems of education and testing that are being imposed by the state. The representations of those forms of struggle, however, are not without their own complications. In this article, we examine how, in popular YA dystopian fiction, the types of selves promoted by testing, and their concomitant skills and abilities, largely serve the interests of the state by generating a passive and productive workforce to maintain the status quo. Resistance to that status quo is crucial to the plot of each series, but the imagination of such resistance in the novels emphasizes not just the difficulty but the personal devastation of working against dominant systems. Published at a time when uprisings around the globe show discontent with reigning orders, these dystopias
The Darker Side of the Sorting Hat

seem to track that discontent but have a hard time modeling change that isn’t itself as catastrophic as the worlds described.

Testing and Social Control

Each series, set in a postapocalyptic or postcatastrophe world, emphasizes the difficulty of surviving, much less thriving when resources are diminished and social support structures are limited. Instead of cultivating an ethic of sharing or mutual dependency, the plots of these books emphasize the ubiquity of competition, offering us worlds in which young people must learn to fight, often one another, in order to survive. Testing emphasizes the battle of individuals for access to limited resources and opportunities.

The Hunger Games gives us perhaps the most extreme version of how a society pits young people against one another in competition for survival; the rules of the games dictate that only one individual can emerge victorious—and alive. As a means of draconian social control, designed as a display of its complete authority over life and resources, the Capitol hosts annual games in which two “tributes” are randomly selected from the twelve subordinate districts and sent to the Capitol for training and a battle to the death in the widely televised “hunger games.” The lone, last surviving victor returns to his or her district and lives in apparent comfort and security, however emotionally or physically damaged, amidst the relative poverty of most other district members. While the choosing of tributes, or “reaping” as it’s called, is random, it does provide access to (momentary) comfort and training that the tributes will use to try to survive the games. The games themselves are depicted in the first two books as not just competitions of brute force but rather cunning and cleverness; not just the strong, but the smart survive—as well as those who are willing to kill their competition. Over the course of the books, narrator Katniss discovers that she, as a victor, is a pawn in the government’s hands to help maintain control: “It’s an awful lot to take in, this elaborate plan in which I was a piece, just as I was meant to be a piece in the Hunger Games. Used without consent, without knowledge. At least in the Hunger Games, I knew I was being played with” (Catching Fire 385). She slowly learns to fight back by using her status as a victor in what becomes a media campaign against the Capitol, and eventually a full-fledged rebellion with Katniss as a propaganda figure; indeed, the final book, Mockingjay, is largely a depiction of the media campaign waged by the rebellion,
with Katniss participating in staged battle recreations and other forms of media manipulation

Scarcity of resources and battles over their distribution are prominent features in many of these YA dystopias, and the competition for survival is often framed as a series of tests that individuals must face for inclusion into a community or even for educational advancement. The stakes for failure are often extraordinarily high. Lu’s *Legend* series centers on Day, a fifteen-year-old who is wanted for multiple criminal infractions committed largely during efforts to cure his younger brother of a plague. During one attempt to rob a hospital in search of a cure, Day injures Metias Iparus, the brother of June Iparis, a fifteen-year-old prodigy with perfect test scores who serves as the female protagonist opposite Day. June is charged with hunting Day and bringing him to justice for the murder of her brother. In the series, a form of testing known as The Trials is used to determine who has access to high school and higher education and who is tracked into manual labor positions. Over the course of the trilogy, June and Day become romantically involved, and realize that the government, not Day, was responsible not only for Metias’s untimely death, but also for infecting low socioeconomic status sectors of the population with the plague in an attempt to create bioweaponry that could be used against the other colonies.

Testing and social control also figure centrally in the *Divergent* series, which depicts a society in which young people take nightmarish virtual reality tests to assess which community or “faction” may be most suitable to cultivate their skills and talents. Young people can choose their own factions, but the testing certainly puts pressure on individuals to choose carefully. The testing simulations put the young people in frightening circumstances in which they have to make choices, sometimes between killing and surviving, to determine defining characteristics that indicate their suitability for various factions. Once in a faction, initiates face additional tests, some of which are dangerous if not even deadly. Narrator Tris, choosing the aggressive protector faction Dauntless, faces a series of physical and mental challenges in which she is pushed to her limits and has to learn to face her worst fears. Other initiates to Dauntless see her increasingly as competition and some try to kill her. In the second volume of this series, *Insurgent*, an initiate into the intelligentsia faction, the Erudite, describes the high cost of failure: “I didn’t get a high enough score on my initiation intelligence test. So they said, ‘Spend your entire life cleaning up the research labs, or leave.’” (103). She becomes factionless, essentially homeless and living on the handouts
spared by members of the Abnegation faction. The series moves toward a dramatic and unexpected conclusion in which we discover that the entire faction-based society is itself a simulation created to explore effective strategies for social organization in a postapocalyptic world.

Such testing in dystopic YA fiction generates much of the action of the plots and is central to the final series we examine, *The Testing*, in which students from the colonies (in the former, now defunct US) are selected to participate in a series of tests in the new capital, Tosu City, where they will be evaluated for entrance into the University. Set in a world that has seen multiple wars and a series of devastating ecological disasters, the goal of the testing is ostensibly to find those who are most fit to lead the country in its recovery, both politically and environmentally. The narrative is told by Cia, a sixteen-year-old from a remote colony, who slowly learns that the testing severely penalizes failure. She and the other colonists take various skills and aptitude tests, sometimes with dire results. In one case, failure to test correctly for a biohazard is punished by extreme illness. In another instance, while her instructors calmly stand by, Cia watches one of her fellow colonists die during a test of mechanical ability. In the first volume of the trilogy, candidates are dropped off in a remote location with limited resources and are told to find their way back to Tosu City. As in *The Hunger Games*, young people find themselves pitted against one another, forming and then breaking loose alliances, as they struggle to survive both a hostile environment and the machinations of other candidates who are trying to thin the competition for a spot in the University. Access to education is predicated on a quite literally cut-throat vetting process, with candidates facing death both from fellow competitors and the testing itself.

Given the close braid woven in these books between testing and access to resources and further education, we are hardly surprised to note that testing itself consists in large part of the cultivation of certain types of skills, rather than the assessment of a wide range of student abilities. In Charbonneau’s *The Testing*, skills under the domains of science, technology, engineering, medicine, and government receive primary emphasis, as they are skills that relate directly to the United Commonwealth’s efforts to restore their lands and governmental infrastructure after the devastation of war. As a result, these skills are a focus of students’ academic endeavors, and only students who excel in these areas are selected for the honor of The Testing and given a chance to attend the University. In fact, when Zandri Hicks, a student
whose bent is more toward the humanities, is selected for the testing, the other students are astonished, noting that “Zandri only excels at science when it helps her create new paints” (*The Testing* 22). And when Zandri, interested in pursuing her art rather than a University pathway, inquires about alternatives, she is informed that “not presenting oneself for The Testing is a form of treason” (23), punishable by death. In the same series, another character, Raffe, is driven to help Cia investigate testing practices because he is searching for his sister, an artist who was “redirected” (code for executed or donated for medical research) after failing her tests. In general, the arts and humanities are devalued; Raffe explains to Cia that there are very few “art lovers” at the University.

Students in Lu’s *Legend* are also required by law to take the Trials. However, the skills cultivated for these tests are all in service of protecting and serving the militaristic interests of the Republic. Students are tested on their physical ability, their knowledge of the Republic, facility with writing, and psychiatric soundness. The skills tested in the Trials are aligned with the courses taught at the university, such as those focused on the history of the Republic and weaponry, and students who receive the highest marks on the Trials and in their elite university classes are given coveted positions in the military. Students who receive slightly lower marks are allowed to attend lesser ranking colleges and then are tracked into lower ranking positions, such as city guards. Students who do not score highly enough to warrant higher education are funneled into dangerous manual labor positions maintaining the civic infrastructure, while those who fail the Trials are sent to labor camps. What these outcomes all share is their focus on service to the Republic in some form or another.

In Roth’s *Divergent*, the cultivation of certain abilities takes place after the administration of aptitude tests, with students being apprenticed into the skills required for their chosen factions. During the Choosing Ceremony, the announcer explains how and why the various factions and their concomitant skills are deemed necessary:

Decades ago our ancestors realized that it is not political ideology, religious belief, race, or nationalism that is to blame for a warring world. Rather, they determined that it was the fault of human personality—of humankind’s inclination toward evil, in whatever form that is. They divided into factions that sought to eradicate those qualities they believed responsible for the world’s disarray. (42)
Thus, the factions are designed not only to cultivate certain qualities but also to eradicate those that are viewed as undesirable. The Abnegation faction fosters selflessness and seeks to eradicate selfishness as a means of creating citizens who can serve incorruptibly in leadership and government positions. The Dauntless faction seeks to promote bravery and diminish cowardice as a means of producing citizens capable of protecting the city and keeping the peace. The Erudite faction values wisdom and intelligence and seeks to eradicate ignorance with the purpose of producing citizens who are responsible for teaching, learning, researching, and record keeping types of positions. The Amity faction values peace and seeks to eliminate conflict as a means of producing citizens who can work together harmoniously in nurturing and sustenance tasks such as farming. And finally, the Candor faction promotes honesty and trustworthiness above all else and seeks to uncover deception as a means of producing sound leaders in law and politics.

Testing also interpolates students into systems that emphasize the ability to survive and withstand extreme pressure. The Divergent series describes drug-induced virtual simulations in which young people and faction initiates must not only face but also overcome their deepest fears. One of the main characters, Four, visits his fears in simulation repeatedly in an effort to tame them. In The Testing, Cia describes a series of skills-based tests as well as pressure-cooker experiences designed to winnow out students who are ill-suited for meeting the goals of the government officials who create, administer, and observe the tests:

Thus far, each of the tasks set for us by the final years has tested specific skills. Mathematics. History. Mechanical knowledge. But in addition to classroom-learned knowledge, the tests have measured something more. They have judged our ability to work under pressure. To trust one another. To listen to instructions and critically think through problems. Successful government officials do all those things, but the best of them do more. They follow their instincts and figure out a way to do what needs to be done. (134–35)

Certainly, young people undergoing testing in these books do so in postapocalyptic environments that are generally devastated and dangerous. So, the cultivation of particular skills and even mindsets often seems necessitated by the plot and the extremity of the settings through which these characters live. At the same time, however, a characteristic shared by all of these works is a focus on the production of youth who,
like lab rats, are able to satisfactorily make their way through a maze of often contradictory tasks, while an adult audience watches and judges every movement. In these worlds, young people are isolated and individuated and are rendered powerless over many aspects of their testing experiences. At the same time, however, they are expected to demonstrate great courage and power, exhibit good judgment, and engage in teamwork in order to succeed and live through many of these tests.

*Testing as the Production of Identities*

Such an emphasis on youth and their choices suggests that these books are taken up with, at least in part, the production of identities—a thematic to be expected in books marketed to young people in the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood. Rather than a Cartesian notion of one true self, identity in these novels occurs more as a process of identification with particular social and cultural ways of being in the world (Hall, Gee). High stakes testing features prominently in this process. In Roth’s *Divergent*, Lu’s *Legend*, and Charbonneau’s *The Testing*, aptitude tests are used to sort students into societal factions, or social and professional groups, in which they will spend the rest of their lives. With these factions comes a set of expectations about how one will dress, act, and even think. If a student chooses or is forced to leave their “home” faction, they go through a painful process of disidentification with friends and family, as contact between factions is discouraged. Then, during the initiation into their new faction, students experience another difficult process of identification with a social group that feels foreign to them, as they must learn the mannerisms, ways of speaking, and material trappings of their new social group.

This process of producing a particular kind of person or citizen is perhaps most evident in Roth’s *Divergent*. In this series, aptitude testing is paired with a choosing ceremony in which testees are able to choose the faction to which they belong. This ceremony is presented to the populace as a way to “honor the democratic philosophy of our ancestors, which tells us that every man has the right to choose his own way in this world” (42–43). However, on the day of her choosing, the protagonist Tris realizes that this choosing is in many ways a farce, as the choices are limited to five predetermined factions that have been created by the state (42). These factions, with their rigid expectations for dress, behavior, and belief, create different types of citizens who serve the interests of the state in different ways. For example, the
Abnegation faction requires members to dress in plain, gray clothes without adornment, to avoid vanity, self-indulgence, and eschew luxuries, and to value selflessness above all else. This cultivation of these traits is aimed at producing a portion of the citizenry that is capable of governing without corruption because these individuals will put the interests of others before their own. In contrast, members of the Dauntless faction dress all in black and adorn themselves with tattoos, piercing, and heavy makeup. The Dauntless are expected to develop their physical prowess, overcome their fears, and value bravery above all else. On the day of the Choosing Ceremony, the narrator Tris reflects on the role of factions in *Divergent*: “My mother told me once that we can’t survive alone, but even if we could, we wouldn’t want to. Without a faction, we have no purpose and no reason to live” (20). Thus, the importance of these factions is part of the cultural mythology that children are apprenticed into at an early age.

In spite of the extremely high social stakes associated with these tests (i.e., choosing the direction of the rest of one’s life), they are not designed to identify students’ passions and interests. Instead the aptitude tests are geared toward identifying how these young people can be sorted into a group where they will be of the most use to society. The second volume of *The Testing* series, *Independent Study*, shows Cia grappling with the realization that the testing she has undergone is hardly designed to help her cultivate her own interests but rather serve the interests of the state. She notes the high-stakes nature of the testing itself: “After six months of taking the same preliminary classes, all twenty of us will be tested and sorted into the fields of study that will serve as the focus for the rest of our lives” (1). As she’s placed into a field she’s not particularly invested in, she reflects both on Tomas, her love interest, and his fortunate placement in a field he cares about, and also on her father, who had successfully completed his own testing and “chosen” a career: “I always assumed he’d made the choice to help revitalize the earth. I hadn’t realized the decision had been made for him, and I have to wonder—if he had been the one doing the choosing, what would his choice have been? Was he, like Tomas, directed into the field of his passion, or was he like me?” (22). Cia grapples with the vagaries of a system in which some people’s natural abilities (like Cia’s affinity for technical skills) and preferences are moot; she herself is tracked into a governmental/political science course of study, while others, like Tomas, are fortunate enough to be able to pursue their passions.
In this system, individual agency is nonexistent in the face of state interests and needs. And yet, students are lulled into participating in the testing through the illusion of agency. What is the promise held out for passing the test and getting into the University? Cia notes that students are often eager to participate in the testing in order “To get closer to their dream” (Independent Study 266). A rhetoric of effort rewarded encourages their submission; as Cia puts it once she recognizes how manipulative and dangerous the testing actually is, “I’d almost convinced myself I could control my future through hard work” (Independent Study 33). Ultimately, the construction of agency and empowerment is based on illusion, existing as another mechanism to control and direct young people’s energies and ambitions as they work their way through the maze of tasks created for them by their leaders.

Testing and the Status Quo

The powers that be present testing as equitable competition or an unbiased measure of participants’ skills and abilities; however, over the course of these novels, there is a clear unveiling of the role that socioeconomic status (SES) plays in students’ ability to access, prepare for, and succeed in these tests. In The Hunger Games, participants’ progress in the games is publicly broadcast throughout the districts, and viewers can choose to send food, tools, medication, or other forms of assistance to the participants. As a result, players from poorer districts are at a distinct disadvantage, as the people in the low SES districts barely make enough money to feed themselves, much less to purchase these forms of assistance, even when it might mean the difference between life or death for the participant.

In The Testing series, testing is intimately tied to the welfare of the state, with the University and its officials responsible for administering the test and ensuring future leadership for the country. These officials, most notably the cold and aloof Dr. Barnes, monitor and assess candidates ceaselessly, seemingly without remorse if students die as part of the testing procedure and even “redirecting,” a euphemism for murdering, students who seem problematic or unworthy of further consideration. Cia’s characterization of the testing clearly links it to governmental control, to the state’s interests in fostering the right kinds of future leaders:

That the only way to ensure the United Commonwealth did not repeat past mistakes was to test the future leaders of our country
and make sure they had the breadth of qualities that would not only help our country flourish but keep our people safe. Over the years, several Commonwealth officials have questioned the necessity of such strong penalties for failing the Testing. Some even say that the Testers rig the outcome of the tests so that those who are too smart, too strong, and too dedicated are weeded out. For those are the ones who feel not only compelled to rebuild the Commonwealth but also to question its laws and its choices. Anyone who voices negative opinions about the Testing either is relocated to an outpost or disappears. (The Testing, 144)

Over and beyond the selection of skilled and capable leaders, the testing process is designed to maintain the status quo. Indeed, Cia discovers that students from the capital Tosu City are given preferential treatment and at times the option to be spared some of the more dangerous aspects of the tests. Such privilege stems from the fact that the parents of students from Tosu City are often closely associated with the University or officials administering the tests.

In Legend, the female protagonist June Iparis, who comes from a high SES background, believes she is the only person in the Republic to have scored a perfect 1500 on The Trials. However, after teaming up with Day, a young rebel leader who self-identifies as one of The Poor, June learns that the testing officials hid the fact that Day also received a perfect score. For her perfect score, June was sent to the university and received a coveted post in the military, while Day was used as a medical guinea pig and left for dead. At the start of the novel, Day reflects on the role of SES in test scores:

It’s almost always the slum-sector kids who fail. If you’re in this unlucky category, the Republic sends officials to your family’s home. They make your parents sign a contract giving the government full custody over you. They say that you’ve been sent away to the Republic’s labor camps and that your family will not see you again. Your parents have to nod and agree. A few even celebrate, because the Republic gives them one thousand Notes as a condolence gift. Money and one less mouth to feed? What a thoughtful government. (7)

As it turns out, failure has a much higher cost than any of the young characters imagine, as the governments in both the Legend and The Testing novels use children who fail the tests for invasive and inhumane medical experimentation. In Graduation Day, for instance, “high stakes”
testing takes a sinister turn as we learn that unsuccessful students are sent to labs where they are forced to participate in a different set of "tests": in scenes suggestive of Nazi-style horrors, these young people are given painful mutations and asked to describe the changes they are undergoing.

In the final book of the Divergent series, Allegiant, we learn that Chicago is itself a simulation, with the US government monitoring it and several other cities full of genetically damaged individuals. In a set of experiments, the government manipulates the social setting to breed out the genetic damage and produce "pure" people—the Divergent—who can then rejoin the larger society. Essentially, the faction system of the first two books in the series is a microcosm of a much larger social division between the genetically "damaged" and "pure." Our heroes move from one sorting system to another, with the "damaged," much like the factionless, being on the short end of the resource stick. Indeed, characters in Allegiant engage in some rudimentary class consciousness; Tris, feeling safe in the compound of the genetically pure, questions herself: "How can I walk these squeaky floors and wear these starchy clothes when I know that those people are out there, wrapping their houses in tarp to stay warm? (367–68). Interestingly, Allegiant figures the class divide as also a generational divide; visiting one of the makeshift camps of the "damaged," Tris notes that "Everyone I see is young—not many adults in the fringe, I guess" (243).

In the faction system, all of the simulation testing is designed to track people into categories. In the macrosociety, genetic testing is "high stakes" in that it assigns you as "pure" or "damaged," while the microsocietal simulation testing, monitored by the pure, tracks individuals who can control the simulation—a sign of genetic recovery or health. Ultimately at the heart of the Divergent series is a narrative about a botched attempt at social control through genetic manipulation—a reconfiguration of the human biology to eliminate violence, for instance, as opposed to addressing the social circumstances and inequities that might give rise to some of this violence. Tobias recognizes that this sorting system is all about social control through identification: "Control the genetically damaged population by teaching them that there’s something wrong with them, and control the genetically pure population by teaching them that they’re healed and whole" (Allegiant 253). But this is also a narrative about how a society has given itself over to the ubiquity of testing—from the testing of reactions and behavior in the simulations to the surveillance of genetic coding itself.
So, despite a veneer of egalitarianism, high stakes tests in these novels all function as a means of maintaining a societal status quo. In some cases, this is by design, such as in the *Hunger Games* when money is explicitly required to gain competitive advantage. In other cases, the connections between testing and the status quo initially seem more incidental, as in *Divergent*, when the social and emotional costs of switching factions serve as a deterrent for social mobility. Even in the *Divergent* series, however, differences that result in socioeconomic disparities are ultimately revealed as being coded into one’s genes.

*Testing and Resistance*

Since these YA dystopias are designed to appeal to young people, each book figures its primary narrators, all young women, as periodically questioning of authority and, at times, even outright rebellious. Read most positively, these books show young people coming into some critical consciousness about the inequities and injustices instantiated in the governmental systems to which they are subject. To varying degrees, we see these young women rebel against and combat those systems. The quality of that resistance, though, is worth discussion, particularly in terms of the imagination of alternatives to hegemonic systems described in these books.

In the *Divergent* series, Tris only begins to warm up to the idea of a factionless society toward the end of the second book, *Insurgent*. After commenting that the factions are destroyed, and that “it was all stupid to begin with,” she muses, “I have never said anything like that before. I have never even thought it. But I’m surprised to find that I believe it” (472). Simply imagining alternatives is represented in this novel as difficult; moreover, the process of coming to imagine those alternatives is occluded: Tris herself is surprised by her own beliefs, and we have little sense of how she came to consider other possibilities of social organization. And enacting those alternatives, much less believing them, is also often short changed in its representation in these books. Evelyn, leader of the factionless, acknowledges the difficulty of transitioning to a different social system: “The faction system that has long supported itself on the backs of discarded human beings will be disbanded at once. . . . We know this transition will be difficult for you. . . .” (*Insurgent* 519). Her instinct is right: the injustices of the faction system require that it be “disbanded,” but while the difficulty of social reengineering is acknowledged, the specifics are glossed over in the text.
In *Allegiant*, because the faction system comprises just a microcosm of larger divisions into the genetically “pure” and “damaged” in the macro society, the concept of resistance in the *Divergent* series is at least initially subsumed within the larger experiment designed to create genetically pure individuals. In the final book of the series, Tris and the other characters work through different options to resist and even overthrow the macro sorting system, asserting that the genetically “damaged” should have the right to some self-agency, as well as access to the resources and opportunities of the “pure.” *Allegiant* interestingly grapples with the problem of genetic determination, questioning the extent to which people should be controlled through tests, of either behavior or genetics. Ultimately, however, the rebels’ methods seem as compromised as those of the “pure.” When the rebels realize that the scientists in the compound are going to wipe the memories of those in the Chicago simulation to prevent the city from imploding in civil war (and thus ending the “experiment”), Tris’s group decides to use the memory-wiping agent on the scientists themselves. On one hand, the books are deeply concerned with fascistic tendencies; on the other, they have a hard time imagining nonviolent alternatives to dealing with fascist tendencies.

Indeed, the cost of imagining alternatives and resisting reigning orders is extraordinarily high throughout all of these books. In *The Testing* series, Cia and other characters who want change seem most invested, not in dismantling the testing completely, but in taking it away from Dr. Barnes, the representative of the University, and putting it in the hands of the government. And even that change is understood as drastic and potentially costly in terms of human life. For example, when Cia finally decides to go to the President with her concerns about The Testing and Dr. Barnes in an attempt to convince the President to change the system, she is confronted by an official who tells her, “I will have your message sent, and I hope it is as important as you believe. If not, you’ll discover there’s a cost to your misjudgment. Is that a price you’re willing to pay?” (*Graduation Day* 17). Ultimately, she learns that the cost doled out to her by the President is to hunt down and kill Dr. Barnes and his top administrators, one of whom is her friend Raffe’s father. Thus, Cia is trapped between allowing more students to be killed should The Testing continue in its current form, or to become a killer herself in order to bring about change. Such drastic stakes are reminiscent of *The Hunger Games* in which Katniss is steadily worn down over the course of the trilogy, having escaped death so many times but
also having had to kill to do so, that she is essentially an empty shell of a person by the close of the final book. Paying particular attention to gender roles in her essay “The Dandelion in the Spring: Utopia as Romance in Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games Trilogy,” Katherine R. Broad argues that “the final image of complacent adulthood and children suggests that Katniss’s instances of rebellion are permissible for girls, not women” (126). The narrative plots a trajectory toward relinquishing struggle, particularly if you’re a young woman.

The cost of resistance, figured in these terms, is crippling and may not be worth the price. In both The Hunger Games and The Testing, at least initially, the resistance is either as bad as the reigning government or is in league with it. The resistances don’t necessarily offer real alternatives, but more of the same—and the corrupt forces of injustice within the resistances must also be overcome before enough ground can be cleared for legitimate change. At the end of The Testing series, for instance, in the final showdown between Cia, the rebels, and Dr. Barnes, resistance is subsumed by the existing power structure, as we learn that Dr. Barnes actually wants to end the Testing and believes that Cia killing him will accomplish that; he’s essentially been grooming Cia all along. As such, Cia is maneuvered into adopting the strategies of the Testing in order to end it, as though the violence and savagery of the Testing could only be ended with comparable acts of violence.

Compounding the nearly insurmountable difficulties facing these young people, they often have relatively few resources to call on to assist them in surviving and managing the psychic distress of testing. These series begin with the protagonists living amidst a strong community of friends and family, but all forms of testing and subsequent education require these youth to be removed from and often sever all ties with former relations, effectively shutting them off from all familiar forms of support. As a result, the protagonists call upon emotional resources developed through past family ties or through newly formed love interests, and such remembered family and fledgling personal intimacies become the only sustaining resources. Hunger Games gives us the initial template of the young woman, Katniss, facing extraordinary circumstances whose primary sources of comfort are memories of her family and intermittent intimacies with the two young men between whom she’s romantically torn. Versions of this template get picked up in the Divergent, Testing, and Legend series, in which Tris, Cia, and June respectively, have to figure out both how to salvage their societies from near fascist control while only relying for emotional and psychological
support on memories of family. Both June and Tris’s parents are dead by the end of the first book in the series, and Cia worries throughout her trilogy that her family may be in danger. All three characters’ love interests are, like Katniss’s, relatively tame and physically chaste and actually often provide more stress and anxiety as characters wonder about the appropriateness and veracity of their romantic feelings, as well as what kinds of emotions, if any, are reciprocated.

And yet, through the protagonists’ efforts to resist the demands and expectations of testing, these books gesture toward the imagination of alternatives for social organization—alternatives that harken back to the narrators’ initial collectivist tendencies. In *Independent Study*, Cia wonders if she can trust another student, Raffe, who seems to want to help her in her fledgling efforts against the testing. She reflects on collectivities that exceed family and romantic partnerships:

Friendship is something I’ve always taken for granted. In Five Lakes, we competed to be the best in the class, but we all worked hard to get along. It’s impossible for me to imagine growing up without Daileen’s whispered confidences or Tomas’s kind understanding. Are the people here in Tosu City so different that they don’t place value on that kind of connection? (208)

Cia begins to make some distinctions between the kind of collectivist upbringing she had in her home colony versus the more competition driven system characterizing the capital. But how far will such thinking go? At least in *The Testing* series, the author seems to want to pit Cia’s collectivist past against the cutthroat ethos of the capital. In an important moment for Cia, reflecting on helping other students instead of just competing against them, Raffe questions her motives and she responds: “To do any less [than help him] would be against everything my parents taught me. Would dishonor the colony I grew up in” (*Independent Study* 111). We see the same sort of collectivist mentality being pitted against an ethos of competition in Katniss’s approach to the Hunger Games, when she collaborates with other tributes, refuses to kill competitors for any reason other than self-defense, and ultimately earns the ire of the president for manipulating the games in such a way that both she and her potential love interest Peeta are able to survive. Such glimpses—and they are often only glimpses of alternatives to high-stakes competition and testing focused on individual achievement—are always contextualized within narratives that foreground the extreme danger of acting, much less thinking, differently.
Each novel we’ve examined in this article imagines a postapocalyptic or postcatastrophe society in which resources are limited and must be tightly controlled. These are worlds in which the severity of the various sorting measures might make a kind of sense. An emphasis on survival, competition, and outsmarting others competing for resources as well as a hostile environment are all skills that seem relevant. But as the allusion to *Harry Potter* in our title suggests, the notion of educational “sorting” isn’t new in YA fiction. And while we may have characterized the sorting hat as a benign form of placement, upon closer examination (especially in the context of the dystopic work we’ve examined here), even the sorting at Hogwarts seems extreme and consequential; choices are strictly limited, there is no apparent recourse to appeal the hat’s decisions, and a placement into Slytherin is hardly without consequence—both for one’s future career and deeper sense of self. Indeed, while we have focused on US texts, an examination of sorting at Hogwarts might link it to longstanding British forms of educational placement that limit choices and hence opportunities. At the very least, even preapocalyptic YA fiction seems, at least tangentially, invested in the dynamics of high-stakes educational decisions.

The contemporary US, however, is not—at least not yet—the postapocalyptic world of *The Testing*, or of the other books we have analyzed. So we wonder what constitutes the attractiveness of these narratives, some of which, like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, have been made into very successful films. Why do many young people enjoy reading them, and what is resonant between the experiences of the young people described and the young people reading these books? Certainly, tales of life-and-death struggle attract adolescent readers responding hyperbolically to their own personal and social transformations. But it is hard for us not to read these books of “high-stakes testing” as also appealing to students’ and young people’s sense of their own increasingly high-stakes choices for employment and life direction at a time of economic downturn. In many ways, we argue, these books reflect a set of affects and attitudes accruing around a culture of testing tied to state (and increasingly corporate) interests. In Jameson’s words, they allow us to probe the “structural limits” of how we imagine the future as born out of contemporary realities.

A major feature of all of these books is their conceptualization of monolithic and totalitarian regimes that control and direct all resources...
and life trajectories. We might read such regimes psychoanalytically as stand-ins for “parental figures,” with the young adult readers identifying with the struggles of the protagonists to resist the overwhelming authority of the parent/state. But strikingly absent in these works—with the notable exception of the citizens of the capital in *The Hunger Games* and the nemesis of the colonies in the third book of the *Legend* series—is a consumer culture that young people can participate in. Young protagonists are cut off from both democratic and capitalist processes. Such represents a shift in the imagination of dystopia. M. T. Anderson’s immensely popular and influential *Feed* from 2002 offers a striking contrast in depicting a world in which rampant consumption is managed by constant corporate-based advertising intrusion through a computer network tapping directly into people’s minds via various implants. You can never escape advertising. In 2002, still in the early years of the economic downturn, the ubiquity of advertising as a threat to autonomous agency still seemed worth critiquing. After 2004, with decreasing consumer spending power and increasing influence of corporations on governmental activity, satires of corporate sponsorship of unbridled consumption as a means of social control began perhaps to seem unnecessary.

Indeed, while often about the distribution of resources, these novels understand such almost entirely as a function of the state. There is very little investigation of relations between states and corporate interests—a key structural relation of contemporary capitalism. Even in the *Legend* series, where corporations sponsor all aspects of life in the Colonies, the State (aka the Republic where June and Day have spent their entire lives) is positioned in stark opposition to corporate interests. We could read such as a critical oversight, a failure to attend in these dystopic imaginings of the future to the weakening of states as guarantors of civil rights and the rise of corporate interests controlling more and more aspects of both governmental and daily life. But we could also read lack of attention to corporations as a recognition of the conflation of corporate and state interests; dystopia is the eradication of the free market under state regulation and the collapse of all resource management into a centralized government—whether corporate or fascist.

However simply drawn the governments are in these books, one feature remains dominant: they control a scarcity of resources and use various sorting mechanisms to monitor access to goods, services, education, and even possibilities for identification—a figuring of social relations that many young people today might find resonant with their
own experiences. For example, one crucial reaction to the economic downturn is a collateral shift in how young people understand their (increasingly limited) options for career and livelihood. Instead of cultivating personal pursuits, students likely feel the need to pursue more “sure bets” or careers with more forecast economic stability. Personal passions are sidelined in the interest of attempts to secure a future within rapidly shifting economic systems. Indeed, a pervasive theme in these novels is that the people who create tests don’t care about the subjects taking the tests, and the creators only view and understand these children in highly instrumentalized ways. In essence, these young people exist only in the service of maintaining larger institutional structures, and the tests are designed to produce particular types of citizens to meet the needs of the state. All of the preparation and learning that goes on around the tests is also highly instrumentalized and primarily skills-based. The dreams, or in extreme cases the lives, of children who tend towards the arts and humanities are quickly extinguished, as these pursuits have little utility in the current social and economic systems. Instead, young people in these novels, much like in contemporary culture, are really commodities trying to survive in a hostile world/market. We see such clearly in The Hunger Games, in which the wealthy Capitol citizens weigh the odds and place bets on which young people will survive the games they have set up.

Also at stake in the economic downturn is our cultural imagination of “youth” itself. Since the 1960s at least, the figure of youth has served as a trope for social progress and hope for the future. Now, according to Henry Giroux, who has written extensively on the shifting fate of young people in contemporary educational and political arenas, much has changed. In “The ‘Suicidal State’ and the War on Youth,” Giroux argues that contemporary young people “inhabit a neoliberal notion of temporality marked by a loss of faith in progress along with the emergence of apocalyptic narratives in which the future appears indeterminate, bleak, and insecure” (107). As in the dystopias, young people in real life have to fight harder just to survive, much less thrive. So much more is expected of students to make any sort of progress; consider the competition for nursery school slots and all the extracurricular items that students are expected to have on their resumes in addition to good grades and expectations for superior literacy and numeracy skills.

But beyond gesturing to the economic hardships many young people face, these books also track a significant change in our imagination of
youth as a time of experimentation and exploration. Giroux notes such a shift in the larger cultural imaginary surrounding young people—an imaginary we can easily see figured in YA dystopias:

What is particularly new is the way in which young people are increasingly denied any place in an already weakened social contract and the degree to which they are no longer seen as central to how the United States defines its future. Youth is no longer the place where society reveals its dreams but where it increasingly hides its nightmares. Within neoliberal narratives, youth are either defined as a consumer market or stand for trouble. (107)

As in all of these dystopias, Graduation Day figures its young adults as self-doubting and conflicted in their relationship to government, and a significant part of the dystopic affect generated within these books is a sense of entrapment in existing structures and an inability to think hopefully beyond them. Cia confesses the following, in tones permeating her narration: “As the youngest student at the University, I find it hard to believe that my actions could change the course of my country’s history. That I am clever enough to outthink Dr. Barnes and his officials and save lives. But there is no other way. The odds favor my failure, but I still have to try” (4). Just a few pages later, she asserts, “As University students, we have almost no control of the world around us” (10). Completely effaced is any sense of the university student as rebel or activist. And the allusion to The Hunger Games—the odds aren’t in her favor—as well as her sense that “there is no other way” both suggest a nearly paralyzing sense of dread of the future.

As such, some of these fictional young people find themselves almost comforted at times with membership and success within their societies, as corrupt as they might be. In Insurgent, Tris initially encounters the notion of a factionless society with panic: “My mouth goes dry. No factions? A World in which no one knows who they are or where they fit? I can’t even fathom it. I imagine only chaos and isolation” (110). Indeed, Balaka Basu, writing in “What Faction Are You In? The Pleasure of Being Sorted in Veronica Roth’s Divergent,” goes so far as to argue that “every attempt at critique of a system of classification” in the novel “simultaneously becomes a celebration” (31).

In The Testing series, Cia’s attitude toward being tested and sorted is a bit more complicated. As troubled as she is by the testing, Cia’s powerlessness positions her as someone who must nonetheless learn to play the game if she is to survive. Even when she moves toward imag-
ining alternatives to the testing and the society that has created and supported it, she nonetheless recognizes benefits she has gained from her experiences as a student: “But the only way to stop [the testing] is to create a new rebellion. A rebellion free of Dr. Barnes’s control. For that, I will have to step up and be the leader the University is teaching me to be” (Independent Study 306). Graduation Day continues to play out the ambivalence about testing in several ways. Cia confesses that “The Testing is terrible in its methods, but it has gotten results” (14). As she moves closer and closer to committing to fighting against the Testing, we also see her design her own set of “tests” to see whom she can trust, and they are as savage in their own way as the University’s testing; for instance, one involves giving Raffe a recording device and telling him not to listen to the message on it, but not telling him that if he does it will explode (and this “test” ultimately does end up exploding and injuring another student). She tries to differentiate herself from those she’s fighting: she says, “While I’m capable of doing what is necessary, I’m not Dr. Barnes” (185). At the same time, she increasingly seems quick to kill those in her way. While one might wonder, with Audre Lorde, if the master’s tools will ever dismantle the master’s house, Cia’s growing interest in questioning and challenging the reigning order is laced with her sense of having gained valuable albeit deadly skills from her experiences.

Ultimately, these novels worry over young people as potential troublemakers, entrapping them in societies that position them as consumers or by heading off any troublesome tendencies through genetic modification, medical intervention, and the enforcement of educational and career tracks that on the surface are presented as being the best match for the student but actually are the best for the society depicted. As we saw in The Testing, students don’t get to follow their passion or even what they view as their best ability, but instead are channeled into tracks that are chosen for them. Even the world of Divergent only offers five specified “tracks” and, at least initially, punishes those who don’t easily fit into predetermined categories. And while the Divergent series shows young people steadily moving toward a world in which more choice is allowed—in which being “divergent” is ok—such a movement is depicted as fraught and even deadly.

In their introduction to Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults, editors Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry write that “Utopian literature encourages young people to view their society with a critical eye, sensitizing or predisposing them to political action” (7).
More specifically, they assert that “Exposure to these types of texts can lead young readers to see inequality in their own communities and countries” (8). As educators, we want to hold on to such a hope—a hope that Ernst Bloch says is necessary as a methodology for critically imagining more equitable and just futures: “Not only hope’s affect (with its pendant, fear) but even more so, hope’s methodology (with its pendant, memory) dwells in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy” (*Literary Essays* 341). For Bloch, the hoped-for not-yet is characterized by an “enduring indeterminacy”—a recognition that present circumstances need not determine a future, which remains malleable as a place in which to imagine better worlds.

Our worry is that these dystopias figure only the most extreme kinds of solutions to the problems of sorting and testing that dominate characters’—and increasingly readers’—lives. Surely, the texts, in their representation of extreme situations that limit youth and force them into ethically compromising positions, might resonate with increasing youthful frustration—even rage—about current impoverished choices, both in education and career. Still, the gesture toward change and possibly hope is there. The “indeterminate, bleak, and insecure” future that Giroux marks is one of the chief characteristics of the YA dystopias that so many young people find so appealing. These narratives, read for entertainment, might also provide the beginnings of a critical discourse for thinking through the issues that Giroux, amongst others, have identified. Such critical discourse need not be limited to discussion amongst youths themselves; after all, to be as successful as they have been, such YA books are also read by many adults. Readers should be prompted to think of these novels and films not just for their entertainment value but also for their ability to prompt discussion about education and economics. Even further, these texts might provide rich opportunities for cross-generational talk about current educational practices.

As we noted, resistance to the dominant and hegemonic orders described in the dystopias is often itself compromised; and even when successful, it often leaves characters damaged. And yet, the presence of numerous novels that worry over the damaging effects of high-stakes testing, as well as the corrupt and inequitable governmental orders that call for such testing, creates at least the possibility for discussion of these issues. Giroux argues that the current economic order, neoliberalism “destroys [our] public spheres, including public higher education, that
traditionally advocate for social equality and contribute to the creation of an educated citizenry that is a fundamental condition for a viable democracy” (103). We have worked long enough in higher education to believe that he may very well be right. But we also believe that the readerly interest in YA dystopias could provide the grounds for a new set of discourses that helps readers—young and old—think through systems of inequality. Giroux argues that “the concepts and practices of community and solidarity” that characterize a socially minded public sphere “have been replaced by a world of cutthroat politics, financial greed, media spectacles, and a rabid consumerism” (110). All of these qualities are very much present in the books we’ve analyzed; the worlds they depict are cutthroat, greedy, and rabid. And in the mass multi-media marketing of series like The Hunger Games and Divergent, the books themselves become filmed “media spectacles” about the political savagery of young people’s lives that many consumers flock to see. And yet, the books (and films) call attention to that savagery, to the ways in which young people’s hopes and dreams are truncated and their lives turned into spectacle. We hope that the marking of such trends will lead to productive discussion, greater critical self consciousness, and renewed interest in working toward an equitable world before the hyperbolic dystopias depicted in these books become fully realized.

Works Cited


