

## **Black and Brown Boys in Young Adult Dystopias: Racialized Docility in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy and *The Lunar Chronicles***

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### **Introduction**

Two young friends recently became an international sensation when one of the boys, both of whom are enrolled in the same Kentucky pre-school class, wanted to cut his hair like his friend's so "their teacher wouldn't be able to tell them apart" ("White Boy"). Their story went viral, in large part, because it depicts an interracial friendship. Jax, a white five-year-old, wanted to have his hair cut like that of his best friend, Reddy, who is black.<sup>1</sup> The friends have been hailed for "teaching people about racial harmony" ("5-Year-Old Boy"). The boys' colorblindness—Jax's in particular—has been promoted as evidence that racism is taught. In the original FaceBook post sharing the story, Jax's mother, Lydia Stith Rosebush, wrote, "If this isn't proof that hate and prejudice is taught I don't know what is. The only difference Jax sees in the two of them is their hair" ("Boy's Surprising Request"). Here, Rosebush reiterates a commonly held social theory: young children have a social innocence that is lost when they learn about racial differences and race.

As citizens, scholars, and critics, we need to question both the ethics of teaching children to be colorblind and the efficacy of doing so. In a *New York Times* editorial, Jennifer Harvey describes racism in terms of pollution:

Not realizing the pollution is there doesn't mean it doesn't affect you. White children are exposed to racism daily. If we parents don't point it out, show how it works and teach why it is false, over time our children are more likely to accept racist messages at face value. When they see racial inequality—when the only doctors or teachers they see are white, or fewer kids in accelerated classes are black, for example—they won't blame racism. Instead, they'll blame people of color for somehow falling short.

As Harvey points out, colorblindness is a privilege only afforded to white Americans. While Jax's mother celebrates the fact that Jax sees no difference between himself and Reddy beyond their hair, parents of color have to face the realities of racism with their children.

Christi Griffin, the president of The Ethics Project, a non-profit focused on

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Reddy is being raised by white parents who adopted him and his younger brother from Africa ("Boy's Surprising Request").

reducing “the impact of crime, wrongful persecutions and mass incarcerations . . . and . . . raising the bar on ethical conduct within the system” (“The Ethics Project”), and an African American mother with a son, explains that black parents must have “the talk” with their children, especially their sons. “The talk,” for black parents,<sup>2</sup> is not about sex. In short, it is an explanation of how people of color, especially black and Latino men, must behave when they are stopped by the police.<sup>3</sup> But “the talk” extends well beyond interactions with the police; it often includes instructions on how to act around and engage with white people so as to avoid being “perceived as menacing and deserving of punishment” (Hughes, “What Black Parents Tell Their Sons About the Police”). Robert Stephens, a young African American man living in Kansas City, recounts that his father told him “that anything [he] did would be perceived as malicious and . . . [he] had to govern [himself] accordingly” (Hughes). “The talk” serves to educate black and brown youth about the “potential consequences” of their status as racial minorities (Hughes). Parents of young black and brown men want their sons to know that their race and their masculinity make them “both a target and a threat” (Hughes). As Jazmin Hughes emphasizes in her *Vice* article “What Black Parents Tell Their Sons About the Police,” parents of color do not have “the talk” because they want their children to feel ashamed of their racial heritage, but because “they fear for [their children's] well-being.” Because the racism and the potential racist violence they face is very real, young men of color don’t have the privilege of being colorblind, and teaching Jax and Reddy to ignore race will not prepare either for the drastically different ways they are likely to be treated throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, many of the Young Adult (YA) dystopian novels published in the last fifteen years or so also seemingly rely on a colorblind ideology. Texts such as the *Divergent* Trilogy, the *Maze Runner* series, *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, the *Pure* Trilogy, and the *Lunar Chronicles* purport to be racially progressive include characters who are described in ways that suggest they are racialized, but the texts do not directly address race, racism, or racialized difference. Instead, the racialized differences are largely overlooked, which suggests that, in the futuristic dystopian settings of these novels, race no longer matters. That authors are simultaneously willing to include diverse characters and unwilling to discuss racialized differences tacitly reinforces colorblind ideology.

Young male characters of color, in particular, are given superficially raced identities, which seems to suggest to readers not only is race no longer important, but also that in the futuristic worlds that so often make up settings of YA dystopian fiction,

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<sup>2</sup> While we specifically refer to black parents, we want to emphasize that most parents of color feel compelled to have a version of “the talk” with their children.

<sup>3</sup> We write “when they are stopped by the police” as opposed to “if they are stopped by the police” because multiple studies indicate that young men of color, particularly young black men, are significantly more likely to be stopped by the police than white men. See David A. Harris, “Driving While Black: Racial Profiling on Our Nation's Highways” and “Report on Traffic Stops” published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2011.

racism is a thing of the past. However, the same young male characters of color, are often depicted in stereotypical ways—as physically imposing, as inherently violent, or as animalistic. In contrast, the genre routinely features strong female protagonists who rebel against both gendered stereotypes and the dystopian regimes that seek to control them. That young female characters, the majority of whom are coded as white, are empowered in this genre is, perhaps not surprising. As Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair assert in their book *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001*, “the apparatus of literature of the fantastic coupled with its referential nature to the experiential world create a testing ground, a safe space, as it were, to explore more imaginative possibilities for the self” (129). Speculative fiction more generally and dystopian fiction specifically have “enthusiastically promoted as a major theme the necessity for girls to gain control over their own lives by embracing their gifts, to engage in self-definition, and to use their own empowerment to challenge oppressive social structures” (129). But, young men of color are rarely given similar opportunities in YA dystopian fiction. While many books in the genre, particularly those written in the last fifteen years, “feature[e] and explor[e] female strength” (Brown and St. Clair 129), the same books typically present young men of color as adhering to society’s expectations of them without question. In other words, these books demand docility from young men of color, presenting them as dangerous unless they have internalized social disciplinary codes. The few who do challenge society are punished harshly, usually with death; such characters include Thresh from *The Hunger Games* and Alby from the *Maze Runner* series.<sup>4</sup> Often, even those who do perform docility according to society’s dictates are punished, and many still die, frequently in ways that benefit the white female protagonists; for example, Uriah, who is described in racialized terms, from the *Divergent* Trilogy<sup>5</sup> adheres so the rules of his dystopian world, yet he dies so that Tris, the novel's protagonist, can realize the ways in which she and her fellow citizens are being manipulated. However, the punishment for a lack of social docility is always present and always severe.

In this paper, we focus on Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy and Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles*, both of which feature young male characters of color in secondary roles. In each of these series, a young racialized man plays a role that allows a white female protagonist to demonstrate her strength, to exercise agency over herself, and to rebel against the totalitarian government controlling all citizens. We

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<sup>4</sup> Alby, a character who is described as “dark-skinned with short cropped hair” (*Maze Runner 7*), dies when he walks into a group of Grievers, creatures that are “a horrific mix of animal and machine” (*Maze Runner 38*). His death can be read as benefiting Thomas and Teresa ( *Scorched Trials 260-270*), both of whom are described as white.

<sup>5</sup> As is typical of this genre, Uriah is not described specifically as black, but Veronica Roth uses descriptors that suggest he is racialized. Uriah is “dark-eyed” with “bronze skin” (Roth 138, 152) that highlights the whiteness of his smile. In *Allegiant*, the series final book, Uriah is seriously injured—and later dies—in an explosion set by Four. Uriah's death serves to make Tris, the series' protagonist and Four's love interest, question Four's allegiance to her as well as to make Four doubt his own abilities; thus, he is another young black man who is sacrificed so that the main characters may grow through experiencing his death.

underscore this narrative construct as a way to consider how young male characters of color are presented in works of YA dystopian fiction. We specifically argue that male characters of color who dissent, who renounce their learned docility are subject to harsh punishment. We further contend that male characters of color who adhere to their society's expectations of docility face uncertain futures and often experience treatment as harsh as their rebellious counterparts, which unfortunately manifests in real life as we will indicate through reference to two well-known African American athletes: Cam Newton and Colin Kaepernick. To close our essay, we consider how society has responded to Newton's "dabbing" and Kaepernick's "taking a knee," drawing parallels between the literary troupes found in YA fiction and our raced social reality, and, thus, indicating the need to critically evaluate these text and current cultural constructs of race and docility.

### **Docility in YA Dystopian Fiction**

It goes, perhaps, without saying that the wider genre of YA dystopian fiction features many characters who are docile. In fact, the structures of both Collins's Panem and Meyer's New Beijing train their respective populaces to be docile. Michel Foucault's analysis of seventeenth and eighteenth-century soldiers, whom he studied to support his theories of docile bodies, shows that the soldier is recognizable because he demonstrated the traits of strength, courage, and valor (135). For Foucault, the seventeenth-century soldier had a natural ability and inclination for the profession. While soldiers learned their professions overtime, "it is true that he had to learn his profession of arms little by little . . . movements like marching and attitudes like the bearing of the head belonged for the most part of to a bodily rhetoric of honour" (135). In other words, the men to whom Foucault refers to here were inclined to be soldiers and, as such, behaving as soldiers came naturally to them. By the eighteenth century, Foucault argues that soldiers can be made; they can be taught to be "pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit" (135). Soldiers become subject to be constrained and controlled, taught to fulfill specific obligations (136), each of which seeks to control and to coerce them (137). As "an infinitesimal power" is asserted "over the active body" (137), soldiers are disciplined and learn to discipline themselves responding to a "mechanics of power" (138). This mechanics defined how "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138).

Foucault's emphasis on soldiers demonstrates the ways in which a body becomes docile while it simultaneously asserts that docile bodies have the potential to become dangerous. Critic Sara K. Day applies Foucault's theory of docile bodies and their potential to become dangerous to the adolescent female body, arguing that the adolescent girl is required "to conform to specific physical requirements that" may code her as a "threat that [must] be monitored, controlled, or exploited by the social system in which she lives" (77). While we agree with Day's assessment that the adolescent

female body is both docile and dangerous, we move beyond her assertion that the adolescent female body offers “a more implicit pairing of docility and danger, both in contemporary society and in dystopian novels” (72). We argue that the bodies of adolescent boys of color offer an explicit pairing of docility and danger. While both adolescent girls and adolescent boys of color are constantly also “monitored, controlled, or exploited by the social systems” in which they live, adolescent boys of color are perceived to pose an imminent threat to society. Therefore, when they reject their docility and act in ways that are seen as dangerous, they are subjected to harsh punishment, specifically incarceration or death.

In contemporary American culture, young men of color are trained to be docile by a variety of individuals and structures. As Hughes argues,

Being a black parent, especially of a black boy, comes with the added onus of having to protect your child from a country that is out to get him—a country that kills someone who looks like him every 28 hours, a country that will likely imprison him by his mid-thirties if he doesn’t get his high school diploma, a country that is more than twice as likely to suspend him from school than a white classmate.

Hughes explains that this fear prompts parents to give a “culturally compulsory lecture that warns young black men about the inherent strikes against them, about the society that is built to bring them down.” Explicit in this lecture are instructions on how to behave in any number of circumstances—when stopped by the police, when questioned by a teacher, when visiting a predominantly white neighborhood, as we have already discussed. Implicit is the message that young black men must be docile in order to stay alive.

Within the dystopian framework of Collins’ *Panem* and Meyer’s *New Beijing* and *Lunar* communities, citizens, especially those of color, are transformed into docile bodies as their actions are controlled and their behaviors dictated by their respective societies. The citizens of *Panem* have trained their bodies and their minds to deal with the various hardships the residents of each district face. Those in District 12 are disciplined to handle the physical deprivations of coal mining, while those in District 11 have adapted to the difficulties of planting and harvesting enough crops to feed an entire nation, while often being food themselves. Many in the districts realize that they are being manipulated and used by the Capitol, but they are too focused on survival to challenge the Capitol. As Katniss observes, “rage seems pointless . . . what good is yelling at the Capitol . . . It doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill our stomachs” (*Hunger Games* 14). Thus, even citizens who are aware of the power structures remain docile because they have little means to challenge the status quo.

Similarly, the residents of *New Beijing* and the moon have been conditioned to distrust cyborgs, to fear Lunar surveillance and, for *New Beijing*, potential invasion, to

follow strict class divisions without question, and to protect themselves against letumosis, a highly contagious, deadly disease that is incurable on earth.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the citizens of New Beijing have been taught to fear contracting letumosis to such a degree that they feel no empathy for those who have the disease; instead, they spy on one another and report anyone who appears to have symptoms to emergency crews, who quarantine all victims in hospitals on the outskirts of the city (*Cinder* 16, 141). Most residents of Collins' and Meyer's universes are too focused on survival to recognize the myriad of ways they are being controlled by their respective governments, which reinforces "the mechanics of power" at play in these dystopian worlds (Foucault 138). To be docile is, to a large extent, to survive in these worlds.

### **Thresh of *The Hunger Games***

As we've noted, Suzanne Collins goes to great lengths to construct the citizens of Panem as docile, but she also implies that the citizenry is diverse. Critic Mary J. Couzelis notes that District 12 is set in a part of the U.S.<sup>7</sup> that "was called Appalachia" and "that everyone who works in the minds look alike, with black hair, olive skin, and grey eyes" while members of the merchant class have "light hair (blonde) and blue eyes" (138). Couzelis goes on to observe that such descriptions connect "class and skin tones in a way that echoes contemporary racial and economic hierarchies" (138). Indeed, these hierarchies are reinforced as readers learn that Katniss's mother, who has "light hair and blue eyes" (*Hunger Games* 7), married outside her class: her mother grew up "in the nicer part of District 12," where her parents "ran an apothecary shop" while her father was a miner who lived in the Seam (8). Within the context of District 12, Katniss, as well as most of the miner class, could be read as racially different from those of the merchant class. Critic Robynn Stillwell suggests that the residents of the Seam may be descendant from "the Melungeon, a group of dark-skinned, blue- and green-eyed people found in Appalachia and the Blue Ridge mountains" (263). Stillwell points out "Melungeons were first identified, much as 'white trash' was defined, by both white and black Americans as 'other'" (263), a characterization which could explain the economic divides that are clearly present in District 12.

The implied diversity of Panem extends to Collins' descriptions of the tributes of District 11, who are the only two characters in the series' first novel described using racialized terms. Readers are first introduced to Rue and Thresh when Katniss recounts the "recap of the reappings across Panem" (*Hunger Games* 45). Katniss describes several

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout the course of the series' first novel, *Cinder*, readers learn that the Lunar government has discovered a cure for letumosis, but Levania, the Lunar Queen, refuses to share the cure with people of New Beijing until Prince Kai marries her (*Cinder* 211-214).

<sup>7</sup> Katniss observes that "District 12 was in a region know as Appalachia," while "the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies" (*Hunger Games* 41). Although she never specifically refers to the United States, these, along with other geographic references, are enough to suggest to readers that Panem was constructed out of a version of the United States.

of her fellow tributes: "A monstrous boy who lunges forward to volunteer from District 2. A fox-faced girl with sleek red hair from District 5. A boy with a crippled foot from 10. And most hauntingly, a twelve-year-old girl from District 11" (45). Rue "has dark brown-skin" (45), and Thresh, readers learn later, "has the same dark skin" as Rue (126). As Couzelis notes, Katniss only notes Rue and Thresh's skin tone, "thereby highlighting their difference" (Couzelis 138). While we agree with Couzelis's observation, we argue that Katniss's description of Rue and Thresh's skin tone also changes the way readers see Katniss. Juxtaposed against Rue and Thresh with their "dark brown skin," Katniss effectively becomes white. That her olive skin is never referenced beyond her initial physical description and that Rue's and Thresh's "dark brown skin" is repeatedly highlighted tacitly suggests that Katniss is meant to be read as white.

It is equally telling that Katniss immediately compares Rue to her little sister, Prim, for whom she volunteered as tribute; like Prim, Rue is young, petite, and quite. In fact, Rue can initially be read as a stand-in for Prim rather than a fully developed character in her own right. Katniss sees Rue as vulnerable and in need of protection, despite the fact that she receives a score of seven during training, which suggests that the Gamemakers consider her to be a strong opponent. Nevertheless, in the Arena, Katniss allies with Rue, in part because she knows she'll be successful with an ally than on her own, but also because Katniss cannot bear the thought that Rue may die: "I want her [to be my ally]. Because she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim" (*Hunger Games* 201). Katniss's determination to protect Rue casts her as a savior<sup>8</sup> of sorts: she wants to save the tribute she sees as most like her sister rather than exploit Rue's weaknesses. While characterizing Katniss as Rue's protector renders Katniss as sympathetic to readers, it also invokes a racial hierarchy among the characters as Katniss represents the benevolent white savior who works to protect her powerless black friend. Rue, ten, can be seen to represent the historical "subordination of African American women" (Simien 8) to the benefit of white women. Here, as well as in its representation of Thresh, the series draws on the United States' complex racial history while simultaneously ignoring it; in other words, the series privileges Katniss, who is inspired to challenge the strictures of Panem after witnessing Rue's savage murder, while it also victimizes Rue, who is, arguably, sacrificed so that her young white friend can go on to join the rebellion.

In contrast to Rue, Thresh is presented as powerful. He is physically large and imposing. According to Katniss, "He's one of the giants, six and a half feet" tall and muscular (*Hunger Games* 126). Thresh is so physically threatening that the Careers, the tributes from wealthier districts who train for the Hunger Games, invite him to join their group. He rejects their invitation, however, preferring to be "solitary, speaking to no one and showing little interest in training" (126). As Couzelis notes, Collins draws on

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Katniss does exhibit protective feelings for many characters, including her fellow tribute, Peeta. However, she feels most protective toward those characters that she sees as weaker and more vulnerable than she is. That she exhibits such feels for Rue emphasizes that she does not see Rue as capable of surviving on her own.

“hierarchies and imagery originating from American Slavery and Reconstruction-era stereotypes” in her representation of both Thresh and Rue (139). This is certainly true of Thresh—he represents the “savage,” which historian Laura Green defines as the “Image of a threatening brute from the ‘Dark Continent.’” The stereotype of the savage reinforces beliefs that black men “were mentally, physically, and culturally unevolved, and ape-like in appearance” (Plous and Williams as cited by Green). Although Katniss never compares Thresh to an ape, she does remark that he is “built like an ox” (*Hunger Games* 126). While this comparison is meant to emphasize his strength and to position him as able to win the Games based on his size and physical abilities alone—which it does—it also implies that Thresh is unintelligent and mentally slow, like most people assume an ox to be. That he only speaks to answer yes or no questions or to give short responses that are not formulated as complete sentences only reinforces the stereotype of the savage. Further, Couzelis observes that when Thresh does speak, his speech patterns are markedly different from the other tributes (140). His syntax is broken, with his sentences structured oddly. For example, he speaks in short phrases, such as “For the little girl” and “No more owed” (*Hunger Games* 288). As Couzelis correctly notes, “none of the other characters speak in such a broken and simplified manner. Thereby, accentuating his difference” (140). Extending Couzelis’s analysis, we argue that Thresh’s speech renders him more savage as it implies he is all brute strength, incapable of coherent, intelligent speech or thought. Whereas other (white) tributes, specifically Cato, the brutally violent boy from District 2,<sup>9</sup> are equally physically imposing, they speak in Standard English. Katniss converses with Cato on numerous occasions, which suggests that he is intelligent enough to carry on a conversation. Cato seems to be, in spite of his sadistic nature, conventionally civilized; he is well-spoken, well-mannered, and well-dressed. Thresh, with his non-standard speech, solitary nature, and ability to throw his fellow tributes around “like a rag doll” (*Hunger Games* 286), is not. Each time Thresh appears in the book his otherness is highlighted and his strength and physicality are referenced. In fact, even his name suggests violence.

Thresh is likely an allusion to threshing, a key part of harvesting wheat. As the *OED* explains, to thresh is “to separate . . . the grains of any cereal from the husks and the straw.” As Thresh is from District 11, the agricultural district, he is aptly named. The *OED* expands on this basic definition, however, including a number of modifiers that have violent connotations. To thresh is “to beat or strike as with a flail” or “to deliver or inflict blows as with a flail; to strike or beat on or at.” Thresh’s name connotes violence and savagery. His name, combined with his imposing stature and Katniss’s descriptions

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<sup>9</sup> Cato’s physical appearance is never described, although Katniss does repeatedly characterize him as “monstrous” and “brutish” (*Hunger Games* 125 and 160). Because he is not described physically but Thresh is described in racialized terms, readers assume that Cato is white. That Alexander Ludwig, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed actor, was cast as Cato in the film adaptation further reinforces the reader’s assumption that Cato is white (*The Hunger Games Wiki*).

of him as animalistic, highlight the numerous “old stereotypes about why white women should fear large black men” (Couzelis 140).

In spite—or perhaps because—of representing these stereotypes, Thresh initially appears to challenge the expectations placed upon him; within the structure of the Hunger Games, Thresh seemingly refuses to be docile. Indeed, each time Katniss mentions Thresh it is to note that he does not conform to the expectations placed upon tributes. In the Training Center, for example, tributes are expected to demonstrate their various strengths as well as to learn skills that may help them survive in the Arena. Thresh, however, does not participate in training. Tributes can also use their time in the Training Center to make allies, an act that the Careers particularly value. As we’ve noted, the Careers ask Thresh to join their group, but he declines (*Hunger Games* 126). Finally, Thresh does not respond to Caesar Flickerman’s questions during the Tributes’ televised interviews. His unwillingness to “banter” (126) with Caesar is perhaps his most obvious rejection of societal expectations. During interviews, tributes have the opportunity to share details about themselves with the citizens of Panem. This personalizes the tributes, helping them gain sponsors, who can choose to send them tools, food, or medicine during the Games. In refusing to share information, Thresh comes across as “sullen and hostile” (126), a demeanor that is unlikely to gain him sponsors. But he simply does not seem to care about the Game, about sponsors, or even about surviving. Here, he challenges the rules of the game; in other words, Thresh renounces his docility, at least within the parameters of the Games.

Although he challenges his docility, Thresh is a static character; readers learn about him only through Katniss, and she mentions him only a few times and directly interacts with him only once. Despite his limited presence in the book, Thresh can be seen as a socially aware and politically engaged character. His refusal to participate in the Games suggests that he realizes the ways in which he—and his fellow citizens—are being used. In refusing to answer Caesar’s questions, Thresh challenges, albeit tacitly, the system that controls him. He only directly challenges the system once, and that, arguably, ensures he will be punished.

At a crucial moment in the Games, Thresh has the opportunity to kill Katniss, yet upon learning she had allied with Rue and tried to save her, he chooses not to kill her. After Katniss tells him that she cared for Rue, that she sang to her while she died, and that she killed Rue’s murderer, Thresh tells her, “almost accusingly . . . I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we’re even then. No more owed” (*Hunger Games* 288). Katniss immediately realizes the implications of Thresh’s decision, thinking to herself, “I do understand . . . if Thresh wins, he’ll have to go back and face a district that has already broken all the rules to save me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me too” (288). In saving Katniss, Thresh does indeed break the explicit rules of the Games and the implicit rules of Panem—he demonstrates that he values caring and compassion more than his own survival. He proves that his love for another person—in this case, Rue—is worth more than winning the Games, which is a fundamental rejection of the

principles governing the Games, and Thresh is punished with death.

Neither Katniss nor the readers learn the circumstances of Thresh's death, only that Cato kills him and that Katniss and Peeta, Katniss's fellow tribute from District 12, are closer to winning. Readers do know that Katniss mourns him: "I slump against the rocks momentarily forgetting about the task at hand. Thresh dead. I should be happy, right? One less tribute to face. And a powerful one, too. But I'm not happy. All I can think about is Thresh letting me go" (*Hunger Games* 307). Not revealing the details of Thresh's death allows readers, as well as Katniss, to be disconnected from his death. Whereas Katniss—and, by extension, readers—experience Rue's death first hand, she learns about Thresh's death only by seeing an image of him that is projected into the night sky by the Gamemakers. She knows nothing of how he was killed, not whether he fought back, nor if his death was slow and painful. On one hand, that Katniss knows nothing about Thresh's death makes sense within the context of the Games: Thresh is merely one more dead tribute. His death directly affects Katniss only insofar as it means she is one step closer to winning. In the arena, life is expendable. That Katniss only mourns Thresh for a few moments and must keep her grief private emphasizes that Thresh's life does not matter, and neither does the life of the other dead tributes.

Thresh's death, however, is not like that of the other tributes, whom Katniss knew but did not grieve. Thresh's death is different because it continually reminds Katniss of two significant events: Thresh's decision to not kill Katniss and Rue's death. Both events cause Katniss a significant amount of guilt throughout the series. Again, her guilt over these events reminds readers that Katniss is kind and compassionate; like Thresh, she values life. Further, their deaths also teach her that every tribute is an individual, someone who will be missed by family and friends: "Their lives were changed forever when Thresh and Rue were lost" (*Catching Fire* 58).

Thresh and Rue's deaths are also meaningful because they inspire and encourage Katniss to rebel. Through experiencing their deaths and through meeting their families during the Victory Tour, which occurs in *Catching Fire*, the series' second novel, Katniss grows and matures. She realizes that the citizens of the various districts are all exploited, and she comes to see the value in rebellion. While their deaths are tragic, readers see their deaths, especially Rue's, as necessary because they enable Katniss to transform into a leader of the rebellion. This also means, as Couzelis points out, that two characters of color must die "for the good of the white protagonist" (141). Thresh and Rue's deaths replicate racial hierarchies that privilege the life of a white girl over that of a black boy and a black girl. Further, while Katniss continues to invoke Rue as one of her inspirations for joining and eventually leading the rebellion throughout the series' second and third novels, Thresh is all but forgotten after *Catching Fire*,<sup>10</sup> and even in that novel, he is only discussed in reference to District 11 and Rue's death. Despite his impact on Katniss's life, Thresh is soon overlooked, both by Katniss and by readers. He

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<sup>10</sup> Thresh is mentioned only once in *Mockingjay*, when Katniss recalls both Cato and Thresh's deaths as she tries to convince a citizen of District 2 not to kill her (*Mockingjay* 213).

becomes another dead black boy whom readers are briefly introduced to and then allowed to forget. He brings to mind Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, and the countless other black boys who have been killed, their deaths discussed in passing, and their lives quickly forgotten. Like Thresh, these young men were taught to be docile but were simultaneously constructed as dangerous, a construction used to justify their deaths and render them stereotypical and obsolete.

### **Ze'ev of The Lunar Chronicles**

Whereas *The Hunger Games* presents a wholly original story for readers, Marissa Meyers's *Lunar Chronicles* is a science fiction, dystopian retelling of the Cinderella fairy tale. The title character and protagonist is a white, young female cyborg, of mysterious origins, adopted by an Asian family in New Beijing, a future nation in what was once China. Meyer explicitly chooses to set her series in "futuristic Asia," both as an homage to the tale's potential origins in China and because, as she writes on her website, this choice "seemed more interesting than setting another book in America" (FAQ). In a guest blog post on *Two Chicks on Books*, Meyer further discusses her setting choices, including narrative arcs taking the characters to "China, France, and the Sahara Desert," which Meyer elsewhere calls, alternately, "Africa" or "Northern Africa"<sup>11</sup> ("Why France?," "China, France, and Northern Africa"):

Having been born and raised in America, it would have been easiest for me to keep the series in a futuristic version of America, but setting the books in locations around the globe was a decision I made very early on in the planning of this series. One of my main reasons was that I wanted the series to feel big. A lot of problems that are facing the characters—the plague, the war being threatened by the Lunars—are problems that would impact every person on the planet. So by spreading out the story locations I felt I could better convey the idea that these are big, scary, global issues. ("Why France?")

Meyer is correct that issues like war and disease are global issues, but her settings often feel colored by privileged American tourism—specifically the false universality of the

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Meyer uses the names of specific nations like China and France, but generalizes when discussing an African locale. Journalist Arit John notes this pervasive problem in the West: "[W]hen we talk about Africa, more often than not, it's to talk about catastrophes and epidemics, and to conflate a single country with a 1 billion-strong continent" (np). Western media coverage of Africa and Asia are analyzed in an app, *Africa Isn't a Country*, which tracks media mentions of China, India, and Japan (Asia's three largest economies) and compares them to coverage of South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria (Africa's three largest). According to app creator Nicolas Kayser-Bril, data suggests that Western journalists are three times more likely to generalize in stories about African nations, a trend that "is hugely detrimental to many countries. When a civil war starts in the Central African Republic (Africa!), it negatively impacts countries as far away as Senegal (Africa!) and Lesotho (Africa!)" (np).

American worldview. When asked if she has been to China, Meyer writes, “I went to China for 10 days when I was 13. It was an awesome experience and I’d love to go again! Sadly, I didn’t realize at the time that I would someday write a book set in futuristic China, so I didn’t take very helpful setting notes. All cultural and setting details for *Cinder* came from research and my own imagination. If I got anything wrong, I sincerely apologize” (FAQ). Regarding France, she says, “Sadly, I’ve never been to France. I hope to change that as soon as possible” (FAQ). And, perhaps most significantly, Meyer chose the Sahara Desert on a whim:

This could be a question of translation, but when I was researching the story of Rapunzel, there were some versions in which Rapunzel was cast out into a forest, some in which she was cast out into a desert, and others in which she was simply cast out into “a great wilderness.” So I figured that if my characters were going to end up in either a forest or a desert, a desert was going to be way more horrible. So naturally I went with that option.

And when I think desert, I think the Sahara. Hence how part of Book Three ended up in Northern Africa. (“China, France, and Northern Africa”)

Glossing over questions of translation and benignly hoping “not to offend” belie Meyer’s white, middle class American worldview, in general, and the troubling impulse to assume that perspective on global issues is the only one. In *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Richard Dyer underscores the ways in which white, Western identity is de-racialized. “Other people are raced,” he asserts, “We are just people. [...] There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. [...] This assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colours are something else, is endemic to white culture” (1,2,2).

Cinder’s human appearance is only briefly detailed and very little is made of her being of a different racial origin than her family or her community. In *Scarlet*, the series’ second installment, the reader learns of Cinder’s “slight build and tanned skin and straight brown hair,” as well as the fact that those features distinguish her from her adoptive family (439, 3775). Her “sun darkened” skin is of particular interest in that it serves as a marker of her working class status (*Scarlet* 3775). Like most Cinderella stories, *The Lunar Chronicles* presents a protagonist who is adopted into relative wealth but forced to perform manual labor to earn her room and board. Cinder’s tanned skin provides visual evidence that she works outside as a mechanic while her stepfamily remains protected from the elements in a life of relative luxury. The much more textually explicit difference between Cinder and her stepmother and stepsister, however, is the protagonist’s “understated confidence” (*Scarlet* 3778). Cinder is “brave, determined,” “smart, resourceful,” and “sarcastic” (*Winter* 403). Despite the fact that she lives in an Asian family in an Asian kingdom, Cinder’s identity is determined not by

appearance, but by character. It may be classed, but Cinder's whiteness isn't noteworthy. It just *is*. Again, we see evidence of Dyer's work articulating the false universality of whiteness. The normalizing of Cinder's race in *The Lunar Chronicles* works as a form of violence that both represents and perpetuates racialized violence in real life.

Meyer does seem invested, however, in thinking about difference and inequality. Cinder's cyborg identity is a concrete, visual marker of her otherness. It is important to note that Cinder also discovers she is a Lunar, an extra-terrestrial. Because her Lunar identity is camouflaged, though, Cinder is publicly labeled as a cyborg. Her racial markers—both whiteness and Lunar—are invisible in the face of her mechanical subtext. To underscore that cyborgs are oppressed as second-class citizens, Meyer creates a cyborg draft for medical research and then outlines a movement that culminates in the reinstatement of the Cyborg Protection Act, a law that ends the draft and returns rights to cyborg citizens. This movement is, by and large, led by Cinder (*Winter* 785). Similarly to the way Collins alludes to the racial history of the United States, Meyer refers to American slavery and Civil Rights history with her cyborg plotline, yet she ultimately evades all but a very minimal mention of race, using subsequent racial descriptors sparingly and removing characters' racial identities from any consideration of their lived experiences. Thus, rather than engage in a complex interrogation of racial injustice, Meyer's nod toward difference serves merely to perpetuate the kind of cultural othering that people of color experience as psychic—and, all too often, physical—violence.

In her erasure of African American history and positioning of Cinder as the white subject of culturally racialized discipline, Meyer perpetuates Dyer's notion that the insidious power of whiteness lies in its desire to represent all of human experience. In *The Lunar Chronicles*, slavery and civil rights are not part of the African American experience. Rather they have been co-opted by cyborgs and their white representative, Cinder. In a matter of weeks, Cinder is able to undo an entire system of oppression. It is her normalized identity as a white character that allows Cinder to free herself of the confines of sociocultural discipline and lead the kind of quick, effective rebellion, which characters of color in the series cannot.

*The Lunar Chronicles'* only major white male character is autonomous, despite rebelling against the state, deserting the military, and being charged with several additional crimes: "two counts international theft, one count attempted theft, six counts handling of stolen goods, and one count theft of government property. That last conviction hardly seemed to do the crime justice. He'd stolen a spaceship from the American Republic's military" (*Scarlet* 683-686). When readers meet Carswell Thorne, he is in a jail cell about to be freed by Cinder. Despite his crimes, Thorne considers himself a gentleman, a stance that he reiterates on several occasions, most notably when he "cleared his mind of the image of [Cinder] opening a plate in her skull, once again calling up the personification of a gentleman, and attempted to make small talk while she worked" (476-478). Thorne escapes from prison with the unasked for help of a

beautiful white young woman, but he experiences distaste at her cyborg identity. Because he is a “gentleman,” Thorne is able to treat Cinder with dignity despite her non-normativity.

To be sure, Meyer uses the term “gentleman” here—and on other occasions—with some level of comic irony. Thorne is a bit of a lothario and spends the majority of the series flirting inconsequentially with nearly every woman he meets. However, the term “gentleman” carries with it a raced, classed stance on social status, and it is significant that Thorne, as the series only white male, carries that status alone. In a related comedic move that is nonetheless significant, Thorne calls himself Captain despite having deserted the army when he was a Cadet (*Scarlet* 730). Readers are meant to laugh at Thorne’s ego and, especially, at his defense: “I’m a captain now. I prefer the sound of it. Girls are much more impressed” (735-736). However, for the remainder of the series, character after character accepts Thorne’s self-created identity, albeit with some level of indulgence. As a white man, Thorne has the power to create his own identity, and, although readers and characters alike perceive the falseness of his claims, Thorne successfully elevates himself via this conspicuously counterfeit information. Foucault’s assertion that discipline produces docile bodies, then, does not apply to Thorne who, as a white male subject, evades discipline from both society and state. Instead of being disciplined, he is rewarded with a government position and the ability to purchase his stolen ship from the U.S. military and serve as its captain. Thus, Thorne is not censured for his false identity, but, rather, he sees it codified by and in the very state body against which he committed theft and desertion.

Meyer does include several characters of color in *The Lunar Chronicles*, namely Winter, the namesake of the series’ final novel, whose “warm, brown skin,” “bright [eyes], the color of melted caramel,” and “silky black hair that curled into perfect spirals, neatly framing her high cheekbones and ruby-red lips” combine to create one of “the most beautiful human beings ever seen” (*Cress* 514, 515). There is great promise in a character of color who not only represents the standard of beauty but is also a royal figure. However, whereas Cinder and her white counterparts are given narrative leeway to exhibit a range of “human” experiences, *The Lunar Chronicles*’ black and brown characters are disciplined—often violently—into docility. Winter is the beautiful and adored princess of her kingdom. However, her beauty and the adoration it inspires makes Winter a significant threat to her very pale, white stepmother, the Lunar Queen, Levanía, who remarks that Winter is “A beautiful child, a beautiful girl, a beautiful young lady, so beautiful, *too* beautiful” (*Winter* 23). Winter’s beauty, the beauty of a brown-skinned princess, is defined through the kind of excess that critic Juana María Rodríguez reads as racialized, as “exceed[ing] the norms of proper corporeal containment” (2). Winter’s excessive beauty does lead to corporeal punishment at the hands of her white matriarch: Levanía uses her Lunar powers of suggestion, “out of envy,” to force Winter to “mutilate her own face, leaving three uniform scars [...] down her right cheek” (*Winter* 161). Suggestively, the scars also underscore Winter’s

blackness, as they have “paled over time” (774). Physical violence, here, is used to reinscribe blackness onto the body by depicting it as whiteness’s other. The whiteness of the scars is a visual reminder of Winter’s racialized excess and of the discipline to which the princess is forced to submit.

The discipline Winter receives at the behest of the white Queen translates into the kind of “voluntary” self-discipline that Foucault describes and Sandra Lee Bartky emphasizes (75). We want to highlight the fact that Levania uses Winter’s own hand to enact her physical discipline. Levania does not need to exert force herself. Rather, she uses “mind control” to compel Winter to discipline herself. Here, Levania’s mental coercion can be read as akin to perceptions about race that some people of color have internalized due to the violence of cultural socialization. Whereas Cinder rejects state and family discipline and is rewarded with labels like “brave, determined,” “smart [and] resourceful,” Winter is described as “insane,” “half-crazy,” and “docile” (*Winter* 403, 387, 510). In this contrast, the reader sees the options available to white characters that are not choices within the disciplinary realm of characters of color. Thus, whether or not the series intends to display, through Winter, a beautiful, beneficent blackness that leads through the example of kindness, the series does, ultimately, perpetuate the violence that people of color face via the hands, minds, and mouths of normative white culture.

This cycle of violence is made even more explicit in the narrative arc of another of the series’ central characters, Ze’ev Kesley, who is known throughout the series as Wolf. It is here, in particular, that we see the effects of disciplinary expectations on young men of color, both in the text and in the culture it reflects. As a boy living in poverty under the authority of Queen Levania, Ze’ev, like his older brother before him, is “recruited”—and, ultimately, forced—into a special and very violent Lunar military unit. Just as Cinder’s fight to improve the lives of cyborgs follows U.S. African American history, Ze’ev’s plotline evokes Islamic State (ISIS) recruitment of child soldiers in Syria. In a November 2015 editorial, Feras Hanoush cites the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights tally of “1,100 children under the age of sixteen” joining ISIS between January and August of that year (paragraph 1). Hanoush discusses several reasons for the ISIS use of children to round out its ranks, including the willingness with which their parents give them up due to poverty and the desire to indoctrinate citizens at a younger age. Interestingly, Hanoush accents the use of children for suicide missions because “children are more disciplined and eager” (paragraph 10, 9). As Bartky reminds us, soldiers may benefit from the “physical and occupational training offered by the army without the army’s ceasing in any way to be the instrument by which he and other members of his class are kept in disciplined subjection” (75). This is certainly the case for Ze-ev. Forced to cut ties with his family, Ze’ev rises through the ranks because of his apparent predilection for violence to become Alpha (leader) of his pack (*Scarlet* 303, *Winter* 500).

However, by the time the reader meets him, Ze’ev, like Thorne, has fled his

military career and is earning a living winning illegal fights. Ze'ev is seen through various perspectives, most often as “trouble. He fought people for a living— or perhaps even for fun. [Scarlet] wasn't sure which was worse” (*Scarlet* 304). White protagonist Scarlet soon becomes Wolf's lover, but not before she assesses him as an “outcast. Unwanted. Crazy” (*Scarlet* 302). In the first fight she watches, Scarlet sees “a new glint in Wolf's eye, like he was enjoying this, and when his tongue darted out to lick the blood from his mouth, Scarlet grimaced” (1084-1085).

Initially, there does not seem to be much about Ze'ev that is docile. His escape, his subsequent fighting career, even his dark unruly hair is characterized by racialized excess, which is further supported when the reader learns of Ze'ev's olive skin. Ze'ev's green eyes are notable in the text and function similarly to Winter's scars in that they serve to highlight his brownness. His eyes stand out as a potentially white feature amidst a nonwhite face. As Scarlet softens to him, she thinks about the dual nature of wolves: “‘Wolf,’ she whispered to herself . . . She let the word linger, feeling it on her lips. To some, a wild beast, a predator, a nuisance. To others, a shy animal who was too often misunderstood by humanity” (*Scarlet* 1475-1477). Here, Ze'ev is characterized as an animal, thereby demonstrating that the white Scarlet views her lover as not quite a person.

Further, Ze'ev has fled state discipline, and he experiences violent psychic and physical repercussions. When black and brown bodies aren't docile, Western culture suggests that discipline is warranted, and Ze'ev's discipline, like Winter's, comes both from within and without. Although in every chapter written from his perspective Ze'ev calls himself by his given name, to Scarlet and all of her friends (the series other central characters), he introduces himself as Wolf. Despite their increased intimacy, even Scarlet continues to refer to him by this name until nearly the end of the series. Thus, Ze'ev encourages the racialized discipline he receives from others via the erasure of his name and identity and, instead, allows himself to be subsumed—at least rhetorically—back into the category of docile (nonetheless frightening) man of color. Notably, when he tells Scarlet that he hates taking part in the illegal fight scene, “Wolf ruffled his hair with a fist, making it even messier than usual. ‘That isn't why I'm telling you this,’ he said, his tone calmer now, but still discouraged.[...] ‘It seemed important for you to know that I don't enjoy it. I hate losing control like that. I've always hated it’” (*Scarlet* 2199-2201). Here, Ze'ev is doubly othered. Not only does he enact racialized excess, with his messy hair and talent for violence, but he also self-disciplines—expressing desire for self-control and self-hatred for losing such. Ze'ev rejects the facets of his personality that are not docile. That the series frames this docility in terms of self-control belies either a misunderstanding of the cultural politics of racial discipline or a willful ignorance of it. Either way, the reader is goaded into pitying Ze'ev for his inability to control himself in the face of state discipline.

Eventually, Ze'ev is recaptured by Queen Levanina and surgically turned into a kind of wolf/man monster. The series seemingly suggests that a man of color can only

evade state-sanctioned discipline for so long. His internalized otherness is made physically manifest via “enormous teeth,” “monstrous hands,” an “inhuman slope to his shoulders,” and a “jaw [that] protruded from his cheekbones” (*Winter* 762). Interestingly, it is at this point that Scarlet ceases referring to him as Wolf and begins using his given name, noting “It was all superficial. They hadn’t changed him” (*Winter* 762). But if Scarlet learns to humanize Ze’ev despite his “monstrous, inhuman” looks, in her acceptance, she reinscribes both difference and discipline: “I’m not going to say it won’t take some getting used to. And it might be a while before we can convince the neighbor kids not to be terrified of you.’ She smoothed down a lock of his hair. It popped right back up. ‘But we’ll figure it out” (762). In Scarlett’s emphasis on children’s fear of his appearance and her attempt to tame his unruly hair, we see a white romantic partner reify her exotic lover’s otherness—and need for discipline—by loving him despite his excess.

Further, we might constructively read Scarlet and Ze’ev’s plotline as an inversion of “Beauty and the Beast,” the fairy tale that likely originated in the second century as “Cupid and Psyche” (Tatar 25). In the contemporary Western version of the tale that would likely be familiar to Meyer’s readers, a handsome (white) prince is transformed into a monstrous beast because of bad behavior and only the love of the beautiful protagonist can redeem his actions and return him to his original form. In *The Lunar Chronicles*, however, the handsome soldier (of color) is transformed into a beast, but his female partner assures him that she’ll accept him despite his physical appearance. Considering this in terms of docility, Wolf’s transformation to Ze’ev is rich with racial discourse. Wolf, the cruel but handsome and politically docile soldier, becomes physically monstrous as he challenges the social constraints within which the state has placed him. Thus, Ze’ev’s story isn’t merely about true love despite physical flaws but, rather, can be read as demonstrating how Ze’ev’s grasp for autonomy is characterized by an “ugliness” that is made physically manifest as punishment for his lack of docility.

Readers might want to see in the series’ narrative a lesson about appreciating a friend or lover for what is inside rather than surface stereotypes or descriptors. That message is, indeed, a sound one. However, a closer reading shows the ways in which the series participates in the very notions it simultaneously works to dispel. White characters—significantly, even those who rebel against state and culture—do not suffer the kind of violent discipline that we expect—and find—occurs to characters of color. By comparing the Cyborg draft to slavery and Civil Rights, Meyer erases blackness and normalizes whiteness as representative of even the most racialized human experience in American history. By fictionalizing the plight of child soldiers in the Middle East, Meyer simultaneously dehumanizes, both physically and psychically, a male character of color. By subjecting characters of color to violent discipline from which white characters are free, Meyer, much like Collins, perpetuates the American cultural system of racialized subjugation.

The same racialized expectations of docility can be seen in the National Football

League. In an August 2016 interview with *GQ* magazine, African American quarterback Cam Newton was asked whether criticism of his touchdown celebrations were racist. Interviewer Zach Baron's question addresses what many critics of pop culture and critical race theorists have argued in response to ongoing criticism of Newton: that Newton is held to a different standard than white quarterbacks. *USA Today* columnist Nancy Armour has highlighted the racial undertones of this criticism: "the criticism of Newton comes from somewhere ugly and mean, based more on prejudice than a wish for proper decorum." Directly answering Baron's question, Newton stated, "It's not racism. Everybody's entitled to their own opinion." Newton continued, "I don't want this to be about race, because it's not. It's not. Like, we're beyond that. As a nation." In responding to Baron's question about race as he did, Newton is clearly keeping with the NFL's modus operandi of avoiding politics at all costs. Newton's answers are troubling, however, because they seem out of touch with race relations in the United States. Further, we see in these statements a kind of self-imposed docility. Newton's move toward a color-blind reading of his critics is his path to a normalized NFL identity. In short, his continued professional and financial success in the NFL depends on public docility.

In contrast to Newton's declaration that "It's not racism," Colin Kaepernick, an African American quarterback who played for the San Francisco 49ers, made his solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement visible throughout the 2016-17 season by kneeling when the National Anthem was played prior to 49ers games. In making his political view public, Kaepernick has been widely criticized, and interestingly enough, the criticism directed at Kaepernick is strikingly similar to the criticism Newton received for his touchdown dances: like Newton, Kaepernick has been called classless, cocky, and egotistical. But he has also been publicly condemned for being anti-American and anti-military; he has been called disrespectful and hypocritical (Witz, "This Time, Colin Kaepernick takes a stand by Kneeling"). Framed another way, both of these young black professional football players have been publicly criticized for behaving in ways the general public deems inappropriate. Newton, in dancing in the end zone, and Kaepernick, in kneeling on the sidelines, have acted outside of the rigid rules placed upon black bodies. In other words, Newton and Kaepernick have not behaved in docile ways, although Newton has attempted to make amends for his behavior by enacting his docility in refusing to attribute the public criticism to which he has been subjected to racism. Significantly, although he suffers ruthless criticism, Newton's career remains viable. However, as of April 2017, Kaepernick is a free agent without a team and many, including former teammates Eric Reid and Brandon Marshall, believe he has not been signed by a team because of his decision to kneel during the anthem (Wells).

The NFL's expectation of docility is replicated in young adult texts like *The Hunger Games* Trilogy and *The Lunar Chronicles*. Most troubling about this similarity is that both of these series purport to be both progressive and racially aware. Yet, they enact literary colorblindness—presenting race as skin deep rather than a complex lived

identity—while simultaneously trading on dangerous assumptions about black and brown men as dangerous and in need of enforced docility. In contrast, both series offer readers examples of strong, empowered young white women, who are able to overthrow their docility to save themselves and to play active, leadership roles in their respective revolutions. While such characters are certainly beneficial for young readers, these white female characters exist and succeed, at least in part, because the young men of color in the series, all of whom are secondary characters, are punished for their refusal to remain docile. These books demonstrate and reify the agency of young white women at the expense of young men of color, who are depicted as frightening others whose bodies and lives must be controlled.

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