

STARVING FOR JUSTICE: TEEN ACTION HEROINES AND THE LOGIC OF ANOREXIA

by

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A dissertation

presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the joint program of
Communication and Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2019

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ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Communication and Culture

Ryerson University and York University, 2019

Marshalling evidence from critical feminist studies of eating disorders (Bordo; Malson and Burns; Warin), including Leslie Heywood's concept of anorexic "logic," this dissertation theorizes how anorexic rationality and subjectivity are expressed through the popular figure of the post-feminist action heroine, specifically within young adult (YA) speculative fiction franchises. Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* novels (2005-2008), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010), and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013) serve as the primary, and I argue ideal case studies for this investigation. Emerging as top-selling YA series in the post-*Harry Potter* era, all three franchises feature teen girl protagonists with post-feminist "sensibility" (Gill), and with their mass appeal, have given rise to global fandoms. Hence, this project also examines reader responses to the series under discussion through a selection of online fan fiction in which female-identifying youth rewrite their protagonists as anorexic. Although media studies scholars have analyzed the gendered discourses surrounding contemporary female action heroes (Inness; Brown; Wright), and feminist literary scholars have explored how motifs of weight, starvation and consumption function within certain narratives (Daniel; Ellmann; Karlin; Meuret; Silver), the correlation between anorexia and action heroine

texts has yet to be systematically studied. This investigation is all the more crucial given Parliament of Canada's 2014 report, *Eating Disorders Among Girls and Women in Canada*, which notes that eating disorders have the highest mortality rates of all mental illnesses. Responding to the report's call for increased research on media messaging aimed at youth, this dissertation focuses on mass media franchises targeted at girls and young women, the largest demographic of eating disorder sufferers, arguing that contemporary teen action heroine mythology reflects and reifies a problematic value system that mutually constitutes conceptions of starvation and justice, and informs the social construction of ideal femininity. This research thus forges new pathways between theories of girlhood, body image studies, and YA literature to offer a theoretical framework for reading female heroism that places the corporeal matrix of gender, consumption, and embodiment at its centre.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would firstly like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Irene Gammel, for her consistent championing both of this project, and of my professional development over the last four years. Thank you for challenging me in the best possible ways, and for helping me find my voice as an emerging scholar. I am forever grateful for all of the opportunities I've been afforded as a direct result of your support.

I also extend sincere appreciation to my committee members, Dr. Miranda Campbell and Dr. Susan Driver. Your attentive and generous engagement with my work, from the early stages of my comprehensive exams through to the final defence, have been instrumental in expanding the depth of this research. I would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Shtern as well, for his continuous support as Graduate Program Director and commitment to my success on the road to defence.

I owe a great deal to Dr. Neta Gordon, whose captivating lectures on gender, literature and the body first inspired my interest in studying anorexia from a literary perspective. Her insights and guidance, along with those of Dr. Ann Howey, underlie the second chapter of this dissertation, which grew out of my Master's research project under Dr. Gordon's supervision. I offer special thanks to Dr. James Allard, whose encouragement and counsel inspired me to consider graduate school at a time when I thought my career path was set; thank you for opening my eyes to my own potentiality. I also extend my gratitude to Dr. Leah Knight, for her ongoing advice that has helped me navigate the waters of the professional academic world.

This dissertation would not have been possible without funding provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program, and the Rogers Family Fellowship. I would also like to acknowledge Ryerson's Communication and Culture program, the Ryerson Student's Union, Ryerson International,

CUPE 3904, and the Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre, all of which have provided financial support for me to attend academic conferences that have directly impacted this work.

A tree is only as strong as its roots, and I am grateful to have a deep-rooted personal support system of individuals who have strengthened and nourished me over the course of my scholarly journey. Thank you to my Barrie Central family for providing me with a steadfast network of loyal friends who can always be counted on to lend an ear or a wholehearted belly laugh; the grounding power of our group has meant more than you know. I would also like to thank Gianluca Agostinelli – my colleague, partner-in-crime, and friend – without whom I would not have survived the first weeks of graduate school. Thank you for always understanding.

I am indebted to my sisters, Alex Macri, Julie Cobb, and Heather Camley, for teaching me the power of feminist sisterhood, and sharing in all of my accomplishments and failures every step of the way. To my parents, Paul and Jennifer Dunn, thank you for instilling in me the confidence to chase my goals while always honouring my values. Your guidance is the foundation of all that I do.

Finally, to Ken Simmons, my selfless and generous partner in life: thank you for believing in me, for supporting me, and for shaping your dreams so that I could pursue mine. This is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 2017, I attended a public symposium offered by Canada's National Initiative for Eating Disorders (NIED), for whom I volunteered at the time. Approximately 50 people were in attendance, most of whom were suffering or recovering from an eating disorder, loved ones of an affected individual, or clinicians. During the open discussion portion of the event, much of the conversation centered on issues of social justice within the eating disorders community. Parents, advocates, and clinicians alike voiced frustration with the lack of appropriate and effective services available for individuals with eating disorders in Ontario. They expressed particular disdain for the prevailing methodology of publicly funded recovery programs: a one-size-fits-all approach that assesses the patient's progress through achievements in body weight, without attending to the deeper roots of eating disorder etiology and long-lasting recovery. The symposium's discussion also centred on the stigma that surrounds those who have been diagnosed with eating disorders, perpetuated within both the medical field and the broader general public. Eating disorders, the consensus seemed to be, are not taken seriously in our country.

Both of the main problems identified – flaws in the dominant treatment model and the dismissal of eating disorders at large – can be traced to prevailing sexist attitudes that disregard feminine health issues and the gendered cultural contexts that inform their development. Interestingly, within the deep and impassioned two-hour discussion that took place at the symposium, the factor of gender came up only once (and fleetingly) when one panelist remarked that, if eating disorders predominantly affected men, more attention might be paid to the cause. As an audience member, I was struck by this relative lack of dialogue surrounding gender and culture. With approximately 80% of eating disorder diagnoses falling on female patients

(Parliament of Canada 9), how can the eating disorders epidemic, and social justice issues therein, be sufficiently addressed without the factors of gender and culture at the forefront of the conversation? In speaking with participants after the panel, I surmised that a fear exists amongst many advocates that speaking about gender in relation to eating disorders delegitimizes these illnesses by framing them as insignificant or surface-level “girly” issues that affect only those individuals who are vain enough to be preoccupied with body image. For me, this admission merely highlighted the fact that greater emphasis must be placed on the gendered dimensions of eating disorders, which are so often misunderstood, ignored, and/or feared, even within advocacy circles. A critical feminist perspective of eating disorders must be employed – not instead of, but in addition to the prevailing clinical paradigm – in order to meaningfully attend to the vital factors of gender and culture in eating disorders today.

This project is a critical feminist study of YA fiction by and for girls; while it does not aim to offer insights into the etiology of eating disorders or their treatment from a medical or physiological perspective, by exploring how gendered discourses in popular media for youth reflect similar binaries and ideologies that inform anorexic rituals, this work contributes to the growing field of eating disorders scholarship that seeks to bridge the gap between discrete clinical and cultural camps of eating disorders research. This dissertation explores theories of anorexia in speculative fiction franchises targeted towards girls and young women – the largest demographic of eating disorder sufferers – in order to answer the following research questions:

1. With attention to the cultural history of Young Adult (YA) fiction and female-led action hero narratives, what is the relationship between action heroines and twenty-first century feminist and post-feminist discourses?
2. What role does the body and its relationship to food play within these fictions and

how do fans respond to these representations?

3. How does an intersectional feminist perspective help address some of these issues and help us explore the underpinning ideological values embedded in both YA fiction for girls and the fan fiction responding to it?
4. How are young female fans – the target audience of these franchises – negotiating their developing body image and the anorexic messages of these narratives, specifically through the medium of online fan fiction? To what degree do their responses reflect and contribute to their intersubjectivity?

To answer these questions, the dissertation performs two primary tasks. First, it examines the figure of the contemporary action heroine within popular YA franchises through the lens of anorexia. The mid-2000s saw an explosion of American YA speculative fiction series starring teenaged female action heroes who revolutionized the action heroine genre. A powerful female protagonist who asserts her independence to activate social change, this new teen action figure – or “New Heroine” – changed the popular culture landscape. While the action heroine’s ability to reflect and resist dominant conceptions of femininity has been a focus of media and cultural studies since the early 1990s, research on the New Heroine figure is still emerging. In the wake of her initial boom, scholars such as Jeffrey A. Brown and Katheryn Wright have begun the critical work of examining the New Heroine’s impact from a media studies perspective, but a corporeal feminist approach is now required to explore this cultural icon’s significance at the juncture of gendered representation and embodiment. Thus, this dissertation marshals evidence from critical feminist studies of eating disorders, including cultural historian Leslie Heywood’s notion of “anorexic logic” developed in her book *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (1996), to argue that New Heroine mythology reflects and reifies an anorexic

value system that mutually constitutes conceptions of starvation and justice, and informs the social construction of ideal femininity in the twenty-first century post-feminist context. Emblematic of the New Heroine phenomenon, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008), Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011-2013) serve as the primary case studies. These series feature female protagonists with post-feminist attributes and emerged as top-selling YA speculative fiction franchises in the post-Harry Potter era.¹ If anorexia is a "crystallization of culture" (35) as renowned body studies scholar Susan Bordo asserts in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), then these series – as record-breaking cultural phenomena and female-led multimedia franchises – are vital objects of study in this field, made all the more salient as the protagonists share a preoccupation with rituals of restriction and consumption, and a problematic pattern of body transformation leading to self-actualization. The analysis herein is primarily literary, focusing closely on the books published within these franchises while also referencing the film adaptations by drawing comparisons between the two mediums when it is theoretically significant to do so.

Second, this dissertation examines a selection of reader responses to the female-led speculative fiction franchises under discussion. From their initial publication as YA serial novels in the early 2000s to their subsequent blockbuster film adaptations, these franchises have given rise to global fandoms that in turn, have spawned an abundance of fan fiction: a genre of fan-authored stories that adapts the characters, settings, and/or plot lines of a "canon" (i.e. original)

¹ The global impact of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series on the children's and YA literature markets has been well documented. In her 2012 article in *Children's Literature*, YA literature scholar Rebekah Fitzsimmons uses the term "the Harry Potter Effect" to describe the series' powerful role in re-framing the children's/YA literature genres as texts with real cultural currency and legitimacy in the twenty-first century.

text to create an entirely new work. This research analyzes a sub-group of online fan fiction inspired by each of the *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* series in which amateur female authors have rewritten the story's heroine as anorexic. It interrogates the ways in which these young writers negotiate anorexic, feminist, and post-feminist discourses in their texts and gain varying degrees of agency through the writing process, considering fan fiction's ability to foster intersubjective experiences between readers and writers through its interactive and dialogic online functions. Ultimately, I posit fan fiction as an unexplored medium of communication for girls struggling with anorexia and/or body image, and assert the importance of studying the expression of anorexic subjectivities in ways that reach beyond the conventional scholarly realms of autobiography and non-fiction.

This project's research practice is rooted in cultural studies methodology as defined by Richard Johnson, former director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), who conceptualizes the discipline as a particular set of approaches within the broader study of culture. In his early influential essay, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" (1987), Johnson delineates the diverse array of cultural studies approaches through their shared understanding of cultural processes as being "intimately connected with social relations" and the "social differences and struggles" (39) of their particular historical contexts. The overarching goal of cultural studies research, then – and the overarching goal of this dissertation – is to investigate how culture evinces the power imbalances of society, or as Johnson writes, the "asymmetries" inherent in the abilities of people and groups "to define and realise their needs" (39). Part of what distinguishes cultural studies from other disciplines is its adoption of the "circuit of culture" en masse as the primary object of study. This "circuit" as conceptualized by Johnson features four stages through which culture itself evolves: production, textual representations, associated readings, and lived

cultures, each of which offer different entry points into cultural studies research – for example, a focus on political economy, textual analysis, or participatory media and cultures. Johnson’s circuit is influenced by Stuart Hall’s active audience theory outlined in his seminal work, “Encoding/Decoding” (1973), which undermines a purely formalist approach to textual analysis by demonstrating how meaning is mediated through discourse, and how both the producer’s “encoded” and audience’s “decoded” construals of a text’s message are influenced by a variety of social, political, and cultural factors that inform subsequent cultural productions in turn. Hall’s theories thus inform Johnson’s argument that a cultural studies approach must recognize each juncture in the circuit of culture in order to understand the full resonance of a cultural form. Although he acknowledges that not every research project will be able to examine, or will be interested in examining, each moment in the circuit of culture to the same degree, Johnson argues that an acknowledgement of other moments and methods within the circuit should always inform the research practice, design, and communication of findings in order to capture the full spectrum of a cultural form’s “social life” (62).

My use of the term “research practice” as opposed to “method” within this discussion comes from *The Practice of Cultural Studies* (2004), a treatise on cultural studies methods in which Johnson and his colleagues employ the term to highlight “the shifting, changing nature” of cultural studies approaches, their “dialogic character,” and their complex and ongoing need to “adjust method to question, see the method itself exert a pressure, [and] stay open to others” (2). In other words, the phrase “research practice” points to the fact that cultural studies methods must always remain flexible and self-reflexive, being tweaked and tailored to the ever-evolving inquiry. Accordingly, this dissertation’s research practice has manifested within and throughout, rather than prior to, the research process, thereby subverting the traditional idea of method as

“stock repertoire, to be taken off the shelf and practiced” (3). As Johnson et al. explain, cultural studies methods tend to be implicit, often rooted in the researcher’s “ways of reading,” or skills and approaches that generally “remain unacknowledged – except perhaps as theory” (3). This project likewise employs particular “ways of reading” that are grounded in several interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, outlined further in the chapters ahead. This tacit approach to methodology is impactful and deliberate within cultural studies work, Johnson et al. argue, as it helps produce three main effects that are essential to the discipline: room for provocation from external disciplines, resistance to the regulating and institutionalizing effect of disciplinarity, and resistance against partiality in the research practice. Rooted in a cultural studies framework, then, this dissertation analyzes its case texts in relation to the discourses, cultural contexts, and power imbalances that inform their production in order to interrogate the texts’ various messages, readings, and lived cultures, and how these contribute to the cyclical development of culture itself.

To be more specific, this project performs a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the YA fiction series and fan fiction texts at hand, taking inspiration from Norman Fairclough’s rendering of CDA as a heterogeneous and intertextual approach that seeks to disrupt unchallenged “truths” by exposing the relationship between language and power in everyday texts and contexts. This research practice advances alternative ways of “reading” that are grounded in social criticism, with various elements of text, including “visual images, body language, as well as language” (122), considered integral to social processes. This study’s adoption of an intersectional feminist paradigm is what necessitates the label of *feminist CDA*, which Michelle Lazar defines in her book, *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse* (2005), as “[a] critical perspective on unequal social arrangements

sustained through language use, with the goals of social transformation and emancipation” (1). A multimodal and political method, feminist CDA is specifically focused on deciphering the interconnections between gender, power, and ideology in a given text.

Although this project considers all four points within the circuit of culture in relation to the texts under analysis, acknowledging the value of each area of the circuit within cultural studies research, its primary focus remains on the texts themselves and their narrative interpretations by a particular sub-group of young readers. This textually-centered approach is premised on the dissertation’s main goal to uncover new and problematic areas of signification within the dominant YA texts at hand. As communications scholar Elfriede Fürsich argues in her essay, “In Defence of Textual Analysis: Restoring a Challenged Method for Journalism and Media Studies” (2009), text-based approaches to media studies are vital in order to uncover meanings that manifest in the spaces between encoding and decoding: that is, the significations that cannot be extracted by focusing on producers, audiences, or political economy alone. A similar argument can be made in comparing text-based approaches to the affective and phenomenological methods that have ascended within feminist studies in recent years: while these latter approaches are novel and valuable in their examinations of lived experiences of the body, their goals and outcomes are different from those of textual analysis, which focuses on text’s potentiality as a pluralistic and discursive site of meaning-making. As media studies scholar John Fiske asserts in his influential book, *Television Culture* (1987), a fictional text does not hold scholarly significance because it “reproduces reality, which it clearly does not,” but rather because it reflects “the dominant sense of reality” (21) at a given time, which informs dominant social actions in turn; the role of the textual analyst within cultural studies, then – and hence within this dissertation – is neither to reveal one singular Truth, or the multiple,

individuated truths of specific persons, but rather to elucidate the discursive possibilities of texts, their performance as a collective, their contributions to cultural myths and archetypes, and the cultural sensibilities that inform their creation to begin with.

My arguments herein rely on the use of several key terms that require definition, the first being “speculative fiction” – the genre to which I claim the three case study franchises belong. There has been much literary debate over the past several decades as to what defines the genre of speculative fiction, which emerged from cyberpunk author Bruce Sterling’s late-1980s conception of “slipstream” fiction: “a nonrealistic genre of a postmodern sensibility” (para 10). At the time of its origin, slipstream was mainly delineated through what it was not; the genre was used to categorize texts that lacked the characteristics to be labelled Science Fiction or Fantasy proper, but that possessed otherworldly qualities nonetheless. Slipstream morphed into what we know today to be speculative fiction, a genre that, as Paul Thomas describes in his book *Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction* (2013), “builds and develops entire and seemingly new worlds (sometimes as thin disguises for our own world and often genuinely speculative or uniquely alternative existences) with characters that exist in extended narratives that readers and viewers can come to know and love (or hate)” (6). This project’s conception of speculative fiction combines Sterling’s and Thomas’ interpretations to encompass a genre of otherworldly texts with postmodern sensibilities that are often replete with thinly veiled metaphors for our own world; speculative fiction thus shares qualities with, but is simultaneously distinct from, the traditionally more rigid genres of Science Fiction, Horror, Fantasy, and Gothic fiction.

Appetite for speculative fiction narratives for youth, particularly those with female action hero protagonists, has been at a high in mainstream media since the initial boom of New Heroine franchises in the mid-2000s. This brings me to the term “action heroine,” which this dissertation

employs to describe the teenaged leads of the speculative fiction franchises under discussion: 17-year-old Bella Swan of the *Twilight* series, 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and 16-year-old Beatrice “Tris” Prior of the *Divergent* novels. None of these heroines begins her journey in possession of any special powers or capabilities; each character’s story begins at home in the domestic sphere, highlighting the protagonist’s unhappiness with the quotidian struggles of day-to-day life. It is over the course of her narrative arc – through a mix of personal drive, physical training, and technology – that each heroine comes into possession of her power and action heroine status, which she leverages to fight enemies, lead battles, and win wars by her arc’s conclusion. This project’s conception of the female action hero thus draws from Sherrie Inness’ notion of “tough girls” in her book, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1998), which explores the archetype of the outwardly feminine character who “can endure tremendous physical and emotional suffering and still emerge the victor” while maintaining “the tight emotional and physical control that has been traditionally associated with men, not women” (13). Although not all of the protagonists under discussion start off as “tough” – Bella, and to a lesser extent Tris, are portrayed as particularly weak and fragile at the beginning of their respective journeys – all three protagonists emerge as heroic figures by the end of their respective series, adhering to the classic template of the hero’s journey established by Joseph Campbell, as we shall see in the chapters that follow. Moreover, in accordance with the “can-do/at-risk” binary of late-modern girlhood – as articulated in girl studies scholar Anita Harris’ book, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004) – these “can-do” teen heroines epitomize white, heteronormative female power in juxtaposition with their “at-risk” (and in many cases, non-white) counterparts. While acknowledging that the term “girl” is sometimes used in popular discourse to describe female

children under age 13 exclusively, for the purpose of this dissertation, “girl” is employed to describe the adolescent heroines at hand; just as girlhood scholar Mary Celeste Kearney claims in her landmark book *Girls Make Media* (2006) that most female-identifying individuals under age 21 prefer the moniker “girl” to other terms such as “young woman” and actually claim girlhood as part of their primary identity (5), so too do the identities of the teen action heroines in this research centre on girlhood, their status as dependents, and the struggles therein.

The terms “eating disorders” and “anorexia” also require clarification. Although “eating disorders” encompass a broad range of mental illnesses, because this project’s primary focus is on the cultural representation and circulation of food restriction and body discipline, the term “eating disorder” is invoked herein to describe disorders with restrictive eating behaviours, namely anorexia. I purposely employ the shorthand term “anorexia” as opposed to the formal *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) of the American Psychiatric Association, or DSM-5 classification, “Anorexia Nervosa,” to separate my feminist theorization of self-restrictive behaviours and anorexic value systems in culture, from the more rigid medical and clinical realm of eating disorders research – a distinction that is unpacked in further detail in Chapter 1. Moreover, the individual with anorexia discussed in this project is for all intents and purposes gendered as female. Although up to 20% of individuals affected by eating disorders are male (Parliament of Canada 9), these disorders often manifest in different ways among boys and men; the overwhelming majority of individuals with anorexia are girls and women.

Like almost all millennial women, I have felt the crushing weight of cultural messaging that aligns female subjectivity with the body and valorizes body discipline through the postmodern notion of the body-as-text. My own struggles with food and body acceptance, especially as an adolescent, along with the experience of bearing witness to a loved one

struggling with the devastating impact of an eating disorder, have inspired my commitment to exploring how anorexia is amplified through contemporary cultural texts. The stakes associated with the dissemination of this logic are high; eating disorders have the highest mortality rates of all mental illnesses, with anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa killing at least 1,000 to 1,500 Canadians each year (Parliament of Canada 10).² In 2014, Canada's Standing Committee on the Status of Women presented the Government of Canada with a list of recommendations to improve the treatment and prevention of eating disorders, which includes "supporting research on the impact of media messaging and marketing directed toward children" and "encourag[ing] academic institutions to promote media literacy for young children" (53). My work serves as a response to this call; in five chapters, this dissertation theorizes the ways in which anorexic messaging is mobilized through contemporary mass media franchises targeted at young female audiences, as well as reader responses to the problematic ideologies therein.

Chapter 1 develops and explicates the theoretical framework on which this project relies, outlining the field of critical feminist studies of eating disorders from its genesis in the 1980s to now, and this dissertation's position therein. Building on the foundational works of Bordo and Heywood, Chapter 1 demonstrates how the theoretical concept of "anorexic logic" corroborates with a variety of empirical studies on the embodied experiences of women with anorexia published over a span of 20 years, thereby demonstrating how the concept can be understood through a lens of corporeal feminism in a twenty-first century (western) context. Theories of post-feminism are invoked here to demonstrate how post-feminism and anorexia share a similar value system, despite post-feminism's rhetoric of "progression" and "liberation" from the gender

² The number is likely higher as death certificates often fail to record eating disorders as the cause of death.

ideals of eras passed. Chapter 1 also demonstrates the relevance of youth to this project, showing how dominant messages about the body and femininity (particularly in YA media) influence young people today. In so doing, this chapter articulates the significance of the overall project to the fields of girl studies and critical feminist studies of eating disorders.

Chapter 2 presents the first literary case study, focusing on Meyer's *Twilight* novels: a four-part series that helped incite the New Heroine phenomenon along with a renewed cultural obsession with vampire lore. The narrative plot of the series centres on high school student Bella Swan's romance with immortal vampire Edward Cullen, and her subsequent transformation from average, soft-bodied, and vulnerable teen into hard-bodied, self-restrictive, and self-actualized vampire. Chapter 2 posits Bella's character as an exemplar of postmodern and post-feminist femininity – in which the body-as-text is meant to inscribe specific masculine and feminine values simultaneously – to argue that the *Twilight* series epitomizes the ways in which post-feminism repackages and reproduces Victorian-era gender norms grounded in anorexia. This chapter also examines the *Twilight* films' aesthetics, as well as the cultural effect of the *Twilight* phenomenon, as Chapters 3 and 4 examine the female-led YA speculative fiction franchises that were popularized in the wake of Meyer's novels.

One of the teen action heroine franchises made possible by the *Twilight* series' success is Roth's *Divergent* series, set in a near-future Chicago where citizens have been stratified into "factions" based on their primary role in society. Although like the *Twilight* novels, the *Divergent* series features a heterosexual teen romance at its centre – shared between heroine Beatrice "Tris" Prior and her mentor Tobias "Four" Eaton – critics have lauded Roth's advancement of a bold female protagonist who, unlike Bella, makes decisions independent of her romantic partner. Chapter 3 contends, however, that similar to its predecessor, the *Divergent*

series valorizes the tyranny of perfection through Tris' transformation from a soft and boring "stiff" into a hard post-feminist action heroine. Where *Divergent*'s manifestation of anorexic logic shifts significantly from that of *Twilight* is in its martyring of the young female protagonist. Throughout Roth's series, Tris engages in a self-deprecating battle between body and mind that logically ends in a deadly act of self-sacrifice and her symbolic ascension into sainthood. Employing feminist theories of female pain and martyrdom, this chapter argues that the *Divergent* series' problematic portrayals of body discipline, masochistic behaviour (as a path to self-mastery), and the self-sacrificial martyr heroine fetishize the female body's destruction and amplify the anorexic ethos of New Heroine mythology.

While both the *Twilight* and *Divergent* novels feature prominent themes related to consumption, restriction, and the body, as its name suggests, Collins' *The Hunger Games* series is the most directly food-related of all the franchises under discussion. The novels take place in the near future in the class-stratified nation of Panem – situated in the former American Midwest – divided into twelve impoverished Districts surrounding a wealthy Capitol city positioned at the nation's core. The trilogy follows protagonist Katniss Everdeen as she volunteers in place of her younger sister to serve as District 12's female Tribute in the Hunger Games: an annual live-televised fight to the death between District children ages 12-18. Chapter 4 argues that, similar to protagonists Bella and Tris, Katniss' heroism hinges on male-coded and sadomasochistic qualities and behaviours (particularly as they pertain to food provision and consumption), which exist in conjunction with her seemingly effortless embodiment of ideal femininity. Food denial is problematically portrayed as a path to self-actualization in Collins' series, and starvation acts as a pre-requisite for cultural knowledge. Unlike Meyer's *Twilight* saga and Roth's *Divergent* novels, however, Collins' self-reflexive questioning of the efficacy and desirability of the

protagonist's sadomasochistic characteristics unsettles the very criteria for what constitutes heroism in these franchises. Drawing on theories of corporeal feminism, this chapter further argues that, by employing a framework of touch (contra sight), Collins' trilogy presents progressive and alternative ways of being for girls and young women that resist a glamorization of anorexic rationality. These arguments offer a shift in the scholarly conversation around *The Hunger Games* franchise and representations of girlhood more broadly, demonstrating how Collins' texts portray female embodiment in ways with potentiality to undo the logic of anorexia that constitutes much post-feminist media for girls. Therefore, although Collins' series was published before Roth's, these texts appear achronologically in this dissertation as Katniss' character marks a departure from, and potential antidote to, the heroines of the previous two franchises under discussion.

Moving from textual representations to readerly reactions and responses, Chapter 5 analyzes a selection of online fan fiction to interrogate the ways in which young female readers turn to writing in order to negotiate anorexic, feminist, and post-feminist discourses online, and gain varying degrees of agency through the intersubjective writing process. This chapter employs Henry Jenkins' foundational theories of fan communities as feminine sites of resistance, Isabelle Meuret's theorization of anorexia narratives as reflections of the anorexic body, and theories of girl cultures as ambivalent sites of both resistance and conformity to demonstrate how, as each fan fiction author negotiates her conflicting position as both fan and critic, her narrative sheds light on her own ambivalent and contradictory relationship with the dominant culture in which she exists. By examining previously unexplored spaces featuring the representation and expression of anorexic subjectivities, Chapter 5 asserts the importance of eating disorders

scholarship attending to fan fiction as an untapped site of inquiry, especially considering the recent proliferation of eating disorders discourse and community building online.

Thus, by introducing the matrix of gender, consumption, and the body into the field of YA speculative literature and its fandoms, this project sheds new light on the conception of female empowerment perpetuated by the popular “girl hero” franchises at hand. Rather than engaging in the narrow debate as to whether individual action heroine characters are progressive or normative as many critics of the franchises under discussion have already done,³ this work interrogates the very terms on which these debates are built. That is, rather than applaud the action heroine’s rejection of the hyper-feminine as being progressive, or condemn speculative fiction series for not doing enough to demonstrate their protagonists’ potential in the realm of masculine power, this dissertation instead examines the cultural values that are reinforced through critical assessments of popular texts that hinge on a positive/negative binary, mirroring the dualistic logic of anorexia. In so doing, this work contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of YA literature, girls studies, and critical feminist eating disorder research, offering new ways of understanding prevailing conceptions of female empowerment aimed at youth, and how these conceptions are being understood and mobilized by their target demographic of girls and young women – the same group that continues to be most affected by eating disorders. A corporeal feminist approach to these internationally renowned cultural texts and their fandoms reconsiders the disembodied version of female heroism that has been reified within New Heroine mythology and celebrated within the broader popular culture, while asserting the importance of

³ These debates are unpacked further in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, which each focus on a specific action heroine series and the scholarly discourses that surround said franchise.

foregrounding theories of corporeality to truly make sense of representations and expressions of gendered embodiment that so often constitute girls' embodied subjectivities today.

CHAPTER 1

Post-Feminism, the Body, and Youth: Toward a Theory of Anorexic Heroism in YA Speculative Fiction

Eating disorders are culturally and historically situated phenomena that were first clinically recognized during the Victorian era, primarily in industrialized societies. While instances of fasting for religious purposes have been well documented since the medieval period, doctors did not formally recognize anorexia nervosa – the most well-known eating disorder and the focus of this dissertation – until the 1870s, when incidences of “fasting girls” became more widespread throughout Europe and the United States (Brumberg, *Fasting Girls* 6).¹ Although these early occurrences of self-starvation marked the beginnings of the modern eating disorders problem, it was not until the late 1970s that eating disorders broadly, and anorexia specifically, began to capture the public imagination. As contemporary reports documented,² this period saw a dramatic rise in instances of diagnosed eating disorders in the west, prompting a new wave of medical and academic research on the topic. A clinical paradigm, driven by the impulse to

¹ In *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg provides a social history of anorexia nervosa by interpreting primary medical sources from the medieval period to the 1980s, with a focus on the Victorian era. Positing anorexia as a socially and historically located disorder, Brumberg argues that Victorian culture’s positioning of physical frailty as an elite status symbol, along with the confinement of middle-upper class women to the domestic sphere, made anorexia an appealing and available form of rebellion for girls and women, provoking anorexia’s transformation from an expression of piety (as seen in medieval saints) to a diagnosable pathology.

² For example, Crisp et al.’s 1976 survey, “How Common is Anorexia Nervosa?” presented one of the first empirical studies on the prevalence of anorexia. The study surveyed nine populations of British schoolgirls between 1972–1974, finding the occurrence of anorexia to be one “severe case” in every 200 girls. Jones et al.’s 1980 study, “Epidemiology of Anorexia Nervosa in Monroe County, New York: 1960-1976” was a similar prevalence study conducted in the United States around the same period, wherein the researchers used hospital records to determine the incidence rate of anorexia nervosa in Monroe County, New York between 1960-1976. Their findings showed a steady increase in diagnoses during this time.

uncover a particular “cause” of eating disorders, drove much of this scholarship, of which Hilde Bruch’s collection of psychoanalytic work, *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within* (1973) was seminal, conceptualizing anorexia as a deviant form of expression of the inner psychological self. Following Bruch’s lead, prominent studies in the 1980s, such as Paul Garfinkel and Allan Kaplan’s diagnostic framework of anorexia in the *Handbook of Eating Disorders* (1986), and Harrison Pope and James Hudson’s research on the etiology of bulimia in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (1988), framed eating disorders as individualized pathologies primarily instigated by psychological deficits, such as body dysmorphia and perfectionism, and familial factors, such as controlling mothers and parent-child attachment problems.

While still following a clinical model, psychoanalytic analyses of eating disorders were amongst the first to examine the role of gender in the anorexic sufferer’s aversion to fat. Many early psychoanalytic studies posited that a woman’s attempt to remove her flesh could be attributed to psychosexual anxieties.³ Although elements of cultural analysis began appearing in research as early as the 1970s, the focus of this work remained on a woman’s individual hyper-susceptibility to cultural and peer pressures – a top-down model of analysis that saw women as victims of media messaging, and that scapegoated celebrities and other media agents as catalysts

³ Kim Chernin’s popular book *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (1981) was one of the first psychoanalytic works to postulate that the anorexic sufferer’s rejection of feminine flesh is a simultaneous rejection of sexuality, and even of femininity itself. Other empirical studies of the time such as Justin Schechter et al.’s “Sexual Assault and Anorexia Nervosa” (1987), and Rachel Calam and Peter Slade’s “Sexual Experience and Eating Problems in Female Undergraduates” (1989), also revealed sexual abuse and anxiety to be contributors to the development of eating disorders.

of the disorder.⁴ The intended meanings behind the individual's desired thinness were almost always presumed in this early scholarship to be related to dominant beauty standards. Attempted interrogations of the beauty assumption were often ignored, so that by the end of the 1980s, dominant eating disorders research followed a familiar pattern, placing the root of eating disorders in one of three places: an individual's biological/psychological make-up, family environment, and/or susceptibility to peer and media pressures.

It is within this context that the 1983 New York Center for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia meetings took place, which saw the first large-scale academic discussions about interdisciplinary methodology and gender specificity within eating disorders research. Feminist psychoanalyst and body studies scholar Susie Orbach presented in this forum some of her first theories of the sociocultural context of femininity in eating disorders development, which would later be published in her prolific book, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for Our Age* (1986). Orbach argued that anorexia functions as (in part) a hyperbolic manifestation of anxiety experienced by practically all women vulnerable to western cultural ideologies. Rather than an individual pathology, she asserted, anorexia should be regarded as an extreme (and often deadly) manifestation of dominant gender values embodied, with the concept of gender values, in this context, encompassing a wide array of ideologies pertaining to gender and the body, including, but certainly not limited to, beauty ideals. Orbach's upending of the dominant clinical paradigm within eating disorders research throughout the 1980s helped inspire

⁴ Although Hilde Bruch's *Eating Disorders* (1973) attributes anorexia to a variety of psychological factors, it also acknowledges the role of a culturally constructed "pursuit of thinness" in the individual's drive to self-starvation. Later studies, such as Silverstein et al.'s publication in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (1986), attribute increased eating disorder diagnoses with the thin body ideal perpetuated in popular magazines such as *Vogue* and *Ladies Home Journal*.

a new sub-field of feminist scholarship examining the deep significance of culture on eating disorders formation, and the embodied experiences of sufferers themselves.

Corporeal Feminism and the Critical Feminist Eating Disorders Paradigm

This new area of eating disorders research emerged in accordance with the burgeoning field of corporeal feminism, which arose in conjunction with Foucauldian theories of the body. Although Michel Foucault does not analyze how power is enacted on women's bodies specifically, his analytics of power and knowledge informs corporeal feminist theory, which interrogates how patriarchal power plays out over the bodies of gendered and racialized groups. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz is often cited as the founding voice of corporeal feminism, as her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) helped shape a new realm of feminist scholarship focusing on philosophies of embodiment. At the heart of Grosz's theories is her argument that Cartesian mind/body dualism sits at the crux of late modern disciplinary practices on the body, within which the mind is the privileged term, signifying intellect and self-control, and the body is the negative term, signifying primal instinct and lack of control:

Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its "integrity." It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgement, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity. (3)

In her discussion of western culture's total reliance on, and valorization of binary thinking, Grosz uses the image of the Mobius strip to symbolize how a new corporeal feminism might conceptualize the mind-body relationship in a way that is not dualistic, but rather mutually constitutive, wherein "through twisting or inversion, one side becomes another" (xii). The

Mobius strip analogy illuminates how corporeal feminism goes beyond an analysis of how social powers inscribe on to the body, and instead seeks to investigate how bodies themselves – neither pure biological substance nor pure text – manifest and evolve continually within systems of meaning. The core tenets of corporeal feminism, then, grounded in Grosz’ theories of the body, call for a complete eradication of exclusive dichotomies, particularly those that separate body and mind; acknowledgement of embodied identities, particularly those that are marginalized in society; and integration of the social and physical aspects of the body.

Feminist theories of abjection are vital to understand how mind/body dualism operates in western culture in ways that subjugate women and femininity specifically. French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s influential essay, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), is foundational in this arena. Kristeva defines abjection as the experience of subjective horror that occurs when an individual is confronted by material evidence of their own corporeal existence, causing a loss of distinction between subject and object or self and other: for example, the experience of seeing a rotting corpse and being reminded of one’s own vulnerability and proximity to death. The concept of “the abject” denotes the breaching of borders that occurs in an instance like this – borders that are normally enforced by the symbolic order on which we rely to make meaning of our lives – along with one’s embodied reaction to the breach. In this way, the abject can be conceived of as a “place where meaning collapses” (2) and a quality of “being opposed to I” (1). This phrase, “opposed to I,” suggests the abject’s role in personal identity formation. As Judith Butler’s concept of the “exclusionary matrix” in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) shows, the constitution of identity necessitates an abject Other: “a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (3). In other words, our very construction of subjecthood relies on the rigid reinforcement of

ideological binaries and the disavowal of certain Othered beings who have been deemed abject by hegemonic culture: *I am me*, the exclusionary matrix tells us, *because I am not them*.

Accordingly, within the framework of Cartesian dualism, the mind represents subjectivity (i.e. the self), while the body signifies the abject (i.e. the non-self). Thus although Kristeva's psychoanalytic approach and Butler's post-structuralist emphasis on discourse over materiality have positioned each of their works outside of the corpus of corporeal feminism proper,⁵ their theories of abjection and identity are useful in articulating the power of mind/body dualism in positioning the body outside of the realm of signification and subjectivity.

Feminist cultural theorist Susan Bordo – who alongside Grosz, is often cited as one of the founding voices of a new corporeal feminism in academia – articulates the gendered implications of the dominant mind/body binary, including its role in the etiology of eating disorders, over the course of her book, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993). Bordo argues that Cartesian dualism, embedded throughout western philosophy, theology, medicine, literature, and culture, has had particular consequences for women, as the ideology associates men and masculinity with the realm of the mind, while relegating women and femininity to the abject realm of the body. By reducing women to their physical, reproductive bodies, Bordo

⁵ In their Introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008), a collection of scholarly essays written by a variety of theorists worldwide from a corporeal feminist perspective, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman condemn the “retreat from materiality” (3) that occurred in feminist studies in the wake of Butler's deconstruction of discursive categories such as “sex” and “gender” in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), as well as in her preceding book, *Gender Trouble* (1990). The subsequent focus on discourse that took over feminist research has been at the expense of the material, Alaimo and Hekman argue: “While no one would deny the ongoing importance of discursive critique and rearticulation for feminist scholarship and feminist politics, the discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices” (3). Corporeal feminist theory's emphasis on materiality and lived experience in conjunction with discourse is what distinguishes this realm of feminist scholarship from Butler's work.

asserts, this view equates women themselves with the abject: “if woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death” (5 original emphasis). Mind/body dualism thus objectifies and abjectifies, symbolically excluding the female body from the realm of subjectivity, and calling instead for its docility and discipline. Propounding the body as a “carrier of culture” (287), Bordo views the evolution of postmodernism over the latter half of the twentieth century – which she defines through the increased emphasis on “heterogeneity,” “discontinuity,” “displacement,” and “destabilization” of modern rationalist and essentialist thought in western culture (279) – as key to understanding how this fragmented relationship between the physical and spiritual realms presides over the daily lives of individuals today. Postmodernism’s “intoxication with possibilities” (35) – that is, its tendency to view the body as pure text, and blindness to the somatic body’s “unbearable weight” – she argues, has turned body-modifying practices that are objectively demeaning, demanding, or even deadly, into activities of daily life that are positioned in culture and perceived by individuals to be healthy, empowering and transformative. The cultural valorization of body discipline through self-starvation and intense workout regimes (especially for women) is one such example of how mind/body dualism combined with the postmodern concept of body-as-text has materialized in popular discourse over the last several decades.

According to Bordo, anorexia can thus be regarded as an extreme manifestation of hegemonic cultural philosophies that privilege the mind over the body and call for rigid self-discipline in the somatic realm. Pulling away from previous discussions that blame the media and female-female relationships for causing eating disorders, and opposing the clinical model’s hunt for empirical explanations, Bordo defines eating disorders as “complex crystallizations of

culture” (35), wherein sufferers, internalizing dualistic thinking, attempt to gain subjectivity through dominance over and transcendence of their female bodies. She asserts that the binary of mind versus body underlies almost all anorexic rituals of self-starvation such that the sufferer – engrossed by black-and-white philosophies and absolutes – seeks to become “male will” for fear of succumbing to the body’s voracious appetites: “She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground” (8). According to Bordo, the quintessential individual with anorexia thus sees herself reflected in the western archetypal image of the “hungering, voracious, all-needing, and all-wanting” (160) woman, so that it is only by employing her mental strength to deprive herself of one of her most fundamental needs – food – that she feels dominant over her abject female body and its seemingly voracious desires: physical, emotional, and sexual. Indeed, because mind/body dualism feminizes the abject realm of the body along with its many desires, while coding mental strength, spirituality, intellect, and willpower as masculine, anorexia directly reflects Cartesian philosophy, hinging on the literal disavowal of embodied femininity.

The critical feminist model of eating disorders research with which this project aligns employs theories of corporeal feminism rooted in the seminal works of Grosz and Bordo to examine the lived experiences of individuals with anorexia (as well as other eating disorders) along with the gendered cultural contexts in which they exist. This is not to suggest that the critical feminist model rejects clinical research and its contributions to the field: as Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight*, for example, anorexia is not a lifestyle choice or “philosophical attitude,” but rather a “debilitating” (147) and “multidimensional” (140) disorder with many contributing elements, including biological and psychological factors – which as has already been noted, are the focus of much clinical research on the topic. The critical feminist model merely positions gender and culture as primary in eating disorders’ complex and multifaceted

manifestations, as opposed to viewing these disorders as individuated pathologies. I use the term “critical” here in accordance with Helen Malson and Maree Burns, who in their Introduction to *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders* (2009) – a collection of essays written by a variety of international scholars – delineate the *critical* feminist approach from other scholarly approaches toward gender and eating disorders through its integration of postmodern and post-structuralist thinking, specifically its disruption of essentialist epistemic categories and emphasis on the power of discourse. For example, Malson and Burns use the slashed term “dis/order” to disrupt the binary between cultural “order” and personal “disorder” that has been constructed by the clinical paradigm, and to refute the idea that eating disorders are personal pathologies expressing either conformity or resistance. Instead, they argue, eating disorders are reflections of “a multiplicity” (4) of competing impulses and ideologies. Today, consensus in critical feminist scholarship is that eating disorders, catalyzed by a variety of bio-psycho-social factors, are discursively constructed arenas of subjectivity constituted through particular practices of body management and discipline, which are expressive of contradictory cultural values, particularly those that pertain to gender and the body.

However, as corporeal feminists like Grosz and Bordo have shown, bodily experiences cannot be understood through representation alone, and must also be examined through the lens of lived experience. Accordingly, over the past twenty years, researchers under the critical feminist umbrella of eating disorders scholarship have, in addition to theorists and philosophers, turned to sufferers themselves to uncover the various meanings behind anorexia’s body management rituals. In examining the personal narratives, artistic representations, and embodied experiences of these individuals, researchers have unearthed a plethora of conflicting ideologies and values that guide disordered eating behaviours. In her book *The Thin Woman: Feminism,*

Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa (1998) – a landmark study of 23 anorexic women, conducted largely through interviews about the meanings behind their eating behaviours – social psychologist Helen Malson found that anorexia commonly develops as a method of bodily control rooted in Cartesian dualism. Paradoxically, through dieting, which is typically conceived in popular media as a hyper-feminine practice, sufferers sought to cast out the “femaleness” of their bodies; for them, extreme thinness signified “not-woman” (112), with female bodily functions like menstruation, which tends to halt with the onset of anorexia, being perceived as negative signifiers of femininity (509). Because for these women, food functioned symbolically, their fixation on food (including its calories, textures, nutrients, and so forth) also stemmed from a fixation on self-control. Indeed, many participants in their narratives described their thin bodies as providing them with a sense of mastery over the material world. Thus, while the women in Malson’s study did not reject femininity wholesale, they did seek to disavow a particular embodied femininity through their disordered eating behaviours, equating dominance over the flesh with a kind of masculine power. Of course, this sense of mastery was achieved through dangerous anorexic measures designed to erase the body itself, resulting in a contradictory pursuit of transcendent being through physical nonbeing.

Over a decade later, Megan Warin’s book *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (2010) offered a new ethnographic approach to studying anorexia that focused on the day-to-day lived experiences of women suffering from anorexia along with the gendered social-cultural contexts that inform their disorder. In accordance with Grosz’s and Bordo’s respective feminist theories of the body and the findings presented in Malson’s empirical study, Warin found that many participants in her work had internalized the mind/body dichotomy so that their bodies were experienced as being separate from their selves (143). Drawing on Kristeva, Warin

emphasizes the central role abjection played in her participants' desire to restrict, which manifested through anorexic patterns like "the simultaneous hungering for and spitting out of foods; the physical retching of vomiting and purging; the erasure of sexual difference; the protection of bodies from contamination; elaborate cleansing routines (both internally and on the margins of bodies); and the desire to be clean, empty, and pure" (116). Many women in Warin's study saw fats and calories as abject due to their "amorphous" (17) nature, characterized by their ability to "seep into" and "infiltrate" (17) the body through various sensual experiences related to smelling, seeing, consuming, and touching food. For some, this fear reached beyond the realm of food to include bodily functions – especially the feminine experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, and sex – as well as human relationships, all of which occupy boundary-bending positions between interior and exterior, self and other. In this way, anorexic rituals offered a path to the symbolic order threatened by particular abject foods and experiences. By starving themselves, these women were able to cast out what they perceived to be abject objects from their seemingly dirty and unruly bodies, bringing themselves to a greater state of virtue, purity, and disembodied transcendence through the process.

Most recently, Muriel Darmon's contribution, *Becoming Anorexic: A Sociological Study* (2017), has reinforced the critical feminist perception of anorexia as a hyperbolic manifestation of western cultural values of gender and the body grounded in Cartesian dualism. Framing her work as the first fully sociological investigation of the disorder, Darmon uses empirical, qualitative research – conducted primarily through interviews and observations of affected adolescent girls, clinicians, parents and teachers in both clinical and non-clinical settings – to argue that anorexia is largely influenced by "broadly disseminated social norms and instructions" (261) related to "the malleability of the body, and particularly the female body" (262). She

asserts that many girls with anorexia have internalized the postmodern concept of the body-as-text, and employ what they perceived as mental strength and willpower to escape their female body's materiality, including its age, shape, and gender, through anorexic practices. For these girls, anorexia is symbolic of "a deliberate, determined and individual mode of self-transformation" (261), with the ultimate end goal of achieving bodily transcendence. Therefore, as the respective studies of Malson, Warin and Darmon reveal, over twenty years of empirical research on the embodied experiences of women and girls with anorexia has continued to corroborate early corporeal feminist theories of gender and the body being rooted in mind/body dualism, and Bordo's theory of anorexia as a somatic crystallization of cultural binaries.

Anorexia and Post-feminist Sensibility

This consensual acknowledgement of anorexia's relationship to dominant cultural values of gender and the body within critical feminist eating disorders research elicits a discussion of post-feminism, which many feminist theorists have argued serves as the dominant cultural paradigm influencing the social construction of femininity in the twenty-first century. The seeds of post-feminism as it exists today were planted in the early 1990s by a variety of self-labelled feminist academics and journalists who sought to elucidate the feminist movement's radicalism and anti-men bias. The publication of *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (1994) by Christina Hoff Sommers, who at the time, served as a Professor of Philosophy at Clark University, Worcester, MA, was instrumental in this discourse. From the book's opening sentence – which reads, "[a] surprising number of clever and powerful feminists share the conviction that American women still live in a patriarchy where men collectively keep women down" (19) – Sommers argues that the feminist movement has become too radical and out-of-

touch with everyday women. Conceptualizing the dominant views within feminist academic circles as “gender feminism,” and her own viewpoint as “equity feminism,” Sommers asserts that feminists should focus less on gendered difference, and more on equal opportunities for all, irrespective of gender – a pursuit, she argues, that has nearly been achieved: “The equity agenda may not yet be fully achieved, but by any reasonable measure, equity feminism has turned out to be a great American success story” (22).⁶ Speaking about what in hindsight can be read as feminism’s burgeoning emphasis on intersectionality, the author takes an ironic tone with her reader as she reflects on her experience at the 1992 National Women’s Studies Association Conference:

Being aggrieved was a conference motif. The keynote speaker, Annette Kolodny, a feminist literary scholar and former dean of the humanities faculty at the University of Arizona [...] reported that ten years ago, the organization “almost came apart over outcries by our lesbian sisters” [...]. Three years later the Disability caucus threatened to quit, and the following year the women of color walked out. (29)

Describing the relief she felt to be united with her “real” (i.e. biological) sister and done with the conference (31), here, Sommers epitomizes her book’s overall goal: to denounce feminism’s focus on intersectionality and “victimization,” along with its related politics.

⁶ In their recent study, *Smart Girls: Success, School, and the Myth of Post-Feminism* (2017), girl studies scholars Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby undermine this very myth that equality has been achieved for girls and young women today. Interrogating mainstream media’s emphasis on female achievement and “girl power,” over a span of six years the researchers conducted interviews with a group of 57 Ontarian girls between ages 12-18 about their experiences and perceptions of gender inequity. They found, not only that sexism is still very much a reality for girls in schools today, but that post-feminist myths of gender equality have been internalized by girls, who now employ a variety of problematic strategies to conform to the archetypal image of the post-feminist “supergirl” (28).

Around the same time, journalist Katie Roiphe released her influential book, *The Morning After: Sex Fear and Feminism on Campus* (1993), which likewise argues that feminism should focus on women's individual self and sexual confidence rather than instigating widespread fear about systemic issues such as domestic and sexual violence. About her former university's "Take Back the Night" march, Roiphe writes:

As I listen to the refrains, "I have been silent," "I was silenced," "I am finally breaking the silence," the speakers begin to blur together in my mind. It makes sense that rape victims experience some similar reactions, but what is strange is that they choose the same words[...], sounding programmed and automatic. As I listen to them I am reminded of the scene in Madeleine L'Engle's children's book *A Wrinkle in Time* in which a row of identical children play outside of a row of identical houses, bouncing a row of identical balls. (36)

Roiphe's view of "Take Back the Night" as extremist, and her peers' autobiographical narratives of sexual violence therein as "programmed and automatic," is also mirrored by journalist Rene Denfeld in *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995). Like her predecessors, Denfeld argues that feminism has "become bogged down in an extremist moral and spiritual crusade that has little to do with women's lives" (5), and views feminist activism on issues such as sexual and domestic violence as conducive to a culture of victimization. While these treatises by Sommers, Roiphe, and Denfeld respectively present some valid criticisms of academic feminism's lack of accessibility to the masses at the time of writing – an issue that would later be addressed by scholars such as bell hooks, whose work aims to promote the idea that *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000) – they also largely ignore the nuanced history of feminist struggles, frame the notion of women's liberation as an individualist issue,

and consider only the needs of their own demographic of young, white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, and middle-class women.

The above authors' shared ideas about feminism – that it is extremist, victimizing, anti-men, and focused on a problem that no longer exists – constitute the foundation for what subsequent feminists have subsumed under the rubric of “post-feminism.” As feminist cultural theorist Angela McRobbie writes in her definitional essay, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture” (2004), post-feminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism” to propound that “equality is achieved” and instill “a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that [feminism] is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (255). Exemplified by the texts of Sommers, Roiphe, and Denfeld, above, post-feminism's version of female empowerment is limited to the needs of a privileged few, employing only the most palatable mainstream elements of previous feminist movements to promote equality for individual women within specific existing patriarchal structures rather than seeking to dismantle patriarchal systems altogether. While post-feminism itself has been conceptualized in numerous ways by feminist scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, this dissertation employs cultural theorist Rosalind Gill's conception of post-feminism as a “sensibility,” articulated in her influential essay, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility” (2007). Conceiving of post-feminism as a “critical object” (148) rather than a true political movement or analytic perspective, Gill posits mainstream media as the primary target of study into which scholars should inquire in order to understand the ways in which post-feminist ideals are represented and constructed today, and defines post-feminist sensibility through the following characteristics:

...the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus

upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. (2)

These core characteristics, Gill argues, characterize much of the mainstream media aimed at women today, from films and television shows, to material culture and advertisements, thus constituting a burgeoning “post-feminist media culture” (147) in western society.

Around the same time that Gill’s essay was published, media studies scholar Diane Negra released her popular book examining representations of “the self” in post-feminist media, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2007). Although she does not reference Gill in particular, likely due to the proximity of their publication dates, Negra exemplifies Gill’s conception of post-feminism as a sensibility permeating popular media, as she maps post-feminist values within a variety of twenty-first century texts, including chick flicks, women’s magazines, literary fiction, and television. Over the course of her arguments, Negra identifies several icons of post-feminism: the “retreatist” woman, who finds solace in abandoning the public sphere (a “solution” only available to upper-class women); the “time crunched” woman, whose perpetual and insidious aging dictates her self-identification; the “working girl,” whose unhappiness with working life reinforces traditional gender norms about women’s place in the home; and relatedly, the “domestic woman,” who transfers the language of empowerment to the private spheres of the home and the body. As Negra’s work demonstrates, within post-feminist media, discourses and images of female “liberation” function as a guise to proffer icons and ideals of femininity that are heteronormative, regressive, and oppressive at their core. As Negra writes, although popular culture has “seldom been as dominated as it is today by fantasies and fears about women’s ‘life choices’” (2), conservative norms are ultimately

reinforced as the “‘best choices’ in women’s lives” (4).

The growth and infiltration of post-feminism in mainstream media grew out of a specific social-cultural-economic context that emerged in the 1990s and continues into the twenty-first century. In her book, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (2000), gender studies scholar Imelda Whelehan argues that post-feminism’s appropriation of the third wave’s discourses of “choice” and “empowerment” is directly tied to the 1990s’ celebration of consumer choice and empowerment; post-feminism’s politics of lifestyle thus “leaves many victims in its wake,” such as “those who don’t conform to its preferred images and those who are too poor to exercise ‘control’ over their lives” (7). Feminist theorist Nancy Fraser’s book, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013), further elucidates the relationship between post-feminism and consumerism by charting the feminist movement’s convergence with neoliberal capitalist ideals in the late-twentieth century. During this time, Fraser argues, neoliberalism resignified the feminist critique of androcentrism so that “the dream of women’s emancipation” became dependent on “the engine of capitalist accumulation” (221). She points to second-wave feminism’s critique of the “family wage” as an example of one feminist position that has “enjoyed a perverse afterlife” (221) by ironically contributing to neoliberalism’s valorization of individualist meritocracy in the workforce.

Similarly, in her most recent book-length study of post-feminism, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), McRobbie examines post-feminism’s relationship with neoliberal capitalism, wherein the abandonment of feminist politics by girls and women is met with the promise of increased wage-earning capacity symbolizing women’s newfound “respectability, citizenship and entitlement” (2) in the public sphere. In the 1990s, McRobbie argues, when forces of consumer culture began appropriating feminist scripts to

encourage women to seek out new modes of freedom and choice grounded in the marketplace, women – especially young women with value in the labour market – were called (and often shamed) into participating in consumer culture, which was, and continues to be, framed as the ultimate pathway to success and self-actualization.

Grounded by the underpinnings of neoliberalism, post-feminism's presence was amplified further post-9/11. Kristin Anderson explores this phenomenon from a critical psychology perspective over the course of her book, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era* (2015), which argues that the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City's World Trade Centers augmented post-feminism's dominance by impelling individuals to assuage their fear of death and the Other through conservative ideals of family, religion, and nation that seemed to give their lives meaning. Post-feminism's return to gender traditionalism, she argues, serves as a kind of terror management in this context. Thus not only does post-feminism posit an individualistic ideology that purports the logic of white "capitalist patriarchy" – a term first used by Zillah R. Eisenstein (1978) to describe the "mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring" (5) – it also furthers conservative and corporate interests that seek to profit, both from fear of the Other, and from the preoccupation with female "liberation" in the western world. Together, then, the emphasis on neoliberal consumer-capitalist pleasures and the "safety" of gender essentialism that permeated western cultural values in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, along with the mainstreaming of feminist politics that occurred in the wake of second-wave feminism, birthed and subsequently amplified post-feminism's voice within hegemonic western culture.

Also informing post-feminism's vision of ideal femininity is the social-cultural context of

postmodernity. In her essay, “Appearing to Disappear: Postmodern Femininities and Self-Starved Subjectivities” (2009), Malson critiques how postmodern philosophies of the body inform women’s relationships with their own bodies and their eating practices in turn:

[Bodies] are reconfigured in postmodernity, not as “natural”, active or lived-in but as plastic images requiring constant maintenance and “enhancement” in the pursuit of a certain look, of a surface that is inscribed with the required rhetorics. Surface image becomes all that matters because all that matters – identity, sexuality, moral worth, intelligence, taste, economic success, health and so forth – is signified by the body and, more precisely, by the body as surface image. (139)

Although Malson’s criticism here remains focused on postmodernity rather than post-feminism, I assert that through its advancement of plastic surgery, aggressive workout regimes, and weight-loss and anti-aging products, post-feminism confirms postmodernity’s notion of the body’s “plasticity” and encourages vigorous discipline over the body’s raw material. Indeed, post-feminist media – reflected in such areas as women’s magazines, chick flicks, and beauty product advertisements – often promote the idea that women should employ their newly gained power to better themselves, “choosing” to slim down, dress up, and cut themselves open in order to adhere to female beauty standards, “because they’re worth it.”⁷ This valorization of the mind/body binary and rhetoric of “choice” within post-feminism promotes the idea that anyone can achieve perfection if she just puts her mind to it. Therefore, postmodernity’s notion of the “body-as-image” constructs and regulates embodied subjectivities such that anorexic logic resides in the

⁷ On their corporate website, the L’Oreal Paris beauty company attributes its iconic slogan, “Because you’re worth it” (1973), to the feminist revolution of the 1970s, through which, they argue, women began to find their self-confidence and power (“Because You’re Worth It”).

challenging set of contradictions with which post-feminist culture confronts women: that they must restrict (food) but also consume (products); embody the masculine (mind) but also the feminine (body); and make autonomous choices but also the “correct” choices.

Connie Musolino et al.’s article, “Disordered Eating and Choice in Postfeminist Spaces” (2015), offers a novel exploration of the continued proliferation of disordered eating amongst girls and women through the lens of post-feminism specifically. By applying Gill’s concept of post-feminist “sensibility” to interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with women with disordered eating practices in Adelaide, South Australia, their study demonstrates the pervasiveness of the rhetoric of “choice” and “empowerment” in the health and fitness industries, and how these ideals inform the self-disciplinary practices of female participants who view their disordered eating behaviours as matters of individual lifestyle, even though these practices do not actually yield any kind of liberating results (4). As this research suggests, although conceptions of the ideal female body have changed in recent years, with post-feminist icons like Jennifer Lopez, Beyoncé Knowles, and Kim Kardashian popularizing a more curvaceous body type, these subtle changes in body ideal have not resulted in meaningful changes in cultural values or the elimination of anorexia. Rather, as Bordo argues in her essay about the relationship between race and body image, “‘Not Just a ‘White Girl’s Thing’: The Changing Face of Food and Body Image Problems” (2009), the new standards are “equally self-punishing” for everyone, broadening the scope of eating problems “from starvation diets and the dream of a body as slender as a reed, to exercise addictions and the dream of a body that is curvaceous [in just the right places] but rigorously toned” (48). Like the quintessential post-feminist woman whose subjectivity relies on “achieving” a particular look, individuals with anorexia similarly work to reach a realm of transcendence above their body’s materiality, including its age, shape, and gender, in order to

gain a kind of (imagined) power. In this way, anorexia and post-feminism share many principles and values, such that as post-feminist media continues to disseminate throughout western culture, so too does the logic of anorexia.

“Reading” and “Writing” Anorexia

The notion of an anorexic “logic” allows for a re-conceptualization of anorexia, not only as a mental and physical disorder, but also as a discourse – that is, as a narrative instituted through texts and everyday social practices. The term was developed by cultural historian Leslie Heywood in *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (1996), which claims that the ideological binaries inherent in western culture, and consequently in western literature, adhere to a specific “logic of anorexia” that is appropriated by thousands of the disorder’s victims. Drawing on Bordo’s theories in *Unbearable Weight* as well as her own lived experience with anorexia, Heywood argues that anorexic subjectivity relies on Cartesian philosophy and the subsequent erasure of the subject’s body. Like the post-feminist “superwoman” who gains subjectivity by embodying aspects of ideal masculinity and femininity simultaneously,⁸ as Heywood notes, the typical woman with anorexia feels she can only be someone, “if she is not herself, if she identifies with the masculine while simultaneously maintaining the appearance of the feminine” (34). That is, in her effort to remove herself from the realm of the body through the discipline and eradication of her female flesh, the sufferer

⁸ In their book *The Illusions Of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths* (1995) Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richtel present one of the first large-scale critiques of post-feminism from a British cultural studies perspective, arguing that despite the myth of feminism’s “success” at producing equal opportunities for women in the public sphere, structural power imbalances still cause the oppression of women. In so doing, they critique the “image-makers’ construction of the ‘superwoman’” (4) in post-feminist media: an idealized figure who simultaneously embodies the masculine qualities of ambition, intelligence, and mobility while remaining feminine in appearance and nurturing in spirit.

emerges with a slender body that represents ideal femininity and masculinity simultaneously:

“Her thin body is her masculine achievement that, until her anorexic artistry goes too far, is the embodiment of cultural standards of female beauty” (30).

Heywood hence defines the terms “anorexic logic” and “anorexic aesthetic” as the set of assumptions that informs the anorexic sufferer, and the symbolic system that underlies and guides her eating disorder, respectively. Both terms rely on a set of binaries rooted in mind/body dualism that privilege mind over body, masculine over feminine, restriction over satiation, control over emotion, and transcendence over the quotidian. Heywood’s work demonstrates how anorexia can function as a metaphorical system within texts that are not literally about anorexia, but that ideologically and symbolically champion the values of anorexic logic. Her concept can be mobilized, then, not in an attempt to explain the rationale behind eating disordered behaviour – which has been the focus of many empirical studies such as the aforementioned by Malson, Warin, and Darmon – but rather to determine how the same rationale experienced and articulated by individuals with anorexia pervades various cultural texts. Heywood begins this endeavour in *Dedication to Hunger* by arguing that the anorexic aesthetic became a “textual ideal” (60) during the modernist period as authors like T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, and Ezra Pound rejected elements of the body in order to “institute the primacy of spirit” (71) in their works. The modernist literary movement, she asserts, centred on a desire to “trim the fat” from “bodies, textual and otherwise” (89), causing the modernist artist to serve as “a paradigm” for the quintessential anorexic sufferer, “who wants beyond all things to be different, to stand out as superior” (61).

Even before Heywood’s articulation of a defined textual framework for anorexic logic, anorexia had been an expanding topic in the realm of literary criticism since the early 1990s. In her book, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (1993), literary critic Maud

Ellmann explores what she terms the “phenomenology of self-starvation” in the literatures of Lord Byron, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Richardson, amongst others, to highlight connections between writing, starving, and incarceration in their texts. Conceiving of food as “the thesaurus of all moods and all sensations” (112), Ellmann argues that writing and self-starvation are two modes of signification that must transcend the flesh in order to make their meanings known. For example, in her comparison of Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) and the Irish hunger strike of 1981, in which 10 inmates died in an attempt to affirm their status as prisoners of war, Ellmann asserts that, for both *Clarissa* and the hunger strikers, self-starvation functions as a mode of self-authoring, wherein “the starving body is itself a text, the living dossier of its discontents” (17). Ellmann also compares contemporary diet culture to biblical portrayals of fasting, noting that women’s “sacred” devouring of “slimming books instead of food” (22) and dedication to writing down everything they eat (often at the advice of clinicians) function as modern-day secular forms of the Eucharist and confession (23).

Drawing on Ellmann’s connections between writing and starving, comparative literature scholar Isabelle Meuret examines textual representations of anorexia in her book *Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures* (2007). As Meuret writes, literary representations of eating disorders are vital areas of study, for “[a] literary text is not just literary. It is a social and political vehicle in that it works on language and interacts with the context in which it emerges” (47). Unlike Ellmann, who focuses on the motifs of self-starvation and fasting more so than anorexia itself, Meuret’s corpus of analysis is comprised of “experiential texts” (14): primary sources written by anorexic authors themselves, usually, though not always, as first-person memoirs. She posits anorexia as a “writing disorder,” and the unique process of writing about anorexia through the lens of lived experience as “writing size zero,” which she

describes as “the linguistic challenge of turning starvation into creation, of giving expression to what left a devastating impression on the body” (13). By classifying these experiential texts into distinct sub-groups, Meuret demonstrates the various ways in which the process of “writing size zero” can provide unique modes of expressing lived experience of anorexia and recovery.

Ellmann’s and Meuret’s respective works are just two examples of the arena of literary criticism examining anorexia specifically, and the motif of self-starvation more generally, in texts written by and for adults, most of which focus on either canonical fiction from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or non-fiction anorexia memoirs. Less has been published on self-starvation in texts for children and young adults. Literary and Victorian studies scholar Anna Krugovoy Silver provides one such example in her book *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002): although primarily concerned with the Victorian literary canon and its reflection of the period’s anorexic gender paradigm – which defined the ideal woman as “spiritual, non-sexual, [and] self-disciplined” (3) in accordance with anorexic values – the book’s chapter on children’s literature is a rare application of the concept of “anorexic logic” (Silver applies Heywood’s concept specifically) to literature for youth. Here, Silver argues that popular children’s stories from the Victorian era, such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), are heavily infused with anorexic values, thereby demonstrating how anorexia can become a “symbolic system” (71) in texts for children and youth that are not directly about eating disorders. Carolyn Daniel’s book *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* (2006) also examines the role of food in children’s literature, although only one of her chapters, “Disorderly Eating,” features the topic of anorexia, and this analysis is limited to realist YA anorexia stories from the 1980s that are about the disorder specifically. Nonetheless, Daniel’s work sheds light on some of the problematic philosophies centring on food

and consumption that proliferate through children's literature, as she argues that food, both literal and figurative, is frequently used to prescribe cultural and social values in texts for youth. Daniel uses the example of feasting fantasies in children's stories to show how food-related imagery serves to warn young readers against selfish or gluttonous behaviour, and to teach lessons about citizenship and social norms. She also claims that these texts regulate children's eating practices by only awarding subjectivity and agency to characters with "normal" appetites.

In her essay, "How to Be Yourself: Ideological Interpellation, Weight Control, and YA Novels" (2014), children's literature scholar Dorothy Karlin adds the layer of ideology to her analysis engaging with two realist YA novels about weight problems from the early 2000s. Employing Louis Althusser's theories of ideology, Karlin asserts that through interpellation – the process by which ideology influences an individual's personal identity formation – realist YA fiction centred on issues of weight and the body, particularly those with young female protagonists, affirm dominant ideologies that equate thinness with moral superiority: "Ideological interpellation has a strong corporeal element, and with its ideological thrust, YA literature works to regulate how adolescents shape and then inhabit their bodies" (73). Even novels that seem to celebrate body "diversity," she argues, "further the same ideological *process* they ostensibly criticize, working only to author an alternative template for its expression" (72 original emphasis). YA novels that do feature overweight characters usually see these protagonists lose weight (or begin to) by the end of the text, Karlin asserts, with these characters gaining friends and self-actualizing through the weight loss process. As Karlin's and Daniel's respective works show, YA and children's literatures featuring stories of food, consumption, and the body frequently encourage specific disciplinary and consumptive behaviours for young people.

Deeper, and more current investigations into how anorexic values intersect with popular, contemporary literatures – in ways that move beyond the obvious and didactic realm of anorexia stories – are now required. Attending to the arena of YA fiction is vital in this endeavor as literatures for young people, Karlin notes, can be just as effective as magazines and other media at encouraging girls to self-restrict or modify their bodies (73). Why, then, has the realm of twenty-first century YA fiction – ever growing in popularity and a site of widespread commercialization – been largely ignored by critical feminist and literary scholars of eating disorders? While estimates vary, most studies place the mean age of onset for anorexia in late adolescence (Parliament of Canada 8). It is also true that females are far more likely – up to four times – than males to develop an eating disorder (9). Thus, popular literatures targeting girls and young women are among the most important objects of study for critical feminist scholars of eating disorders. It is here that this project seeks to make a unique contribution to the existing scholarship.

Young Adult Fiction and the New Heroine

To understand how anorexic ideologies circulate through literatures for girls and young women requires an understanding of how the genre has been mobilized in popular culture in recent years. The birth of YA fiction is often attributed to the publication of Hinton's 1967 novel, *The Outsiders*, whose male-centred narrative is emblematic of the genre's gendered past, as historically, books for teens have been categorized according to the gender of their target

audience.⁹ In the quintessential YA novel – defined here as a Bildungsroman targeting readers between ages 12-18 (American Library Association) – teen protagonists struggle to answer fundamental questions of youth and identity. The YA narrative also centres on issues of subjectivity and power, as adolescent characters learn to understand their own power as well as that of the various institutions within their society. Over the past 15 years or so, YA fiction has reached an all-time peak in popularity, with sales jumping almost 150% between 2006-2012, and 25% more YA books being published in 2017 than they were in the 1990s (Clasen and Hassel 1). This rapid growth in the market has caused a total restructuring of the ways in which literature is consumed, critiqued, and classified. For instance, in 2000, the *New York Times* Bestseller list introduced a Children's Bestseller list – with even further classification systems within that category – in order to organize and promote the onslaught of books being published for young people.

Even non-literary media giants like MTV have begun capitalizing on this relatively new and extremely profitable market, funding the production of multimedia book and television franchises aimed at adolescent audiences. Reading habits have been altered through these popular media convergences; as the lines between discrete media formats become less important, teen readers increasingly consume and participate in transmedia forms of their favourite

⁹ In *Reading Children's Literature: A Critical Introduction* (2013), authors Carrie Hintz and Eric Tribunella investigate the children's literature genre's gendered past. The chapter "Domesticity and Adventure" explores examples of the historical sub-genres of "domestic fiction" for girls and "adventure fiction" for boys, as well as their socializing functions.

narratives.¹⁰ In the post-Harry Potter era, the schemas informing the operations of mass media influence YA fiction like never before. As children's literature scholar Elizabeth Bullen explores in her article, "Inside Story: Product Placement and Adolescent Consumer Identity in Young Adult Fiction" (2009), with increased emphases on cross-marketing and even product placement within literature, brands, acting as signifiers of both class and affiliation, often intersect with narration to play a socializing function and promote specific consumer behaviours amongst young readers. The YA novel, then, has become an important object of study, not only in literary disciplines, but in cultural studies as well; as children's literature scholars Tricia Clasen and Holly Hassel argue throughout their book, *Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of Gender in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2017), the material and ideological significance of this burgeoning realm and its impact on the gendered identities of young people "cannot be understated" (1).

Specifically, YA fiction for girls has made a major impact in this new media landscape. When YA fiction sales increased almost 87% to \$444.4 million between 1995 and 2004 (Bullen et al. 506), book series for young women comprised a significant proportion of the market. While, as noted above, the proliferation of post-feminist values in contemporary media for women has been well documented, researchers are now beginning to explore similar phenomena

¹⁰ In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) fan studies pioneer Henry Jenkins coins the term "convergence culture" to define the twenty-first century's new age of media convergence wherein old (e.g. literary) and new (e.g. virtual) forms of media intersect. Jenkins argues that these intersections also play out in the creative and cultural industries through the convergence of grassroots and mainstream media, and increasingly blurred boundaries between creator and consumer. See also Miranda Campbell's book *Out of the Basement: Youth Cultural Production in Practice and Policy* (2013), which interrogates the new entry points into the creative industries that have opened for youth, often as a result of media convergences, and policy's response to these small-scale creative labourers. Campbell critiques neoliberalism's effect on youth cultures, arguing that the creative industries need support in order to redefine youth creative labour.

within media aimed at girls. For decades, girl studies scholars have explored the many ways in which girlhood is loaded with anxieties about subjectivity, autonomy, and appearance, which have taken on new significance since the turn of the millennium. As girl studies scholar Leah Phillips writes in her article, “Real Women Aren’t Shiny (or Plastic): The Adolescent Female Body in YA Fantasy” (2015), for the twenty-first century girl, “the body is the self,” as the “neoliberal narrative of choice,” funnelled through post-feminist media, encourages her to modify her body “to be whomever she wishes” (40). Popular media texts equate the girl’s selfhood with her growing and developing body’s outer surface, framing the body both as her primary obstacle and her primary source of power. Moreover, the postmodern fixation on the body-as-image has given rise to what Phillips describes as a “representational economy” within girlhood: a system that equates the self with the body while simultaneously rejecting bodily difference (41). Thus, a primary focus of girl studies work concerns the ways in which problematic ideologies related to the body are produced and reproduced in mainstream media for girls.¹¹

¹¹ With girl studies’ emergence as a new academic field in the 1990s – a sub-field of women’s studies at the time – came a new realm of scholarly criticism examining the world of mass media aimed at girls. Some of this work takes a historical approach, such as Susan Douglas’ book *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (1995), and Ilana Nash’s subsequent publication, *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture* (2006). Both of these works analyze historical portrayals of girls in the mass media with examples ranging from the 1930s to 1990s, and how these representations intersect with the dominant values of their time, many of which worked to subjugate and objectify female bodies. Dawn Currie’s book, *Girl Talk: Magazines and their Readers* (1999), exemplifies the field’s contribution to amplifying voices from the margins; in her study, Currie takes the novel approach of interviewing real girls about the messages they encode from teen magazines, finding that girls use texts and images to construct their social selves in relation to their own social contexts. Anita Harris’ book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004) examines mediated representations of girlhood at the turn of the millennium, arguing that the new obsession with reproducing “authentic” girls’ voices and images in popular media is more about surveillance and control than it is about female empowerment.

One of the most-explored genres in this area of research is teen romance fiction, also known as teen “chick lit,” which is often published in book series. In these texts, exemplified by such series as Ann Brashares’ *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* (2001-2011), Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl* (2002-2009), and Meg Cabot’s *The Princess Diaries* (2000-2009) – all of which have had wildly successful on-screen adaptations – the young reader is able to develop a strong relationship with the protagonist over the course of several books. As a result, girls’ series generally, but particularly those from the teen chick lit genre, encourage readers to conform to dominant discourses and standards, while simultaneously providing the illusion that they are “in” on the winning side of the sympathetic and desirable protagonist. In their article, “Doing What Your Big Sister Does: Sex, Postfeminism and the YA Chick Lit Series” (2011), Elizabeth Bullen et al. describe teen chick lit as an “artefact of the mass-mediated culture” (502) with “postfeminist sexual rationality” (503). These texts function as enculturation devices for consumer capitalist and post-feminist stakeholders, they argue, as protagonists exemplify qualities of the ideal post-feminist subject through the consumption of consumer products, personal lifestyle choices, and modes of heterosexual expression (505). While literary critics like Joanna Webb Johnson have lauded teen chick lit’s ability to offer “helpful messages concerning coming of age” (146), and praised the genre’s potential as an “educational tool” that “uses entertaining scenarios to create an aware reader” (148), as Bullen et al. assert, this view ignores the cultural context of post-feminism that permeates the texts under discussion, and instead posits an “uncritical espousal” (505) of teen chick lit as a device for girls’ literacy and socialization.

The recent boom of American YA speculative fiction franchises starring teenaged female action heroes proves that teen chick lit is not the only literary genre being consumed by masses

of girls and young women, nor is it the only genre for youth situated in the corpus of post-feminist media. Growing distaste for explicitly sexist gender norms as a result of the mainstreaming of feminist rhetoric has led to an explosion of girl heroines in typically male-dominated literary genres, the most successful of which have been adapted into blockbuster multimedia franchises featuring action heroine protagonists. Rather than following previous scripts that fetishized the heroine as a hypersexualized male proxy, these texts present teen heroines who assert their independence to activate social change. This popular new figure has origins in what Cristina Lucia Stasia terms “the new public/private female action hero” in her 2004 article of the same title. According to Stasia, the new public/private heroine – who emerged in the late 1990s and is epitomized in films such as *Double Jeopardy* (1999), *Charlie’s Angels* (2000), and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) – serves as an “attitudinal feminist hero”: someone who employs the rhetoric of feminism and “kicks ass” (181), but fails to recognize or act on systemic injustices. In this way, she argues, the public/private heroine comprises a new genre unto its own that both reflects and reifies third wave feminist discourses.

It is against this backdrop of kick-ass, third wave action heroines that the younger, scrappier figure of the new teen action heroine emerged in the mid-2000s. Mainstream news sources began extolling the “rise of female action heroes” in YA fiction franchises around 2012 –¹² the same year the first *Hunger Games* film was released, riding on the coattails of the hugely

¹² Joe Satran’s article in the *Huffington Post*, “Brave, Prometheus, and the Rise of Female Action Heroes” (2012) argues a new female action hero is on the rise in popular cinema, citing *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) films as examples. Reversing previous action heroine scripts, Satran argues, these heroines are “killers first and knockouts second” (para. 9). Similarly, Scott Meslow’s article in the *Atlantic*, “The Rise of the Female-Led Action Film” (2012), points to the *Twilight* (2008-2012) and *Underworld* (2003-2012) film franchises as examples of a new era of big-budget action films starring women that encourage male audiences to actually identify with the female protagonist rather than merely gaze upon her.

successful *Twilight* franchise – and in 2014, *Time* magazine notably declared our entry into “The New Age of Heroines,” which authors Lily Rothman and Emily Zemler distinguished through the decade’s fervor for “plucky young women who outwit, and sometimes outmuscle, totalitarian regimes” (52). This position that we have entered into a *new* realm of teen heroines is affirmed in recent media studies scholarship. In her book, *The New Heroines: Female Embodiment and Technology in 21st-Century Popular Culture* (2016), Katheryn Wright defines the “New Heroine” as a seemingly average teenaged girl who, under the surface, possesses a unique talent or skill that positions her outside the norm in the narrative world (3). The New Heroine is also self-sacrificial and brave (4), and in a constant state of flux throughout her journey; that is, she expresses a “not done baking” (3) form of subjectivity that is cultivated through her engagement in various communities and systems over the course of her story. As Wright argues, “[w]ho the New Heroine becomes emerges through the complex interplay between the potential she embodies as a character trait and the networks she enters into as part of her journey” (3). The New Heroine also possesses a very specific body type. Rather than embodying the curvaceous, hypersexualized form of action heroines past (e.g. Lara Croft, played by Angelina Jolie in the original *Tomb Raider* films), the New Heroine is “thin and without curves” (125). Although Wright attributes this somatic presentation to the heroine’s expression of gender fluidity and youth, as is explored in subsequent chapters, these qualities have troublesome implications when examined through the lens of anorexia.

Just prior to the publication of Wright’s book, Jeffrey A. Brown, an important voice in media studies on the action heroine today, released *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (2015), in which he presents his own argument for the conceptualization of a new action heroine in popular culture. While many of the qualities Brown attributes to the New

Heroine are in accordance with Wright – such as her individuality, rule-breaking, and subversion of the male gaze – Brown attributes these qualities to the burgeoning of post-feminist media culture explicitly. He argues that despite their defiance of certain gender stereotypes, New Heroine narratives for youth still perpetuate the post-feminist myth that finding a heterosexual partner should be every girl’s ultimate goal, no matter how “powerful” she may be independently (193). These action-packed YA narratives, Brown asserts, continue to perpetuate many of the same notions of ideal femininity found in mainstream post-feminist media for women. However, Brown distinguishes the “new” heroine from earlier versions through her position as being “closely aligned with cultural conceptions of ideal masculinity” (5). That is, rather than functioning as a hypersexualized and fetishized proxy for male power as she often was in the 1980s and 1990s,¹³ the contemporary heroine actually possesses such power; although she may be sexual, her power does not rely on her sexuality. Brown celebrates the contemporary teen heroine’s gender politics by proclaiming that many of these characters “are a type of feminist wolf in postfeminist clothing,” who are in fact “feminists through and through” (196).

¹³ In *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (1993), one of the first scholarly accounts to take the action film genre seriously, Yvonne Tasker argues that action films are not “*simple and obvious*” (166 original emphasis) as previous critics have assumed, but rather complex reflections of the shifting gendered, sexual and racial politics of the 1980s requiring scholarly attention. Her chapter “Women Warriors” posits the contemporary action heroine as a response to feminism, who is made safe through her heterosexual desire and glamorous exterior. Sherrie Innes’ subsequent publication *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1998) argues that even some of the strongest depictions of female “strength” from the 1960s-1990s are complicated by their simultaneous affirmation and subversion of gender stereotypes. Rikke Schubart presents a similar argument in her book *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (2007), asserting that despite the action heroine’s reversal of traditional gender roles, she is also typically constructed as an anomaly: i.e., the only female on the team, who is prettier, smarter, and sexier than everyone else. In this way, Schubart argues, the action heroine is a fantasy about women functioning “outside [their] natural place” (6), and reflects the contemporary “age of ambivalence” (7) between feminist and post-feminist values.

The teen action heroines that are examined throughout this dissertation – Bella Swan of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005-2008), Katniss Everdeen of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), and Beatrice “Tris” Prior of Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series (2011-2013) – all epitomize the New Heroine frameworks articulated by both Wright and Brown respectively. Brown references all three of these franchises in his research, while Wright only includes *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* trilogies in her corpus. However, I argue that all three of the series under discussion fit Wright’s criteria – including the *Twilight* series, despite its more melodramatic tones – for the following reasons. The protagonist of each franchise expresses an emergent subjectivity over the course of her narrative arc, consistently reminding the reader of her general uncertainty and lack of self-assurance, while engaging in various networks to support her transition from adolescence into adulthood: for example, Bella progresses from high school student to wife and mother by infiltrating the vampire realm; Katniss transitions from dependent of the state to independent leader by connecting local communities and building meaningful relationships; and Tris grows from meek follower of the law to courageous fighter in the rebellion by engaging her own community of peers. Their special skills also distinguish each of these heroines from those around them: Bella’s innate ability to block vampires’ psychic powers is what first attracts her vampire love interest Edward Cullen; Katniss’ charisma and special hunting skills augment her rise to leadership; and in a world divided into virtue-based factions, Tris’ unique status as “divergent” allows her to exhibit multiple virtues at once. A markedly thin body and drive toward self-sacrifice are also defining traits of each of these characters, as all three submit themselves to death at various points in their stories – a problematic pattern that will be explored in-depth in subsequent chapters.

All three of the narratives under discussion also accord with Brown’s vision of the New

Heroine framework. Each series places a post-feminist emphasis on heterosexual romance, as the heroine's relationship with her male partner lies at the heart of her narrative journey. The series also espouse a distinct rhetoric of individual choice: Bella consistently asserts her right to "choose" Edward, despite the dangers he and the vampire world impose on her in the *Twilight* books; Katniss fights throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy for the right to choose her own destiny; and the catalyst of Tris' journey in the *Divergent* novels is her choice to forego her former faction's value of communal altruism in favor of her new faction's emphasis on individualism. Each heroine also explicitly rejects elements of stereotypical femininity in her characterization, seeking to transcend her feminine embodiment to reach the masculine realm of power – a complex phenomenon that will also be explored in the forthcoming chapters.

Although both Wright's and Brown's respective theories of the New Heroine usefully situate her character within the contexts of feminism and post-feminism, the dominant conception of what makes a character progressive, or in Brown's words, "feminist," requires further digging. In many ways, contemporary heroines Bella, Katniss, and Tris do extol certain virtues of feminist thought: they often express disinterest in material beauty culture, resist the male gaze, show qualities of leadership by standing up for themselves and their loved ones, and emphasize the importance of making their own autonomous choices. These are all admirable characteristics of the New Heroine that oppose common conceptions of young women as vapid slaves to consumer culture, as often portrayed in the teen chick lit genre. However, the ways in which these seemingly progressive qualities manifest must be attended to. For example, despite the increase in female-centered YA fiction within typically male-dominated genres, the most popular of these stories continue to feature almost exclusively white, heteronormative heroines, whose resistance against dominant societal powers usually fails to address intersectional issues

of race, ability, or sexuality (themes related to class and geopolitics are more often explored due to genre conventions). Moreover, as both Wright and Brown acknowledge, these texts often perpetuate dominant ideals of femininity related to beauty and the body. My research thus employs a corporeal feminist approach to uncover the New Heroine's significance as a cultural icon at the intersection of gendered representation and embodiment.

Over the course of this dissertation, I argue that no figure is more emblematic of the convergence of anorexic and post-feminist values than the New Heroine, whose representation of female "strength" reflects and reifies an anorexic value system that mutually constitutes conceptions of starvation and justice, and informs the social construction of ideal femininity in the twenty-first century cultural context. For instance, while Brown applauds the trend in teen action heroine mythology to replace the post-feminist beautifying makeover trope with a transformation in which the protagonist is "made over" into her position as heroine through gruelling mental and physical training (187), I argue that this substitution – which as will be shown, features prominently in all three of the franchises under discussion – valorizes exactly the kind of mental and physical self-discipline that informs anorexia. Anorexic rationality also underlies the many of the acts of "bravery" girl heroines perform, which are typically masochistic acts of bodily self-sacrifice, as well as the heroine's resistance to hypersexualization, which in some cases manifests as an outright rejection of sexuality. Hence, this dissertation asks the questions: what if the qualities that constitute the "empowered" girl figure are not actually liberating for all? What if the seemingly progressive and gender-bending characteristics of the contemporary heroine – independence, personal control, mental strength, and masculine subjectivity – manifested in certain post-feminist contexts, serve at the altar of anorexic ideology? As Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will elucidate, New Heroine mythology rigidly enforces the

protection of boundaries, both literal (e.g. through armouring and shaping the body's surface) and figurative (e.g. through enforcing boundaries between right and wrong). In short, I argue that these narratives centering on the heroine's quest for virtue within a system of ideological binaries mirror the "anorexic dogged pursuit of absolutes" (Saukko 71) that informs the anorexic paradigm.

Female Fandoms and Fan Fiction

Despite this dissemination of a dualistic and potentially dangerous value system amongst a largely young, female readership, as Chapter 5 explores in its investigation of New Heroine fan fiction, young female readers of these series are not passive victims of ideology. In 1970, at a time when formalism was the in-vogue approach within literary criticism, Hans Robert Jauss conceptualized a new reader response theory within literary criticism, asserting readerly reception and impact as being crucial to a text's aesthetic value and social functionality. In "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" (1970), Jauss uses the image of the triangle to symbolize the three equal components of literature – the author, the work, and the reading public – arguing that "the latter is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but even history-making energy" (8). Aware of the pitfalls of psychologizing readers, Jauss argues that by focusing on the impact of a text within a defined frame of reference, literary analysts can determine the "horizon of expectation," that is, how readers come to understand and decode the texts they read using the conventions and norms of their particular time and space. By analyzing texts in this way, Jauss asserts, "the passive reception of the reader and critic changes into the active reception and new production of the author, or in which – stated differently – a subsequent work solves formal and moral problems that the last work raised and may then itself present new

problems” (23-24). Similar to Stuart Hall’s and Richard Johnson’s theories of cultural production and the active audience elucidated in this dissertation’s Introduction, Jauss’ reader response theory emphasizes the productive power of the reader, whose reception of a particular text works to inform future outputs. In the twenty-first century context, Jauss’ thesis can be found at play within various fan cultures, whose creative, subversive, and sometimes emancipatory productions function as responses to mainstream textual productions.

The discipline of fan studies proper can be traced to the publication of Henry Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), which rejects perceptions of fans as mindless, obsessive, and anti-social consumers, instead showing how fan productions function in political and dialogical ways that speak back to the original (i.e. “canon”) text. Jenkins argues that fan activity is often a response to fans’ felt sense of powerlessness over the institutions that produce and circulate their favourite media. While fan creations come in a variety of formats, including visual art, blogs, social media profiles, and tribute bands, the focus of this research is on fan fiction in particular, for which Jenkins provides the first comprehensive definition. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins notes that fan fiction stories (i.e. “fanfics”) are usually, though not always, published online, using the characters, settings, and/or plot lines of a canon text to generate an original narrative. He categorizes the top-ten approaches of (re)interpretation employed by fan fiction writers in their stories as follows:

1. **Recontextualization** – providing missing scenes that fill in gaps of the canon text concerning plot and/or character motivation (162);
2. **Expanding the Series Timeline** – providing hints about characters’ backgrounds not fully explored within the canon text (163);
3. **Refocalization** – shifting the story’s focus from primary to secondary characters

(165);

4. Moral Realignment – altering the moral universe of the text, usually so that the positions of villain and protagonist are reversed (168);
5. Genre Shifting – re-writing the series through the lens of alternative genre conventions (169);
6. Cross Overs – blurring the boundaries between various texts (sometimes by different authors) and fictional universes (170);
7. Character Dislocation – giving characters alternative names, identities, and contexts in which to live (this method typically takes the fanfic furthest from the canon) (171);
8. Personalization – inserting the author’s own experiences/personality into the story, often through a “Mary Sue” character who represents the idealized self (171);
9. Emotional Intensification – emphasizing moments of narrative crisis within the canon text (174);
10. Eroticization – exploring the erotic dimensions of canon characters (175).

Through these various methods, authors produce fanfics that may be further categorized into particular subgenres, the most popular of which include “Angst” (stories with a foreboding tone, mood, and/or characters); “Alternate Universe” (stories set in a different fictional realm than the canon); “Fluff” (stories that are comical and/or romantic); “Hurt/Comfort” (stories in which a character is hurt, only to be comforted by another character); and “Smut” (stories that are sexually explicit). These subgenres, which developed organically over time in online fan communities, continue to be employed today in fan fiction forums to categorize texts.

Fan studies also has roots in the academic turn toward youth cultures that began in the 1970s with Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson’s seminal work on British working-class youth

cultures, *Resistance through Rituals* (1976). The 1970s marked a shift in cultural studies from focusing on texts to studying audiences, and from focusing almost exclusively on high culture to studying popular/low culture as well. Youth cultures – which prior to the technological revolution were primarily situated in either localized sites of resistance, or within translocal style affiliations and print cultures – are the primary focus of Hall and Jefferson’s research, which argues that youth groups develop “distinctive activities” (7), “specific rhythms of interchange” (35), and “a perspective on the immediate future” (35), while exploring “focal concerns” (7) of the cohesive group.¹⁴ Although the academic field of youth cultures was later criticized by feminist theorists, notably McRobbie in her essay “Settling Accounts with Subculture: A Feminist Critique” (1991), for assuming a masculine subject position and ignoring female participants in their work, Hall and Jefferson’s conception of youth cultures as socio-cultural responses to mainstream culture, rather than products of innate deviance or psychology, provided a critical lens through which critics continue to view various youth cultures – including girl and fan cultures – today.

One of the first major girl cultures to gain the attention of academics was Riot Grrrl, which challenged dominant (patriarchal) culture by combining the aesthetics of rage and girliness in girl-made media to resist consumer-capitalist ideology. In the 1990s and early 2000s,

¹⁴ In their book, *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (2004), Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris track the development of “subculture” as a central concept in cultural studies research, problematizing the currency of the concept in a twenty-first century context. While Hall, Jefferson, and subsequent followers of The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) conceptualized subcultures as sites of creative resistance against hegemony, beginning in the 1990s, theorists taking postmodern critical approaches such as Steve Redhead (1990), David Muggleton (1997), and Andy Bennett (1999) began to argue against conceptualizing subcultures as “given” entities, arguing that increasing cultural fragmentation renders the very idea of “subculture” problematic.

Riot Grrrls employed their DIY creations to promote their own political agenda, using self-made texts as tools of resistance during adolescence – a time of declining self-confidence and increasing body-consciousness (Haenfler 116) – in their own lives. Riot Grrrl is significant within the context of New Heroine fandoms as the movement was instrumental in promoting amateur female authorship and allowing girls to self-produce in a space separate from mainstream commercial youth culture: an achievement that continues to influence girl-led fan communities today. In accordance with Hall and Jefferson's view of subculture as being anti-consumerist, girlhood scholar Mary Celeste Kearney in *Girls Make Media* (2006) describes Riot Grrrl as a "rebellion," not only against girls' oppression and negation in mainstream society, but also their "complicated economic position as one of the primary target groups for the fashion, beauty, and culture industries" (68).

Of all the media texts to come from the Riot Grrrl movement, zines were particularly influential in girls' identity formation, as they allowed young female authors to "explore unruly identities that they may not be able to perform publicly in their everyday lives" (Kearney 187). Although zines can now be found in digital formats, as feminist literary scholar Janice Radway notes in her article, "Zines, Half-Lives, and Afterlives" (2011), the genre was initially popularized through handmade, paper-based texts, which were circulated in special-interest youth groups (including but not limited to Riot Grrrl), straddling the line between the personal and the communal; that is, although zines are often deeply personal in their subject matter, they are also collaborative efforts that often incorporate multiple voices in addition to the author's. In this way, girl-made zines produce what Radway calls "intersubjects," defined as "girls constituted in relation to and therefore always together with others," and foster "intersubjectivity," the phenomenon through which girl writers gain agency through

communication and coalition-building with other female subjects (148). Accordingly, at the height of their popularity, zines rendered female youth audible as well as visible, enabling girls' development as "subjects in their own right, as writers worthy of attention rather than as targets of surveillance, policing, and silencing by others" (145) – an achievement that continues to impact young female writers in today.

The creative and emancipatory potentialities of the Riot Grrrl and zine communities helped create the conditions for the expansion of other "intersubjective" girl cultures online – namely, fan fiction communities – with the proliferation of Web 2.0 technologies. Emerging at the turn of the millennium, Web 2.0 sparked a new wave of scholarly discourse surrounding the social construction of identity amongst young people. Characterized by its focus on sociality and the visual rather than merely the textual, Web 2.0 is comprised of online activities like social networking – a core aspect of fan fiction websites – which allow users to construct their identities through a process of curation. Explored by cultural studies researcher Vincent Miller in his book, *Understanding Digital Culture* (2011), Web 2.0 functions have come to be seen as methods of augmenting the offline self, rather than constructing an entirely new identity, as was assumed to be the case with Web 1.0 (161). As a result, social networking sites have become vital to identity construction within the online/offline continuum. Social theorist and digital media scholar Rob Cover argues in his essay, "Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking" (2014), that participation on social media is the twenty-first century's in-vogue mode of identity performance (in Judith Butler's sense of the word) because it is both ongoing and reflexive: "I recognize my relationship status by choosing from the drop-down menu. But simultaneously I re-cognize that status, re-think the self, re-constitute my status and its related identity facets in the act of making that apparent

choice” (64). Thus, web platforms with social networking capabilities such as fan fiction sites not only help users perform identity, they also help them *constitute* identity. This process of online identity construction is especially significant for young people, whose identities are in a heightened state of growth and flux; as such, youth participation in virtual spaces has been studied carefully by scholars of digital, youth, and girl cultures since the new millennium.¹⁵

Girl-made fan texts are increasingly produced in online spaces, as younger fans who were previously excluded from many offline fan cultures are now able to enter these spaces thanks to new Web 2.0 technologies (Hellekson and Busse 13). My research explores the growing body of fan fiction about anorexia that is largely written by girls and young women – a trend with thousands of publications in online fan communities –¹⁶ and its complex and contradictory implications. Encouraging interaction between authors and readers through its online dialogical and social media functions, online fan fiction often fosters conversations about difficult topics related to gender and culture – in this case, anorexia – amongst its young female users. As I argue, on the positive side, this dialogue subverts post-feminism’s emphasis on masculine individualism and consumer-capitalist success; fan fiction forums empower female authors

¹⁵ For examples, see Sharon Mazarella’s collection of essays, *Girl Wide Web: Girls, the Internet, and the Negotiation of Identity* (2005), which offers analyses of how young women construct themselves online, portraying girls as tech-savvy producers of the internet despite the common rhetoric surrounding a gender gap in this area; Susan Driver’s book *Queer Youth Cultures* (2008), which works to subvert the status of “passive victim” often attached to queer youth, and instead frame this demographic as one of active producers of (digital) media; S. Craig Watkins’ *The Young and the Digital* (2009), which presents a social scientific study of young people’s relationships with social and mobile media, rejecting the blanket notion that technology has made teens antisocial, and instead arguing that sociality has been reconstructed; Rob Cover’s “Becoming and Belonging: Performativity, Subjectivity, and the Cultural Purposes of Social Networking” (2014), which frames social networking as ongoing reflexive performances of the self.

¹⁶ At the time of writing, a general search for the terms “anorexia” and “anorexic” on the top two leading fan fiction websites, FanFiction.Net and Archive of Our Own, produced 3,629 results, comprised of stories with either one or both of those terms in their title or description.

through their democratic and often anonymous community and coalition building functions. However, in accordance with Jenkins' assertion that fan culture is never consistent or coherent, but rather "a patchwork culture" (290), in fan-written texts featuring anorexic protagonists, conflicting themes emerge. Marshalling evidence from the fields of fan studies, girl studies, and youth cultures, the closing arguments of this dissertation demonstrate how through the participatory medium of fan fiction, young female authors gain agency in making explicit the implicit anorexic logic that is central to both New Heroine fiction, and contemporary Western culture as a whole; but, as each author negotiates her conflicting position as critic and subject of post-feminist culture, her narrative epitomizes the complex and contradictory nature of anorexia itself.

In developing a theory of anorexic logic in YA speculative fiction for girls through the vehicle of several popular YA franchises, the following chapters unpack the conflicting, gendered positions that emerge from these contemporary media texts, and that girls themselves negotiate through their consumption and online adaptations of these narratives. This work thus offers new avenues of interdisciplinary study for researchers from various backgrounds interested in exploring correlations between eating disorders, fandoms, and post-feminist media culture. Interdisciplinarity is necessary for eating disorders research to move beyond its historically rigid disciplinary boundaries, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter. As diverse illnesses influenced by a combination of cultural, physiological, and psychological factors, eating disorders require a multi-perspective approach in order to capture their complex manifestation and proliferation in contemporary culture. This research thus forges new pathways between theories of girlhood, food and the body, and discourse to offer a theoretical framework for reading the cultural construction of female heroism, along with its social/cultural implications

for young people, through the lens of anorexia, placing the corporeal matrix of gender, consumption, and embodiment at the centre of analysis.

CHAPTER 2

Good Vampires Don't Eat: Anorexic Transformation and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* Phenomenon

You shouldn't be able to do any of this. You shouldn't be so...so rational. You shouldn't be able to stand here discussing this with me calmly and coolly. And, much more than any of that, you should *not* have been able to break off mid-hunt with the scent of human blood in the air.

– Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 420

Near the end of *Breaking Dawn* (2008), the concluding novel of Stephenie Meyer's four-part *Twilight* series, hunky vampire Edward Cullen makes the above statement: a climax to series protagonist Bella Swan's transformation from average teenaged girl into perfect vampire immortal. While hunting in the woods – mere moments after Bella awakens from the painful coma that converts her into a vampire – the pair encounters a group of hikers, whose human blood triggers Bella's insatiable vampire thirst. In this moment, against seemingly insurmountable odds, Bella uses sheer willpower to restrain her wild “newborn” vampire hunger, her mind heroically overcoming her body's darkest desires. This moment catalyzes a series of events in Meyer's final text that test Bella's ability to self-restrict – a challenge from which the heroine emerges as victor, marking her place as a master food restrictor in the narrative universe.

Bella does not begin her journey in the *Twilight* novels possessing this level of willpower and self-restraint, however; in fact, the heroine does not possess any special powers at the start of her character arc – at least none that she is aware of at the time. Bella's story begins in *Twilight* (2005), the first book of Meyer's series, when she moves from Arizona to Washington State to live with her farther, Charlie Swan, and begin Junior year at a new high school. It is there that she meets the Cullen family: a group of impossibly beautiful and wealthy students, whose

porcelain skin, stoic demeanor, and “untouched food” (18) immediately capture Bella’s attention. Bella soon learns that the five Cullen “siblings” – Rosalie, Emmett, Jasper, Alice and Edward, Bella’s love interest – are not biologically related, but rather the foster children of Carlisle and Esme Cullen: a cover, we soon discover, that the group of vampires uses to explain to mortals the proximity of their ages (which never change) and inter-family romances. Over the course of Meyer’s subsequent novels, *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), Bella and Edward’s interspecies relationship blossoms despite a love triangle with neighbourhood werewolf Jacob Black, and a plethora of life-threatening experiences that Bella encounters as a result of her proximity to Edward. Nonetheless, Bella consistently asserts her right to “choose” to be with Edward – giving up college, a career, and eventually her life – despite his reservations about the safety of such a match. She employs the same rhetoric to try to convince Edward over the course of the series to end her human existence and transform her into a fellow vampire. It is not until Bella dies while giving birth to her and Edward’s daughter – a human-vampire hybrid who kills Bella in utero by blocking her food intake and growing so rapidly that Bella’s spine breaks – that Edward agrees to convert the deceased heroine, allowing her to become the ageless model of disembodied perfection, and ultimately, the virtuous restrictor, that she always longed to be.

During its peak from 2008-2009, as the novel series was concluding and the first films were released, the *Twilight* series was nothing short of a cultural phenomenon. Though marketed toward a young adult audience, Meyer’s books had inter-generational pull, with adult women in large droves joining the *Twilight* bandwagon alongside their daughters. As a result of their diverse and widespread appeal, the texts have since become contenders for “the most popular teen-girl novels of all time” (Flanagan 11), leading to the development of Summit

Entertainment's *Twilight Saga* film franchise, which broke numerous records at the box office. In 2008, the first film earned \$35 million opening day, setting a record for female directors (B. Johnson 53), and grossed \$350 million total (Grossman). The second film broke records set by *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince* for highest opening day ticket sales (B. Fritz), and boasted the third biggest opening weekend of all time (Barnes para. 3). These figures demonstrated to critics and producers alike the power of female-driven teen action narratives at the box office, even those with romance at the centre of their stories. As journalist Brian Johnson wrote in *Macleans* upon the 2008 release of *Twilight*'s inaugural film: "*Twilight* confirms there's a powerful new demographic in play: the fangirl" (54).

Having sold over 100 million novels in 50 different countries, the series has inspired an abundance of scholarship on the texts and fandoms in turn. With its immense popularity in teen girl culture has come widespread scholarly critique of the series' ideologically conservative gender politics, and to a lesser extent, celebrations of the series' potentiality as a female-centric fantasy. This chapter contributes to the existing feminist literary research on the *Twilight* series by analyzing representations of food, gender, and the body in Meyer's novels, arguing that the series' glamorization of Bella's painful transformation from human to vampire, and her journey toward strict self-restriction and self-discipline therein, problematically mirrors the quintessential journey toward disembodied perfection that informs anorexia and the social construction of femininity more broadly. With Bella serving as an exemplary post-feminist subject, for whom the body-as-text inscribes masculinized values (of willpower, autonomy, and control) and feminized values (of domesticity, passivity, and beauty) simultaneously, Meyer's novels employ discourses of female empowerment and "choice" to perpetuate the reproduction of longstanding anorexic gender norms that date back to the Victorian era. In so doing, the *Twilight* series

epitomizes the New Heroine's emergence in twenty-first century girl culture as an aspirational figure of female strength and independence, whose dichotomous virtues simultaneously perpetuate anorexic ideals about feminine embodiment.

Vampires and Western Cultures of Anorexia

Part of the *Twilight* series' appeal as a cultural artefact and object of scholarly study is its prominent position in the canon of popular vampire fiction. Like the bloodsuckers themselves, vampire lore is immortal, with legends and folktales of the vampire dating back to antiquity. Although vampire figures have more or less always retained their quality of immortality and voracious thirst for blood, other popular features – such as their fangs, fear of garlic, and propensity to sleep in coffins – have come and gone in mythology, depending on the time and place of the vampire's existence. This is because, as Nina Auerbach argues in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995), vampires function as hyperbolic manifestations of their specific generation's cultural values and anxieties. However, as literary scholar James Twitchell writes in his exploration of horror narratives through the centuries, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (1985), in order for a legend to endure, it must do more than just validate the social order; it must also offer a path forward – “specific behaviour” that simultaneously reinstates hegemony and “bolsters the individual's sense of worth” (85). For instance, the vampires of ancient folklore, bearing little resemblance to those we know best today, were often used in their contemporary moments to explain away common questions and concerns surrounding death, disease, and decay.

Likewise, vampires of the Victorian period were used to replicate and reinstate dominant gender norms at a time when the traditional roles of women were beginning to be questioned and

upended. The Victorian period is particularly significant on the timeline of vampire mythology, as it saw the publication of Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula* (1897), which continues to serve as a touchstone for almost all vampire texts created since. For over a century, Stoker's novel has been a hot topic of scholarly debate and critique, particularly regarding its gendered discourse. In his book *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (1986), comparative literature scholar Bram Dijkstra argues that Stoker's portrayal of the female vampire epitomizes Victorian fears of femininity, and as a result, *Dracula* has become the modern era's "commonplace book of the antifeminine obsession" (342). Many feminist analyses of the novel have centred on its portrayal of vampire feeding specifically. The vampire's enduring and insatiable thirst for blood, usually replete with erotic connotations,¹ has made the vampire bite one of its most fearful qualities, and because of the genre's benchmark motifs of appetite and consumption, vampire literature is a particularly rich arena for exploring cultural fears about gender and hunger.

Victorian literature scholar Anna Krugovoy Silver performs such an analysis in her chapter on *Dracula* in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002). As noted in Chapter 1, the Victorian period was the era of anorexia's emergence as a diagnosable disorder in western medicine. Silver connects this occurrence to the fact that, during the same time period, what would now be generally regarded as an anorexic body became a highly sexualized symbol of feminine perfection, and as a result, anorexia became "deeply rooted in" (3) the values, ideologies, and aesthetics that constituted ideal femininity. She defines the "Victorian culture of

¹ In "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips," his contribution to Elaine Showalter's collection *Speaking of Gender* (1989), Christopher Craft argues that the vampire mouth is the "primary site of erotic experience" (218), signifying gender fluidity and the breaching of binaries by being both receptive and penetrative, masculine and feminine, at once.

anorexia” through five primary characteristics: an aesthetic valorization of slenderness as feminine; an understanding of the disciplined body as emblematic of self-control; the belief that the “good” woman restricts her appetites for both food and sex as a reflection of her piety; the related belief that a thin body corporealizes self-mastery and spirituality; and the idea that self-imposed restriction (not to be confused with involuntary hunger) is a sign of affluence (27). Silver argues that Stoker’s portrayal of female appetite in *Dracula* affirms these values through its juxtaposition of main characters Mina Harker and Lucy Westenra, the latter of which is victimized by Count Dracula and transformed into a monstrous vampire. While Mina – devoted wife and pious Christian – represents the angelic Victorian ideal of femininity in Stoker’s text, Lucy – Mina’s sexualized and self-confident best friend – represents the New Woman: an icon of first wave feminism who stood for (white) women’s suffrage, education, and economic independence. Although the Count is the primary villain in Stoker’s narrative, Silver asserts that it is actually the female vampire figure – namely Lucy, signifying the New Woman – who dominates both Stoker’s novel and the Victorian literary imagination; with Lucy’s horrific thirst signifying cultural fears of female lust, aggression, and lack of control that accompanied the rise of first wave feminism, female hunger is the cynosure of *Dracula*’s horror, so much so that hunger itself becomes a signifier of evil in the book: “the evil Lucy feasts” while “the good Lucy, at least usually, does not” (126).

Contemporary vampires, on the surface, seem a far cry from their Victorian counterparts. The era of what many have deemed “modern” vampire fiction replaced the monstrous, supernatural corpse of the past with a more sympathetic, glamorous, and sensual vampire influenced by the glam rock, Gothic, and fantasy subcultures of late-modernity. The shift to modern vampire fiction is often attributed to Anne Rice’s novel, *Interview with the Vampire*

(1976): the first book of a larger series released near the end of the second-wave feminist movement.² However, just as *Dracula* expressed contemporary fears of femininity at a time when gender roles were destabilizing, Rice's series has likewise been accused of promoting anti-feminist discourse. Despite the series' subversive portrayal of homosociality between its two male protagonists, Lestat de Lioncourt and Louis de Pointe du Lac, its depiction of the stereotypical man-hating feminist, embodied through the figure of the powerful female vampire, along with its erotic displays of violence have been critiqued by various fan groups and critics alike. Rice's texts nonetheless helped inspire the vampire's modern makeover into a relatable cultural outsider, prompting a further category of vampire fiction to emerge in the 1980s – what cultural studies scholar Veronica Hollinger calls the “postmodern” subgenre – in accordance with the rising third wave of feminism. Still falling under the loose category of “sympathetic” vampire literature, this group of texts, like postmodernism itself, deconstructs binaries, “approaching categories like Good and Evil with a certain ironic scepticism” (Hollinger 202). Vampires at the centre of the postmodern subgenre embody a variety of intersecting identity markers concerning race, sexuality, and class. This diversification, which Gothic literature scholar William Day calls the “liberation of the vampire” (33), can be seen in popular television shows like Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and Alan Ball's *True Blood* (2008-2014), whose narratives have been lauded for subverting hegemonic notions of gender, class, race, and sexuality.

In recent years, an entirely new realm of YA vampire fiction has emerged, of which Meyer's *Twilight* series is paramount. Just as Stoker's *Dracula*, Rice's *Interview with the*

² For further contextualization of Anne Rice's influence on “modern” vampire fiction, see Gail Zimmerman's “The World of the Vampire: Rice's Contribution” (1997) and Lynne Hume's “Liminal Beings and the Undead: Vampires in the 21st Century” (2006).

Vampire, and Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* all emerged during pivotal shifts in feminist movements, reflecting the changing gender ideologies and cultural fears of their time, this new wave of YA vampire mythology is likewise reflective of current ambivalence toward feminism in western culture. While still following the modern vampire trend of spotlighting vampires who are relatable to the reader rather than repulsive, instead of promoting acceptance of the Other through their sympathetic vampires, these new YA texts often reinforce oppressive and retro-sexist gender norms best described as post-feminist, with their thematic content aimed at girls and young women largely focusing on the importance of feminine desirability, consumer behaviour, heteronormative relationships, and conservative family values. The YA post-feminist vampire trend can be traced to the release of L. J. Smith's teen novel series *The Vampire Diaries* (1991-1992), whose adolescent heroine Elena Gilbert exemplifies the ideal post-feminist subject: "She didn't even glance at the elaborate Victorian mirror above the cherrywood dresser; she knew what she'd see. Elena Gilbert, cool and blond and slender, the fashion trendsetter, the high school senior, the girl every boy wanted and every girl wanted to be" (6). *The Vampire Diaries*, one of the first texts to bring vampires to the world of teen chick lit, helped set the stage for the explosion of vampire narratives that gripped popular girl culture at the dawn of the new millennium, epitomized by subsequent texts like the CW's popular *Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) television spin-off, Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007-2010) book series, the *Vampire Academy* (2014) film adaptation, and of course, the *Twilight* phenomenon.

As suggested by the symbolism of Elena Gilbert's "elaborate Victorian mirror" positioned centrally in her twentieth-century bedroom, neo-Victorian echoes feature prominently in many YA texts for girls today, especially within the sub-genre of YA vampire fiction. In her book *Neo-Victorianism on Screen: Postfeminism and Contemporary Adaptations of Victorian*

Women (2017), Victorian studies scholar Antonija Primorac argues that the recent proliferation of neo-Victorian adaptations on screen serves as a response to the post-feminist fantasy of a simpler time – what Primorac terms the “neo-Victorian *imaginarium*” (12 original emphasis) – free from the struggles and complexities stoked by feminism today. Post-feminism’s embrace of Victorian culture follows Christine Geraghty’s theory of adaptation, which views adaptation as a layering process: “a recognition of ghostly presences, and a shadowing or doubling of what is on the surface by what is glimpsed behind” (195). Through this process, post-feminist media does not seek to authentically represent or understand the Victorian past, but rather to reinstate traditional ideals for a safer – that is, more gender essentialist – future.

Evidence of Victorian culture’s infiltration of twenty-first century girl culture is exemplified through Meyer’s *Twilight* novels. For example, despite the fact that his body remains frozen at 17 years old, Edward himself is 109 at the start of *Twilight*, placing his birth date some time in the late nineteenth century. His traditional Victorian manners and speech distinguish him from the other boys at Bella’s school, as he performs chivalrous tasks like taking Bella’s coat, gaining her father’s blessing for a date, and gallantly protecting her from harm. Edward’s moral compass, one of the major sources of conflict in his and Bella’s romantic relationship, is also grounded in Victorian values, as he steadily asserts his desire to be married before having sex. The aesthetics of the *Twilight* films further enhance the narrative’s neo-Victorian qualities, as Edward’s theme song is portrayed through the music of French Impressionist composer Claude Debussy, the films offer frequent flashbacks to the Victorian era when Edward was originally transformed, and the Cullens are often portrayed in formalwear with nineteenth century airs. Even Bella, in a dream sequence in the first *Twilight* film, imagines herself being eaten alive by Edward while dressed in traditional Victorian garb (48:50) – a scene

with obvious erotic connotations.

Unsurprisingly, then, the *Twilight* series' neo-Victorian qualities, specifically its intertextuality with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, has been a prevailing theme in *Twilight* scholarship.³ Numerous feminist scholars have drawn attention to the novels' perpetuation of Victorian gender ideologies, with literary critic Judith Weissman calling Meyer's series a modern-day "transplant" (109) of *Dracula*'s Victorian sexual mores. The *Twilight* series' position in the canon of post-feminist literature has also been well established,⁴ with feminist cultural theorist Anne Helen Petersen describing it as "one of the most striking manifestations of postfeminist culture in recent years" (54). While both of these schools of thought usefully challenge the *Twilight* narrative's problematic portrayals of gender and sexuality, what has been missing from the conversation to this point is a corporeal feminist approach attending to the motifs of food, consumption, and the body in the series. In so doing, this chapter argues that the *Twilight* series' post-feminist discourse, combined with its neo-

³ In *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the "Twilight" Series* (2016), Anne Morey establishes *Jane Eyre* as an "unacknowledged or displaced intertext" (15) of the *Twilight* series; Jessica Groper examines Meyer's use of the Byronic hero trope, which was central to early Victorian literature, in her essay in *Theorizing Twilight* (2011); in the same collection, Sarah Wakefield's work offers a comparative reading of the *Twilight* series and *Wuthering Heights*; while Katie Kapurch's book, *Victorian Melodrama in the Twenty-First Century* (2016) – the most extensive scholarly exploration of the *Twilight* franchise's neo-Victorian dimensions – argues that the series' use of nineteenth century melodrama conventions highlight melodrama's potentiality as an empowering rhetorical strategy for girls.

⁴ Petersen posits the *Twilight* series as the epitome of post-feminist media, arguing that the series' widespread draw, even amongst feminists, comes from the fact that the narrative "provides a romance and experience for feminists that the realities of contemporary culture and living as an adult, responsible, woman do not" (58); Natalie Wilson likewise asserts the series' post-feminist dimensions, critiquing its valorization of sexism and consumer capitalist behaviours; Anthea Taylor's work examines the real life implications of the series' post-feminist values (particularly those concerning sexuality/romance) on its teen audience; while conversely, Agata Luksza acknowledges the *Twilight* series' post-feminist ethos, but argues that the centrality of its female hero signals a progressive shift in agency in western sexual politics.

Victorian qualities, work together to perpetuate what I view as an anorexic value system, not unlike that perpetuated by Stoker's infamous vampire tale centuries ago; although Meyer uses the language of "choice" to frame Bella's realization of a monolithic post-feminist identity as an expression of female autonomy, the protagonist's journey to self-actualization through body transcendence and restrictive sexual and eating behaviours exemplifies the same logic of anorexia that defined Victorian ideals of femininity, and continues to define the New Heroine today. Like a post-feminist reincarnation of her predecessor, Lucy, the "bad" Bella feasts – both figuratively and literally – while the "good" Bella does not.

The Horror of Female Embodiment

By interrogating Bella's character arc through the overarching framework of anorexia, this section demonstrates how over the course of Meyer's narrative, Bella's vampire identity comes to represent the privileged (masculine) realm of the mind, while her human identity represents the abject (feminine) realm of the body. Despite her status as first-person narrator, Bella's inner-self remains largely one-dimensional throughout the first three *Twilight* novels while she exists as a human, with her character being defined almost solely by her body's inadequacies. Bella emphasizes this point upon meeting Edward for the first time in *Twilight*: "I wasn't *interesting*. And he was" (Meyer 79, original emphasis); she goes on to tell Edward later in the novel, "I'm absolutely ordinary – well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled" (210). These excerpts are indicative of how bland and indistinctive Bella's character is prior to her vampiric transformation, that is, except for her physical challenges, a fact that she reflects on in *Breaking Dawn* from the perspective of her new vampire life: "I'd never been strong enough to deal with the things

outside my control...Always human and weak, the only thing I'd ever been able to do was keep going. Endure. Survive" (374). Bella remains outside the realm of control in her human body: she simply "survives." Her body acts as a prison from which she cannot escape, at least until she sacrifices her feminine flesh and transcends her physical form into vampirism, as will be explored later in this chapter.

For the majority of Meyer's series, however, Bella epitomizes the horror of female embodiment. The *Twilight* novels illustrate the negativity of Bella's embodied life, in part, through the metaphor of softness, with Bella's body coded as a symbol of feminine weakness. In the series' narrative universe, the soft human body is one that is fragile and vulnerable to attack, while the hard vampire body is externally "perfect" (*Breaking Dawn* 25) and seemingly invincible; vampire bodies are so hard, in fact, that when destroyed, they appear like shattering glass in the *Twilight* film franchise. Bella first introduces herself to readers in *Twilight* through a description of her body that emphasizes its softness, inactivity, and lack of self-discipline: "I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete" (10). Although Bella refers to herself as "slender," within the anorexic paradigm, as Bordo states in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), "[s]imply to be slim is not enough" – one must achieve the solid, "flab-free, excess-free body" (191) in order to demonstrate control over the body's raw material. The negativity of Bella's softness extends so deep that it brings her close to death at many points in the series. Edward repeatedly warns Bella, in varying versions of the same message expressed here in *Twilight*: "you are so soft...You don't realize how incredibly *breakable* you are" (310). The correlation between Bella's mortality and her softness is also highlighted in the opening dream sequence of *New Moon*, in which Bella looks in the mirror to see her aged self with "soft and withered [skin], bent into a thousand tiny creases" (3). Here, the heroine's imagined softness, signifying age,

decay, and the inevitability of death, represents the abject realities of embodied life that Bella and the quintessential anorexic subject, who equates the raw female form with “the grave” (Heywood 46), both seek to transcend.

In addition to its physical softness, the negativity of Bella’s human body is also imagined as a metaphorical softness, as Bella lacks firm mental and emotional boundaries to contain her many appetites. One of these is sexual appetite, which individuals with anorexia often suppress in addition to their appetites for food, each acting as a signifier of the body’s uncontrollable hunger. This tendency is encouraged within post-feminist media culture, which ironically employs the rhetoric of sexual “choice” and “freedom” to encourage strict sexual self-surveillance and self-objectification amongst its female subjects. Feminist cultural theorists Diane Negra and Kristen Anderson each explore this phenomenon in their respective theorizations of post-feminist sensibility, arguing that an increased explicitness in dialogue and images of female sexuality since the 1990s has correlated with even greater restrictions on how female sexuality can be expressed; for example, Anderson writes that women are now encouraged to “‘choose’ to be sexual objects” (2) by consumer-capitalist discourses in mainstream media, while Negra posits male heterosexual desire as the new “cynosure” (48) for women’s self-identification and consuming behaviours. As children’s literature scholars Elizabeth Bullen et al. likewise assert in their exploration of post-feminist sexual expression in the teen “chick lit” genre, sex and sexuality in these texts, conceived as expressions of personal identity, are presented in ways “that are as potentially as coercive to young girls as rigid moralities” (498). Both anorexic and post-feminist sexual rationality hence call for a tightening up of female “looseness” through the employment of mental (read: masculine) control over women’s voracious sexual appetites.

While many scholars have focused on the conservative and regressive gender politics of the *Twilight* novels' portrayals of sex and desire already,⁵ I read Bella's sexuality through the lens of consumption. Equating sexual acts with acts of eating, the *Twilight* novels disparage Bella's "soft" and voracious sexuality during her embodied life, while celebrating her more controlled and "hardened" vampire sexuality later on. From the first book of Meyer's series, vampire eating is presented as hyper-sensual and hyper-pleasurable. Explaining the vampire hunting experience, Edward tells Bella, "we give ourselves over to our senses" and "govern less with our minds" (*Twilight* 225). But it is not just the violent vampire bite that equates sex with hunger in Meyer's series; at numerous points in the novels, Bella depicts her love interest Edward in terms of food, describing herself "breathing in the smell of his skin" (*Twilight* 313), noting the delicious "smell of his breath" (319), and frequently ruminating on "the *taste*" (*Eclipse* 44 original emphasis) of him. Bella's longing for Edward, her object of desire/consumption, is framed as being explicitly dangerous for both of them: Bella, because of her constant vulnerability to death if Edward loses control over his hunger during moments of intimacy – "the hunger – the thirst – that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you" (*Twilight* 277) – and Edward, because of his dependency on the heroine's survival, which in the spirit of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, prompts him to attempt suicide in *New Moon* upon learning a

⁵ Examples include Anna Krugovoy Silver's article, "Twilight is not Good For Maidens" (2010), which examines Meyer's avowal of abstinence and construction of premarital sex as "risky, life-threatening, and brutal for everyone involved" (129); Carrie Anne Platt's work, which similarly argues that the *Twilight* series follows the tradition of moralistic YA novels punishing female sexuality (76); Natalie Wilson's book *Seduced By Twilight: The Allure and Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga* (2011), which dedicates a chapter to arguing that despite its portrayal of active female sexuality, the series' messaging valorizes sexual violence and rape culture; and Jackie C. Horne's article, "Fantasy, Subjectivity and Desire in *Twilight* and Its Sequels" (2016), which in its analysis of the series' abstinence-only ideology, also argues that the books celebrate female sexual exploration (32).

rumor of Bella's death: "Even if I'd had no hand in your death [...] even if it *wasn't* my fault, I still would have [killed myself]" (508 original emphasis). Therefore, until her vampiric transformation late in the series, Bella must suppress her sexual impulses to safeguard Edward during romantic encounters: "I wanted to turn toward him, to see if it was really his lips against my hair. But I had to be good; I didn't want to make this any harder for him than it already was" (*Twilight* 308). By attentively restricting her sexual behaviour, Bella "saves" Edward from experiencing a hunger – both for sex and blood – that cannot be satisfied.

However, as the series and Edward and Bella's relationship progresses, Bella exhibits less and less control over her sexual appetite, causing Edward to increase his dominant behaviour. Near the end of *Eclipse*, Bella loses control over her desire and overtly begs Edward for sex – "Just let us *try*...only try. And I'll give you what you want" (448) – but instead of giving in to Bella's pleas, Edward merely emphasizes his jurisdiction over her: "silly girl...I'm trying to protect *your* [virtue]. And you're making it shockingly difficult" (453). In scenes like this, which occur throughout the series, Edward acts as the manager of Bella's voracious sexuality, so that when his control fails and Bella satiates her sexual appetite, it is not without consequence. One of these moments occurs in *Eclipse*, when Bella slips out from under Edward's rule and kisses werewolf Jacob Black – the third party to Bella and Edward's love triangle who is configured as Edward's rival – an experience that she both initiates and enjoys: "My brain disconnected from my body, and I was kissing him back. Against all reason, my lips were moving with his in strange, confusing ways they'd never moved before – because I didn't have to be careful with Jacob, and he certainly wasn't being careful with me" (527). Here, Bella employs the rhetoric of mind/body dualism to explain her ill conduct, blaming her regression from "careful" to careless sexual behaviour on her body's "disconnect" from her brain. After the

act, Bella articulates her self-loathing: “I more than deserved whatever pain this caused me. I hoped it was bad. I hoped I would really suffer” (528). Following the scripts of post-feminist sexual rationality, while Bella is free to explore her sexuality and stray from her monogamous relationship with Edward in the *Twilight* narrative, her feelings of self-hatred after the act highlight the potential hazards of such sexual risk-taking. Bella’s reaction to this moment of intimacy thereby mirrors the anorexic sufferer’s propensity for self-punishment in the face of desire, while simultaneously emphasizing the negative consequences of liberal female sexuality as constructed by the post-feminist imagination, which as Negra writes, “fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits” (4).

Although, as previously noted, many scholars have viewed the *Twilight* series’ restrictive take on sexuality as an expression of conservative-Christian, abstinence-before-marriage ethics, even when Bella’s sexual activity is ostensibly risk-free – that is, within the confines of traditional marriage – she continues to face punishment for her sexual appetite, substantiating this chapter’s argument that the innate danger of Bella’s sexuality is located in her body rather than (or in addition to) her moral codes. The morning after she consummates her marriage to Edward, Bella awakens to discover she has swollen lips and large purple bruises all over her body from her ribs, to her shoulders, to her cheekbones (*Breaking Dawn* 89); in her first and final sexual act as a human woman, Bella is physically brutalized by Edward, whose hard body and massive physical strength cause him to hurt her inadvertently during sex. However, as Anderson writes in her critique of post-feminism’s ethos of individualism, which she argues treats abuses of women as personalized cases that are often the women’s own fault rather than matters of cultural/systemic misogyny (4), in this case, Bella’s assault stems from her own hunger for sexual gratification rather than a larger injustice. After all, it is she who insists on

having sex with Edward despite his reservations. Edward's assault on Bella's person thus works to naturalize masculine dominance over female sexuality without vilifying the male subject – a topic that has been critiqued by *Twilight* analysts through the lens of intimate partner violence.⁶ Of interest to this chapter is how Bella's voracious and "breakable" body is framed as inviting the physical harm she receives. In linking Bella's sexual appetite with an appetite for food, and then emphasizing the hazards of satiating that appetite from within a soft female body, the *Twilight* series realizes an anorexic paradigm that deplores feminine embodiment, especially bodily processes related to sexual difference,⁷ and mobilizes that hatred by advocating for dominance over the body's many appetites and desires.

The anorexic themes underlying Bella's character arc becomes most obvious, however, through her literal appetite for food. Prior to her vampire transformation, like the typical anorexic sufferer, Bella's eating (or lack thereof) becomes a channel for expressing a range of primarily negative emotions, specifically those involving her relationship with Edward. For example, when Bella sees Edward in the cafeteria after their initial meeting, she consumes only a soda for lunch to assuage her anxiety; later, she refuses to eat on her date with Edward, telling the reader, "I

⁶ Jessica Taylor explores how romance conventions are used to re-code instances of sexual violence as safe and assuring in Meyer's series; literary critic Lydia Kokkola argues "true love" is constructed as a product of self-harm in the *Twilight* saga; Victoria Collins and Dianne Carmody perform a content analysis to show how nuances of dating violence manifest throughout Edward and Bella's relationship; focusing on real world implications, Frann Michel asserts parents and educators should approach the series through the lens of sex-positivity in order to emphasize with teens the pleasures of sex alongside the dangers of sexual violence; similarly, Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scher highlight the real life impacts of eroticizing violence in Meyer's novels.

⁷ While, as explored in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, many clinical studies and feminist theorizations of anorexia have elucidated the anorexic correlation of eating with sex, Peter Churven's remarks in his clinical study on mind/body dualism in the anorexic psyche capture the dominant view of research in this arena: that teenaged girls (in particular) with anorexia commonly feel "undone" (185) by their own sexual maturation and sexual experiences.

didn't feel like mentioning that my stomach was already full – of butterflies" (91). Bella's tendency to channel emotions through her food intake continues throughout her human life: in *New Moon*, Bella refuses to eat or drink when Edward deserts her (396); in *Eclipse*, Bella's nerves prevent her from eating at her high school graduation (359); and in *Breaking Dawn*, Bella describes herself as being "too keyed up to have any interest in eating" (39) on her angst-filled wedding day. The film adaptation of *New Moon* also picks up on Bella's propensity for food restriction, depicting the protagonist as a strict vegetarian, and highlighting her lack of food intake during an episode of depression, after which Bella's schoolmate Mike Newton tells her: "now that you're talking and eating again, you know, gotta get that protein in there" (48:20). Together, these instances suggest that food restriction functions as a kind of coping mechanism for Bella's feelings of anxiety, allowing the protagonist to gain a sense of control while remaining within the confines of acceptable feminine behaviour.

The scenes in which Bella does eat can be divided into two categories: those in which she eats because she must, which occur throughout the series, and those in which Bella eats for pleasure, which occur primarily in *Breaking Dawn* during her pregnancy. In the former category, Bella's attitude towards food seems nonchalant. Just as Bordo notes about the ideal woman in western culture, who when she must eat, does so "without deep desire and without apparent consequence" (*Unbearable Weight* 102), Bella treats eating as a chore – as something she must do rather than something she enjoys doing. For instance, when Bella meets Edward in Port Angeles in *Twilight*, she resists the idea of going out for dinner and eats solely because Edward asks her to, with her indifference towards food reflected by her picking "the first thing" (169) on the menu. In another scene in the novel, as Edward speaks to Bella, she explains to readers, "I'd been so intrigued, I hadn't even noticed I was hungry" (291), and eats, once again, only at

Edward's insistence. Bella's cool attitude towards food in these scenes frames her restriction as both easy and natural. As cultural theorist Rosalind Gill writes of the ideal post-feminist subject, who must achieve body perfection without complaint, and whose labour in the process "must never be disclosed" (12), Bella's ambivalence towards food ignores the work and turmoil that goes into creating, what Negra calls, "one of the most distinctive features of the postfeminist era" (119): the underfed female body.

Although Edward – whose vampirism prevents him from ever eating in front of Bella, and accordingly, in front of readers – encourages Bella's appetite when it is modest, restrictive, and functional, in those scenes in which Bella eats for pleasure, he humiliates her. In accordance with the anorexic paradigm that correlates appetite for food with appetite for sex, once Bella loses her virginity and immediately becomes pregnant, her nonchalant attitude towards food disappears, and her hunger increases. When Edward makes breakfast for Bella the morning after they first have sex, Bella describes her cravings: "The scent of the food overwhelmed me. I felt like I could eat the plate and the frying pan, too; my stomach snarled" (*Breaking Dawn* 97). This sensual description serves as a stark contrast to Bella's ambivalent discussions of food pre-pregnancy. Edward hence becomes suspicious of his wife and shames her for her hunger, asking, "Do you know how many eggs you've gone through in the last week?" (111), and, "Do you want to swim with the dolphins this afternoon – burn off the calories?" (117). Here, Edward's attitude shift emphasizes the increased wildness of Bella's appetite and the subsequent need to contain it. Following this rationale, as Bella's pregnancy progresses, her association with the female body strengthens and the dangerous implications of her hunger become even more explicit. Bella's voice shrinks in correlation with her growing abdomen – a universal symbol of motherhood and female embodiment – so that at the peak of the heroine's pregnancy, Jacob takes over as narrator,

placing Bella's character firmly in the realm of the body. Losing her narrative voice and subjecthood, Bella develops a monstrous appetite that is epitomized by a horrific craving for human blood – a response to her fetus' half-vampire physiology in utero. When Rosalie Cullen satiates Bella's bloodthirst for the first time, Bella admits in a "tiny voice" that the blood "smells good" and "*tastes* good," wearing an expression that narrator Jacob describes as "apologetic. Pleasing. Scared" (249 original emphasis). The protagonist's distress here stems less from the act of consumption itself – she wants to do what is necessary to keep her baby alive – than it does from her enjoyment of the act. Bella's facial expressions and "slumped" (252) shoulders characterize her appetite as both shameful and embarrassing, adhering to post-feminist rhetoric in which victimhood for women is associated with self-pity, lack of accountability, and weak personal drive (Anderson 5). By the end of her human life, as a voiceless, pregnant and hungry woman engulfed by her body's needs, Bella lacks access to acceptable modes of self-empowerment, and thus regresses to a primitive state marked by monstrous hunger, lack of control, and dependency on others. Only by reaching a realm of transcendence above her body's materiality, then, can Bella regain power over herself and her destiny, ultimately emerging as the hard-bodied, self-controlled, and self-restrictive immortal she always longed to be.

Bodily Transcendence and Anorexic Vampirism

Having occupied the abject realm of the body during her human life, Bella transcends into a state of disembodied perfection upon her vampiric transformation. The anorexic aesthetic of her evolution is captured in Meyer's final novel, as well as visually in the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, which each portray Bella's body, both before and after birth, as skeletal. Bella's emaciation occurs as a result of her half-vampire fetus blocking the heroine's

body from accepting nutrients, causing her to progressively “starve to death by the hour” (*Breaking Dawn* 235). Bella’s sickly pallor, baggy eyes, concaved face and thighs, and prominent neck, shoulder, cheek, and arm bones all contribute to her anorexic appearance: visual markers of the heroine’s slow march towards death. Despite multiple warnings that her heart will likely stop before she is able to deliver her baby, Bella carries her fetus to term, asserting her willpower by repeatedly telling the Cullens, “I can do this. I can do this” (190).⁸ The semiotics surrounding Bella’s pregnant body in the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* also reinforce the narrative’s valorization of the protagonist’s maternal nature; as exemplified in figure 1 – a still from the scene in which Bella receives her ultrasound – the heroine’s folded arms over her belly reinforce her status as mother and nurturer, while her furrowed brow and stern facial expression suggest a resolute determination, despite the body’s obvious deterioration.

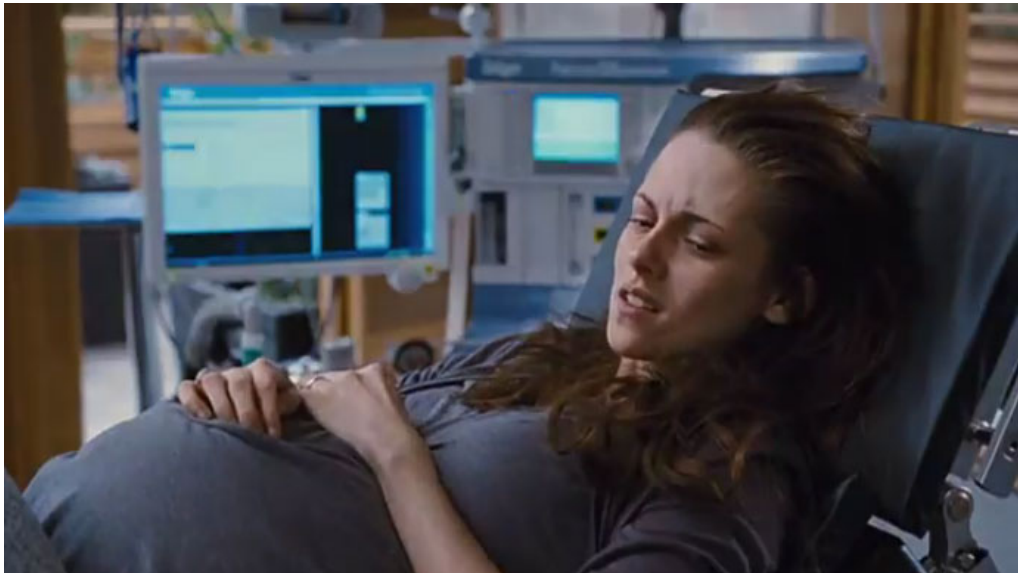


Fig. 1. Bella Swan’s pregnant and emaciated body; *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*; dir. Bill Condon; Summit Entertainment; 2012; Netflix; Web.

⁸ For analyses of the conservative-Christian values that underlie Bella’s pregnancy, see the works of Anna Krugovoy Silver, who argues that Bella’s pregnancy perpetuates pro-life rhetoric in “*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens” (2010), and Merinne Whitton, who in *Bringing Light to Twilight* (2011), asserts that the series posits motherhood as women’s ultimate role in life.

When Bella does indeed die as a result of her delivery and slow, self-inflicted decay, she does so as a martyr, appearing in the film as both anorexic and angelic in her hospital bed/coffin. As figure 2 reveals, despite her utter emaciation at this point in the narrative, Bella is meant to appear beautiful in death. The heroine's long flowing hair, serene facial expression, placid folded hands and prim blue dress serve as markers of her grace, beauty, and virtue on the road to self-destruction. Thus not only is the emaciated body romanticized in the *Breaking Dawn* narrative through Bella's (impossible) ability to deliver a baby while facing starvation, but also through the heroine's makeover into a dress and makeup-wearing skeletal corpse. In addition to showing the external decay of Bella's body, the film also provides viewers with an inside look at Bella's deteriorating physiology; when Edward "saves" his wife's life through the immortalizing vampire bite, Bella's veins and capillaries freeze up, the venom slowly shutting down her internal organs (*The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* 1:36:00). Her insides turn black, crumble off, and die.



Fig. 2. Bella Swan's death; *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1*; dir. Bill Condon; Summit Entertainment; 2011; Netflix; Web.

It is through this corporeal process of self-emaciation and annihilation that Bella transforms into a vampire, gaining the ability to dominate all aspects of her previously unruly body, including its appearance, abilities, and desires. A stark contrast to her “soft” (*Twilight* 10), “average” and “shamefully plain” (*New Moon* 65) human body, Bella describes her vampire physique the first time she looks in the mirror as follows: “The alien creature in the glass was indisputably beautiful. Her limbs were smooth and strong, skin glistening subtly, luminous as a pearl” (*Breaking Dawn* 403). Bella’s delight at her new vampire form is visualized in the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2* as the heroine sports bombshell blown-out hair, a glowing complexion, a sexy new dress, and elevated body language communicating total self-assurance (figure 3). The film’s cinematic transition from dull/cool tones to bright/warm tones affirms the desirability of Bella’s new life – a literal bright light at the end of the long and dreary tunnel of human girlhood. In these ways, Bella’s new physical beauty, rather than celebrating the female body, instead celebrates the post-feminist fantasy of the “achieved self” (Negra 119), in which hard work and mental fortitude manifest physical and personal perfection. Indeed, Bella’s new body is so glamorized and removed from nature that it literally sparkles in the sunlight.



Fig. 3. Before and after Bella’s transformation. Left: *Twilight*; dir. Catherine Hardwicke; Summit Entertainment; 2008; Netflix; Web. Right: “Bella Swan’s Bombshell Hair”; *Real Style Network*; n.d.; Web.

In addition to being beautiful, Bella's new form is also rock-solid. Following anorexia's ideological valorization of corporeal "purity," "hyperintellectuality" and "transcendence of the flesh" (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 148), Bella's "soft" imperfections, both literal and figurative, disappear in congruence with her body's acquired hardness. *Breaking Dawn* emphasizes this fact the moment Bella stands up in her new vampire form: "The instant I'd considered standing erect, I was already straight. There was no brief fragment of time in which the action occurred; change was instantaneous, almost as if there was no movement at all" (391). The book's film adaptation, *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, likewise shows Bella moving at hyperspeed, and allows the audience to experience the world through Bella's heightened, ultra-clear vampire senses (26:00). As this scene highlights, in contrast with her clumsy, human form, in which Bella constantly struggles to perform the most mundane physical tasks, Bella's vampire mind and body seem to work in seamless congruence with one another, becoming one entity over which Bella reigns as master.

By transcending her human form, Bella is also able to overcome all physical obstacles that previously prevented her from realizing her full potential. Throughout the *Twilight* series, the heroine expresses her desire to become "strong and fast" (*Eclipse* 344) like her supernatural friends, and by shedding her abject body, this dream becomes reality. After winning an arm-wrestling match against Edward's brother Emmett Cullen – the strongest vampire in the Cullen household – Bella describes her celebratory victory:

Fascinated by the undeniable proof that I was stronger than the strongest vampire I'd ever known, I placed my hand, fingers spread wide, against the rock... With a grin stretching my face, I whirled in a sudden circle and karate-chopped the rock with the side of my hand. The stone shrieked and groaned and – with a big poof of dust – split in two. I

started giggling. (*Breaking Dawn* 521)

Bella's demonstration of physical strength in this scene signifies her removal from the feminine/human realm of weakness and inadequacy, and induction into the masculine realm of power. In this regard, Bella embodies Jeffery A. Brown's definition of the New Heroine, whose actual possession of masculine strength distinguishes her from the bombshell male proxies of action heroines past. Importantly, however, Bella's physical power in this scene exhibits her ability to enact certain masculine characteristics without seriously reworking traditional gender roles. The protagonist's "giggle" after her demonstration of strength functions as an assurance that her strength is non-threatening to patriarchal power or the traditional gender paradigm: an example of what feminist theorists Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra call the "girling" of femininity in post-feminist culture, in which the competent adult woman "is made safe by being represented as fundamentally still a girl" (109). Bella's kick-ass abilities are similarly presented in the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, whose action sequences show the beautiful heroine successfully fighting her male counterparts only in moments in which her child requires protection, emphasizing her innate motherly instincts. Like the ideal post-feminist "superwoman," who perpetuates a myth of female power by embodying certain, sanctioned traits of masculinity and fundamental feminine qualities simultaneously,⁹ Bella demonstrates an ability, through willpower and body modification, to thrive in the masculine realm while remaining nurturing, non-threatening, and ultimately feminine at heart.

Furthermore, Bella's mind gains total control, not only over her body's physical abilities, but also over the range of appetites that restrict and burden her as a human, including sexual

⁹ See Chapter 1 for further discussion of the post-feminist "superwoman" archetype first established by Vicki Coppock et al. in *The Illusions Of Post-Feminism: New Women, Old Myths* (1995).

appetite. Although Bella's body is "sexier" and she does have more and better sex post-transformation, the protagonist's new sexuality is fundamentally different than that exuded by her human self. In accordance with Bordo's theories of muscles, Bella's hard body expresses a controlled sexuality that is "not about to erupt in unwanted and embarrassing display" (*Unbearable Weight* 195). With her limitless physical potential, the protagonist also manifests the kind of performative sexuality that Negra argues is valorized in post-feminist culture, wherein women use their sexual "liberation" to perform male heterosexual fantasies that center on feminine beauty and youthfulness (48). Bella explains her newfound prowess in the bedroom the first time she and Edward have sex as vampires: "I was never going to get tired, and neither was he. We didn't have to catch our breath or rest or eat or even use the bathroom; we had no more mundane human needs [...] I was always going to want more" (*Breaking Dawn* 482-83). In this way, Bella is the model post-feminist subject: an ever-young, hard-bodied, and beautiful woman who can (literally) have heteronormative sex with her husband forever.

Significantly, though, Bella is only able to safely engage in this kind of exciting sexual activity after destroying her female flesh. As cultural studies scholar Anthea Taylor notes, Meyer's novels posit a utopic, yet nihilistic eroticism, one that links the young female sex drive with death (31). While Taylor argues that this connection has troubling implications from a domestic violence perspective, I argue it is also problematic from the critical feminist viewpoint of eating disorders. Just as many individuals with anorexia view their sexuality as a symptom of their own abjection, the *Twilight* novels frame Bella's enhanced sexuality as dependent on her own annihilation: Bella is only able to have sex when her body is safely hardened and safely dead. In constructing Bella's character as a male heterosexual fantasy, and then linking her sexuality with death, the *Twilight* novels thus posit a decidedly anorexic view of female sexuality

that assumes the body's disposability and fetishizes its death.

Finally, with increased control over her body and sexual appetite, Bella gains power over her appetite for food as a vampire, and in this way, the *Twilight* series contributes to a growing body of modern vampire tales that feature self-restrictive vampire protagonists. As film scholar Alexandra Frank illustrates in *What's Eating You?: Food and Horror on Screen* (2017), depictions of vampire eating have become more nuanced and genteel in recent years; for example, “good” vampires from popular series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Twilight* are deemed virtuous in their respective stories through their moralistic refusal to drink human blood. While Frank asserts that these new vampire foodways reflect growing cultural concerns about food and where it comes from (e.g. the growing veganism movement), I propose that vampiric self-restriction also reflects post-feminism's culture of anorexia, whose discourses of “empowerment” and “choice” work to mask the propagation of nineteenth century gender norms valorizing female asceticism and body discipline. Indeed, almost the entire second half of Meyer's concluding novel, the content of which comprises the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, centers on Bella's evolution into the ultimate restrictor figure, whose ability to resist consumption paradoxically increases along with her desire to consume.

Although, as previously noted, Meyer's novels portray vampire feeding as euphoric and uncontrollable, they simultaneously condemn the satiation of that very hunger. Like women with anorexia who often experience the battle between will and appetite as one between good and evil, in the *Twilight* series, “good” vampires (i.e. the Cullens) restrict their appetites, while

villainous vampires indulge.¹⁰ In fact, the Cullen family is rarely shown eating at all. At her first impression of the Cullens, Bella notes their uneaten lunches: “they weren’t eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them...As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray – unopened soda, unbitten apple – and walked away with a quick, graceful lope” (*Twilight* 18-19). From these first moments, the Cullens are characterized as angelic figures marked by their ability to transcend the body’s needs and appetites, garnering Bella’s attention and admiration. When Bella becomes a vampire herself and legitimizes her place in the Cullen family, she too becomes a virtuous restrictor. Indeed, she becomes the *ultimate* restrictor, since as a “newborn” vampire, she faces the most temptation to consume, yet exhibits the strongest ability to resist. Awakening from her painful coma, the protagonist articulates the dread she feels upon discovering her insatiable hunger: “I was the monster now. I had to keep away from scents that might trigger my wild side” (*Breaking Dawn* 408). Despite her desperate appetite, however, Bella demonstrates an uncanny ability to push her hunger into a “separate part of [her] brain” (397), a talent that continues to grow with practice.

Bella’s exceptional skill at self-restriction is dramatized during her first hunting trip, where she briefly loses her mental focus while face-to-face with humans. Initially unable to resist the scent of hikers in the woods, Bella’s worst fear comes true and the “monster” inside of her comes to life: “The scent ruled completely. I was single-minded as I traced it, aware only of the thirst and the smell that promised to quench it” (417). As Bella’s craving threatens to take over her intellect and reason, she lets out a “feral snarl” (417), symbolizing the animalistic nature of her desire. In the film *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2*, Bella chases her human prey

¹⁰ Bella refers to “vegetarian” vampires – those who choose to drink animal instead of human blood – as “good vampires” in both *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*.

by quickly scaling a cliff, crawling across the surface like an insect, all while snarling and gnashing her teeth (26:30). However, Bella's willpower and mental strength help her through the difficult task of restraining her bodily impulses: "I'd known it was going to be hard. That was why I'd been so on guard" (420). The heroine hunts instead for mountain lion, a supposedly more ethical, but less pleasurable meal than her initial (human) choice. Even so, Bella still feels repulsed by herself after the act: "The thirst flared again when [the mountain lion] ran dry, and I shoved his carcass off my body in disgust. How could I still be thirsty after all that?" (423). Discomfort with her strange new eating habits would be expected in Bella's supernatural circumstance, but here, the protagonist's "disgust" seems to stem less from the hunt itself than it does from her own insatiable appetite: "How could I still be thirsty?". To be clear, Bella's participation in consumer culture at large is celebrated in the *Twilight* series: vampires are exceedingly wealthy in the *Twilight* universe, and accordingly, Bella obtains a new sports car, designer wardrobe, and seemingly unlimited bank account upon transformation. It is only her consumption of food that is portrayed as excessive and potentially hazardous in the narrative. Bella's self-loathing after consumption is therefore exclusive to food consumption in particular rather than a commentary on consumer-capitalist behaviours broadly. The heroine's relationship with food, as Danielle Celermajer writes in her psychoanalytic account of the anorexic sufferer's, involves a simultaneous attraction/repulsion: "obsessed with [food], she similarly regards it as an object of desire and disgust" (Celermajer 65). It is Bella's ability to ignore her strongest cravings despite this dichotomy that frames her as a model restrictor, and therefore an icon of post-feminist womanhood in Meyer's series.

The protagonist's exemplary self-control only continues to grow as she gains more practice restricting. When Bella returns home from her hunt, she employs a methodical mental

process to manage her cravings as she advances towards Renesmee – her delicious-smelling daughter with half-human blood – for the first time: “I thought about every step before I took it, analyzing my mood, the burn in my throat, the position of the others around me” (443). In contrast with her “compulsory” reaction to temptation on the hunt, here, Bella’s “slow procession” (443) and careful focus make her hunger easier to ignore; pointedly, she tells the Cullens, “I’m in control” (462). Her final test of self-control, however, comes with the arrival of her human father Charlie Swan at the Cullen family home. Bella describes meeting him for the first time post-transformation:

Charlie’s scent was a fistful of flames, punching straight down my throat. But it was so much more than pain. It was a hot stabbing of desire, too. Charlie smelled more delicious than anything I’d ever imagined. As appealing as the anonymous hikers had been on the hunt, Charlie was doubly tempting. And he was just a few feet away, leaking mouthwatering heat and moisture into the dry air...I tried to collect myself and ignore the pain and longing of the thirst. (507)

With its erotic and incestuous undertones, Bella’s description of Charlie in this passage rivals the most enticing of food advertisements. By resisting what she desires so deeply, the heroine highlights her ability to distinguish between good and bad forms of consumption, which as Imelda Whelehan argues in *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (2000), is a fundamental practice that women must learn in order to navigate the post-feminist cultural landscape in which some types of consumption (like that of retail products) are valorized, while others (like that of food products) are vilified (7). In this final test of willpower, Bella shows complete self-awareness and self-control over her desire to consume, suggesting that, by the end of the series, the protagonist has become master over her own hunger.

Rather than causing her pain or frustration, these efforts to be a “good vampire” provide the heroine with deep personal gratification. Bella describes the challenge to restrict as “worth it” to feel “in control” (425), highlighting the mental and emotional reward of overcoming her body’s desires. The Cullen family’s responses to Bella’s transformation extend this sense of fulfilment. While Edward declares his “shock” and “amazement” (420) at Bella’s extraordinary willpower, as highlighted at the start of this chapter, Edward’s brother Jasper Cullen, too, declares that Bella’s “calm” and “cool” attitude towards her food cravings is “not natural” (442). Although Edward explains that, after much practice, mature vampires *can* learn to “prioritize and manage” (485) their hunger as Bella has done, the heroine’s superior mental strength helps her secure this achievement right from the start of her new vampire life. Bella and the Cullens initially struggle to determine whether this extraordinary capability stems from a supernatural gift, or from Bella’s own will and determination; however, when the heroine discovers her true gift (in the *Twilight* universe vampires can only have one) – her ability to metaphysically shield other vampires’ powers – she confirms that her advanced self-restriction is “just a product of good preparation – *focus and attitude*” (598 original emphasis), suggesting that anyone could achieve the same result, given the right disposition. Against seemingly insurmountable odds, then, Bella uses sheer willpower to restrain her wild and insatiable newborn hunger, forcing her mind to overcome her body’s deepest cravings. In so doing, Bella solidifies her status as the ultimate restrictor who, despite her masculine strength and willpower, remains the epitome of outward feminine perfection.

Accompanying Bella’s mastery over her appetites at the end of the series is her ascension to self-actualization. Near the end of Meyer’s final novel, Bella makes a narrative statement that serves as a climax to her transformative character arc:

After eighteen years of mediocrity, I was pretty used to being average. I realized now that I'd long ago given up any aspirations of shining at anything. I just did the best with what I had, never quite fitting in to my world. [...] I was amazing now – to [the Cullens] and to myself. It was like I had been born to be a vampire. The idea made me want to laugh, but it also made me want to sing. I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined. (524)

Like the individual with anorexia who ironically discovers “a way to become safe, to rise above it all” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 179) through her restriction rituals, Bella rises above her own humanity and finds her “true place in the world” as a virtuous restrictor, wherein death of the flesh leads to eternal undeath. Bella's undead subjectivity mirrors that of the anorexic sufferer's, for whom life transcends the body: as Heywood writes, “The denial of feminine flesh makes [the sufferer] godlike both in her difference from other female corpses invoking death and decay and in her ostensible participation in the ‘eternal’” (48). Although anorexia involves the slow and painful process of self-starvation, and up to 15% of sufferers do in fact die as a result of their illness and its complications (Parliament of Canada 10), a common experience of sufferers throughout the illness is a feeling of invulnerability (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 153).

Accordingly, in disciplining, erasing, and ultimately transcending her body, Bella gains entry into the privileged world of the “eternal” through which she can ostensibly rise above it all, even death – a fact highlighted by the final lines of the *Twilight* series, which leave readers with an image of the protagonist living on in undead bliss with Edward, “forever and forever and forever” (*Breaking Dawn* 754).

The *Twilight* Series' Impact

Reading Meyer's novels through the lens of anorexia therefore offers new ways of understanding the texts' contested gender politics and neo-Victorian qualities by shedding light on how the Victorian era's culture of anorexia – expressed through the valorization of slenderness, asceticism and body discipline – continues to pervade contemporary post-feminist vampire texts and mainstream media for girls more broadly. As the *Twilight* series exemplifies, while today's sympathetic and self-controlled female vampire may appear antithetical to her vulgar and monstrous Victorian counterpart, her character's aspirational virtue merely masks the reproduction of feminine gender ideals rooted in Victorian anorexic logic. Despite the fact that Meyer has denied having read *Dracula*, similarities between the two texts persist. Both were accused of being “bad” literature at the time of their publication, have become enduringly popular, and most importantly, reflect the sexist subconscious of their respective cultural moments. What this chapter has demonstrated is that, through the figure of the female vampire, the two texts also share a troubling reification of anorexic values; indeed, although Bella and Stoker's Lucy seem worlds apart – one, a monstrous corpse, and the other, a model action heroine – when studied through the critical feminist framework of eating disorders, both characters epitomize the anorexic underpinnings of their contemporary moments.

Meyer herself has been dismissive of her series' impact on its largely young female audience. On her website, the author claims: “I never meant for [Bella's] fictional choices to be a model for anyone else's real life choices. She is a character in a story, nothing more or less. On top of that, this is not even realistic fiction, it's a fantasy with vampires and werewolves, so no one *could* ever make her exact choices” (para. 33). As has been proven time and time again, however, through popular media texts, young people build and re-build their subjectivities,

gender identities, desires, beliefs, and worldviews. Although fans of Meyer's series are not all passive readers, and have indeed begun speaking back to the texts' anorexic ideologies – a topic explored in further depth in Chapter 5 – it is nonetheless vital that the *Twilight* series' cultural and ideological impact be attended to, particularly considering the franchise's deep influence on the popular culture landscape broadly, and girl culture specifically.

The *Twilight* series was highly parodied in the media for its melodramatic prose and zealous teen fan base, but in their book *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise* (2010), Melissa Click and her colleagues assert that the series' influence – comparable to other boy-oriented, “well-respected” franchises like *Lord of the Rings*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Harry Potter* – positively changed, “and will continue to change how the industry approaches girls' and women's media” (6). This has since been proven through the enduring popularity of both the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* franchises, each designed to attract the same “fangirl” demographic that drove the *Twilight* series' enormous success from the first novel's publication in 2005 to the final film's release in 2012. Granted that the headstrong heroines of these latter franchises, Katniss Everdeen and Tris Prior, in many ways diverge from Bella's character, whose overemotional characterization prompted readers to call for “stronger, less vapid” protagonists with “goals beyond falling in love” as Kelsey McKinney writes in *Vox* (para. 19), as Chapters 3 and 4 will show, an increase in supposed “strength” and independence in YA protagonists is not always fundamentally progressive, and should not be embraced uncritically as markers of feminist virtue.

CHAPTER 3

The Angel in the Faction: Martyrdom and Mascochism in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* Series

It is better to scream than cry, so I scream and slam my heel into the wall behind me. My foot bounces off, and I kick again, so hard my heel throbs. I kick again and again and again, then pull back and throw my left shoulder into the wall. The impact makes the wound in my right shoulder burn like it got stuck with a hot poker. Water trickles in to the bottom of the tank [...] I uncurl my fists and drop my hands. I am not a coward [...] I breathe in. The water will wash my wounds clean. I breathe out. My mother submerged me in water when I was a baby, to give me to God.”

– Roth, *Divergent* 437-38

Near the end of *Divergent* (2011), book one of Veronica Roth's YA speculative fiction trilogy, sixteen-year-old Beatrice “Tris” Prior wakes up inside a glass tank that is slowly filling with water. In her unnamed city, set in a futuristic Chicago in which citizens are born into one of five factions – Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the kind), Erudite (the intelligent), Abnegation (the selfless), and Candor (the honest) – Tris discovers she is “Divergent,” meaning she possess traits belonging to multiple factions at once. At the climax of the novel, the protagonist is captured by members of the ruling Erudite faction, who feel threatened by Divergents' ability to transcend the social categories that govern their society. Since drowning is one of Tris' most primal fears, the Erudite seek to study the heroine's unique and “divergent” response to her circumstance in the glass tank before ultimately letting her perish. Although Tris is ultimately saved by Natalie Prior – her mother and fellow undercover Divergent – the protagonist's response to drowning in this scene nonetheless reveals two key characteristics that constitute Tris' heroism over the totality of Roth's series: first, her uncanny ability to control pain and fear (along with other corporeal responses) with her mind, and second, her purity and saintliness, evidenced here by the heroine's focus on becoming “clean” and close to “God” through her death.

In her study titled, “Self-Starvation and Binge-Purging: Embodied Selfhood/Sainthood” (1994), medical sociologist Liz Eckermann found a paradox narrated in the experiences of individuals with eating disorders who sought selfhood by mobilizing the postmodern concept of the body-as-project, and simultaneous sainthood through acts of body denial. As elucidated in the previous chapter, Anna Krugovoy Silver’s book *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002) locates this selfhood/sainthood paradox in the Victorian era, whose qualities demarcating perfect femininity, Silver argues, created a “culture” of anorexia that defined the nineteenth century. Epitomized by Coventry Patmore’s vision of the “Angel in the House,” the ideal Victorian woman was one who restricted her various physical appetites, and was, by nature or self-discipline, less libidinous than men. With the feminist movements of the twentieth century radically altering the discourses surrounding women’s rights and positions in the public sphere, Patmore’s fragile and domestic “Angel” may seem far removed from today’s image of the ideal woman. However, as has been elucidated over the course of Chapters 1 and 2, many of the anorexic qualities that defined Victorian femininity can still be found in twenty-first century modernized conceptions of feminine perfection, which have re-packaged problematic traits as qualities of the now-liberated woman. For example, while the Victorian emphasis on female fragility and domesticity has been replaced with an emphasis on female “strength” and economic independence in the public sphere, what Silver defines as the top qualities of Victorian anorexic culture – an aesthetic validation of female slenderness; understanding of the disciplined body as emblematic of self-control; view of the perfect women as one who restricts her various appetites; and belief in the thin body as symbolic of self-mastery, spiritual transcendence, and cultural/economic capital (27) – continue to influence dominant conceptions of ideal femininity today. Thus, as this chapter explores, throughout Roth’s YA trilogy, Tris’ saintliness is

corporealized through a variety of anorexic patterns, which include the heroine's mental response to pain, repeated refusal to eat, and "small," "sickly," and "childlike" (*Allegiant* 415) body.

In the wake of Stephenie Meyer's hugely successful *Twilight* series came an explosion of New Heroine franchises targeting the newly sought-after market of young female speculative fiction fans, and Roth's *Divergent* novels – *Divergent* (2011), *Insurgent* (2012), and *Allegiant* (2013) – emerged from this group of female-led narratives as top sellers in the YA fiction, and later, film markets. Although like many YA series, neither Roth's books nor films garnered much critical praise upon their respective releases (or for that matter, since), the *Divergent* series' widespread commercial appeal and success on the teen awards circuit solidified its reigning status in YA media nonetheless.¹ Roth's books have been widely compared to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010),² which launched just prior to *Divergent*'s release, as both series reflect, and contributed to, the mania for teen action heroines that swept mainstream girl culture in the late 2000s. Although the *Twilight* phenomenon helped create the conditions for these franchises to come to fruition, in many ways, the popularity of the latter series stemmed from the ways in which they departed from their vampire predecessor. Unlike

¹ *Divergent* won the 2014 Teen Choice Awards for "Choice Movie: Action/Adventure," "Choice Movie Actor: Action/Adventure (Theo James)," "Choice Movie Actress: Action/Adventure (Shailene Woodley)," and the 2014 MTV Movie Award for "Favorite Character: Tris."

² In addition to numerous fan sites dedicated the topic, see Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark's collection of essays, *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy* (2012), as well as journalist Susan Dominus' *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (2011), which asserts that the *Divergent* franchise can be attributed to "the wild success" of Collins' trilogy (BR17).

Meyer's neo-Victorian melodrama, Roth's and Collins' dystopias are politically driven,³ with their heroines fronting civil wars that dismantle their societies' oppressive power structures. Although like the *Twilight* series, both the *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* narratives feature heterosexual teen romances at their centers, the active subjectivities of heroines Tris Prior and Katniss Everdeen have shielded them from receiving the kind of backlash received by *Twilight*'s Bella Swan, who as shown in Chapter 2, has been criticized for her weaker and more passive characterization, both in academic and popular discourse.

Scholarly criticism of the *Divergent* series' gender politics – which like mainstream media, has often aligned the series with Collins' *The Hunger Games* franchise – has been largely positive in tone, praising the trilogy's representation of Tris: a brave, strong, and independent teen girl protagonist. In *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (2015), Jeffery A. Brown argues that by actively invoking change in their societies while embodying aspects of ideal femininity, “girl revolutionary heroines” Tris and Katniss are able to subvert the “limiting pitfalls” of post-feminism (such as consumerism and overt sexualization), while remaining attractive to young female audiences who continue to be influenced by post-feminist sensibilities (171). Likewise, in her literary analysis of Tris and Katniss' “rebellious subjectivities,” Miranda Green-Barteet applauds the heroines' “revolutionary” and gender-fluid attributes, as does Nancy Jennings, whose feminist literary analysis of the *Divergent* series praises the “strength” of Tris' character in particular, viewing her as a role model for today's

³ In their Introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan define the dystopia genre as a “narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance” taking place in a “nightmarish” society that in some way, resembles our own (5). The genre is epitomized by such classic speculative fiction texts as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

girls and young women (111). For these scholars, and other critics who regard Tris' character as an exemplar of female empowerment,⁴ the protagonist's aspirational heroism stems from her ability to remain strong in the face of adversity, and actively construct her own destiny, all while remaining fundamentally feminine.

This chapter argues that, despite its protagonist's seemingly progressive qualities, like Meyer's *Twilight* series before it, Roth's *Divergent* trilogy continues to perpetuate a conception of female heroism that hinges on anorexic logic, as Tris transforms from a soft and vulnerable misfit into a hard-bodied and courageous action heroine over the course of the narrative. In so doing, this work explores how the seemingly progressive YA dystopia perpetuates underlying conservative ideologies – a branch of research that is growing in contemporary literature scholarship.⁵ While Edward Cullen serves as the Christ figure in the *Twilight* series, “saving” Bella from her wild and sinful feminine appetites, in the *Divergent* series, it is the protagonist herself who functions as the sacrificial, spiritual martyr. Tris' self-deprecating battle between

⁴ See also YA literature scholar Sara K. Day, whose chapter ““Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopia Novels” (2014) applauds Roth's portrayal of Tris' sexual journey, which Day argues provides the protagonist with “a new sense of strength in both her personal relationships and in her interactions with society at large” (86); youth literature scholar Beth Brendler's article, “Blurring Gender Lines in Readers' Advisory for Young Adults” (2014), which posits Tris as a gender-bending, and therefore positive role model for young readers; film writer Allie Funk, whose 2016 *Bustle* article calls the *Divergent* series “the most feminist franchise around”; and feminist blogger Anne Theriault, whose 2015 piece in *Huffington Post* pointedly remarks that *Divergent* possesses “some of the most revolutionary words ever written in a young adult novel” (para. 1) in its portrayal of the heroine's outer appearance.

⁵ For example, see Balaka Basu's chapter in *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* (2013), which argues the *Divergent* series, despite its surface message of celebrating individual difference, purports a message of “fitting in with an already extant *type* of self” (19); Philip Reeve, whose critique of twenty-first century dystopias demonstrates how these texts turn “to the rugged individualism of the frontier spirit, or a meek retreat to preindustrial ways of life” (36) as answers to today's complex problems; and the respective works of Mary J. Couzelis, Grace L. Dillon, and Lynette James, which all call attention to the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in contemporary speculative fiction.

body and mind, which logically ends in a deadly act of self-sacrifice and her symbolic ascension into sainthood, crystallizes the protagonist's self-actualization and status as girl hero. As this chapter will reveal, the *Divergent* series' post-feminist discourse of individualism, reverence towards the hard and thin female body, valorization of self-discipline and masochism, and depiction of the martyr as symbolic of self-actualization, all work to perpetuate the problematic logic of anorexia that constitutes the figure of the twenty-first century New Heroine today.

The *Divergent* Series' Post-Feminist Rhetoric

Challenging the popular claim that Tris presents a more responsible model for girls than most post-feminist heroines – who are often portrayed as vapid consumers, particularly in the genre of teen chick lit – this chapter begins by arguing that Tris does, in fact, adhere to many of the characteristics of the typical post-feminist subject, whose outer appearance and transformational makeover correlate directly with her subjecthood. As explored in Chapter 1, post-feminist media culture, which exploits the language of second- and third-wave feminism to disseminate its values, relies on several core themes related to female subjectivity, including a focus on the self over the collective, understanding of consumerism, hypersexualization, and bodily discipline as being representative of personal empowerment, and emphasis on the overall “safety” of gender essentialism within postmodern contexts. For girls in particular, the body is typically the site of signification onto which these post-feminist values are inscribed, informing girls' subjectivity, worldviews, and identity formation. Despite the *Divergent* series' seemingly progressive surface message about the importance of being unique and autonomous – of being “divergent” – Roth's series wields this post-feminist sensibility that equates girls' power and subjectivity with their neoliberal individualism and sexual desirability from its opening chapters,

which employ the discourse of “choice” to privilege individual self-improvement over communal care. In Tris’ dystopian society, although citizens are born into one of the five factions, they may choose to join a different faction at age sixteen during a process called the Choosing Ceremony, and it is at this point in Tris’ life that the series begins. Born into Abnegation – a highly feminized faction, defined by its qualities of community, nurturance, vulnerability, and softness – Tris is expected to participate in “selfless” activities, and conversely, to avoid practices considered to be selfish throughout day-to-day life.

The first third of *Divergent*’s narrative thus focuses on Tris’ disdain towards Abnegation’s value system and the limitations it places on its subjects’ independence. Both the book and film versions of the text employ a mirror motif to symbolize the heroine’s desire for individual self-determinism, as exemplified by the scene of the hallucinogenic Aptitude Test, through which Tris discovers her unique yet dangerous status as Divergent. During the test, Tris finds herself in a hall of mirrors, facing her own reflection, and later that evening, in the film adaptation of *Divergent*, she is shown staring at her own reflection again in her spoon, metaphorically confirming both her desire for individuality, as well as her need to employ her own willpower to fulfill that desire (00:14:22); as the Aptitude Test facilitator explains to Tris upon disclosing the heroine’s Divergence: “The test didn’t work on you. You have to trust yourself” (00:12:25). While Tris’ desire for individuality may be read as resistance to her society’s metanarrative of conformity expressed through its mandatory and prescriptive faction system, rather than questioning the system itself, Tris merely resists Abnegation’s emphasis on selflessness as it relates to her own physical appearance and individual ability to succeed. To be selfless, the narrative suggests, is to impede self-improvement, particularly as it pertains to one’s outer appearance; indeed, for Tris, one of the hardest parts of belonging to Abnegation is the

limited amount of time she is allowed to look at herself in the mirror.

This post-feminist turn away from the political and toward the self influences Tris' decision to leave Abnegation (the selfless) and join Dauntless (the brave), where she asserts her newly acquired independence to focus on her outer appearance. While prior to the faction change, Tris is portrayed as clumsy, frumpy, and "stiff" – "My slacks are too long, and I've never been that graceful" (*Divergent* 4) – upon her transition, Tris begins a process of self-transformation that ultimately remodels her into one of the quintessential archetypes described by Diane Negra in *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (2009): the girl who has "lost herself" but achieves self-actualization through consumer behaviours and a beautifying makeover (5). For example, in her inaugural task as a Dauntless initiate, Tris volunteers to be the first recruit to jump off of a roof into a dark bottomless chasm. As she prepares for the task by undressing, the process becomes sexualized within the context of the scene: "I undo the hooks from collar to hem, and pull it off my shoulders. Beneath it, I wear a gray T-shirt. It is tighter than any other clothes I own, and no one has ever seen me in it before...I hear catcalls and shouts behind me" (58). As she jumps into the chasm, the shedding of Tris' clothes comes to symbolize her newfound bravery. Lacking critical commentary on the catcalls and shouts the protagonist receives, the text thereby suggests a correlation between personal autonomy and feminine desirability, both of which Tris begins to acquire upon landing the jump, asserting: "I can be remade here" (60).

Divergent continues to rely on post-feminism's self-actualizing makeover trope as Tris trains to become an official member of her new faction. The heroine describes her first shopping experience as a Dauntless initiate, through which she obtains a sexy new wardrobe: "I stand in front of a mirror in the clothing place wearing a knee-length black dress. The skirt isn't full, but

it isn't stuck to my thighs, either. [Christina] slips the tie from my hair and I shake it out of its braid so it hangs wavy over my shoulders" (86). Although as a result of her upbringing, the protagonist initially experiences discomfort with her new look and retains throughout the series her hallmark quality of modesty – a defining characteristic that will be explored later in this chapter – Tris soon begins to embrace her more provocative appearance and participation in consumer culture (figure 4). When her parents travel from Abnegation to visit the Dauntless compound, Tris brushes off fears that they will frown upon her exposed skin, declaring, "Who cares if they approve?" (177), and by the end of Roth's first novel, proclaims that she finds herself "enjoying" her increasingly sexualized style (246). The problem with Tris' aesthetic makeover as exemplified in these scenes has little to do with the heroine's participation in the world of fashion or beauty, or her increased sexual appeal outright. Rather, it is her character's embodiment of the post-feminist sensibility that equates neoliberal individualism and sexual desirability with one's virtue and autonomy that proves problematic, subverting the narrative's surface message about the importance of "divergence" from the norm. In the *Divergent* series, personal empowerment is framed as a matter of choice; only by choosing to mould the body to conform to heteronormative images of ideal femininity can the girl-as-hero emerge.



Fig. 4. The progression of Tris Prior's aesthetic. Left: "Publicity still of Shailene Woodley"; *The Movie Stills Database*; 5 Feb. 2014, Web. Center: "Publicity still of Shailene Woodley & Maggie Q"; *The Movie Stills Database*; 21 Mar. 2014, Web. Right: "Divergent Wallpaper"; *Feel Grafix*; 7 Sept. 2015, Web.

Visualizing the Anorexic Body

The *Divergent* series' post-feminist discourse is significant within the context of anorexia as Tris' post-feminist attributes are – at least in part – what ascribe her character's anorexic qualities to model femininity. Contrary to critical celebrations of Tris as a progressive and/or feminist icon, I argue that the protagonist's newly gained independence, bravery, and desirability – defining qualities of the twenty-first century "empowered" woman – work to mask her character's embodiment of longstanding anorexic values: a guise that, as this dissertation has been arguing, characterizes the figure of the New Heroine at large. One way that Tris' character accomplishes this, aesthetically, is by adopting a look akin to "death chic" – the term Joshua Gunn coins in his article, "Dark Admissions: Gothic Subculture and the Ambivalence of Misogyny and Resistance" (2007), to describe the "fetishization of a skinny, feminine corporeality" (58) and "pale, deathlike pallor" (57) that defines twenty-first century Goth subculture. Although Gunn does not tie death chic to anorexia specifically, he does posit the

aesthetic as a modern-day reincarnation of the Victorian period's invalid ideal (57), through which the fragile and slender female form came to represent the pinnacle of female beauty. In his theorization of Goth's gendered dimensions, Gunn further asserts that death chic reifies "cultural misogyny" (59) by rendering the "deathlike" female body a desired yet "diseased object" (58).⁶ Gunn's correlation of death chic with Victorian femininity and cultural misogyny points to the ways in which the contemporary aesthetic's negation of the corporeal realm perpetuates some of the same anorexic ideologies as its nineteenth century antecedent.

Upon joining Dauntless, Tris leaves behind Abnegation's soft/neutral colours, attire and attributes for her new faction's hard-core gothic aesthetic, which influences everything from members' personas and attire, to the faction compound's dark, cavernous setting. The heroine's makeover, then, not only transforms her into a sexualized dream of action heroine perfection, but also a gothic badass, who despite her modest and conservative values, sports fresh tattoos and dark black makeup/attire (figure 4). These dark dimensions of Tris' transformation adhere to post-feminist scripts that call for women's resistance to the mainstream, but only on a superficial level, as noted by both Negra (4) and Whelehan ("Remaking Feminism" 162) in their critical assessments of post-feminist culture. Tris further conforms to Gunn's notion of death chic through her "skinny" (*Divergent* 168) and "sickly pale" (*Allegiant* 415) bodily aesthetic, which is not represented in the *Divergent* film franchise, but referenced repeatedly in the book series. Throughout Roth's novels, the heroine often compares her physique to a bird's, stating that she is "made narrow and small as if for taking flight, built straight-waisted and fragile" (*Insurgent* 49). Tris' corporeal aesthetic thereby reflects a modernized, gothic version of the the invalid feminine

⁶ See also Ross Haenfler's book, *Goths, Gamers, & Grrrls: Deviance and Youth Subcultures* (2010), which examines how sexism and male privilege remain deeply ingrained within Goth subculture despite its rhetoric of mainstream resistance.

ideal that was deeply influential to Victorian anorexic culture.

The anorexic aesthetic of Tris' dark, fragile, and slender appearance is further problematized by her body's perpetual state of pre-pubescence in Roth's books. While Katheryn Wright posits from a media studies perspective that Tris' slim pre-teen body may provide "a contrast to her inner strength," or represent "a type of blank-slate androgyny emphasizing that she is free to decide her future" (125) – when examined through the lens of anorexia, the heroine's small and undeveloped figure has different implications. Although the nuanced significance of puberty is a contentious issue in eating disorders research, with some scholars de-emphasizing the idea that anorexia centers on a desire to undo puberty's effects, and others focusing on the impact of sexual development on anorexia's etiology, scholarly consensus accepts that many individuals with anorexia have, at least in their own narratives, expressed anxiety about the physical, social, and sexual changes that accompany puberty, and a desire to shed, what Susan Bordo calls, the "femaleness" (*Unbearable Weight* 8) of their bodies. The empirical studies of eating disorders researchers Peter Churven and Megan Warin (amongst others) have also explored the impact of sexual development on anorexia etiology, demonstrating that food refusal, for many individuals with anorexia, is often used as a means to escape puberty's influence on the body.⁷

It is significant, then, that readers are repeatedly reminded of Tris' pre-pubescence throughout the *Divergent* novels, with both the heroine herself and other characters in the text continuously confirming that she is built like "a child" (*Divergent* 169; 324). Tris' lack of physical/sexual development does not stop her character from being sexually desired, however,

⁷ See Chapter 1 for further discussion about anorexia as a disavowal of the reproductive female body.

as in the wake of her makeover, she attracts the eye of Dauntless leader Tobias “Four” Eaton, and remains popular amongst other male members of the Dauntless crew. In this way, Tris embodies the impossible contradiction that both post-feminism and anorexia ask of their female constituents: to disavow and transcend those parts of their female bodies deemed “too much” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 161) – that is, their abject and volatile markers of sexual difference – while retaining those aspects of femininity that render women desirable in dominant heteronormative culture. Over the course of her character arc, Tris paradoxically grows and develops in a way that increases her attractiveness, all without *actually* growing or developing: she remains instead a “small” and “childlike” model of anorexic femininity.

Tris’ body does change, however, through its process of external hardening. Although semiotically, the protagonist’s bodily aesthetic reflects many of the same qualities as the nineteenth century’s invalid aesthetic (i.e. pale, small, thin), as a post-feminist reincarnation of this Victorian ideal, Tris’ body must also (ironically) signify female “strength.” Thus the heroine’s makeover, in addition to increasing her sexy gothic appeal, also increases her body’s muscularity – a common trope within teen action heroine mythology, wherein the protagonist is “made over” into her position as hero through a process of mental and physical conditioning. While scholars like Brown and Wright applaud this trend of the New Heroine as a seemingly progressive alternative to the beautifying makeover trope of post-feminist media, I argue that, at least in Tris’ case, the physical training process reifies the Cartesian notion of bodily punishment as a path to inner strength and selfhood that constitutes anorexic principles.

From the beginning of Roth’s series, Tris covets Dauntless members’ hyper-athleticism; the camera lingers on the protagonist’s facial expressions in the *Divergent* film’s opening scenes as she stares longingly at the Dauntless sprinting past her, who also climb dangerous objects and

physically compete with one another. Although when she initially joins her new faction, Tris has trouble keeping up with the level of physical activity that she once revered from afar, as her self-confidence builds, so too does the heroine's physicality. Tris dedicates herself to the faction's intense training regimen, which she extends beyond its normal, rigorous training hours, to perfect her skills, and as a result, begins to see the effects on her body soon after: "I stand in front of the mirror. I see muscles that I couldn't see before in my arms, legs, and stomach. I pinch my side, where a layer of fat used to hint at curves to come. Nothing. Dauntless initiation has stolen whatever softness my body had. Is that good, or bad? At least I am stronger than I was" (*Divergent* 167-168). Although Tris does contemplate the significance of her body's changes here – "Is that good, or bad?" – within the context of the narrative, her question comes across as ingenuous, or at the very least, naïve. Of course Tris' hardened physique is a "good" thing, the text suggests, as it allows her to enter the powerful realm of masculine strength that she has always longed to join, while remaining intrinsically feminine and sexually desirable. It is only by hardening her already-thin exterior and hindering her body's development of "curves to come" that Tris is able to gain the strength, power, and confidence required to step into her new status as action heroine, catalyzing the series' entire sequence of events, as well as the heroine's romantic relationship with Tobias Eaton. Although in her Foucauldian analysis of the body politics of female muscles, Honi Fern Haber demonstrates how the image of the muscled woman *can* be used to call attention to the artificiality of gender norms by subverting the connection between muscles and masculinity, in the *Divergent* series, Tris rids her body of feminine fat without actually breaching the gender binary. In other words, Tris' muscles are not extreme or subversive enough to be considered transgressive in the *Divergent* franchise, following Haber's theoretical framework. As Tobias remarks at the end of Roth's trilogy, Tris' "wiry" (*Allegiant*

173) muscles have transformed her “thin, fragile form” (423) into one that is still small and slim, but simply hardened (423). In these ways, the heroine’s death chic aesthetic, combined with her transformed physical state from soft and vulnerable to thin, hard and powerful, corporealize the abjection of feminine flesh that constitutes anorexia.

The signification of Tris’ physical transformation is augmented by the *Divergent* series’ thematic moralization of body fat, which manifests through the text’s frequent juxtapositions between the protagonist’s body and those of the series’ larger female characters. As comparative literature scholar Dorothy Karlin notes, in YA novels for girls, no matter the author’s intention, fat and obesity are still usually presented as the obese person’s fault, with weight serving as “a visible and irrefutable marker” (82) of characters’ internal and external deficiencies. Karlin’s remarks ring true for Roth’s texts, in which overweight characters are used as foils to better highlight the thin protagonist’s goodness and “coolness” at various points in the story. An example of this phenomenon occurs during the scene of Visiting Day in the Dauntless compound, when Tris describes her irritation as “a short, round woman” gets in her way: “I twitch, resisting the urge to smack her” (*Divergent* 183). Although this fleeting moment may be read as an authorial attempt to accentuate Tris’ short temper, it comes at the cost of villifying the overweight female character, whose body works to signify her slow and obtuse nature.

While the “round” woman featured on Visiting Day is presented as merely irksome, other overweight female characters in the *Divergent* series are portrayed as explicitly evil. In her description of Jeanine – Erudite’s leader and the series’ primary villain – Tris emphasizes her enemy’s fat, stating: “[s]he wears a blue dress that hugs her body from shoulder to knee, revealing a layer of pudg around her middle” (428), and, “[s]he perches on the edge of the desk, her skirt pulling away from her knees, which are crossed with stretch marks” (430). Similar to

the nameless woman on Visiting Day, whose “roundness” serves a caricaturizing function, the description of Jeanine’s “pudge” and “stretch marks” serves no purpose in the narrative other than to signify her character’s innate evil. The most explicit cases of the series’ moralization of fat are presented through the character of Molly: a fellow Dauntless initiate who acts as Tris’ nemesis during the Dauntless training process. Molly’s nickname, “The Tank,” stems from her status and stature as Peter’s – Tris’ peer and the series’ secondary villain – “slightly more feminine-looking minion” (92). The heroine describes Molly as having “broad shoulders, bronze skin, and a bulbous nose” (92), explaining to readers that if Molly’s “chin was bigger, it might balance out her nose, but it is weak and almost recedes into her neck” (127). Descriptions like these reinforce sexist and racist cultural discourses that frame large, brown skinned, masculine looking, and/or conventionally unattractive women as vulgar and Other. The dehumanization of Molly’s character continues as Tris repeatedly points to Molly’s “ugly laugh, all snorting and shaking shoulders” (121), as well as her “unpleasant noise[s]” (197), which include “snorting” (197), “grumbling” (197) and “groaning” (172). Tris concludes that Molly is “more animal-sounding than human” (172-73).

My argument here is not one of censorship; in a utopian, body positive media climate, characters of all shapes and sizes would be portrayed in many different roles, both on screen and in text. It is the evocation of a character’s body fat for the sole purpose of emphasizing her monstrosity, and fuelling many of the dystopian aspects of the novel, that proves problematic in the case of Molly, Jeanine, and other female characters in Roth’s novels whose bodily descriptors are used to accentuate their particular grotesqueness. That the film adaptations of the *Divergent* series largely avoid the books’ pitfall, both by eliminating discussions of characters’ weights from the narrative, and by avoiding extreme contrasts in the body shapes of its actors

(i.e. Tris, played by actor Shaileen Woodley, is not portrayed as markedly “thin,” (Allegiant 423), “flat-chested” (Allegiant 415), or “childlike” (*Divergent* 169) compared to other female characters in the film, including Molly and Jeanine), demonstrates just how gratuitous these physical descriptors are in Roth’s original text. In pointedly juxtaposing the righteous heroine’s thin physique with the fatter, more vulgar bodies of her foils, the *Divergent* books thereby reinforce damaging cultural correlations between fat and morality that inform hegemonic perceptions of gender and the body.⁸

Modesty, Self-Restriction, and Emotional Control

In addition to Tris’ physical look, the *Divergent* series also reifies anorexic rationality through the heroine’s restrictive appetites, both sexual and physical. From the start of the trilogy, Tris’ fraught relationship with sex mirrors that of anorexic sufferers, many of whom, as Megan Warin documents in her ethnographic study of anorexia, use food restriction as a protective mechanism against what they perceive to be their abject sexuality. Wanting to be “out of the grasping reach of others” (151), these individuals employ anorexic rituals of cleansing, emptying, and purifying the body as a means to squelch the perceived threat posed by certain processes of relatedness – such as sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and relationship building – which they view as “disgusting, threatening, and transgressive” (151). This anorexic emphasis on restraining the sexual self plays out in many YA fictions for girls, which as YA literature scholar

⁸ In her study, “How Big Girls Become Fat Girls: The Cultural Production of Problem Eating and Physical Inactivity” (2009), body studies scholar Carla Rice examines how hegemonic anti-fat attitudes and discourses in culture are productive of problematic eating and physical activity behaviours; for example, for the Canadian women in her study, weight stereotyping manifested in “a tendency to avoid physical activity and adopt problematic eating” as well as an inability to claim a “credible” (99) gendered identity.

Beth Younger asserts, often depict female sexuality “as a threatening force” or “primitive, taboo drive that must be regulated” (45). This is especially problematic, Younger argues, because YA fiction serves as a “touchstone” (45) for contemporary conceptions of teenaged sexuality at large. Rosalind Gill, in her theorization of post-feminist sensibility, likewise explains how post-feminism’s rhetoric of self-discipline and restriction permeates dominant discourses of female sexuality: “Girls and women are interpellated as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects, as well as for pleasing men sexually, protecting against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, defending their own sexual reputations, and taking care of men’s self-esteem” (5). As Gill’s words suggest, the deep-rooted contradictions that constitute post-feminist ethics manifest in hegemonic conceptions of female sexuality that ask women to regulate their sexual impulses while remaining sexually desirable in the heteronormative cultural context. Combined with post-feminism’s neoliberal emphasis on “choice,” this version of femininity “involving strict adherence to rules, rationing oneself and not displaying any needs” must also be “freely chosen” (11).

Following these YA and post-feminist media conventions, in the *Divergent* trilogy, processes of relatedness are likewise constructed as risky and threatening, especially as they pertain to sex. For example, when Tris discovers she is expected to sleep, change, and use the bathroom in a mixed-gender setting at the Dauntless compound, she becomes disconcerted, expressing envy toward her “dark-skinned” (*Divergent* 51) best friend Christina, who walks into Dauntless sleeping quarters wearing only a t-shirt: “I wish, suddenly, that I could stare so boldly at someone with hardly any clothes on, but I would never be able to do that” (131). As readers, we are not meant to take the protagonist’s words at face value here. Following white supremacist

conceptions of non-white bodies as being more sexualized and provocative than their white counterparts, Christina functions as Tris' more outspoken and immodest sidekick, whose self-serving and sarcastic traits are consistently rebuked. She and Tris' relationship thereby exemplifies education scholar Teri Sucio's conception of the "good girls versus other girls" trope in YA books for girls, which describes the oppositional roles of the white, beautiful, and unassuming "good girl," and her contrasting, subordinate best friend. In accordance with Sucio's argument, while young female readers (in particular) may relate to Tris' admiration of her bolder friend Christina, the protagonist is clearly presented as the more virtuous and admirable of the two characters – "*I would never be able to do that*" (my emphasis). Just as Tris' moral goodness is highlighted through juxtaposition with the series' large-bodied female characters, here, the protagonist's virtue, whiteness, and purity is likewise emphasized through juxtaposition with Christina's morally ambiguous lack of bodily inhibition.

The virtuous modesty that Tris exhibits in relation to Christina partially stems from the heroine's "wariness" towards touch, which is established in the series' opening chapters as Tris explains that she has been raised to regard "physical contact [as] powerful" (32). Later on, when Tris' friend and potential love interest, Al, puts his arm around her shoulder, like the anorexic women in Warin's ethnographic work, Tris "draws inward," explaining, "I have trained myself to pull away from all gestures of affection, because [my family] raised me to take them seriously" (192). Tris' dislike of touch progresses into a fear of sex as the narrative continues. During her final initiation test meant to reveal participants' most primal fears, in addition to drowning, Tris hallucinates a situation in which her new boyfriend Tobias tries to have sex with her: "I have been wary of affection all my life, but I didn't know how deep that wariness went [...] *This* is the fear I have no solutions for – a boy I like, who wants to...have sex with me?"

(393). Although Tris is embarrassed by the experience, which is projected to a group of her peers, her perception of sexual signification as threatening continues to be upheld throughout the series. For instance, when Tris asks her friend Lynn why the latter's head is shaved, Lynn explains that her baldness encourages men to view her as equal: "I figured, if I don't look so much like a girl, maybe they won't look at me that way" (*Insurgent* 173). Lynn goes on to tell Tris, "you do the same thing, but without the head shaving" (173), affirming the protagonist's enduring will to remain untouchable, outside the threatening realm of sexual signification, while (unlike the more politically radical character of Lynn) retaining her post-feminist markers of feminine desirability.

When Tris does enter into a romantic relationship with her mentor Tobias, rather than guiding the protagonist toward a state of sex-positivity or personal empowerment, the relationship serves as a heteronormative sanctuary from the terrifyingly liberal and borderless sexuality of the Dauntless dynamic, where unlike the heroine's former faction of Abnegation, members dress, sleep, and freely touch one another without judgement or consequence. Although Tobias is technically only two years older than Tris, his character functions as the metaphorical patriarch of the Dauntless faction, who enforces his position of power by reprimanding Tris and her friends when they act out of order. Enacting Eve Sedgwick's notion of the homosocial triangle, wherein relations between men rest on their common interest in, and objectification of, a single female counterpart, Tobias also asserts his patriarchal power over Tris through discussions with her brother, Caleb Prior, about his suitability as Tris' boyfriend (*Insurgent* 17; 29). Tobias' jurisdiction over Tris remains constant over the course of Roth's novels, as the former continually serves as the older and wiser voice of reason against the latter's rash ideas and impulses.

It is logical, then, that Tris requires Tobias' approval to inform her sexual subjectivity. Both characters are described as virgins in the first book of the series, but while Tris' virginity is constructed as a deep-rooted psychological fear of intimacy in need of correction – affirmed by the psychosomatic fear simulation she endures, above – Tobias' virginity is presented as the product of a wise and established personal belief system. Only when Tobias confirms to Tris that abstinence is their best course of action can Tris begin to relax in their relationship, embracing her boyfriend's conservative values as her own (*Divergent* 403). Following Gill's articulation of how post-feminist sexual subjectivity rests, not on male expectations and desires, but on women's internalization of the male gaze and subsequent expression of sexual autonomy (7), Tris' ability to overcome her fear of intimacy also relies on Tobias' approval of her death chic and pre-pubescent look. When Tris closes off emotionally with Tobias, conscious of her "small and flat-chested and sickly pale" (*Allegiant* 415) body, it is only through Tobias' coaching that the heroine can come to embrace the intimacy between them: "[he] whispers 'beautiful' against my stomach. And I believe him" (415). Just as the "good girl" in YA fiction must be attractive (to boys) without being aware of her own appeal (Sugio 18), in many ways, Tobias serves as Tris' mirror, communicating her allure to readers, while helping the heroine herself understand her own beauty and budding sexuality.

Importantly though, sex itself is absent from the *Divergent* series. In interviews, Roth has revealed that she purposely left it unclear as to whether or not Tobias and Tris ever consummate their relationship in her books (Kidd para. 8), a decision indicative of Roth's desire to de-emphasize her heroine's sexuality. The film adaptations of Roth's novels avoid this negation of female libido and sexual agency by showing Tris as an active agent in her relationship with Tobias; the pair do have sex in the film, *The Divergent Series: Insurgent* (2015) – an act that Tris

both initiates and takes pleasure in. Although YA heroines do not, and should not, need to be sexually active in order to self-actualize in their respective coming-of-age stories, by constructing Tris' flat-chested, virginal, and pre-pubescent body as a chaste and untouchable object of male desire, the *Divergent* novels perpetuate the contradictory logic of anorexia that seeks to keep its subjects outside the threatening realm of sexual signification – “out of the grasping reach of others” (Warin 151) – while simultaneously conforming to dominant, heteronormative standards of what constitutes acceptable femininity.

In addition to her limited sexual appetite, the *Divergent* series validates Tris' limited physical appetite as well. Although, as Fabio Parasecoli argues in his work on intersections between food and media, motifs of “ingestion and consumption” are often used in speculative fiction to critique the status quo and imagine “alternatives to present realities” (63),⁹ in Roth's novels, these motifs are employed to the opposite effect, reinforcing longstanding ideals of female appetite rather than upending them. Like Bella of the *Twilight* series, Tris uses food restriction as a coping mechanism in the *Divergent* trilogy by resisting consumption in moments of anxiety. For example, after her first aptitude test, Tris deals with her unease by avoiding eating – “I move my peas around with my fork” (Roth, *Divergent* 80) – while Christina makes a sandwich beside her; likewise, in *Insurgent*, when Tris wakes up in confinement, she refuses to eat the food given to her, indifferent towards her own hunger (359), and after her escape, only eats at Tobias' insistence (406). When Tris does choose to eat at her own will, her modest tastes extol the virtues of a restrictive appetite. In accordance with the central discourse of modern food culture – whose privileging of “nutrition” over “taste” began in the late eighteenth century

⁹ For example, Parasecoli argues food motifs are employed to critique hegemonic ideologies in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Samuel R. Delany's *Dahlgreen* (1974), and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993).

(Lupton 69), and continues to inform anorexic ideology today (Warin 102) – Tris’ eating habits enforce the problematic, hegemonic value system that aligns “good” foods with wellbeing, virtue and hygiene, and “bad” foods with sin, filth and abjection (17). These principles are reflected in Tris’ habit of eating solely “plain,” or “clean” foods, as exemplified during her first meal at the Dauntless compound. Appearing sceptical towards her plate, the heroine reveals that she has never before eaten a hamburger (*Divergent* 65), affirming that members of Abnegation typically eat “plain” foods, since “[e]xtravagance is considered self-indulgent” (66). In the film adaptation of this scene, Christina mocks Tris’ food choices: “I’m surprised Abnegation eats at all. Too selfish, right? No wonder you left” (00:31:30). While Christina’s remarks may be read as a critique of Abnegation’s restrictive dietary customs, which prevent members from eating tasty or calorie-rich foods, her character’s lack of restraint during the exchange – speaking with her mouth full and eating with her hands – calls into question her reliability on the subject, which has also been compromised throughout the narrative by way of her excessive consumption of both food and male attention: in other words, her position as the “other girl” within the good girl/other girl binary.

In addition to Christina, Tris’ modest eating habits are also juxtaposed against the foodways of other Dauntless members. For example, when Lynn “pil[es] her mashed potatoes onto a roll,” Tris admonishes her: “[d]on’t tell me you’re going to eat a mashed-potato sandwich” (*Insurgent* 239). Likewise, when Uriah brings his plate of beef stew and chocolate cake to the dining table, Tris comments that her own plate is “more sensibly stocked” (284), and shames her friend for his food choices: “you’re planning on eating that mountain of cake by yourself?” (285). Tris’ plain tastes and restrictive eating rituals, what she describes as eating “like a robot” (379), continuously stand out against other characters’ more disorderly diets – a

narrative device used to highlight the heroine's superior etiquette and propriety around food. In accordance with Pierre Bourdieu's theories of taste, which demonstrate how "form," "restraint," and "modest[y]" while dining provide the bourgeois subject with increased social capital over the working class subject who adopts a more "free-and-easy" way of eating (196), the sympathetic gaze rests on Tris in these scenes as she struggles – not to overcome her restrictive habits – but to negotiate the shifting terrain of her new social environment in which her modest (yet virtuous) tastes make her feel misunderstood by her (messier, more uncouth) peers. In these ways, then, the *Divergent* series' privileging of its heroine's restrictive sex- and food-related practices enforces anorexia's equation of bodily self-restriction with the qualities of virtue, propriety, and superiority over others.

The virtuous modesty and self-containment expressed by Tris' small body and restrictive appetites are further propelled in Roth's series through the privileging of control over emotion, which as elucidated in Chapters 1 and 2, is a key binary of anorexic ideology. Unlike Bella of the *Twilight* series, who must learn to control her wild emotions over the course of her journey to disembodied perfection, Tris epitomizes, what Leslie Jamison terms in her article "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain" (2014), the "post-wounded" archetype. Jamison argues "post-woundedness" describes the "shift away from wounded affect" (120) that has occurred in female-centered narratives in recent years (in correlation with the growth of post-feminism) as an attempt to disavow the kind of feminine melodrama that has made "girly" texts (like the *Twilight* series) targets of ridicule in the media. In accordance with post-feminism's inherent assumption

that feminism itself is obsolete – that we are *post-feminism* –¹⁰ post-wounded women “make jokes about being wounded or get impatient with women who hurt too much. The post-wounded woman conducts herself as if pre-empting certain accusations: Don’t cry too loud; don’t play victim” (120). While the post-wounded woman is not above pain, which she can and does experience, she recognizes that feminine woundedness has been deemed “over-done and overrated,” and thus takes on “a new native language spoken in several dialects: sarcastic, jaded, opaque; cool and clever” (120). Through its privileging of control over emotion, masculine over feminine, and transcendence over embodied experience, I argue anorexia itself can be seen as a manifestation of the post-wounded ethos, which calls for women to negate their feminine weakness and harden their softness, both physical and emotional.

Tris’ character is defined by her desire for emotional control and disdain for emotional weakness throughout the *Divergent* novels, which like many individuals with anorexia, stems from her desire to protect the self from the volatile and abject realm of relatedness. Many women with anorexia in Warin’s research, for example – in addition to viewing sex, food, fats, calories and ingestion as abject – experienced emotions themselves as abject signifiers of the body’s penetrability and weakness, due to their amorphous ability to “seep into and infiltrate the body” (17). Accordingly, throughout the *Divergent* series, Tris strives to control her emotional responses as a mode of self-preservation, describing the act of crying as an act of weakness

¹⁰ In her article published at the dawn of post-feminist media culture, “Charting the Currents of the Third Wave” (1997), feminist cultural scholar Catherine Orr argues that the post-feminist ethos “assumes that the women’s movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental social changes” (34). In this way, female empowerment becomes a matter of “personal style or individual choice” and any emphasis on women’s oppression or systemic change “is regarded as naïve and even oppressive to women” (34).

(*Divergent* 74; 117; 481), and the suppression of tears as an act of strength (72; 74; *Insurgent* 23;). She also expresses “disgust” (*Divergent* 74) towards characters like Al who cannot stifle their emotions – who fail to become “cold” and “hard” like herself (72) – and as highlighted at the start of this chapter, possesses an uncanny ability to manage her emotional response to fear. Tris completes the Dauntless fear simulation test – designed to keep participants in a fear-inducing simulation until they are able to physically calm themselves down – three times faster than the other initiates (238), and while completing the test, realizes that each of her fear simulations stems from a fear of losing control: “it isn’t about the birds [or water]. It’s about control” (384). Confronting this reality only urges Tris to refine and perfect her post-woundedness and emotional self-management; ultimately, the heroine’s uncanny ability to “feel steady” and “calm” (255) while under simulation reflects her superior ability to control her emotional responses (239), as well as her innate lack of vulnerability (285).

Tris’ dominance over her emotions is highly gendered in Roth’s text, as the protagonist’s disdain for emotional weakness is coded as disdain for femininity at large. For example, when Christina seeks Tris’ advice on a romantic issue, she must beg her friend to “be a girl for just a few seconds...Like a silly, annoying girl,” in order to overcome Tris’ cold outer layer; when Tris responds, “Kay” (369), while jokingly twirling her hair around her finger, Christina retorts excitedly – “You *can* be a girl!” (369). While in one sense, this scene calls attention to the performativity of gender, as Tris consciously performs stereotypical girlhood, it also signals the protagonist’s alignment with the post-wounded archetype that negates the realm of feminine weakness. As her “disgust” toward emotional expression suggests, Tris does not fall prey to the girlish world of feelings and melodrama, functioning instead above the volatile and abject realm of embodied affect. Unlike most girls, the text posits, Tris possesses an intrinsic capacity for

emotional control; she is *post*-wounded, rising above the realm of human relatedness.

Heroic Masochism and the Path to Self-Actualization

While emotional pain is portrayed as symbolic of the body's weakness in the *Divergent* series, the endurance of physical pain signifies personal willpower, bravery, and self-actualization. As Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight*, for individuals with anorexia, embodied practices that are "constraining, enslaving, and even murderous" on an objective level, often transform into experiences felt to be "liberating, transforming, and life-giving" (168). Through acts of self-harm:

...a new realm of meaning is discovered, a range of values and possibilities that Western culture has traditionally coded as 'male' and rarely made available to women: an ethic and aesthetic of self-mastery and self-transcendence, expertise, and power over other through the example of superior will and control. The experience is intoxicating, habit-forming. (178)

The anorexic fervour towards masochism,¹¹ described here by Bordo, has become crystallized within pro-ana (i.e. pro-anorexia) and pro-mia (i.e. pro-bulimia) online communities through the image of the self-inflicted wound, which literary scholar Remedios Perni argues has become a symbolic "trophy" (508) for eating disorders sufferers in these online groups.¹² Significantly, Tris' journey toward self-actualization within the *Divergent* series begins with an actual self-

¹¹ Throughout this chapter, I use the term "masochism" in the general sense of the word, to refer to the extraction of pleasure from one's own physical pain. This conceptualization is distinct from sexual masochism, and the American Psychological Association's classification of "sexual masochism disorder" in the DSM-5.

¹² Pro-ana and pro-mia groups are online communities of eating disorders sufferers who exchange advice, inspiration, and personal narratives with one another, usually with the intent of sustaining eating disordered practice.

inflicted wound that is symbolic of personal autonomy. During the Choosing Ceremony, Tris must use a knife to inflict a deep wound across her palm, letting the blood pour into her desired faction's basin to signify allegiance to her new faction of choice. This ceremonial gesture foreshadows Tris' journey throughout Roth's series, which asserts the idea that self-inflicted pain not only comes with, but is integral to, personal growth and subjectivity.

Almost immediately after Tris drips the blood from her wound into the Dauntless basin, her propensity for masochism amplifies. Just as self-harm acts as a common motif with gothic subculture, which Gunn argues expresses its somatophobic underpinnings through practices of "ritual self-mortification" (58), Dauntless' defining emphasis on "courage" is determined by the degree to which members submit themselves to physically dangerous scenarios. While leaving the Choosing Ceremony, Tris instantly begins to negate her body's wellbeing in favour of self-discipline and mental fortitude: she scales a tall industrial structure without any protection, jumps on to a moving train, nearly missing her target, and leaps out of that train on to the roof of a high-rise building. The visuals of *Divergent*'s film adaptation focus on Tris' bruised and bloodied body in these moments, which do not stop the protagonist from sharing a laugh with Christina and continuing to push herself forward through the dangerous action sequence. In Roth's novel, readers come to understand what drives Tris to push her body to this limit: "my lungs burning, my muscles aching, the fierce pleasure of a flat-out sprint" (*Divergent* 50). Following anorexia's conception of bodily discipline as representative of personal improvement and even liberation, Tris finds pleasure in her body's pain; when a new recruit dies during Dauntless' perilous initiation task, the protagonist reminds herself: "*that is how things work here*. We do dangerous things and people die. People die, and we move on to the next dangerous thing" (56 original emphasis). Although characters like Tobias and Christina often chastise Tris

for her indifference, and even drive towards, death, it is precisely this quality that grounds the protagonist's heroism, providing her with the strength and bravery required to act in the face of danger throughout the series.

Tris' masochistic behaviours and correlating sense of self-actualization increase as Dauntless' formal training program begins – a process designed to push members to their physical and mental breaking points. During training, Tris stands in as the target for knife-throwing practice, subjecting herself to a new near-death experience each time the weapon is thrown towards her body; she is rewarded for enduring the task, earning “points” and gaining her first opportunity to speak openly with Tobias, which initiates the beginning of their romantic relationship. Tris also participates in violent fighting matches during training, taking on Molly, “the Tank,” in the boxing ring, as well as the series' secondary villain Peter: a strong male character with a history of violent behaviour. Tris is kicked, beaten, face-stomped, and ultimately loses both fights, but continues to push herself through the pain, even while her body remains broken: “I have gotten used to aching every time I move, so now I move better, but I am still far from healed” (130). These initial activities in the Dauntless compound root the series' conceptual understanding of the dominated and injured physical body as symbolic of self-mastery and self-actualization.

As the stakes associated with Tris' masochistic behaviours continue to rise, so too does her pleasure in her pain. After completing Dauntless training, the protagonist begins to take on a variety of assignments described as “suicide missions” (217; 469) that epitomize her heroic drive towards death. The first of these missions is Tris' self-imposed challenge to climb a ferris wheel – a life-threatening task that ignites the protagonist's love affair with death: “This is crazy, and I know it. A fraction of an inch of mistake, half a second of hesitation, and my life is over. Heat

tears through my chest, and I smile as I grab the next bar” (146). Following anorexia’s paradoxical rationality wherein individuals experience feelings of transcendence and invincibility the closer they move toward death,¹³ the further Tris ventures towards her demise, the more alive she feels: “the height makes me feel alive with energy, every organ and vessel and muscle in my body singing at the same pitch” (143). Although Tobias reluctantly accompanies Tris on her ascent up the ferris wheel, in the same way that anorexia distinguishes between involuntary malnourishment and purposeful acts of starvation, it is not the performance of a death-defying act itself that constitutes heroism within the text, but rather the actor’s conscious affirmation of the act. That is, Tobias’ natural fear during the ferris wheel scene is contrasted with Tris’ disembodied pleasure in order to highlight the heroine’s superiority; when Tobias asks Tris, “Are you *human*?” (144 original emphasis), his question serves as a complementary indicator of Tris’ exceptional bravery and transcendence above the realm of the physical.

As the trilogy progresses, Tris’ addiction to pain prompts the protagonist to use self-inflicted hurt as a coping mechanism to deal with various emotional stressors in her life. Regarding the expression of female pain in twenty-first century media, Jamison describes how starvation can be employed as “an act of self-wounding that preempts other wounds, that scrubs away the blood from the shower” (119). She explores this phenomenon in Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974), whose title character responds to her pain by “weaponizing” it: “she doesn’t get rid of the bleeding; she gets baptized by it” (119). Jamison’s baptismal metaphor recalls Warin’s work outlining how the painful restriction and purging rituals of anorexia are often experienced by sufferers as being cleansing and transformational (174), providing these individuals with a

¹³ See Chapter 1’s elucidation of the transcendence/quotidian binary of anorexic logic, as well as Chapter 2’s discussion of Bella Swan’s ascension to self-actualization and immortality through literal death.

baptism of their own. As exemplified in the epigraph at the outset of this chapter, Tris' relationship with pain takes on a similar cleansing quality during moments of grief, fear, and humiliation in Roth's books. For example, as she grieves for her friends and family lost during a shoot-out, Tris inflicts pain on herself in an attempt to avoid the emotional toll: "I press my face into the pallet I'm sleeping on, so hard it hurts my forehead, just to force the memory out, out, out" (*Insurgent* 110). Likewise, after confessing to having shot her friend Will – which, through no fault of Tris', occurs while Will is under a simulation that turns him violent – the heroine climbs to the top of a tall building, relishing the pain she feels during the long ascent: "As I climb step after step, and my muscles begin to burn, and my lungs fight for air, I feel the first moments of relief I've experienced in days [...] I grin at the fierce burn in my legs, in my chest. Using pain to relieve pain" (154). Examples like these highlight how Tris weaponizes the physical pain she feels as a way to cope with negative affect throughout the *Divergent* series. Indeed, near the end of Roth's first novel, Tobias makes a statement to Tris that epitomizes the heroine's proclivity for self-harm: "My *first* instinct is to push you until you break, just to see how hard I have to press [...] Fear doesn't shut you down; it wakes you up. I've seen it. It's fascinating" (*Divergent* 313 original emphasis). As Tobias' remarks suggest, fear, or more precisely, the ability to endure fear through pain, lies at the core of Tris' heroism. Like the quintessential anorexic sufferer, the protagonist paradoxically experiences objectively harmful conditions as life-giving, using modes of bodily discipline and self-harm as strategies for coping, growing, and eventually, self-actualizing.

Tris' masochistic behaviours and correlating sense of self-actualization reach a climax in *Allegiant*, the final novel of Roth's trilogy, when the protagonist dies, marking her symbolic ascension into sainthood. As articulated in Eckermann's work on the selfhood/sainthood paradox

outlined at the start of this chapter, and again in Katie Day and Tammy Keys' 2009 feminist discourse analysis of pro-ana communities, theological themes of secular sainthood permeate the self-constructions of individuals with anorexia, who view the "good anorectic" (89) as one who "abides by the 'rules'" of the eating disorder "religion" (Day and Keys 90). The *Divergent* series' tragic conclusion employs this kind of theological discourse in its portrayal of the heroine's self-destruction, which comes as the result of two plot devices: first, exposure to a "death serum" (which Tris confronts in order to destroy a mechanism capable of wiping her society's memories), and second, a face-off with the death serum's maker, who ensures Tris' pending death by shooting her.

In this discussion, it is important to note that despite Tris' drive towards death throughout the *Divergent* series, which in many cases, is expressed as an actual desire to die (*Divergent* 469; *Insurgent* 181; 261; 322; 364), Tris does reach a state of inner peace and self-acceptance by the end of her character arc, just prior to her demise. In one of *Allegiant*'s closing chapters, before her deadly mission, Tris reflects on how far she has come in her ability to deal with her emotions and accept life's challenges:

A few weeks ago, I would have volunteered to go on the suicide mission myself – and I did. I volunteered to go to Erudite headquarters, knowing that death waited for me there... I don't want to die anymore. I am up to the challenge of bearing the guilt and the grief, up to facing the difficulties that life has put in my path. (411)

Tris' movement away from self-harm and towards self-actualization at the end of the series, as exemplified by this passage, creates an important distinction between suicidal ideation and heroic martyrdom in Roth's narrative. As French psychoanalysts Ginette Rimbault and Caroline Eliacheff note, individuals with anorexia are rarely suicidal; it is not death itself that is their goal,

but rather approaching death *without* dying that is the ultimate marker of the sufferer's transcendence above the abject realm of embodied experience (90). Accordingly, Tris' sudden and insistent embrace of life at the end of the *Divergent* series, just prior to her death, works to downplay the role of her masochistic mindset – which heavily constitutes her heroism throughout the series – in her ultimate destruction, instead constructing her death as an honourable, even saintlike act of bodily self-sacrifice that is emblematic of her heroism.

Having removed the onus of Tris' demise from her own internal death drive, the narrative is free to romanticize its heroine's death without the problematic of teen suicide at its centre, adopting a theological discourse in its portrayal of Tris' bodily destruction. Significantly, the protagonist's initial confrontation with death is depicted as a battle between body and mind over which Tris (temporarily) prevails – at least until she is shot by the death serum's maker. During her struggle against the serum's effects, Tris narrates: "The fire, the fire. It rages within, a campfire and then an inferno, and my body is its fuel. I feel it racing through me, eating away at the weight. There is nothing that can kill me now; I am powerful and invincible and eternal" (*Allegiant* 468). The metaphoric use of "fire" in this passage – symbolizing both light and activity, and death and destruction – captures the paradoxical life-giving and life-destroying nature of Tris' internal battle. Using the language of consumption, the text also posits a metaphorical correlation between death and weight, as Tris' internal "fire" (read: willpower) "eat[s] away" (468) at the "weight" (467; 468) of death itself. This metaphor is further emphasized through the representation of death as an "oil" (469; 471) – a heavy, fatty substance that "clings" (469; 471) to Tris' skin, pulling her closer and closer to the afterlife. Like the quintessential anorexic sufferer, Tris' battle between mind and body – or personal willpower and the heavy weight of death – provides her with feelings of power, "invincibility" and "eternity."

The holy nature of Tris' bodily sacrifice is reified post-mortem through surviving characters who affirm the heroine's saint-like status. Roth herself is a devout Christian, and Tris' canonization within the text echoes Christian theology, which upholds the figure of the martyr as a holy symbol of heroism. Anorexia's valorization of martyrdom is a gendered one, as it is the destruction of a feminized body in particular that warrants reverence in anorexic as well as cultural discourses more broadly. As Jamison notes in her treatise of female pain, harm towards the female body is infused with spiritual and intellectual meaning in western culture:

The pain of women turns them into kittens and rabbits and sunsets and sordid red satin goddesses, pales them and bloodies them and starves them, delivers them to death camps and sends locks of their hair to the stars. Men put them on trains and under them.

Violence turns them celestial [...] We can't stop imagining new ways for them to hurt.

(114)

Although Jamison's remarks do not reference anorexia in particular, they are revealing in understanding how anorexia's theological reverence for the thin, even if destroyed female body continues to permeate hegemonic discourses, as it has since the time of Dante's Beatrice, who in death, remained "[c]arnal and celestial at once" (Balsamo 70). For the post-wounded, post-feminist subject, mental/spiritual triumph over the embodied realm of emotions, pain, and even death, serves as a marker of inner strength and power, creating an idealized image of disembodied femininity from which we "can't look away" (Jamison 114).

Accordingly, the closing chapters of Roth's final novel *Allegiant* centre on this image of the celestial female corpse that equates femininity with death, and the female body's destruction with (renewed) life and beauty. Tris' extraordinary ability to overcome the power of the death serum, albeit temporarily, is a physical feat described as "impossible" (*Allegiant* 470) in the text,

signalling the heroine's superiority over the deadly realm of the physical. After Tris' final demise by shooting, Tobias reflects on his girlfriend's exceptionality, which was revealed in life, he asserts, through her masochistic acts and self-sacrifice: "I saw her, but I didn't see her; no one saw her the way she truly was until she jumped [into the chasm]. I suppose a fire that burns that bright is not meant to last" (492). This passage – which stands out to readers stylistically, as it comprises an entire chapter by itself – reinforces the *Divergent* series' correlation between female masochism and spiritual superiority, while also framing Tris' death as a pre-requisite for her heroism: "*a fire that burns that bright is not meant to last.*" Just as the spiritual martyr reaches ultimate proximity to God by submitting herself to physical torture followed by death, only by consciously subjecting herself to bodily harm followed by bodily destruction can Tris' heroism be fully "seen" by those around her.

The glorified nature of Tris' death is further highlighted through Tobias' romanticized portrayal of her actual corpse. In her discussion of pictorial representations of dead women in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), literary and cultural theorist Elizabeth Bronfen writes, "the feminine corpse inspires the surviving man to write, to deny or to acknowledge death, while at the same time the corpse is the site at which he can articulate his knowledge" (13); amidst the various meanings and symbolisms attached to this poetic process, she argues, "what remains persistently constant is that signification in all possible cases occurs over her dead body" (13). Similar to Jamison's commentary on female pain generally, Bronfen problematizes the image of the female corpse specifically, which is often employed in cultural texts as a catalyst for processes of male signification. Tobias' descriptions of Tris post-mortem exemplify this trope, which in romanticizing the figure of the dead woman, works to further cultural ideologies that correlate femininity itself with death. For example, when Tobias learns

that Tris has died, he immediately turns to a fantasy image of his girlfriend, one that emphasizes her eternal beauty and ethereal nature: “Tris is still alive, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed and her small body full of power and strength, standing in a shaft of light in the atrium” (*Allegiant* 489-490). This angelic vision of the (small-bodied) dead heroine is reinforced by Tobias’ description of Tris’ actual corpse, which appears to be “just sleeping” (493), ready to “wake up and smile” (493) at any moment.

Rather than capturing the abject reality of death, Tris’ beautiful corpse is a romanticized text through which the surviving male characters achieve self-discovery; only after Tris’ death does her brother Caleb realize his shortcomings and betrayals in their relationship (497), and in the closing lines of the series, Tobias likewise learns through Tris’ death that, amidst all the pain, “We can be mended. We mend each other” (526). Roth’s trilogy thus concludes with the image of the dead female body, which through self-destruction, provides the heroine’s male disciples with increased wisdom and autonomy. The legacy of Tris’ Christlike act of self-sacrifice is thereby crystallized, confirming her own self-actualization and status as ultimate girl hero. To be clear, then, it is not the fact of Tris’ death itself, but rather the discourse surrounding her death that proves to be problematic about the *Divergent* series’ ending. In constructing Tris’ death as a life-giving battle between mind and body, then framing the female corpse as a romantic site of male signification, the series reinforces anorexic rationality that equates femininity with death, and views the eradication of the female body as the ultimate path to meaning, self-mastery, and spiritual transcendence.

Therefore, while in some ways Tris’ character does represent female power and agency in the *Divergent* series, the prevalent idea in both critical media scholarship and popular discourse that her character acts as a progressive model for girl heroes at large – or as Brown writes, one

who is “feminist through and through” (196) – is controversial at best. When examined through the critical feminist framework of eating disorders, Tris’ heroic journey problematically equates female thinness, bodily hardness, self-restriction, and the ability to tolerate pain with the qualities of willpower, autonomy and moral strength. Like Bella before her, Tris’ character exemplifies the ways in which anorexic values continue to permeate post-feminist media, mobilizing mainstream hostility towards feminine weakness and fragility (now seen as passé), while reproducing longstanding ideals that valorize female slenderness, self-discipline, and asceticism. The question, then, remains: if the characterizations of both Tris and Bella – two very different teen action heroines and contrasts in many ways – each perpetuate problematic anorexic discourses of the body, how *can* female strength and heroism be portrayed in YA narratives for girls in ways that do not support anorexic ideology? The answer, of course, cannot be to avoid depictions of female pain, self-restriction, or masochism altogether, but rather to represent these very real embodied experiences in ways that do not romanticize or fetishize their existence. It is time to redefine, then, through the figure of the YA action heroine, what constitutes heroism and empowerment for girls in ways that transcend the pervasive cultural construct of the mind-body binary. The succeeding chapter thus turns to Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series, whose heroine Katniss Everdeen offers insights into alternative and progressive ways of being a teen heroine in today’s post-feminist climate.

CHAPTER 4

The (Starving) Girl On Fire: Hunger and Heroism in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Franchise

“Look what I shot.” Gale holds up a loaf of bread with an arrow stuck in it, and I laugh. It’s real bakery bread, not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain rations. I take it in my hands, pull out the arrow, and hold the puncture in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes my mouth flood with saliva.

– Collins, *The Hunger Games* 7

Fresh bread is a luxury in *The Hunger Games* trilogy’s setting of Panem: a class-stratified nation comprised of the wealthy Capitol city and twelve surrounding districts struggling to survive under the Capitol’s control. In the first chapter of Suzanne Collins’ hit YA series, 16-year-old heroine and survivalist Katniss Everdeen describes the rare pleasure of eating fresh bread in the woods alongside her male best friend and hunting partner Gale Hawthorne, who moments later, tosses a berry – another rarity – in the air for Katniss to swallow: “I catch it in my mouth and break the delicate skin with my teeth. The sweet tartness explodes across my tongue” (8). These acts of consumption in the opening of *The Hunger Games* series are also acts of resistance: not only is Katniss’ presence in the woods forbidden, with hunting punishable by death in her home of District 12, but her very ways of eating are also subversive, mobilizing sight, smell, taste, and touch in ways that savour the bodily act of eating and disrupt the traditional standards of propriety that pervade Panem’s food culture (as well as our own). Like Stephenie Meyer’s heroine Bella Swan of the *Twilight* series, and Veronica Roth’s heroine Tris Prior of the *Divergent* trilogy, Collins’ protagonist embodies the self-sacrificing heroine archetype over the course of her journey. As this chapter will demonstrate, not only does her character’s heroism hinge on male-coded and masochistic qualities and behaviours, particularly as they pertain to food provision and consumption, but these qualities exist in conjunction with

the heroine's seemingly effortless embodiment of ideal post-feminist subjectivity. In many ways, then, this opening scene of *The Hunger Games* epitomizes the revolutionary yet contradictory representations of food and consumption that pervade the entire series – a narrative that, at its core, is all about hunger, both literal and metaphorical.

The trilogy's plot centers on Katniss' struggle to negotiate her appetite for political rebellion – in hopes of saving her family from oppression and ultimate starvation – with her desire to remain within the familiar confines of District 12. Her heroic journey begins on Reaping Day, the annual event in which one boy and one girl from each district are randomly selected to serve as Tributes in Panem's Hunger Games: a live-televvised fight to the death amongst youth ages 12-18. Katniss' 12-year-old sister Primrose "Prim" Everdeen is selected as Tribute during the Reaping, before Katniss asserts her right to volunteer in Prim's place – an admissible but largely unused rule of the Games. Katniss goes on to successfully win the Hunger Games in Collins' first novel, *The Hunger Games* (2008), earning her nickname "the girl on fire." She then survives the Quarter Quell (an all-star version of the same deadly event) in the succeeding novel, *Catching Fire* (2009), and in *Mockingjay* (2010), the final novel of the trilogy, leads the districts through a civil war against the Capitol that culminates in the series' finale. Despite her successes, Katniss' heroism comes at a cost. For the heroine, who is named after the real-life edible plant, "katniss," food denial serves as the primary path to self-actualization, and starvation acts as a pre-requisite for the acquisition of cultural knowledge. This chapter argues that in these ways, Katniss' heroism falls into the now-familiar pattern of reifying anorexic ideology. Yet as the opening epigraph suggests, Collins' novels subversively question the efficacy and desirability of the problematic aspects of Panem's extreme and dichotomous cultural values, especially pertaining to food and the body. Moreover, as the series progresses,

Katniss' character moves away from her self-punishing and disembodied state of being, towards a more balanced state of embodied existence – a shift epitomized by the heroine's decision at the end of the series to marry her fellow Tribute and ally Peeta Mellark, who she pointedly nicknames "the boy with the bread." Therefore, although Collins' series (2008-2010) was published after the *Twilight* novels (2005-2008) and before the *Divergent* trilogy (2011-2013), these texts appear achronologically in this dissertation as the denouement of Katniss' character arc marks a departure from those of Bella and Tris.

As will be illuminated over the course of this chapter, *The Hunger Games* series has already inspired a plethora of feminist research into the books' gender politics, with some critics viewing Katniss' character as a progressive model of female empowerment, and others taking the opposite point of view. The goal of this chapter is not to pigeonhole Katniss' character into either/or categories, but rather to unsettle the very criteria for what constitutes "progressiveness" in these various readings. In so doing, this work offers a shift in the scholarly conversation around the franchise, and around representations of girlhood more broadly, demonstrating how Collins' texts portray female pain, strength, and embodiment in ways with potentiality to undo the logic of anorexia that constitutes so much of post-feminist media for girls. Through a corporeal feminist exploration of *The Hunger Games* trilogy's construction of both literal and symbolic hunger, this chapter argues that despite its problematic correlation between the heroine's starvation, suffering, and self-actualization, the series also provides a successful critique of the dualistic ethics that are central to anorexic logic, using a framework of touch (contra sight) to offer alternative ways of being during female adolescence that exist outside of dominant binaries.

The Heroism of Suffering

The Hunger Games series has earned its place in what Susan Dominus of *The New York Times* calls the “publishing holy trinity” (32) of twenty-first century YA literature, standing alongside J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* and Meyer’s *Twilight* series as one of the best-selling YA fiction franchises of all time. All three of Collins’ books were met with strong sales and positive critical reviews upon their respective releases, with the final novel, *Mockingjay* (2010), selling over 450,000 copies in its first week in the USA alone (“*Mockingjay*, The Final Book”). Much fascination with the trilogy has stemmed from the character of Katniss herself, who like Tris of the *Divergent* series, is often viewed as a more progressive and active contemporary of *Twilight*’s Bella. In their Introduction to *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy* (2012), YA literature scholars Mary Pharr and Leisa Clark argue that *The Hunger Games* trilogy serves as a “positive antithesis” (17) to Meyer’s “highly romantic” (9) texts, the latter of which focus more heavily on the heroine’s heterosexual romance than the former. Similarly, in his feminist geopolitical analysis of the franchise, Phillip Kirby views Katniss as emblematic of a new kind of progressive action heroine (460), as do feminist cultural scholars Sonya Fritz and Katheryn Wright, who deem her character a “paragon of girl power” (Fritz 22) and an “exemplary role model for young girls” (Wright 1), respectively.

This popular and optimistic view of Katniss principally stems from the heroine’s gender-bending characteristics, as Katniss adopts both masculine and feminine traits to suit her various purposes for survival. For many scholars who write on the subject, the degree to which Collins’ protagonist is seen as empowering and progressive is largely determined by her embodiment of

both masculine and feminine traits simultaneously.¹ I argue in contrast, that when viewed through the lenses of post-feminism and anorexia, there is nothing inherently subversive about Katniss' masculine subjectivity, as it is precisely the combination of particular masculine qualities – such as independence, personal will, and self-control – and feminine qualities – such as thinness, conformity, and purity – that constitutes the ideal anorexic subject. As Leslie Heywood explains in *Dedication to Hunger* (1996), anorexia hinges on a western cultural – and as this dissertation has argued, post-feminist – paradox, “that requires women not to choose between traditional femininity and ‘progressive’ professionalization or masculinization, but that they enact both simultaneously” (15). In other words, gender ambivalence in and of itself is not a panacea for the problematics of today's New Heroine.

Some of the issues associated with Katniss' particular brand of gender fluidity can be seen in her character's adherence to, what Kelly Oliver calls in her psychoanalytic reading of the series, the “suffering ideal” (684) archetype. Katniss' conventionally feminine qualities are often undercut by her masculine subjectivity and identification with her deceased father, whose self-sacrifice and propensity for suffering Katniss takes on after his painful death working in the mines. Becoming the family's primary protector and provider at age 11, Katniss sacrifices her

¹ For example, in “Of Queer Necessity: Panem's Hunger Games as Gender Games” (2012), Jennifer Mitchell argues that Katniss' struggle to play the roles of girl/hunter simultaneously manifests a queer identity that highlights the insufficiency of gender categories: “her constantly shifting gender identity...is itself a gesture of queerness” (128); similarly, Kelly Oliver in “Ambiguity, Ambivalence and Extravagance in The Hunger Games” (2014) views Katniss' position between the feminine and the masculine as “an ambiguous space of new possibilities” (677). Oliver even valorizes Katniss' connection to the figure of “the beaten father” in the series, regarding this “somasochistic” self-identification as one of rebellion against “the father of the law and his punishment” (684); focusing on the series' genre conventions, Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel assert in their essay, “‘Killer’ Katniss and ‘Lover Boy’ Peeta” (2012) that Collins' trilogy defies “gender-genred reading” through Katniss' masculine identification and the series' combination of war and romance conventions.

own needs for the sake of her family's survival while her stereotypically feminine mother sits by, static and useless, throughout Katniss' youth. The urge to protect and provide for her family is what drives much of the heroine's action throughout the series, most notably her decision to volunteer as Tribute for the Hunger Games in place of her younger sister Prim. Like the person with anorexia who feeds others (often obsessively) in lieu of feeding herself,² Katniss' name is featured in the Hunger Games reaping lottery 20 times – four times more than the State's requirement – as payment for obtaining extra grain for her family. As the name of the Games suggests, Katniss' participation exacerbates her own hunger and starvation, which is highlighted throughout the text by way of the heroine's dialogue about her "prominent" bones (*The Hunger Games* 198), and emaciated physique: "when I look at my naked body in the mirror, all I can see is how skinny I am...I can easily count my ribs" (353). Although Anna Krugovoy Silver in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (2002) reminds us about the differences between self-imposed and involuntary starvation, with the latter having more to do with poverty than anorexia (27), in Katniss' case, hunger serves as a commentary on class *as well as* the virtues of self-denial, as it is through Katniss' renunciation of her own needs in order to feed others that her character's valour emerges and the series' primary inspirational message about the price and profile of heroism comes to light.

² The anorexic obsession with feeding others before the self was first noted in the early psychiatric works of Arthur Crisp (1974) and Katherine Halmi (1977); critical feminist theorists have since connected this phenomenon to cultural pressures on women to commit acts of self-sacrifice to nourish loved ones (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 118; Orbach, "Visibility/Invisibility" 134). Today, the UCLA Eating Disorders Program continues to list "[p]reoccupation with feeding others or with meal preparation" as a key symptom of anorexia, and discourse on the topic can also be found in prominent "pro-ana" forums: interactive peer "support" groups aimed at promoting the logic and behaviours of anorexia as a valid lifestyle choice (e.g. "Anyone Else Like Feeding Others?").

Although Katniss' drive to punish the self to provide for her family may be read as a kind of mothering instinct, her character's strong alignment with the world of the paternal and negation of the realm of the maternal is repeatedly emphasized throughout Collins' books. Katniss' relationship with her mother is badly fraught, a fact captured in the opening pages of the series when the heroine introduces her mother as "the woman who sat by, blank and unreachable, while her children turned to skin and bones" (*The Hunger Games* 8). Although Katniss struggles to reconnect with her mother after her father's death, the heroine fails to do so time and time again: "I try to forgive her for my father's sake. But to be honest, I'm not the forgiving type" (8). Katniss' hard and protective love for her sister, and impulse to provide both physically and financially for her mother despite her mother's estrangement, are presented as masculinized virtues in the text, meant to resemble her father's stoic loyalty more than a motherly impulse to nurture: "At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family" (27). Katniss' explicit connection to her deceased father, primary position as hunter, and lack of identification with her own mother situates her character firmly within the realm of the masculine/paternal at the cost of alienating the feminine/maternal.

This alignment with the paternal sufferer, what Oliver further describes as a "sadomasochistic" association with "the beaten father" (684), has several implications for Katniss' heroism. While it does remove her character from the confines of stereotypical femininity, which as previously noted, numerous scholars have celebrated – and as Oliver argues, highlights her character's subversive rebellion against another paternal force in the text, the father of law (684) – the symbolic implications of Katniss' identification with the paternal shift when examined from the perspective of anorexia. Much research has been done on the role of the mother in the etiology of eating disorders; in her feminist literary work on the semiotics of

self-starvation in anorexia memoirs, Isabelle Meuret describes anorexia as an attempt to “starve” the inner child, who is “famished for maternal care and love” (86). This view of anorexia as a protest against the mother dates back to the seminal work of Hilde Bruch, who in *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within* (1973), posits the disorder as a response to fractured mother-child communications in early life. In the 1980s, Susie Orbach (*Fat is a Feminist Issue*) and Kim Chernin (*The Hungry Self: Women, Eating, and Identity*) each echoed this idea in their respective works, defining anorexia as a fight for autonomy amongst adolescent girls who lack control over their changing bodies and relationships with their mothers. Although these early psychoanalytic theories of anorexia have been criticized for “mother-blaming” (Vander Ven and Vander Ven) and over-simplifying the roots of eating disorders (Eisler et al. 292), consensus amongst current theorists is that these previous arguments were overstated more than altogether unfounded.

Since 2000, numerous studies have shown a positive correlation between maternal care and the daughter’s own body image and/or restrained eating habits.³ Wendy Pitcairn’s correlation between eating disorders and Andre Green’s “Dead Mother Complex” is particularly

³ For example, in their 2000 clinical study of thirty mothers and their daughters (aged 16–19), Jane Ogden and Jo Steward found that daughters were more likely to show restrained eating if their mothers reported a low belief in their own autonomy and body dissatisfaction, or if their mothers reported a low belief in both their own and their daughter’s autonomy; similarly, Jane E. Smith et al.’s 2016 study of 152 girls (ages 8–12) and their mothers revealed through hierarchical linear regression analysis that daughters’ perceptions of the quality of the mother–daughter relationship was positively associated with the daughters’ body esteem and satisfaction; Analisa Arroyo and Kristin K. Andersen’s 2016 study of 199 American undergraduate women and their mothers found using social learning theory that mothers’ and daughters’ self-objectification were also positively correlated to one another’s. Perceived maternal care was found to moderate this relationship, such that daughters reported higher levels of self-objectification when they perceived their mothers to be less caring; finally, in her extensive sociological study of anorexia, *Becoming Anorexic* (2017), Muriel Darmon asserts the significant role of the mother in controlling family nutrition (80).

applicable to *The Hunger Games* series, as in many ways, Katniss' character personifies Green's framework. In his book, *On Private Madness* (1986), Green conceptualizes the Dead Mother Complex as what occurs when maternal depression and/or emotional detachment reads as maternal death to the child, who mourns for the lost mother and internalizes that grief through emotional hardening later in life. From the start of Collins' narrative, Katniss' character embodies the Dead Mother Complex by perceiving her depressed mother as dead or lost: "I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness, but at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, but a mother as well" (*The Hunger Games* 27). This perception leads the heroine toward her own state of emotional detachment, as she erects an emotional "wall" in order to "protect [her]self from needing" (53) her mother. Employing Green's concept, Pitcairn argues in her article, "The Spectre at the Feast: An Exploration of the Relationship Between the Dead Mother Complex and Eating Disorders" (2013), not that mothers are to blame for their children's eating disorders (55), but that maternal depression resulting in insecure attachment between mother and child may be expressed through eating disordered behaviour later in life: a phenomenon that we will see Katniss embody later in this chapter.

Even when the mother figure herself is not the subject of research, rejection of motherhood and the maternal more generally have been tied to anorexia by critical feminist theorists who view the disorder as a response against the "femaleness" (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 8) of the body. Megan Warin's *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (2016), an extensive ethnographic study of women being treated for anorexia, corroborates this idea, elucidating how these women "interioriz[e] abjection" (139) as it relates to processes of maternity (such as childbirth and menstruation), and use restricting and purging rituals to distance themselves from the "intensely problematic" (13) issues of relatedness that accompany

womanhood. While Warin's work does not investigate the influence of the mother specifically on anorexic behaviour, many participants in her study expressed a desire to remove themselves from the realm of motherhood. Katniss' character expresses similar concerns about becoming a mother and all that it entails. Katniss is sexually inexperienced, described by Peeta as being (sexually) "pure" (*Mockingjay* 216), and repeatedly shows discomfort with nudity, sexuality, and romantic relationships; she also explicitly asserts her disdain for motherhood (*The Hunger Games* 9), and states multiple times throughout the series that she will "never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children" (373). Katniss' negation of the maternal follows genre conventions of YA action narratives for girls, which Jeffery A. Brown describes as "a genre so obsessively concerned with maintaining borders [that] the maternal comes to represent the most feared aspects of femininity and/or chaos" (151). Thus, although Katniss' identification with the suffering father and rejection of the maternal do not result in an eating disorder proper, they do contribute to the kind of dualistic thinking about gender, the body, and as Brown writes, the maintenance of "borders," that constitutes her character's anorexic rationality within *The Hunger Games* series.

Katniss' characterization is also constituted by her propensity for radical emotional restraint – one of anorexia's key values, as shown in Chapter 1 – especially at the start of the trilogy. For instance, after she is confirmed as Tribute on Reaping Day, rather than crying while saying goodbye to her mother and Prim, Katniss steels her emotions in a savvy play of strategy: "I don't want to cry. When they televise the replay of the reapings tonight, everyone will make note of my tears, and I'll be marked as an easy target. A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction" (*The Hunger Games* 23). Although in this moment, Katniss must remind herself that "[c]rying is not an option" (34), as the series progresses and her emotions harden, the

imminent threat of Katniss' tears fades. On her train ride into the Capitol, the heroine explains, "no tears come. I'm too tired or too numb to cry" (54), and in *Mockingjay* after surviving a bombing, orchestrated by the evil leader of Panem, President Snow, the heroine proclaims, "I no longer feel like crying. In fact, I can only manage to hold on to one simple thought: an image of Snow's face accompanied by the whisper in my head. *I will kill you*" (183 original emphasis). As these examples illustrate, over the course of the narrative, Katniss armours herself emotionally, if not physically, mobilizing the emotional hardness she has acquired through her early identification with her beaten father and detachment from her mother to amplify her heroic compulsions, which eventually lead her to triumph in the final battle of the series.

The emotional pain that Katniss works to suppress in the narrative is compounded by her ability to withstand vast amounts of physical pain, which serves as another indicator of her strength. Like Bella of the *Twilight* series and Tris of the *Divergent* trilogy, Katniss also expresses masochistic tendencies over the course of her character arc, demonstrating an exceptional ability to tolerate pain and take on the position of the martyr, which similar to her New Heroine counterparts, leads her to self-actualization by the story's conclusion. For example, during her first Hunger Games, Katniss wins the competition, at least partially, because of her ability to persist through suffering: "I feel like an old piece of leather, drying and cracking in the heat. Every step is an effort, but I refuse to stop. I refuse to sit down" (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 169). Although in this case, much of Katniss' physical pain is involuntary due to her participation in the Games, as the series continues, Katniss' masochistic tendencies proliferate so that her ability to withstand pain becomes symbolic of her own heroism. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss repeatedly tells readers that she would "be more valuable dead," turned into "some kind of martyr for the cause [of the rebellion]" (244), than she would be alive, while in *Mockingjay*,

Katniss' death drive is exacerbated by her growing self-hate, demonstrated through the heroine's explicit expressions of self-loathing (8; 232; 375; 377), and refusal to seek medical help (150), protect herself from the cold (210), or take pain killers after a serious injury (236). At the end of the series, after winning a war and assassinating two corrupt leaders, Katniss expresses her final and most profound suicidal ideation, telling readers: "I should be dead. It would be best for everyone if I were dead" (375), "I need to focus now on the manner of my suicide" (375), and "I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despite being one myself" (377). Although Katniss' impulse towards death and ability to endure pain lack the kind of romantic glorification that accompanies both Tris' and Bella's respective self-destructions, which ultimately lead each of those heroines toward an idealized state of eternal disembodiment, Katniss' position as the suffering ideal throughout Collins' trilogy contributes to her anorexic character nonetheless. By venerating the protagonist's identification with the paternal, state of emotional detachment, ability to withstand physical pain, and impulse towards death, the series makes heroic an anorexic subjectivity that privileges the binary constructions of masculine over feminine, disembodiment over embodiment, and self-sacrifice over self-care.

The most potent way that Katniss' position as the ideal sufferer expresses anorexic ideology is through the narrative's construction of food denial as a pre-requisite for self-actualization and cultural knowledge. Although Katniss is not expressly anorexic in *The Hunger Games* series, and Collins does make it clear that much of her heroine's food deprivation, especially in the first novel, is not by choice, Katniss' practiced ability to withstand starvation underlies her entire character arc, providing the heroine with the wisdom, resilience, and mental strength required to win both the Hunger Games themselves and her society's civil war. As Katheryn Wright notes in her feminist literary analysis of *The Hunger Games* and the New

Heroine figure, textual conceptions of heroism reflect the values and ideologies of their “specific time and place” (4). It ensues, then, that Katniss’ heroism relies on her familiarity and even comfort with starvation, which as discussed in Chapter 1, constitutes ideal femininity in many (if not most) cultural texts about women today. Katniss’ affinity with starvation is explored by Meghan Gilbert-Hickey in her essay, “Gender Rolls: Bread and Resistance in the ‘Hunger Games’ Trilogy” (2014), which asserts Katniss is “primed, through starvation” (97) to materialize as a political revolutionary in Collins’ series. Gilbert-Hickey examines Katniss’ relationship with bread through the lenses of class and geopolitics, arguing that the heroine’s starvation “in no way resembles Bordo’s [...] frail, hungry woman. Katniss’s starvation is a move finding its source in strong, un-gendered, personal rebellion, not feminine mores” (104). I contend in contrast that this distancing of Katniss’ starvation from Bordo’s theories of female hunger is hinged on a fundamental misunderstanding of Bordo’s primary argument. For Bordo, hunger is not (exclusively) an expression of hyperbolic femininity or fragility; rather, self-starvation reveals a struggle between the “male and female sides of the self” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 174) – a battle in which feminine women “must also learn to embody the ‘masculine’ language and values of that arena – self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so on” (171). The idea that Katniss’ starvation is grounded in “ungendered, personal rebellion” (Gilbert-Hickey 104) actually supports much of the research on anorexia’s semiotics, and is thus not mutually exclusive to Bordo’s work on eating disorders or female appetite. As Gilbert-Hickey writes, the only person who the “underfed, underprivileged, quietly defiant” (96) heroine hurts through food deprivation, “is herself” (104).

Much of *The Hunger Games* series is spent illustrating, in great detail, Katniss’ experiences with starvation in District 12 – the nights she and her family “go to bed with [their]

stomachs growling” (*The Hunger Games* 9). Katniss’ hunger is juxtaposed in the narrative against the excessive amount of food consumed in the Capitol, with starvation in the districts coming to represent inner strength and humility against the Capitol’s gluttony and gratuitousness. As Valerie Estelle Frankel argues in her essay, “Reflection in a Plastic Mirror” (2012), the Capitol as a construct enforces the series’ critical commentary against the hyper-consumerism that defines modern life; with its surgically altered bodies, artificial aesthetic, and homicidal consumption of children for mass entertainment, in many ways, the Capitol parodies western society’s preoccupations with body modification, consumer culture, and reality television. I argue that in other ways, the Capitol’s hyperbolically “grotesque” (*The Hunger Games* 63) trademarks create a dualism between the people of the Capitol “who have never missed a meal” (59), and the famished dreamers of the districts, who are starved for both food and political independence – each mode of hunger feeding the other. As YA fiction scholar Max Despain asserts in his exploration of food as cultural metaphor in Panem, starvation in *The Hunger Games* “actually forces independent thinking and action among [district] citizen by requiring the starving people to supplement their meager allotments by using ingenuity and illegal behavior” (71). In other words, only by facing starvation do the citizens of the districts find the wisdom and courage required to revolutionize their society – a kind of dexterity made unavailable to the people of the Capitol whose well-fed bellies have made them lazy, stupid, and compliant.

Accordingly, multiple virtues and modes of knowledge are made available to Katniss through food deprivation in Collins’ trilogy. As reflected by her “edible” first name, Katniss is a food expert, preoccupied with thoughts of food and hunting at all times, even during her classes at school (*The Hunger Games* 42). This mastery over the world of food, which initially manifests

out of need, due to her perpetual hunger throughout childhood, helps the heroine in her quest to win the first Hunger Games, providing her with both knowledge – “I sweep the edible plants test without blinking an eye” (96) – and grit – “it’s a little hard to choke down. But I’ve eaten plenty of pine in my life. I’ll adjust quickly” (155). In the Games, then, a lifetime of nourishment is constructed as a handicap for fellow Tributes: “That the Careers have been better fed growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don’t know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and I do” (208). As the protagonist explains, her scavenging of edibles from the woods back home, along with the physical labour required to perform said task, provide her with “a healthier body than most of [the Tributes] around her” (94), a fact that works to her character’s advantage during the competition.

Importantly, though, the supposedly “healthier” body that Katniss occupies is also a decidedly thin body. Upon meeting the other Tributes for the first time, Katniss notes that “half the girls are bigger” (94), with each weighing at least “fifty to a hundred pounds” (94-95) more than her, and later in the Games, Katniss repeats this sentiment: “I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career” (181). Katniss’ slenderness is of clear value in the text, helping the heroine survive by climbing tree branches too weak to support the heavier Tributes (181). The narrative pre-empts critiques of its heroine’s thinness by insisting that Katniss’ small frame is “natural” (94), and as the heroine herself states: “while I’m thin, I’m strong” (94). Rather than erasing the problematic ideological implications associated with Katniss’ thin body, however, these sentiments merely reinforce anorexic ethics that construct slimness as a necessary requirement of ideal femininity, but simultaneously as “no big deal” (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 100); as Rosalind Gill writes in “Postfeminist Media Culture:

Elements of a Sensibility” (2007), a woman’s labour in achieving the perfect (i.e. thin and toned) physique within post-feminist culture “must never be disclosed” (12).

Katniss’ history of starvation composes so much of her character’s identity, that when her risk of starvation vanishes at the end of the Games, so too does the heroine’s self-image: “No more fear of hunger...What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I’m not really sure who I am, what my identity is” (*The Hunger Games* 310-311). Accordingly, even when Katniss does have access to food, her relationship with eating is often construed problematically, reflecting similar patterns seen in the *Twilight* and *Divergent* series, wherein the New Heroine purposefully restricts her food intake as a coping mechanism during moments of anxiety. Reflecting Warin’s findings that anorexic foodways are central to issues of relatedness for affected individuals (99), signifying not just “profound transformations of the individual self,” but also “profound transformations of social relations” (178), Katniss shows ambivalence toward food at various moments throughout the trilogy, even during times of starvation, as a result of her own issues of relatedness. For example, in the first novel of the series, the heroine restricts her consumption the morning of Reaping Day (16); prior to meeting the other Tributes for the first time, the idea of which makes her “queasy” (88); before a particularly dangerous offense during the Games themselves (282); and when Thresh dies (308), after which food becomes “like glue” and takes “a lot of effort to swallow” (308). In the subsequent novels of the trilogy, Katniss asserts an ambivalent attitude towards food when urged to eat by her caretakers (*Catching Fire* 47); must be “press[ed] to eat” (261) before her second Games; and restricts her consumption upon discovering that her friends have been injured (*Mockingjay* 51). Most notably, after being rescued from the Quarter Quell, Katniss attempts to end her life through self-starvation: “I give up. Stop speaking, responding,

refuse food and water. They can pump whatever they want into my arm, but it takes more than that to keep a person going once she's lost the will to live" (*Catching Fire* 389). As these examples begin to elucidate, starvation lies at the heart of Katniss' character: during moments of emotional distress, the heroine often shows either ambivalence toward, or downright refuses to eat, food – even while facing involuntary, life-threatening hunger.

This tendency to use food restriction as a coping mechanism comes to a head when the heroine attempts to end her life through self-starvation for the second time, in the final chapters of Collins' series. Emotionally scarred by the horrors of war and the death of her sister, Katniss illuminates for readers her methodical process of starving herself into oblivion: "I continue with my own annihilation. My body's thinner than it's ever been and my battle against hunger is so fierce that sometimes the animal part of me gives in to the temptation of buttered bread or roasted meat. But still, I'm winning. For a few days I feel quite unwell and I think I may finally be traveling out of this life" (376-77). Although Katniss' effort at self-starvation is relatively short lived – two days of "lying on [her] mattress with no attempt to eat, drink, or even take a morphling tablet" (377) – the discourse surrounding her suicide attempt is ripe with anorexic ideation. Like the person with anorexia who thinks in dualisms, experiencing the fight against hunger as a battle of good versus evil, or as Helen Malson writes in *The Thin Woman* (1998), a "discursively produced conflict between mind/self and body" (125), Katniss frames her self-starvation as a "battle" against appetite over which she reigns as champion.

By "winning" this fight, Katniss consequently triumphs over the "animal" part of herself, reflecting Cartesian notions of the wild/uncontrollable body as being separate from the soul, and the anorexic view of eating as an animalistic process whereby "the body, something that is not me, 'takes over'" (Malson, *The Thin Woman* 125). The particular foods that "the animal part" of

Katniss craves are also ideologically charged, as the enemy “battered bread” and “roasted meat” reflect anorexic binaries that view specific foods – especially red meat and fatty/oily foods – as dirty and/or dangerous.⁴ Although Katniss does not succeed in killing herself through self-starvation, her feelings of “travelling out of this life” throughout the process highlight the contradictory mix of self-production and self-destruction that often underlies lived experiences of anorexia, through which the sufferer “fight[s] to overcome herself, to cancel herself out, to go beyond herself” (Heywood 29). In these ways, then – and despite its geopolitical rhetoric emphasizing the horrors of class stratification and famine – through its perpetually starving heroine, *The Hunger Games* series frames self-inflicted suffering as symbolic of strength, and food restriction and starvation as prerequisites for heroic subjecthood.

The Mandatory Effortlessness of (Post) Femininity

Although to this point, Katniss’ position as the ideal sufferer/starver has been framed as a product of her character’s largely masculine identification, the logic of anorexia centers on gender ambivalence, showing reverence for particular male-coded and female-coded traits simultaneously. In other words, self-starvation and masochism themselves are not inherently anorexic; it is the valorization of these qualities within constructions of ideal femininity that

⁴ In *Food, the Body, and the Self* (1996), Deborah Lupton explores the motif of hygiene in individuals’ conceptions of what makes foods “healthy,” and corresponding motifs of fat and disgust in individuals’ conceptions of what makes foods “unhealthy.” She argues that both conceptions are rooted in binaries deriving from nutritional and biomedical discourses around food and the body that moralize certain “clean” foods while denigrating others as unclean (80-82). Megan Warin’s book *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (2010) dedicates an entire chapter to elucidating how anorexic rituals help sufferers feel that they are “Be-coming Clean” (152). Warin discusses how discourses of cleanliness and hygiene are mobilized by individuals with anorexia to rationalize their restrictive eating habits, and argues that anorexia is, in part, a way to remain clean and pure for fear of being defiled by specific foods perceived to be abject, namely fats, oils, and meats (103).

constitutes a logic of anorexia. This section thus turns to the post-feminist dimensions of Katniss' character and the heroine's seemingly effortless embodiment of ideal femininity, which exist in conjunction with her position as the idealized sufferer. In comparison with the *Twilight* and *Divergent* series, *The Hunger Games* trilogy's post-feminist dimensions are more understated, existing ironically amidst the text's critical commentary on gender performativity. As scholars such as Alison Bewley (375), and Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel (118) have respectively argued in their critical readings of Collins' novels, *The Hunger Games* series does present a compelling critique of traditional gender roles by highlighting Katniss' efforts to perform femininity for her various audiences. The first novel of the series shows Katniss learning to make "polite small talk" (6), walk in high heels (115), smile (115), "sit like a lady" (125), and wear makeup for the first time (120), all for the purpose of pleasing the Hunger Games' audience. The mundanity and artificiality of learning these feminine mores is not lost on Katniss, who compares herself to a "trained dog" who is "trying to please people [she] hate[s]" (117). The heroine's various beautifying makeovers in each of the novels also expose the elaborate efforts that go in to constructing an image of ideal femininity, even to achieve the "Beauty Base Zero" look, which Katniss defines as "what a person would look like if they stepped out of bed looking flawless but natural" (*Mockingjay* 60). In these ways, *The Hunger Games* novels do frame gender as a social construct, at which females must labour in order to be deemed socially acceptable.

Although the texts emphasize the efforts required for Katniss to become the image of ideal femininity desired by the Capitol, the Capitol itself is constructed as the pinnacle of artificiality. As exemplified in figure 5, a still from the film, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2* (2015), Katniss' "naturally" thin body, slick aesthetic, and innate self-composure are

juxtaposed in both *The Hunger Games* books and films against the Capitol's garish aesthetics, wherein women exemplify the precise brand of "too much" (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* 161) femininity that anorexic logic seeks to eradicate. Katniss' murder of an innocent and nameless Capitol woman in *Mockingjay* – whose recognition of Katniss threatens to expose the heroine and her troupes to their Capitol enemies – epitomizes this juxtaposition, as the action heroine's inherent coolness and position as patriarchal proxy triumph over the woman's vulgar hyperfemininity within the scene:

[A] woman throws open the door. She wears a bright turquoise silk robe embroidered with exotic birds. Her magenta hair's fluffed up like a cloud and decorated with gilded butterflies. Grease from the half-eaten sausage she's holding smears her lipstick. The expression on her face says she recognizes me. She opens her mouth to call for help.

Without hesitation, I shoot her through the heart. (314)

Here, the woman's ostentatious appearance, grease-smeared face, half-eaten sausage, and helpless demeanor all work to frame her as the grotesque antithesis to Katniss' lean and self-controlled heroism. Despite the woman's status as innocent bystander, and the fact that it is Katniss' first time killing a harmless civilian, this moment of death does not linger or call for mourning in the text, treated instead as necessary collateral on Katniss' journey toward womanhood. This example epitomizes how *The Hunger Games* trilogy as a whole – despite its critical rhetoric surrounding gender performativity – reifies post-feminism's semiotics of elitism, which as Diane Negra explains in *What a Girl Wants?* (2009), calls for a de-emphasis on aesthetic artifice and places women "under particular obligation to efface the signs of their own labor" (126) – in terms of their weight, as previously noted (Gill 12) – but also in terms of their beauty regime. The nameless Capitol woman thereby embodies two of the major taboos of post-

feminism, gluttony and artifice, against the valorized image of the effortlessly achieved self that Katniss' character at this point in the series has come to represent. In this respect, then, Collins' novels do not offer much that is new or progressive in the way of gender representation; as opposed to presenting a deconstruction of the gender binary altogether as some critics have suggested,¹ the trilogy merely critiques a specific grotesque, performative femininity that is already debased under the rigorous guidelines of anorexia and post-feminism.



Fig. 5. Contrasting images of femininity in *The Hunger Games*. “Publicity still of Elizabeth Banks & Jennifer Lawrence”; *Movie Stills Database*; 7 Oct. 2015, Web.

The Hunger Games series also highlights Katniss' post-feminist virtue through her juxtaposition with other female characters from the rural districts. That is, not only is Katniss' slender body constructed in ways that valorize her starvation and suffering, but it is also compared with the bodies of her female allies to reinforce the same “good girls versus other girls” (Sugio 17) trope in YA fiction for girls that is ascribed to Tris' character in the *Divergent*

series. For example, when Johanna – a fellow Tribute and ally from District 7 – eats alongside Katniss in *Mockingjay*, the protagonist emphasizes her friend’s boorish eating habits: “[Johanna] rubs her hand over her protruding belly. I look at the layer of grime under her fingernails. Wonder if the people in 7 ever bathe” (244-45). Here, Johanna’s “protruding belly” and “grimey” fingernails serve to reinforce false cultural equivalencies that equate female hunger with barbarism, and eating with lack of hygiene.⁴ Johanna’s wild mode of consumption is countered by Katniss’ more polished eating rituals, which the heroine maintains even during times of starvation, like when she brings home bread during a particularly scarce time in District 12: “Prim’s hands reached to tear off a chunk, but I made her sit, forced my mother to join us at the table, and poured warm tea. I scraped off the black stuff and sliced the bread. We ate an entire loaf, slice by slice” (*The Hunger Games* 31). In addition to Johanna, the character of Delly Cartwright, Katniss’ overweight school friend with “a couple of pounds to spare” (*Mockingjay* 187), is also used as a foil in the text to highlight Katniss’ embodiment of ideal femininity. In several instances, Katniss mocks Delly’s jovial personality and simple demeanor, highlighting her schoolmate’s over-attachment to (187), and fangirlish admiration of (188), the thinner, sharper heroine. Katniss’ juxtaposition with Delly adheres to problematic stereotypes that equate thinness with intellect and fatness with stupidity, while emphasizing the heroine’s detachment and general aplomb by comparison. The bodily indiscretions of Katniss’ female peers are therefore used to highlight Katniss’ post-feminist “cool,” which is constructed as both natural and necessary within the narrative’s framework of ideal femininity.

The sheer effortlessness attached to Katniss’ aspirational subjecthood is emphasized throughout *The Hunger Games* series. For example, in Collins’ first novel, despite her intention to appear hard-nosed on stage during her pre-Hunger Games interview, Katniss unwittingly

showcases her youthful and girlish demeanor for the Capitol audience while showing off her dress: “I lift up my arms and spin around and around...I’m dizzy! I’m also giggling” (128). Katniss’ gender performance is acceptable here because it is unintentional, framed as an innate aspect of the heroine’s inner character rather than a laboured effort to adhere to societal values, as is displayed through the previous example of the nameless, pink-haired and grease-smeared Capitol woman. Katniss’ essential femininity is also emphasized through the conventional heterosexual love triangle she shares with Gale and Peeta over the course of the series, as well as the trilogy’s epilogue, which centers on Katniss’ domestic life years after the war: “They play in the Meadow. The dancing girl with the dark hair and blue eyes. The boy with blond curls and gray eyes, struggling to keep up with her on his chubby toddler legs” (*Mockingjay* 389). Indeed, despite her abhorrence of domesticity throughout the series, Katniss inevitably returns home at the end of Collins’ narrative, following almost precisely Negra’s formula of the “retreatist woman” archetype in post-feminist media culture, in which the independent, mobile, and working woman leaves the public sphere for the idealized hometown where she rediscovers her true identity as mother, wife, and daughter. As Negra argues, not only does this trope place limits on the reach of female power, but it also posits a solution that is typically only available to upper class women. In the end, the heroine’s early identification with the masculine is made safe through her coexisting girlish virtues, deep-rooted heterosexuality, and strong family values. Thus despite its critical rhetoric surrounding the performativity of gender, in many ways the trilogy does not defy normativity; rather, *The Hunger Games* series perpetuates the same anorexic ideologies as its fellow New Heroine franchises, which challenge readers to adhere to the impossible paradox of post-feminist ideals that valorize specific masculine and feminine traits simultaneously, all without seeming artifice or effort.

Toward Embodied Existence: A Framework of Touch

Unlike the *Twilight* and *Divergent* series, *The Hunger Games* trilogy does self-reflexively unpack some of its own assumptions rooted in the pervasive cultural paradigm of mind/body dualism. While it is true that Katniss' self-actualization relies on her (sometimes self-inflicted) suffering and starvation – with her character arc concluding at the epicenter of post-feminism, the domestic sphere – the heroine's journey also takes her further towards a balanced state of embodied existence as the narrative progresses. In this way, Katniss follows the framework of The Heroine's Journey theorized in Maureen Murdock's text of the same name: a feminist response to Joseph Campbell's seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). While Campbell's quintessential "journey" centres on the hero's quest to find the self, Murdock's centres on the heroine's quest to heal the "wounded feminine" (i.e. internalized misogyny) inside of her. By bridging the divide between certain binary oppositions – masculine/feminine, mind/body, control/emotion – over time, Katniss becomes a "Mistress of Both Worlds" (Murdock 29). As Wright argues in her literary analysis of Katniss' heroic journey, the heroine experiences the false sense of success that stems from adopting masculinist narratives, and by rejecting those scripts in the end, "heals the split between masculine and feminine" (13) that underlies much of her character's struggle, as well as heroine stories in general.

I contend that the "heroine's journey" Katniss undergoes is made possible, at least in part, through the narrative's framework of touch (contra sight) that suggests alternative ways of being in a female adolescent body, outside of the dominant anorexic paradigm. As girls studies research has established, the surface of the adolescent or pre-adolescent body often serves as the

site of signification for girls' identities.⁵ Feminist literary scholar Leah Phillips calls this the "discursively produced body" (41), which she asserts emanates from western celebrity and social media cultures, all being concerned with image and aesthetic conformity: "this obsession with appearance has coalesced into a representational economy that equates [the girl's] self with her body, while also eroding visible (bodily) difference" (41). In *The Hunger Games* series, Katniss' emergence as the heroic war icon "the Mockingjay" mirrors this real-life cultural equivalency by highlighting the protagonist's transformation from girl into spectacle; through aesthetics and style, Katniss becomes the image of the Resistance – an intangible symbol of rebellion over which she has no control. For instance, while watching herself back on video in a piece of war propaganda, the heroine is only able to see herself from a third person point of view: "Her body seems larger in stature, more imposing than mine... Wisps of smoke – suggesting she has either just been extinguished or is about to burst into flames – rise from her clothes. I do not know who this person is" (*Mockingjay* 70-71). As the Resistance continues to exploit the symbol of the Mockingjay, Katniss comes to believe that she has lost all self-determination and becomes subsumed by the wants and needs of the masses: "I was their Mockingjay long before I accepted the role" (90). Although the heroine ultimately reclaims her autonomy by the end of the series, using her natural "effect" (*The Hunger Games* 91), that is, her charisma, rather than just her image alone to garner a group of authentic allies and followers, the protagonist's struggle with image calls attention to the valorization of the visual that underlies popular conceptions of girlhood.

⁵ For example, both social historian Joan Brumberg's *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1998), and gender history scholar Carol Dyhouse's *Girl Trouble: Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women* (2013) argue that girls in western culture employ the body as a way of defining the self. See Chapter 1 for a deeper discussion on this phenomenon, as well as Chapter 3's analysis of Tris Prior's pre-pubescent body in the *Divergent* trilogy.

It is through this problematization of surface image that the series' discourse of touch emerges in accordance with Elizabeth Grosz's theories of corporeal feminism. In her pivotal text *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Grosz condemns feminism, amongst other philosophies and movements, for being complicit in mind/body dualism, and posits touch as a necessary key to dismantle the binary oppositions that fall under it: mental/physical, visual/tactile, intellect/emotion, and so forth. As she explains, touch bridges borders, bringing proximity and closeness as "the surface of the toucher and the touched must partially coincide" (98). Rather than replacing the visual, touch works collectively with the other senses – sight, hearing, smell and taste – to extend the possibilities of subjectivity, not only providing the subject with access to meaning, but allowing the subject to define and redefine their own state of being as well (99). In her feminist literary analysis of mythopoeic YA fantasy, Phillips employs Grosz' theories to examine how the genre subverts the "dominancy of sight" (41) in stories for girls. She argues that many mythopoeic YA fantasy novels present "bodies that express multiplicity and difference, thereby offering frameworks for living and being a body that challenge the dominant, hegemonic fantasy of (embodied) female adolescence" (41). Although *The Hunger Games* series does not belong to the genre of mythopoeic YA fantasy, the trilogy similarly subverts the emphasis on sight and appearance that constitutes hegemonic constructions of femininity and girlhood by using a framework of touch to rethink the binary oppositions that define anorexic frameworks.

One way the series accomplishes this is through its sensual and tactile descriptions of food and eating, which run rampant through all three of Collins' novels. Although, as has been argued, many aspects of Katniss' relationship with food are problematic, in other instances, her character's descriptions of food and eating are radical immersions of the reader within the eating

experience, emphasizing the embodied pleasures of tasting, smelling, and consuming food. Some examples of this discursive phenomenon include Katniss' descriptions of drinking hot chocolate for the first time, "the hot, sweet, creamy liquid" prompting a "shudder" within (55); snacking on "strong fatty cheese" and apples "sweet and crunchy" (309); consuming assortments of roasted meat, her "tongue flood[ing] with orange sauce" (*Catching Fire* 78); and eating melted chocolate with a spoon, "scrap[ing] the second pot clean" (205). While moments like these highlight the bodily pleasures that accompany the consumption of rich and delicious foods, when Katniss eats, she often engages herself in the experience regardless of how abject or unconventional the food may be. For example, portrayals of Katniss' eating in District 13, where available food is less delicious and more scarce, also use a discourse of touch to bridge the divide between sight and feeling: "The stew doesn't taste bad, but there's a certain sliminess that's hard to get around. Like you have to swallow every bite three times before it really goes down" (*Mockingjay* 63). The protagonist's narration of her experiences hunting and skinning game provoke a similar effect, embracing through the body what may otherwise be regarded as "strange," "alarming," or abject: "I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me...I clean the game, taking extra care with the bird, but there's nothing alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it's no bigger than a chicken, but it's plump and firm" (*The Hunger Games* 199). Katniss' somatic knowledge of food, both appealing and not, thus subverts anorexia's positioning of certain foods, and consumption itself, as vulgar and abject symbols of the body's grotesque nature.

In several instances, Katniss' eating is constructed as a mode of rebellion against diet discourse and contemporary western food culture, particularly in the first novel of Collins' series. Frustrated by the interview preparation in which she must learn to perform femininity

according to Capitol standards, Katniss announces to her training team, “I’m going to eat” (*The Hunger Games* 116), and descends to the dining room while shedding her feminine attire: “I kick off my heels and stomp down to the dining room, hiking my skirt up to my thighs” (116). This declaration of rebellion, “*I’m going to eat*,” signals Katniss’ rejection of the Capitol’s standards of femininity, which like our own culture, feature a simultaneous obsession with and rejection of food. Likewise, when Katniss’ chaperone from the Capitol Effie Trinket makes derogatory remarks about some of the previous Tributes’ uncouth eating habits, Katniss “make[s] a point of eating the rest of [her] meal with [her] fingers” (45) while wiping her hands on the tablecloth: an out-of-character gesture enacted as a form of protest. Just as the first pages of *The Hunger Games* series portray Katniss breaking the rules of food propriety – hunting illegally and catching berries in her mouth – the protagonist’s somatic, and even emotional ways of eating in these scenes work to resist the dominant narratives of diet culture and food etiquette that constitute the Capitol’s ideological structures, as well as western ideals of female embodiment in general. Thus while there are many problematic instances in Collins’ trilogy that reinforce the self-discipline and eradication of female bodies, the series’ radical portrayals of feeding cannot be ignored. Eating is everywhere in the narrative – there are over 350 references to food – and by using a framework of touch that normalizes the somatic pleasures of eating, as well as the object of food itself, the texts embrace the liminality of the embodied eating experience, unsettling anorexic ideologies that both objectify the body and abjectify the experience of consumption, especially for girls and young women.

These somatic modes of consumption are reified in the series through juxtaposition with the disembodied modes of consumption that dominate District 13 and the Capitol. While, as previously noted, the Capitol represents the hyper-consumerism and hyper-materialism that

pervade mainstream western society, District 13's militaristic attitude and "very strict rules about food" (*Mockingjay* 36) reflect the severe discourses that surround contemporary diet and nutrition cultures. Both extremes – excessive consumption on one end, and rigorous discipline on the other – are critiqued in the text, which explores how disembodied foodways on both sides devalue subjects' lived experiences. Just as Katniss disparages the Capitol's excess in terms of its aesthetics and gender norms, so too does she criticize its privileged cultural position in terms of food consumption. The heroine's position as hunter/gatherer – that is, her personal relationship with food and where it comes from – colours her view of what may otherwise be seen as desirable by a girl facing starvation: the Capitol's endless supply of edible delicacies, which appear for citizens "at the press of a button" (*The Hunger Games* 65). The heroine's disgust toward Capitol foodways is epitomized during a party in which she witnesses Capitol folks binging and purging on party snacks: "[They're] vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It's what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun" (*Catching Fire* 80). Here, it is not the consumption of food itself that horrifies Katniss – as we have already seen, the protagonist often relishes the bodily pleasures that accompany Capitol cuisine – but rather the split between body and mind that allows Capitol citizens to justify their disembodied food rituals. The heroine experiences a similar disdain in District 13, where hyperbolically rigid food rules serve as a foil to the Capitol's exorbitant foodways: "They have nutrition down to a science. You leave with enough calories to take you to the next meal, no more, no less. Serving size is based on your age, height, body type, health, and amount of physical labor required by your schedule" (*Mockingjay* 35). As Katniss' contempt here reveals, it is not an overindulgence in food exclusively, but rather a mindless and disembodied relationship with food more generally – expressed in the Capitol

through excess, and in District 13 through measured restriction – that offends the heroine’s somatic sensibilities. Katniss’ ways of eating offer non-binary possibilities outside of the dualistic ways of thinking that divide her country and guide post-feminist discourse at large. In these ways, *The Hunger Games* series self-reflexively critiques the kind of extreme mindsets that constitute anorexic ways of eating, suggesting alternative ways of living in a (young female) body that desires, tastes, chews, swallows, and is fuelled by food.

Over the course of the series, Katniss’ somatic self-development extends beyond food consumption into the broader realm of human relatedness, as through touch, the heroine develops relationships of affinity that help her overcome her previous fears of bodily abjection. Literary scholars Sonya Fritz (29) and Lindsey Issow Averill (163), respectively, have explored Katniss’ progression from isolated sufferer into caring nurturer, noting that the heroine’s capacities for care and compassion grow over the course of the series in ways that are both powerful and feminine at once. What has yet to be addressed in this discussion is the role of the body in Katniss’ progression, as I argue it is only through mending the Cartesian split that Katniss is able to overcome her fear of relatedness and embrace those embodied connections that ultimately lead her to self-actualization. Just as the anorexic sufferer’s relationship with the body centres on fear and disgust – toward the body’s weakness, vulnerability, and amorphous borders – so too does Katniss begin her journey expressing both fear and discomfort with the body’s abject qualities, especially its central role in issues related to death and sexuality. For example, in Collins’ first novel, Katniss highlights her aversion to the injured bodies that often enter her home for nursing care from her mother and sister Prim (*The Hunger Games* 178). Yet, out of both empathy and necessity, the protagonist herself nurses Peeta through his injuries during the first Hunger Games, working through her aversion to tend to his abject wounds: “I can see the tear Cato’s

sword made in the fabric over his thigh, but it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh. I want to run away” (256). In contrast with anorexia’s rejection of the body’s abject nature – those grotesque, corporeal qualities that feel for sufferers “both out of place and too close” (Warin 150) – here, Katniss embraces Peeta’s injuries despite her initial discomfort: touching, comforting and healing the body inclusive of its proximity to, and alignment with, death.

Through touch, Katniss also experiences increased comfort with the naked body over the course of her character arc. While at first, the protagonist expresses embarrassment and shame, both in being nude herself and being near other naked bodies (*The Hunger Games* 256), by the events of *Catching Fire*, she develops a level of comfort with nudity that allows her to grow as a friend to others, and as an autonomous subject. For instance, when elderly characters Beetee Latier and Wiress Plummer experience injuries in the Quarter Quell, Katniss tends to their naked flesh, embracing the acts of peeling off their clothes (321), scrubbing blood from their skin (322), and stroking their bodies to soothe them (324). Not only do these actions deepen Katniss’ relationships with her elderly allies and increase her own self-knowledge through personal reflection (both of which help her unlock a secret to escape the Hunger Games arena, moments after this scene) but they also help mollify her previous aversion to the human body: “There’s no choice but to strip him naked to get him clean, but I have to say this doesn’t make much of an impression on me anymore” (321). As these examples begin to demonstrate, over the course of the series, Katniss learns to tolerate and even embrace aspects of the body’s abjection that she previously rejected – its amorphous borders, open wounds, and sexual organs; in accordance

with Grosz' theorization of touch (99), the heroine's tactile experiences allow her to construct and reconstruct her own relationships and subjectivity.

This gradual disintegration of the barriers between mind/body and self/other comes to a head in the final novel of Collins' trilogy, when Katniss, playing the role of the wartime Mockingjay, is forced to confront a plethora of injured and nude bodies in a warzone hospital:

Hungry fingers devour me, wanting to feel my flesh. As a stricken man clutches my face between his hands, I send a silent thank-you to Dalton for suggesting I wash off the makeup... The damage, the fatigue, the imperfections. That's how they recognize me, why I belong to them... I didn't faint or throw up or run out screaming. Mostly, I just rode the wave of emotion rolling through the place. (*Mockingjay* 91)

In this chaotic scene filled with the sights, smells, and textures of death, Katniss sets aside her previous discomforts to bond physically and emotionally with those patients who look up to her for guidance. Gale expresses his surprise at the heroine's growth, telling her: "I can't believe you let all those people touch you. I kept expecting you to make a break for the door" (91). By embracing the proximity between bodies, Katniss reaches a new level of self-understanding and relatedness with others, acknowledging that her "ongoing struggle against the Capitol, which has so often felt like a solitary journey, has not been undertaken alone" (90) and that through this coalition building, she has gained "a kind of power [she] never knew [she] possessed" (91). These moments of self-discovery are only made possible through bodily contact, which as Grosz explains, disrupts the dominance of sight to provide the subject with access to new forms of meaning about the self and others (99). Therefore, while at the start of Collins' series, Katniss' issues with relatedness more closely resemble those of the anorexic sufferer's – who strives to keep herself from the "disgusting, threatening, and transgressive" (Warin 151) realm of others –

by the end of the trilogy, the heroine achieves a more embodied state of existence, defined not only by a more somatic relationship with food, but through a somatic relationship with other bodies as well.

Perhaps the most pronounced aspect of Katniss' journey toward embodied subjectivity is the role of reciprocal feeding in mending her mind/body split. As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, food is dialogic in *The Hunger Games* series, taking on multiple meanings at various points in the narrative. A common theme throughout the texts, however, is food's ability to foster relationships; unlike the *Twilight* and *Divergent* franchises, which each galmourize and valorize their heroines' fractured connections with food, the body, and relatedness, *The Hunger Games* series showcases viable alternatives to the problematic rationalities that manifest Katniss' self-starvation and alienation at various points in the story. As Gilbert-Hickey explains in her analysis of bread in the franchise, "bread serves as a link between – but not a barrier to separate – the masculine and the feminine, the domestic and the political" (96). Building on Gilbert-Hickey's analysis, I argue it is reciprocal feeding specifically – of bread, but also other foods – that establishes these links between binary oppositions, subverting the kind of dualistic thinking that constitutes dominant, problematic views of food and the body.

There are numerous examples of reciprocal feeding forging bonds of relatedness in Collins' narrative, the first of which is Katniss' relationship with Rue during the first Hunger Games. Despite knowing that only one of the two girls can exit the arena alive, Katniss forms an alliance with the youngest member of the Games, bonding with her over a shared meal to which both girls contribute provisions (*The Hunger Games* 201). Together, they feast on Rue's "starchy root" (201) and Katniss' groosling, with "meat that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it" (202). Unlike the female-female relationships with her mother and sister at

home, Katniss is not Rue's caretaker here, but rather her equal, whose inclination to nourish others is mutually reciprocated. In the second novel of the trilogy, when Katniss finally begins to mend her dysfunctional relationship with her mother, it is once again feeding that fortifies the maternal bond. While in *The Hunger Games*, Katniss' actions prior to the Games see her refusing food, rebuffing her mother, and hiding her emotions, in *Catching Fire*, when it is announced Katniss must return to the arena for the Quarter Quell, the heroine embraces the familial love bestowed upon her through food and physical care: "[Prim] gets a towel and dries my hair, combing out the knots, while my mother coaxes tea and toast into me" (180-81). These moments mark a new beginning for Katniss' maternal relationship, as the heroine's status as the ideal sufferer/paternal provider gives way to her alternate position as child/sister. Thus, in *The Hunger Games* series, food is not merely dialogic and symbolic: through the literal acts of feeding others and being fed herself, Katniss is able to overcome emotional obstacles to form meaningful relationships of affinity that nourish her character both physically and spiritually.

The denouement of Katniss' prolonged love triangle with Peeta and Gale is also significant in this context, as it symbolizes her character's final decision to embrace nourishment over hunger. Like Katniss, Gale's character fits the archetype of the idealized sufferer, whose hypermasculine subjectivity reinforces his hardened emotional core, violent responses to anger, and self-sacrificial drive to provide for his family. As Katniss explains, the two characters bond over the "glue of mutual need" (*Mockingjay* 127), having come together as children to help each other hunt and feed their respective families. While the foundation of Katniss' bond with Gale rests on mutual starvation, the heroine's relationship with Peeta begins with an act of feeding. Peeta (homophone of the bread, "pita") is nicknamed by Katniss "the boy with the bread," as it is through Peeta's initial act of giving bread to the starving heroine that the two characters come

into contact. From that point early on in their youths through to the conclusion of the series, Peeta and Katniss nourish each other both emotionally and physically, providing one another with food and water through both Hunger Games, tending to each other's physical and emotional wounds, and showing one another consistent love and care despite Katniss' apprehensions about romance. Peeta's feminized characterization also functions as a counter to Gale's hypermasculine subjectivity, with the former's propensity for deep emotion and loving kindness helping to guide Katniss away from the position of disembodied sufferer and toward an embodied state of existence. While kissing Peeta, for example, Katniss is able to connect with her body in new, pleasurable ways she previously thought impossible: "The sensation inside me grows warmer and spreads out from my chest, down through my body, out along my arms and legs, to the tips of my being" (*Catching Fire* 352).

Katniss' ultimate decision to choose Peeta over Gale is thus a privileging of soft embodiment over hard masculine strength, as explained in Katniss' closing remarks of the entire trilogy:

[W]hat I need to survive is not Gale's fire, kindled with rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again. And only Peeta can give me that. (*Mockingjay* 388)

In this way, Katniss' romantic journey is distinct from those of the post-feminist heroines featured in previous chapters, whose relationships with men hinge on masculine control over feminine desire. While Bella chooses vampire Edward Cullen's cold and controlling immortality over werewolf Jacob Black's life-giving warmth, and Tris chooses a partner who exacerbates her masochistic drive and strives to "push her until she breaks, just to see how hard [he has] to press"

(Roth, *Divergent* 313), Katniss' choice to be with Peeta leads her towards a "rebirth" that allows her to reconnect with, rather than disconnect from, her femininity, body, and appetite for life. Therefore, although Katniss' story in many respects follows the quintessential post-feminist narrative that begins with an emphasis on female self-discipline and ends with the achievements of heterosexual love, marriage, and children in the domestic sphere, by framing Peeta as a feminized male romantic partner and highlighting his ability to nourish Katniss in multiple ways, Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy deconstructs typical post-feminist and anorexic discourses that uphold binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, mind/body, and control/emotion, and instead showcases the value of embodied relationships of affinity that embrace the affective dimensions of choosing nourishment over hunger and touch over sight.

In conclusion, despite her character's position as the suffering ideal and reliance on starvation as a prerequisite for self and cultural knowledge, Katniss does diverge from the archetypal anorexic roadmap over the course of her character arc. By mending her own internalized dualisms, the heroine presents her young female fans (in particular) with alternative ways of being during adolescence, outside of the binary oppositions that constitute anorexic logic and dominate hegemonic conceptions of ideal femininity. Unfortunately, this messaging seems to have been lost on the many critics of *The Hunger Games* film franchise who protested the casting of Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss around the first film's release in 2012, deeming her too fat to play the role. Notwithstanding the plethora of internet trolls who contributed to this discourse, several notable film critics also perpetuated the idea, with Todd McCarthy of *The Hollywood Reporter* calling attention to Lawrence's "lingering baby fat" (para. 13) in his review of the film, and Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* arguing Lawrence's "womanly figure" prevented her from looking "hungry enough to play Katniss" (para. 10). In a review that has

since been removed from his website, Jeffery Wells of the popular film blog “Hollywood Elsewhere” also pointed to Lawrence’s size, expressing that the “tall, big-boned” actress seemed “too big” to match her co-star Josh Hutcherson (qtd. in Busis para. 2). This backlash, which was widely discussed both in the mainstream media and in online fandoms, serves as a reminder that a narrative’s encoded messages may not always be decoded by its audience in the ways intended. However, just as Chris Vanden Bossche claims of *Jane Eyre* that it matters less which ideologies constitute a text than which ideological subjects are created through its consumption, attention must be paid to how readers themselves interpret the various ideological messages encoded in their favourite franchises, since as numerous girls studies and fan studies scholars have shown, young female fans are not passive consumers of their favourites narrative series. The final chapter of this dissertation therefore examines how young female fans of the *Twilight*, *Divergent*, and *Hunger Games* series actively engage with these franchises’ anorexic discourses, specifically through the medium of online fan fiction.

CHAPTER 5

Flipping the Script: Anorexic Heroines in YA Fan Fiction

I feel like *such utter crap*. I want to be that perfect girl on the cover of magazines, and I want to be that perfect girl walking down the beach in that one movie, and I want to be that perfect girl who matches her skintight [sic] dress with her confidence. Talking to friends, the ones who don't give a flying fuck what others think, the ones who have accepted their own skin, I wish I could be more like them. I want to love my body, to accept it for what it is and look forward to what it can be, to thank my body for all that it does for me... but somehow I just can't find it in myself [...] So I, Katniss Everdeen, the girl in love with food, begin to starve myself.

– Blisterkissed, “What’s My BMI?”

Fan fiction is the genre of fan-authored stories that employs the characters, settings, and/or plot lines of an original (i.e. “canon”) text to create an entirely new work.¹ Fan fiction originated online, and while some fan stories (i.e. “fanfics”)² are published in print – E. L. James’ popular novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), which was originally written as a *Twilight* fanfic, being the most famous example – most remain contained to the fan fiction website on which they began. Intertextuality, community interaction, and meta-fictional commentary are defining features of the genre, which together, provide readers with unique insights into the literary world of the story as well as the authorial process of telling it: a process typically hidden from readers of professionally published texts. Due in part to this unique array of perspectives that fan fiction offers, the medium has become a ripe source of analysis for scholars from various

¹ See Chapter 1 for a more comprehensive definition of fan fiction that draws on Henry Jenkins’ seminal book, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), in which he categorizes the various conventions and sub-classifications of the genre. Jenkins’ work helped articulate a fan fiction taxonomy in fan studies scholarship, including the use of the term “canon” to refer to a story’s source text.

² Some critics use the terms “fan fiction” and the shorthand “fanfic” interchangeably; for the purpose of this chapter, the term “fan fiction” will be used to denote the genre, whereas “fanfic” will be used to identify an individual text itself.

disciplinary backgrounds, including English literature, gender studies, media and culture studies, ethnography, and psychology. Together, this research constitutes the growing interdisciplinary field of fan studies, which hosts an abundance of fan-related scholarship, spanning from psychoanalytic work on fan motivations, to literary and cultural analyses of fan artefacts, including, but not limited to, fan fiction itself.³

The immense popularity of the twenty-first century's New Heroine franchises and their enormous fan bases have ignited a subfield of fan studies scholarship that focuses on these texts and their correlating fandoms specifically. Following the frameworks instituted by fan studies pioneer Henry Jenkins – whose research in the field since *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992) has worked to conceptualize fandoms as active and participatory subcultures – scholars of New Heroine fandoms have argued that young fans of these franchises are active navigators rather than passive consumers of the series' potentially damaging ideologies. For example, in her analysis of female and self-identified “feminist” *Twilight* readers, media studies scholar Anne Helen Petersen asserts that these fans experience tension between their love of the series and their discomfort with its gender politics. Similarly, gender studies scholar Penelope Eate affirms in her critical reading of *Twilight* fan fiction that female authors operate “critical dexterity” (21) in their readings of the canon texts, and “rewrite/right” the series' “gender wrongs” (23) through their stories.

What is missing from the scholarly conversation about these fandoms thus far is attention to the increasingly prevalent themes of food, the body, and eating disorders within the fan

³ In addition to fanfics, other fan related artefacts studied in the field may include listservs, archives within online fan communities, blog posts, Twitter accounts/threads, fan art, Tumblr pages, etc.

fiction. Since their emergence, New Heroine franchises have inspired hundreds of thousands of fanfics,⁴ and a growing body of these amateur authors are writing stories about anorexia. Girl author and FanFiction.Net user Blisterkissed is one such example,⁵ who in her *Hunger Games* fanfic, “What’s My BMI?” (2013), re-imagines Suzanne Collins’ heroine Katniss Everdeen as explicitly anorexic. As illustrated in the epigraph above, throughout Blisterkissed’s story, Katniss’ feelings of depression, combined with her self-perceived failure to conform to dominant notions of model femininity, cause her to turn to self-starvation in an attempt to become the “perfect girl.” This story, and others like it, illuminate compelling questions about how anorexic subjectivities are perceived and expressed by young female authors who may be dealing with their own issues pertaining to mental health, body image, and eating disorders. Within either interdisciplinary field of fan studies or eating disorders scholarship, the link between fan fiction and anorexia, typified by Blisterkissed’s story, has yet to be considered.

Therefore, building on existing research of the gender politics of New Heroine fandoms, and Abigail Derecho’s theory of fan fiction as an “archonic” genre used for social and cultural critique, this chapter examines how young female fans actively engage with their favourite series’ anorexic discourses through fan fiction writing. While amateur authors do express agency in making explicit the implicit anorexic ideologies that – as this dissertation has demonstrated –

⁴ At the time of writing, the *Twilight* category on FanFiction.Net and Archive of Our Own – the top two leading fan fiction sites and source of this chapter’s fan fiction corpus – had a combined total of almost 148,000 published fanfics; *The Hunger Games* category had a combined total of over 55,500 stories, and the *Divergent* category had over 8,900 fanfics. These numbers do not include fanfics from other popular fan fiction websites (e.g. Wattpad) or fanfics in which the author chose not to officially categorize their story under the domain of a specific fandom. These numbers also do not include “crossover” stories, which combine the narrative universes of two or more canon texts.

⁵ Although some authors do note their birth names on their authorial profiles, on fan fiction websites authors typically use pseudonyms or “usernames” rather than their real names to denote authorship. I will thus refer to fan fiction authors by their usernames in this chapter.

are central to both the canon texts under discussion and girl culture as a whole, through their contradictory and sometimes problematic depictions of anorexia, these fan narratives also epitomize the dichotomous nature of anorexic logic itself, highlighting each author's position as both critic and subject of the cultural climate in which she exists. This chapter thus considers fan fiction as an unexplored medium of expression for girls struggling with anorexia and/or female embodiment generally, asserting the importance of examining how anorexic subjectivities are articulated in ways that expand beyond the conventional genres of autobiography and non-fiction.

Theorizing Girl Cultures and Online Fandoms

At the dawn of the digital revolution into Web 2.0,⁶ girls aged 12-17 were the fastest growing group of Internet users,⁷ playing a large role, not just as participants in technology, but as coders and producers as well.⁸ Correspondingly, fan fiction forums are highly feminized spaces, with some estimates positing that up to 78% of all fan fiction authors are female (Sendlor para. 43). In her article analyzing "Fangirl Communities and Their Fictions" (2010), cultural studies scholar Jaime Warburton notes that adolescent girls in particular were the fastest growing group of romantic fan fiction authors in 2008, ignited by the success of both the *Harry Potter*

⁶ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Web 2.0 technologies and their role in the growth of fan fiction forums as sites of identity performance and construction, especially for youth.

⁷ According to a study conducted by Jupiter Communications and Media Matrix during the first quarter of 2000, for the first time, women and girls outnumbered men on the internet, comprising 50.4 percent of online users. The study also concluded that the use of the internet by 12-17 year-old girls increased by 126.3 percent in the previous year, 1999.

⁸ In *Girls Make Media* (2006), Mary Celeste Kearney presents the first book-length study of American girls' media production in the twenty-first century, analysing the creative productions of girls and young women ages 12-21, and the factors that impede and allow them to make media in the first place. Kearney argues that a scholarly focus on girls as active producers helps contradict stereotypes that frame girls as consumers and boys as producers.

and *Twilight* series (117). With the dwindling cultural currency of the Riot Grrl and zine movements at the turn of the millenium,⁹ online fan communities became a major draw for young female authors, who sought the kind of creative space and intersubjective coalition building afforded to them by previous girl-led subcultures. As will be shown in the following pages, fan fiction sites fulfill these functions by allowing girls and young women to not only express their creativity, but to perform their own identities and build relationships of affinity through the medium's literary and social capabilities.

This idea is supported by research in the field of fan studies that has established affect as a key component of fandom's draw.¹⁰ One of the affective dimensions of fan fiction that attracts girls in particular is its potentiality as a space for coalition building with peers. In accordance with sociologist Kristen Schilt's argument that zine networks give adolescent girls a safe place to expose and critique through their writing the "cultural devaluation of women" (71), fan fiction forums similarly promote modes of "c/overt resistance": Schilt's term for purposeful coalition building that retains participants' anonymity. Warburton's 2009 survey of young female *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* fan fiction writers affirms this idea, demonstrating how fan fiction communities allow girls across the globe to "create relationships with each other at the same time as they create relationships between their favorite characters" (117); of Warburton's

⁹ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the Riot Grrrl and zine communities' contributions to the development of girl-led writing communities and online fandoms as spaces for young female authorship.

¹⁰ For example, Lewis Grossberg's argument about "The Affective Sensibility of Fandom" (1992) posits fandom as an "affective sensibility" with empowering potentiality that is created when individual consumers come together under a cultural domain of their own making, distinct from mainstream culture. Angela Thomas' study of a 400-participant fan fiction world, discussed in her article "Fan Fiction Online: Engagement, Critical Response and Affective Play through Writing" (2006), likewise frames fan fiction as a form of "affective play," wherein girls use role-playing to engage in self-reflexive critical practice.

participants, 53.8% developed what they considered to be true friendships within their fan fiction communities, and 5.1% even met in real life (124).

I maintain that fan fiction's immense success and potentiality with adolescent girls makes it an important medium of study for critical feminist work on eating disorders. Fan fiction sites augment female adolescent identity construction distinctively, as teenage female authors, more so than any other demographic, tend to "write themselves into their fics" (Warburton 117). In this way, fan fiction may be considered an unorthodox form of "auto/biography" as conceptualized by Janice Hladki and Sarah Brophy in their book, *Embodied Politics in Visual Autobiography* (2014); contrary to autobiography's traditional focus on the life writings of "successful, even exemplary subjects," Hladki and Brophy employ an alternative concept of the "autobiographical signature or trace," which denotes "the elusive and/or risk-taking articulations of subjectivity" of contemporary autobiographers, many of whom are marginalized subjects (6). Since, as established in Chapter 1, eating disorders affect the lives of teenaged girls and young women more than any other group, it is logical that eating disorders are a prevalent theme in fan fiction narratives, such that a search for the terms "eating disorder" and "anorexia" on the top two biggest fan fiction sites on the web – FanFiction.Net and Archive of Our Own – presented over 8,500 results at the time of writing, each hit indicating a distinct story featuring one or both of the search terms in its title or abstract. It is clear, then, that girls are writing about eating disorders in their online fictions, and existing scholarship by feminist literary scholars about the links between anorexia and writing offers some insights as to why.

As explored in Chapter 1, for some, the anorexic body is experienced as text, with the rituals of anorexia themselves serving as processes of signification. Paradoxically, however, anorexia is also a process of erasure – both literally, by shrinking the physical body, and

figuratively, by erasing the symbolic body that almost exclusively constitutes a woman's identity in hegemonic culture. Not only does the individual with anorexia struggle with her own contradictory experience of the body as a site of both signification and erasure, but as feminist cultural theorist Debra Ferreday asserts in her essay, "Anorexia and Abjection" (2012), she also experiences the silencing effect of anorexia imposed on her by external cultural forces as a result of her illness:

In a culture saturated with spectacular images of thinness, how can the anorexic subject speak? Indeed, how is it possible to speak of the anorexic as subject when s/he is doubly silenced: first by being positioned as the object of a gaze (and a gaze, at that, which is oriented to the act of turning away) and, second, through a mental health discourse that positions her words as the mere ramblings of hysteria? (142)

Ferreday's work highlights the multiple levels of silence levied on individuals with anorexia who are prevented from speaking, or being taken seriously when they do speak, by medical and cultural forces that objectify and abjectify her gendered and disordered body. Writing has thus proven to be a prevalent source of expression, catharsis, and even recovery for individuals who are suffering or have suffered in the past from anorexia, with anorexia memoirs becoming a popular subgenre all their own.

Comparative literature scholar Isabelle Meuret, whose work was considered briefly in Chapter 1, calls this process of experiential writing about anorexia, "writing size zero," arguing that the signifying practice of *writing the body* through anorexia shares many similarities with the signifying practice of producing a *body of writing*. Anorexia and writing, Meuret argues, comprise "two faces of the same coin" (13), existing in the shared space between the mental and physical realms from which new epistemologies emerge. Through close readings of the semiotics

of self-starvation in contemporary anorexia memoirs from across the globe, Meuret categorizes these texts into three categories: “renunciation/disincarnation,” defined as cryptic, fragmented writing that renounces the physical body; “enunciation/incarnation,” which focuses on recovery and describes how individuals manifest their identity through writing their truth; and most relevant to this chapter, “denunciation/reincarnation,” which arises when an experiential writer moves away from the “I” voice and portrays her experience through an outside, usually fictional character. According to Meuret, in this final category, the writer seems to be “more often than not” through her writing “reliving [the] unresolved trauma – be it personal or collective –, acting out sacred moments, or expressing a profound alienation” (239), which allows her to achieve a mode of rebirth through the literary. Drawing on Meuret’s framework, I argue that much of the fan fiction about eating disorders falls into the category of “denunciation/reincarnation” by allowing writers with lived experience to transpose their own experiences on to characters from their favourite stories; as Meuret notes, texts in this group turn the writer’s gaze from the self to the other, moving away from the self-absorption that often consumes individuals with anorexia to potentially open up dialogue with others on the topic (12).

However, this semi-autobiographical process of “writing size zero” is not without its complications. In her Introduction to *Confessional Politics: Women’s Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media* (1999), literary historian and body studies scholar Irene Gammel discusses the complex workings of authors telling intimate stories of the self in their writing. Conceiving of “the confession” in both life writing and popular media as a “female discursive practice,” Gammel asserts that speaking about the self (particularly the sexual self) is always a risk for women, whose “real-life” narratives consistently impart “suspicion and skepticism” (2) toward the confessional genre, even while they are consciously participating in

the confessional act; as a result, Gammel argues, women “encode boundaries and warnings” in their texts, “signaling their desire to create their own safe space in which to articulate their personal and sexual lives” (2). Although Gammel’s words are about women’s sexual self-representations in particular, her conceptualization of a “safe zone” (8), created and mobilized by the female author for the purpose of protecting her story against appropriation and co-option, is applicable to the study of fan fiction, wherein many authors use the mediating effect of technology and the anonymizing device of usernames to disclose deeply personal material.

The sociological work of gender studies scholars Frances Mascia-Lees and Patricia A. Sharpe, captured in their article, “Body as Text: Young Women’s Negotiations of Subjectivity” (2000), supports this idea, highlighting some of the difficulties that young women with self-identified eating disorders encounter when they attempt to write about their experiences. The authors assert that the complex nature of eating disorders can make it difficult for young women to express themselves in traditional writing formats: “They desire a truth that speaks to the complexity of their experience: they may be female, but they are more than body; they may be text, but they are also agent (or author)” (161). Since it is “the linearity of [traditional, academic] writing” that often presses these individuals into “falsification” so that “they cannot say what matters to them” (161), Mascia-Lees and Sharpe suggest that non-linear or creative (that is, non-academic) modes of writing may be key to unlocking the individual’s self-expression. I contend that the non-linearity of fan fiction writing in online forums – manifested through its intertextual, metafictional, and participatory elements – may afford writers affected by anorexia an opportunity to transcend the confines of traditional and/or confessional writing in order to safely, creatively, and authentically represent the complexity of their lived experiences.

Fan fiction is thus as much artistic practice as it is a mode of identity construction or socio-cultural phenomenon. In her essay, “Archonic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction” (2006), Abigail Derecho conceptualizes fanfics as additions to the figurative archive of a canon text, as opposed to a lesser-than derivative of an original, superior work. She employs Jacques Derrida’s theories of “the archive” in his work *Archive Fever* (1995), which conceives of the archive as an ever-growing entity that can never be closed. Drawing on examples from as early as the seventeenth century, when women first began publishing adaptations of prominent male-authored texts to provide social criticism, Derecho asserts that archonic literature has long been “inherently, structurally, a literature of the subordinate” (72). By conceiving of alternative significations, meanings, and pathways of a canon text that subvert the hegemonic norm, and then realizing those very potentialities through the vehicle of an entirely new work, fan fiction, Derecho argues, is all about making the possible, real (74).

Due in part to fan fiction’s archonic quality, within their narratives, fan fiction authors have the capacity to speak back to the problematic messages and dominant ideologies that pervade their favourite texts and mainstream media at large. As Jenkins explains in his conceptual framework of fan fiction, fan writers may “pull characters and narrative issues from the margins” and “focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots” (155) in order to express their *own* questions and concerns within their texts (156). As will be shown, the stories in this study exemplify this theory by drawing on elements of the canon series’ underlying anorexic messages (as explored in Chapters 2-4) to elucidate for readers the actual experience of living with anorexia. Although the writers under discussion accomplish this in various ways and to different degrees of success, all attempt in some capacity to use their

heroine's canon characterization and specific plot points from the original series to provide a critical commentary on problematic messages of the body, and/or the manifestation of eating disorders specifically, amongst girls and women. By analyzing the discourses of these anorexia-themed – and in some cases, semi-autobiographical – fanfics through the critical feminist framework of eating disorders, this work addresses the dissertation's third research question inquiring how young female fans, the target audience of New Heroine franchises, are responding to and negotiating the anorexic ideologies of popular teen action heroine narratives.

Corpus of Analysis: Selection and Storylines

In her book, *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (2017), leading fan studies scholar Kristina Busse argues that the process of narrowing in on, and selecting fanfics for analysis – made difficult by the sheer volume of texts online – is the primary issue researchers face when studying fan fiction; since most scholarly analyses of the genre seek to elucidate something representative of a larger phenomenon (as opposed to a close reading of the text from a formalist literary perspective), she states that fundamental to the selection process should be “the relationship between the particular and the universal, between a given case study and the case study's ability to represent” (2). Drawing on Busse's method, this study engages each of the New Heroine franchises discussed in prior chapters – Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* novels, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy – via three fanfics, chosen both for their particular qualities (outlined below), and their ability to represent the larger phenomenon of eating disorders in fan fiction writing. The number three was selected for its capacity to discern emerging patterns between the texts, while keeping the volume of texts under analysis (nine in total) manageable

for the purposes of close reading. The corpus derives from leading fan fiction websites FanFiction.Net and Archive of Our Own, and were discovered through a multilayered search process that included searching specific terms and “tags” (i.e. keywords assigned to the text by the author) related to anorexia and eating disorders on the respective fan fiction websites,¹¹ combined with filtering the results by fandom. Due to each website’s somewhat limited search strategies and algorithms, general Google searches of the terms “fan fiction,” “anorexia,” and “[heroine name]” were also useful in locating some of the fanfics housed on FanFiction.Net and Archive of Our Own.

The search process uncovered 167 fanfics about eating disorders taking place in the fictional universes under discussion, published between 2007-2018, and these results were further narrowed to focus solely on those stories wherein the heroine herself is depicted as suffering from anorexia. Of this group, the texts selected for analysis were ultimately chosen for their substantial lengths (averaging 27,196 words per story), by which the author is able to explore the topic of anorexia in depth; their ability to spark online discourse (averaging 140 peer reviews per story), providing a substantial data set to analyze readerly feedback; and the author’s gender and age. That is, each author self-identifies as a female youth, which I define using Mary Celeste Kearney’s conceptualization of “the girl” in *Girls Make Media* (2006), who is between the ages of 12-21; as Kearney argues, this is the age range between childhood and adulthood at which the ideals of femininity in mainstream culture take root (4). To be exact, the ages of the authors in this study range from 12-19 years old at the time of publication. The writers of these stories thereby reflect the New Heroine series’ target demographic, as well as the demographic

¹¹ The following specific keywords and tags were used in the searches: “anorexia,” “anorexic,” “eating disorders,” “self harm” and “mental illness.”

most often diagnosed with anorexia.¹² Other identity categories such as race, ability, and socio-economic status were not considered in the selection process, as this information is not typically available in fan fiction forums, and indeed was not self-identified by the authors at hand. All but one of the authors identified their geographical locations in their online profiles, which together spanned the global west, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.¹³ Although authorial self-identification of having suffered from an eating disorder was not one of the selection criteria, as this chapter's research questions apply to girl consumers of New Heroine franchises broadly rather than anorexic sufferers exclusively, seven out of nine of the authors do explicitly identify in their online profiles or texts as having been affected by an eating disorder or mental illness more generally. Of the two remaining authors, one claims that she has never experienced an eating disorder, but that her writing is assisted by the advice of a friend who has suffered from anorexia, while the other does not disclose whether or not she has had any personal experiences with eating disorders. Regardless of their personal disclosures or past and present diagnoses, all of these writers' orientations as female youth living in a western cultural context, and as consumers of popular media, position them as targets of anorexic

¹² While estimates vary, most studies place the mean age of onset for anorexia in late adolescence, with diagnoses peaking between ages 19 and 20 (Parliament of Canada 8). However, the problematic behaviours and thought processes that lead to the diagnoses of young females typically begin to manifest much earlier in a girl's life; the Public Health Agency of Canada's 2010 nationwide survey, *Health Behaviour in School Aged-Children* (HBSC) found that 11% of girls in grade six (ages 11-12) engaged in weight-loss behaviours, with this percentage steadily increasing each year to reach 21% by grade ten (ages 15-16) (Chapter 9.5); moreover, 26% of grade six girls feel they are too fat, with this percentage steadily increasing each year to reach 39% by grade 10 (Chapter 9.3). Overall, less than two-thirds (63%) of girls in this age range with a healthy weight feel that their body is actually the right size (Chapter 9.7).

¹³ The prevalence of diagnosed eating disorders is highest in western countries, but appears to be increasing in non-western countries as well (Makino et al. 49).

messaging – a reality that I contend is reflected in their choice to write about the topic of anorexia to begin with.

While the stories selected for analysis vary in their settings and trajectories, there are common threads that bind the fanfics at hand. To provide context, the following paragraphs provide a brief introduction to the texts being analyzed, categorized by fandom. From the *Twilight* fandom:

- “Transcend into Descent” (2010) by Rho-xx
- “Disappearing Act” (2010) by Krumpingxballerina
- “When Losing Is Winning” (2009) by Sacha-lee

The narrative plots of these stories are strikingly similar: each takes place in the world of *New Moon*, the second novel of Meyer’s series, and narrates Bella Swan’s struggle with anorexia from a first-person perspective. All three stories are set in the *Twilight* series’ primary location of Forks, Washington, and follow Bella through regular teenaged life as she slowly succumbs to an eating disorder. The focus of these narratives is namely on the heroine’s phenomenological experience of self-starvation, resulting in rather horizontal narrative arcs. Each author categorizes her text under the Hurt/Comfort sub-genre,¹⁴ signalling the text’s narrative focus on Bella’s pain, which in each case is ultimately “comforted” by her boyfriend Edward Cullen. Drawing on Meyer’s original novel, *New Moon* – which chiefly focuses on Bella’s depression as a result of Edward leaving her – these fanfics reimagine the heroine’s despair as explicitly triggering anorexia. While in the canon text, Bella and Edward are reunited in the end, thus halting the heroine’s feelings of low self-worth, Bella does not recover from her anorexia by the

¹⁴ Chapter 1 outlines the primary narrative strategies and sub-genres employed by fan fiction authors in their storytelling, as defined by Henry Jenkins in his taxonomy of the fan fiction genre in *Textual Poachers* (1992).

end of any of the fan fiction stories under discussion. The story “When Losing Is Winning” ends with Edward turning Bella into a vampire in order to save her from her deadly anorexic practices, while the other two stories conclude more ambivalently, with Bella continuing on in her pursuit of thinness.

Following the previous stories’ focus on the more quotidian aspects of Bella’s day-to-day life, all three fanfics selected from *The Hunger Games* fandom take place in contexts that mirror modern-day America as opposed to Collins’ speculative setting of Panem:

- “Capitol Boarding School” (2012) by user RedheadedGodess (henceforth called “Redhead”)
- “Catch Your Breath” (2016) by user Blueberrychills94
- “What’s My BMI?” (2013) by user Blisterkissed

The plot line of “Capitol Boarding School” centres on Katniss Everdeen’ freshman year at boarding school, where the pressure to achieve perfection in all aspects of her life, including her grades, looks, and care for her younger sister Prim, leads to the development of anorexia. In “Catch Your Breath,” Katniss begins her narrative journey by expressing suicidal tendencies, which transition into anorexic behaviours as the story progresses; after the heroine voluntarily joins a website called The Reaping, which provides her with a 23-day countdown to commit suicide, she meets Peeta, whose zest for life moves Katniss to re-think her decision to die over the course of the story. “What’s My BMI” has the most horizontal narrative arc of all the *Hunger Game* fanfics under discussion, as the story simply centres on Katniss’ internal feelings about her body as she descends into obsessive self-starvation. In all three stories, Katniss ultimately “recovers” from her eating disorder by the end of the narrative.

Reflecting Tris Prior's core character development in Roth's canon series, which focuses on the heroine's masochistic tendencies and how they affect her romance with boyfriend Tobias Eaton, all three of the *Divergent* fanfics at hand centre on the development of Tris' anorexia and how it impacts her romantic relationship:

- "Burning the Ashes" (2013) by user Autumn Black 74
- "Fate Happens" (2014) by user Divergent24-7
- "I Will Always Protect You" (2013) by user CityofClaceAndFourtris (henceforth called "CityofClace")

Despite their thematic similarities, the onset of Tris' disorder is sparked by different plot points in each of the texts: in "Burning the Ashes," set in the universe of the first *Divergent* novel, Tris develops anorexia after experiencing the death of a child; in "Fate Happens," which takes place somewhere in modern-day America, Tris' eating disorder is triggered when Tobias moves away to another city; and in "I Will Always Protect You," set in the world of *Insurgent*, Tris stops eating as self-punishment for killing her friend Will (which she also does in the canon text). All three fanfics conclude by showcasing Tris' recovery from anorexia, which is largely prompted by Tobias' encouragement.

In taking a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to analyzing the nine fanfics at hand,¹⁵ this chapter discusses five prominent themes related to anorexia that emerge from the texts' collective discourse: (1) anorexic embodiment; (2) anorexia's development; (3) eating disorders education; (4) stereotypes about eating disorders; and (5) coalitions of lived experience. The following sections unpack these themes one-by-one in order to demonstrate how

¹⁵ See the Introduction of this dissertation for further elucidation of feminist CDA and this project's research methods.

the young female authors in this study both expose the dangers of anorexic logic and perpetuate its tropes through their fan fiction writing.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

Theme 1: Anorexic Embodiment

This first theme captures the ways in which fan fiction authors portray the anorexic heroine's relationship with her own body, which in the case of two *Twilight* fanfics, is depicted through the motifs of corporeal weakness and vulnerability. As elucidated in Chapter 2, in Meyer's *Twilight* series, Bella often blames her body for the limitations it places upon her as a human girl, including her weakness, vulnerability, and lack of coordination; in Rho-xx's *Twilight* fanfic, "Transcend into Descent," Bella employs the same rhetoric of "weakness" that the heroine expresses in the original novels to blame her body for the discomfort and pain she feels within her anorexia. While in the shower, for example, Bella explains, "I nicked myself and flinched...*Stupid weak skin*" (Chapter III original emphasis),¹⁶ and when she begins to feel cold all the time – a common side effect of anorexia as the body's metabolism slows – Bella's inner voice tells her: "*You are weak*" (Chapter VII). Bella's bodily vulnerability is also expressed by Krumpingxballerina in her fanfic, "Disappearing Act," but this time within a specifically sexual context. The author expands the *Twilight* series' original plotline to reveal that Bella was assaulted at a party just after Edward's departure in *New Moon*, reflecting the real-life

¹⁶ Being an almost-exclusively online genre, fan fiction does not feature typical page numbers. Although not every fanfic published online is split into chapters, all of the fanfics that I analyze here are divided as such. Rather than citing page numbers, I thus use chapter numbers to point to the location of a particular quotation in my in-text citations. I use roman numerals in these citations to distinguish the fan fiction chapters from the chapters of my own dissertation, which are also referenced at various points.

experiences of many girls and young women who develop anorexia after an episode of sexual assault. As Susan Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), for some survivors, sexual violence is viewed as being invited by their occupation of a vulnerable female body, which informs their perception of the corporeal realm as the realm of weakness and “female negativity” (5). These *Twilight* fanfics thus mobilize the characteristics of bodily weakness and vulnerability that are central to Bella’s character in the original series to demonstrate how those aspects of bodily abjection or “female negativity” align with the experience of anorexia.

In other cases, the heroine’s relationship with her anorexic body is represented through the motifs of alienation and disgust. In “What’s My BMI?,” Blisterkissed’s *Hunger Games* fanfic, Katniss emphasizes the discomfort she feels living in her own body, even while performing everyday mundane tasks like getting into bed:

I fidget...uncomfortable in every aspect. Whenever I move, my sweatpants twist around my legs in a way that makes the seams awkward and some places tighter than they should be. The sheets keep clinging to me when I roll over [...] I’m hyperaware of my hair, thrown all over the place and a mess and on top of all that, the nape of my neck is overheating while the rest of me is too cold. (Chapter II)

Katniss’ agitation and discomfort here reflect the profound disconnection from their bodies that many women and girls with anorexia experience throughout their disorder; Megan Warin’s ethnographic work on the “everyday worlds” of anorexia highlights the severe “disconnection and alienation” from their own bodies (and others) that women with anorexia suffer, perceiving the body to be totally “separate” from the self (143). Blisterkissed’s story thus uses the discomfort with embodiment that Katniss expresses in Collins’ original trilogy (as explored in

Chapter 3), in order to highlight the affective elements of disembodiment that constitute anorexic subjectivity.

This sense of alienation or disconnection from the body is elevated to a feeling of disgust in several other fictions. In Sacha-lee's *Twilight* fanfic, "When Losing Is Winning," Bella refers to her body as "disgusting" numerous times, and employs the language of hygiene to frame the body and consumption itself as dirty; she describes food as "dirty filth" (Chapter VII), and persistently highlights her need to make herself clean: "I didn't want them to see my body...having to look at the fat on me ripple when I cleaned myself" (Chapter III). Autumn Black 74's *Divergent* fanfic, "Burning the Ashes," likewise underlines the heroine's perception of her body as disgusting, with Tris using the horrific and boundary-bending language of abjection to describe her own physique as "hideous," "swollen," "weird, unattractive and surreal" (Chapter XII). "Catch Your Breath," a *Hunger Games* story by Blueberrychills94, follows a similar pattern, as heroine Katniss worries that her body will spoil the "clean cut and expensive" interior of her friend and love interest Peeta Mellark's home: "she worried about touching anything in case dirt came off her hands like a natural oil of some sort. She never felt comfortable in strange environments, and she never felt more out of place than she did in Peeta's kitchen" (Part III). In showcasing the protagonist's relationship with her body as one centering on feelings of dirtiness and disgust, these fanfics thus realize the correlation between anorexia and abjection that underlies many sufferers' experiences with the disorder; as Warin's work exemplifies, themes of "dirt, disgust, and cleanliness" often constitute the everyday bodily experiences of anorexic individuals, who use self-restriction to avoid the perceived "defilement" of food consumption (129). For the heroines depicted above, then, as for many women living

with anorexia, the body is experienced as a deplorable source of filth and abjection, which can seemingly be purified and cleansed through the rituals of anorexia.

By foregrounding the heroine's perception of her own body as weak, alien, and/or disgusting, I argue these fictions posit the rationality of mind/body dualism as being central to the anorexic subject's embodied experience, even if the authors do not expressly use the language of Cartesian dualism to do so. Accordingly, themes of bodily dominance and punishment (including, but not limited to the obvious self-starvation) also permeate many of the fanfics at hand. For example, Sacha-lee's *Twilight* fanfic, "When Losing is Winning," highlights Bella's disregard for her body by re-imagining the heroine as a cigarette smoker, with Bella consciously embracing the toxicity of cigarettes in an attempt to curb her hunger and lose weight (Chapter III). Sacha-lee's story reflects the real-life experiences of many individuals with anorexia, who often smoke,¹⁷ and take other forms of bodily risk,¹⁸ to gain control over their body's many appetites. In Rho-xx's fanfic, "Transcend into Descent," Bella enacts a more direct form of bodily self-punishment as she repeatedly scalds herself in the shower to "teach [her] pathetic body a lesson" (Chapter II); Krumpinxballerina's "Disappearing Act" likewise shows Bella using cold water in the shower to "assault all of the fat covering [her] body, wishing every inch would just melt away" (Chapter II), and later in the story, as she reaches a breaking point in her weight loss obsession, Bella cuts herself with a razor, "savoring the pleasant empty feeling [...] the only way to empty [the] mind of the stress of living" (Chapter VIII). Just as Bella

¹⁷ Doris Anzengruber et al.'s clinical study "Smoking in Eating Disorders" (2006) found that women with eating disorders reported higher rates of smoking and greater nicotine dependence than control subjects.

¹⁸ See Angela Favaro and Paolo Santonastaso's clinical study "Self-Injurious Behavior in Anorexia Nervosa" (2000) which posits self-injurious behaviour as a continuum with multiple expressions within anorexic practices.

eradicates her female flesh in Meyer's canon series in order to gain complete self-control, in the fan fiction, Bella hurts herself in order to gain a sense of control over the otherwise uncontrollable events in her life. In both the *Twilight* series' canon and fan fiction texts, then, Bella seeks to overcome her bodily abjection through self-inflicted punishment and discipline, but while Meyer's original texts celebrate Bella's actions by idealizing her disembodied vampire identity, the fanfics, in contrast, emphasize the severe risks inherent in the protagonist's mindset and behaviours. Overall, through their portrayals of the heroine's fractured relationship with her body, these fanfics subvert popular discourses that portray anorexia as a trivial problem having mostly to do with a superficial desire to be thin – a problematic yet popular view, as discussed in Chapter 1. Instead, they present nuanced depictions of anorexic subjectivity that frame the disorder as a complex experience of embodied abjection, highlighting both the serious and lesser-known consequences of anorexic rationality.

Theme 2: Anorexia's Development

While the first theme focuses on the ways in which protagonists embody anorexia, the second attends to the social and cultural contexts that allow the heroine's disorder to manifest and develop in the world of the narrative. In "Fate Happens," a *Divergent* fanfic written by Divergent24-7, heroine Tris exploits her parents' dedication to work and manipulates her public-facing emotions, just as she does in the canon text, in order to mask her anorexic behaviour – an effective strategy that progresses her weightloss to the point of hospitalization: "I finally came to the conclusion that my mother would be better off at work then [sic] at home, with her depressed child. After that I begin to act more happy and bubbly around my family, though it was all fake" (Chapter XIII). Here, the author replicates Tris' tendency in Roth's original books to self-

deprecate and self-sacrifice, but does so within the context of an eating disorder, demonstrating how easily invisible troublesome behaviours and attitudes can become amongst loved ones who are too preoccupied or oblivious to see under the sufferer's mask. Once Tris' family does find out about the heroine's anorexia within the story, they remain withdrawn, refusing to broach the subject, even when Tris attempts suicide: "It's been a little awkward, people refusing to talk about what I did, refusing to say the words, suicide, self harm, depression, and death. I wouldn't mind them speaking those words as much as I mind what they have been saying, things like, 'We think you should consider help because you did...that stuff,' causing it to make things even more awkward" (Chapter VII). While in the canon series, Tris' impulses towards death are celebrated as indicators of the heroine's unmatched bravery, in *Divergent*24-7's fanfic, these qualities are taken to their logical end, with the protagonist performing an actual suicide attempt. The refusal of Tris' loved ones to speak about the heroine's eating disorder and its life-threatening impacts mirrors the silencing effect of anorexia, as articulated by Ferreday earlier in this chapter, wherein the sufferer is engulfed by multiple layers of silence within the context of her disorder (142). "Fate Happens" thus exposes the quiet, quotidian environments that inform anorexia's development, while covertly exposing how the same anorexic rationality that Tris expresses here, also resonates within Roth's original series.

Stories from the *Twilight* fandom also emphasize the insidious nature of anorexia's emergence in daily life. In Krumpingxballerina's story "Disappearing Act," Bella's father Charlie Swan remains oblivious to his daughter's extreme self-restrictive behaviors; over the course of the story, Bella progressively skips meals, over-exercises, and drops down to the dangerously low weight of 93.6 pounds, but as she explains to the reader, "[Charlie] isn't very observant" (Chapter I). Rho-xx takes this commentary further in her fanfic, "Transcend into

Descent,” framing Charlie, not just as ignorant to, but as an enabler of Bella’s disordered behaviour. Bella employs the rhetoric of “health” and “productivity” to convince her father to accept and encourage her (secretly obsessive) pursuit of weight loss, and as a result, Charlie tells the heroine that her body shows signs of “obvious improvement” (Chapter V), and ironically, that he is proud of her for using a “healthy coping mechanism” to deal with her negative feelings (Chapter II). Rho-xx’s story suggests a connection between post-feminist rhetoric and the perpetuation of eating disorders, as Bella’s emphasis on personal “improvement” – which permeates her characterization in the canon series – works to easily assure her father that his daughter’s behaviours are “healthy” and “normal.”

The normalization of problematic dieting discourse amongst girls and women is also captured within Rho-xx’s fiction through re-contextualization of the shallow behaviour of Bella’s school friends in the original *Twilight* series; when Bella’s friend Angela Weber sees the anorexic heroine in an “extra extra small” net ball uniform within the fanfic, she exclaims, “Wow you are tiny Bella but the uniform fits perfectly and you look great in it” (Chapter V). Jessica Stanley and Ms. Cope, Bella’s friend and teacher respectively, also compliment Bella on “how gorgeously slim” she looks within the text (Chapter IV), and family friend Leah Clearwater likewise tells Bella that she “look[s] great!” because she is “so much fitter now” (Chapter V). These moments, which all occur while Bella secretly struggles with self-starvation, show how habitual practices and discourses within hegemonic girl culture, such as complimenting a friend’s weightloss, work to regularize and render invisible eating disordered behaviour. By recontextualizing pre-existent relationships between the original series’ characters in this way, the narrative thus exposes the normalization and consequent invisibility of

problematic body discourses both within and outside the series itself, and their high levels of influence on eating disorder development.

Blueberrychills94's *Hunger Games* fanfic, "Catch Your Breath," also focuses on the figurative invisibility of eating disorders, but self-reflexively positions its commentary within the virtual realm. In the story, when Katniss tries to discuss her mental illness in an online forum wherein fellow youth are likewise instigating discussions about their own mental health issues, her attempt backfires as she fails to access help from others that she and the other forum participants so desperately desire: "[t]he human race were selfish; fickle; boring beings. They were all wrapped up in their own little bubbles" (Part II). In addition to her cries for help being ignored online – a potentially metafictional nod to the fan fiction author's own embodied struggles and virtual dialogue on the topic – Katniss is also ignored by the adults around her, whose patronizing attitudes towards the heroine make her feel misunderstood and unheard:

Why was Katniss so determined to die? It seemed like a valid enough question; one that she had been asked so many times by her family and psychologists. One that, no matter how often she answered with brutal honesty, they never seemed to understand. They either treated the answers she gave as if they were silly and invalid or kept probing with more inquiries that pretty much had the same answer. (Part I)

In the original *Hunger Games* series, Katniss too is "determined to die" as her autonomy is stripped away by the patriarchal state. Here in the fanfic, Katniss' suffering and lack of autonomy are more explicitly linked to anorexia, critically highlighting some of her character's problematic behaviours and ethics in the canon text. This passage also critiques the disempowering experience of living with anorexia as a young woman in western society, whose experiences are rendered invalid by various figures of authority. In her fanfic, Blueberrychills94

thus implicitly asks the same question that Ferreday more directly asks in her research on anorexia and abjection: “how can the anorexic subject speak?” (Ferreday 142). In these ways, the fan fiction stories above employ and expose some of the problematic elements of each heroine’s journey and characterization in the canon text, in order to highlight the various levels of silence and invisibility permeating various contexts of eating disorders development.

Theme 3: Eating Disorders Education

The most pragmatic theme uncovered in the analysis centres on bystander strategies and education about eating disorders. While in some instances, didactic lessons on these topics derive from the heroine herself, who teaches readers through her narration and/or actions about some of anorexia’s lesser-known symptoms, such as hairloss – “She’d find hair everywhere. Her sweaters; pillows; chairs” (Blueberrychills94 Part II) – in most cases, explicit information sharing comes from the perspective of an outside character, allowing the narrative to explore, not only the viewpoint of someone with lived experience, but that of the bystander as well. For example, in addition to highlighting Katniss’ personal experience of living with anorexia, Redhead’s *Hunger Games* fanfic, “Capitol Boarding School,” also tells the story from Johanna Mason’s (Katniss’ friend and fellow Tribute) point of view. Johanna holds a meeting with their peers to discuss Katniss’ declining health, and in the discussion that follows, the group underlines some of the major warning signs that bystanders might notice when a loved one is trying to hide an eating disorder: eating privately, going to the bathroom after eating, and engaging in obsessive exercise practices (Chapter XIX).

In a similar narrative turn, Autumn Black 74’s *Divergent* fanfic, “Burning the Ashes,” also adopts the bystander’s point of view, temporarily engaging Tris’ friend Christina in the

position of first-person narrator. In the story, when Christina sees Tris for the first time amidst the heroine's battle with anorexia, she illustrates the severe physical and mental consequences of her friend's disorder:

She's a ghost. Her skin is sickly and unhealthy, almost a grey tone. Her hair is limp and greasy; I can tell it hasn't been washed for at least a week [...] Tris is a skinny person, but oh my god, she's skinny now. Her cheekbones are almost poking out of her ill looking face and her arms are bony and gangly. Oh Tris... What has happened to you? (Chapter IX)

Although Christina predictably focuses on Tris' "bony" and "skinny" frame in this passage, (while acknowledging the protagonist's "skinny" stature pre-anorexia as well), she simultaneously highlights the more inconspicuous but equally devastating outcomes of the heroine's disorder, such as skin discolouration and apathy toward personal hygiene as a result of anorexia's accompanying depression. Thus rather than valorizing Tris' self-restrictive behaviours through narrative redemption or sensationalism as is the case in the original series, Christina's dialogue, relying heavily on the discourse of illness, emphasizes the lamentable and dangerous impetus behind Tris' characterization as it relates to anorexia.

Divergent24-7's fanfic, "Fate Happens," offers the most straightforward example of narrative didacticism, as Tris' boyfriend Tobias Eaton conducts research on anorexia throughout the heroine's struggle with her disorder. Using the device of a frame story, the fanfic features an online newspaper article about a young woman's death by way of anorexia, which Tobias reads in his attempt to help the heroine. The article provides readers with the "true definition" of anorexia – defined therein as "[a] lack or loss of appetite for food (as a medical condition). An emotional disorder characterized by an obsessive desire to lose weight by refusing to eat"

(Chapter XIII) – and goes on to note that both boys and girls can develop an eating disorder. The text also asserts that weight is not always a strong indicator as to whether or not someone has developed anorexia: “anorexia doesn’t always mean you are skinny. Though many people believe, and match, anorexia with being thin” (Chapter XIII). As these exemplars demonstrate, young female authors are using their fanfics, not only as creative outlets to communicate their own understandings of anorexic subjectivity and the anorexic ideologies of girl-centred media, but to educate their peers, who may occupy the position of bystander, as well. Much like the zine and Riot Grrrl texts of the late 1990s, which were used as forms of underground information sharing about relevant issues for girls and young women, these texts work to validate uncomfortable truths about the lived experiences of eating disorders that often go unrepresented in mainstream texts, while highlighting possible modes of detection for peers and loved ones of affected teenaged girls.

Theme 4: Stereotypes About Eating Disorders

Despite their often progressive portrayals of anorexic subjects, contexts, and education, these writers’ depictions of, and approaches toward, eating disorders are multilayered and contradictory. Indeed, many of the fanfics that seemingly strive to expose and resist the logic of anorexia simultaneously reproduce problematic stereotypes of the disorder and sufferer herself. While research about eating disorders stigma and stereotyping is still underdeveloped, studies that exist on the topic have shown the stigma surrounding anorexia to be deep and pervasive,

both in mainstream society,¹⁹ and amongst affected individuals themselves.²⁰ In their clinical study of the stigma experienced by individuals with eating disorders, “The Prevalence and Adverse Associations of Stigmatization in People with Eating Disorders” (2015), Griffiths et al. categorize eating disorder stigma into four thematic groups: “personal responsibility,” “attention-seeking,” “weakness of character,” and “eating disorders being a problem that sufferers should be able to overcome with relative ease” (767). Unfortunately, each of these themes can be found in several of the fan fiction texts in this study; for example, while Sacha-lee’s *Twilight* fanfic, “When Losing is Winning,” offers an insightful critique of how anorexia pervades Meyer’s novels and mainstream girl culture at large, it simultaneously characterizes Bella as a “selfish brat” (Chapter XIII) who refuses to get better. Edward also repeatedly describes his anorexic wife as both a “child” (Chapter IX) and “broken angel” (Chapter XI; XIV; XV) in the text, and at the end of the story, he must turn Bella into a vampire to prevent her from dying of the disorder, echoing the canon series’ problematic plotline that shows an emaciated Bella gain access to her dream vampire life through a steady process of self-starvation. Sacha-lee’s story thereby

¹⁹ In their study, “Stigmatization of People with Mental Illnesses” (2005), Arthur Crisp et al. surveyed 3,000 adults in the United Kingdom on their attitudes towards individuals with various mental illnesses. Participants noted that they were unable to empathize with people living with eating disorders at a ratio of two to one; 13% of participants described their impression of individuals with eating disorders as “negative,” 55% described their impression as “neutral,” and only 32% described it as “positive.” Similarly, Jonathan Mond et al.’s study “Stigma and Eating Disorders” (2006) questioned 250 female university students on their attitudes towards individuals with eating disorders. The researchers found that participants expressed negative attitudes towards individuals with these disorders in the categories of “self-centredness” and “social distance.” Many participants also expressed that it “might not be too bad” to experience an eating disorder.

²⁰ Joanna Holliday et al.’s study, “Perceptions of Illness in Individuals with Anorexia Nervosa” (2005), compared perceptions of anorexia amongst individuals diagnosed with the illness and lay men and women. Participants who had anorexia viewed their illness as chronic and highly distressing, while lay perceptions of anorexia generally conceptualized the disorder as a “slimming disease.”

exemplifies some of the common stigmatizing tropes about anorexia that posit the disorder as simultaneously selfish – that is, the sufferer’s *fault* or *choice* – and as a way to canonize oneself and gain male attention.

Redhead’s *Hunger Games* fanfic, “Capitol Boarding School,” promotes similar ideas in its depiction of Katniss’ anorexia; although the text does take a didactic tone in its attempt to teach readers about the realities of the disorder and its often-invisible consequences, the story’s portrayal of anorexia’s etiology also adheres to stereotypes that view the affected individual as attention-seeking. In the midst of her disorder, Katniss explains to Johanna: “You want to know why I did this? Fine, I’ll tell you. I was going to see Peeta for a date when I saw him talking to some extremely skinny girls. You know the type. Blonde, fit, popular, the kind that everybody likes. I was nothing compared to them” (Chapter XX). This example illustrates how some of the fan fiction texts in this study – despite their efforts to expose and critique anorexic values in girl-centred media – continue to perpetuate stigmatizing tropes about anorexia that trivialize the disorder in much the same way that post-feminist ideology trivializes other feminist causes, with “victimhood” being associated with “insufficient personal drive, a lack of personal responsibility for one’s own life, and self-pity” (Anderson 5). In many ways, then, fan fiction centered on eating disorders is emblematic of the contradictory nature of both post-feminist sensibility and anorexia itself, which paradoxically call for simultaneous resistance against, and conformity to, normative feminine virtues.

This repetition of stigmatizing discourses, however, does not nullify the subversive potential of fan fiction as a site of resistance. As has been demonstrated, both writers and readers of fan fiction are constituted in ways that are intersubjective – which Janice Radway defines in her article on teen zinesters, “Zines, Half-Lives, and Afterlives” (2011), as “the interweaving of

social subjects, their relations to and connections with others” (148). The dialogic elements of fan fiction forums, which provide a feedback loop of communication between readers and writers, has proven instrumental in combatting stigmatization in those instances when stereotypes manifest within the fanfics at hand. When *Divergent* fanfic author CityofClace ends her story, “I Will Always Protect You,” with Tris’ abrupt (and implausible) recovery from anorexia, adhering to the eating disorders stigma that “sufferers should be able to overcome [their eating disorder] with relative ease” (Griffiths et al. 767), numerous reviewers push back in their comments, with statements such as: “I am currently facing anorexia and depression and I can say that recovery is not that easy” (Chapter III), and “[a]n anorexic girl would definitely not just say okay after one person suggesting that starving is a bad idea... You’re a very good writer, just make it realistic” (Chapter III). Just as creators of fan fiction use their writing to express their own frustrations with the canon text (H. Jenkins 283), so too do reviewers, who are often fan fiction writers themselves, push back against discourses and representations they deem problematic in the fan-authored texts they read.

Logically, the inverse occurs in instances when the author does work to combat stigma in her text, with messages of support from reviewers replacing messages of dissent; for example, Blisterkissed’s *Hunger Games* fanfic, “What’s My BMI,” highlights the problematic trope in YA fiction of using anorexia as a coming-of-age motif, which adheres to the stigma that individuals with anorexia should take “personal responsibility” and/or have “weakness of character” (Griffiths et al. 767). Numerous reviewers applaud Blisterkissed’s critical commentary on this subject, which manages to emphasize the protagonist’s personal agency without glamorizing her decision to starve herself; one reviewer notes – “Not many people write anorexia like this; I love the way you don’t make her a princess, that you’re writing Katniss as a pitiable girl trapped in

her own failure not a girl [whose] self-will is so strong she can starve herself” (Chapter I) – while another writes, “It’s just so real – I love the stark, bleak, piercing way you write this, the unforgiving voices she’s at war with...So many anorexia stories are really ‘poor little girl, struggling to be thin’...This though – it’s just so, so good” (Chapter III). Comments like these are significant in light of Yan et al.’s recent sociological study, “Reducing the Stigma Associated with Anorexia Nervosa” (2018), which demonstrates that social consensus – wherein “individuals tend to endorse values, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or actions consistent with social norms” (68) – is one of the most effective approaches to reduce anorexia stigma amongst young women. According to Griffiths et al.’s aforementioned study analyzing the various categories of anorexia stigma, reducing stigma amongst sufferers may also help reduce the duration of the disorder itself, limiting feelings of low self-image and fear of seeking help amongst sufferers. Thus, not only does engagement with anorexia stereotypes in fan fiction help subvert stigma by creating a communication feedback loop that may affect the fanfic author’s own intersubjectivity and narrative outputs moving forward – a phenomenon rooted in Hans Robert Jauss’ reader reception theory, explored in Chapter 1 – but also by building social consensus through public-facing commentary that conveys a message of allyship against stigmatizing discourses.

Theme 5: Coalitions of Lived Experience

The fan fiction writers in this study also tend to build coalitions with their peers through exchanges of lived experience, using the Author’s Notes and Reviews functions of the online forum to foster meaningful relationships with others outside of the narrative world. Many authors explicitly call on readers to interact with their texts, with readers posting reviews and responses

in turn. In some cases, as can be seen in Rho-xx's transcribed Author's Notes below, the conversation centres on the author's own experience with anorexia:

...for some that suffer an eating disorder it happens and others it doesn't but for Bella and a lot of other people (such as myself and others I have known), [an inner voice speaks to you] like an intense feeling that drives thought into words... Eating disorders can be confusing as hell to understand if you haven't had one so comment and ask anything you want. (Chapter III)

As notes like this one suggest, publishing stories about the experience of living with anorexia can help young authors affected by eating disorders gain confidence and agency as they encourage others to share, comment on, and empathize with the experience within the interactive forum. Drawing on Gammel's theories of women's confessional writing discussed earlier in this chapter, I contend that through these virtual interactions, young female writers create "safe zones" (Gammel 8) for themselves, wherein they are able to articulate sensitive issues from their personal lives with a group of virtual, and often anonymous, peers.

In other cases, the authors use the Author's Notes function, not to speak about their own experiences, but to encourage others to self-reflect and speak out; for example, writer Sacha-lee asserts in her Author's Notes that she would like to see "more anorexia/bulimia stories" because it is "better for people that are suffering from it, when people can begin to understand them" (Chapter VI). Similarly, user Divergent24-7 explains to readers in her Author's Notes, "I just want to get out what some people go through and that if you are one of those people, you are not alone...I just don't want anyone to feel upset with me or make anyone think that this is okay" (Chapter XXV). These excerpts express concern with eating disorders as well as an understanding of the power of narrative storytelling; through their desire to build coalitions with

fellow affected individuals through their fiction, these young writers assert the idea that girls impacted by eating disorders are not alone.

This desire for connection is reciprocated in the Reviews section of the forum: the space where readers are able to comment on, and respond to the fan fiction author's original text. More so than the Author's Notes function, which centralizes the single voice of the author, Reviews allow for a multitude of perspectives and reciprocal communication amongst the story's many readers, increasing the sense of community and coalition building ignited by the author's initial appeal for dialogue. While some reviewers seek to connect with the author herself – "is this based off personal experiences? Because if you have, I know it's hard, but I would recommend you get some help, and I wish you the best of luck with recovery" (reviewer of *Blisterkissed*, Chapter I) – other reviewers pose a public call to action: "More people need to see and talk about such issues. If people ignore help (going to therapy) at least they can see and read about characters who go through similar pain and thoughts" (reviewer of *Divergent24-7*, Chapter XX). Many reviewers of the fanfics at hand use the Reviews function to communicate their personal experiences with eating disorders, thereby validating the author's work and letting her know that her story has made a personal impact on the reader. For example, one reviewer explains to author *Blisterkissed*: "I personally have struggled with self harm, anorexia and bulimia so it was interesting to see the strongest character (in my opinion) struggling with the same things I am" (reviewer of Chapter XLI); another praises writer *Divergent24-7*'s work, stating, "Amazing chapter! I've been through several diagnoses, including a weird physical thing and a mental health issue, and Tris's response was so perfect I could have cried [...] this chapter really spoke to me on a personal level (reviewer of Chapter XXXVI). These excerpts are indicative of a larger trend of readers with lived experience building connections with writers (and each other) both

emotionally and intellectually through dialogue about eating disorders in online fan fiction forums. In this way, the fanfics in this case study foster intersubjectivity, wherein girl writers and readers gain agency through communication and coalition-building with one another through text. Fan fiction forums thus afford writers and readers the opportunity to not only interact with one another, but to work together through personal and challenging topics – in this case, anorexia – dialogically.

In the end, by viewing fan fiction as an archonic genre centered on the realization of virtual possibilities, the growing body of New Heroine fanfics with anorexic protagonists highlights the many ways in which young female fans of the series read and negotiate the texts' anorexic values within the context of their own subjectivities and embodied struggles. In *Reading the Romance* (1984), Janice Radway argues that print romance novels are subversive entities even if their underlying ideologies are heteronormative, in that they allow women writers to supply for other women readers more of what they do not get “enough of” (212) from mainstream cultural texts. In the same vein, while these fan fiction narratives may not – and need not – offer the kind of thoughtful and robust critique necessary to provoke widespread understanding of, or change in, eating disorders etiology or policy, what this chapter has shown is that fan fiction is productive in its capacity to empower young female authors struggling under the weight of harmful cultural discourses through acts of self-expression, community building, information sharing, and cultural critique. In her work on zine-making as a form of girl-led resistance, Kristen Schilt asserts that “[h]aving the power to produce a cultural artifact that speaks about your own life and over which you exercise complete creative control gives a new dimension to the empowerment of adolescent girls as it teaches them the tools for seeking their own strategies for navigating [adolescence],” even if “these strategies may not always be

successful or positive and are constrained by girls' race and class positions" (94). In accordance with Schilt's claims, critical feminist studies of eating disorders would benefit from attending to fan fiction as a site of study, especially considering the recent proliferation of eating disorders discourse in other online spaces. As this chapter's initial research in this area has shown, fan fiction can help us understand how girls and young women (in particular) are internalizing and resisting the anorexic ideologies with which they are constantly confronted in today's post-feminist climate, both in their fictional worlds, and in real life.

CONCLUSION

At the onset of my research into teen action heroines and the logic of anorexia, I set out to answer a series of questions that had been pulling at me as a feminist critic, eating disorders advocate, and fan of speculative fiction. These questions centered on the conception of female heroism dominating mainstream media, and how its related aesthetics and discourses intersect with anorexia; they also interrogated reader responses, questioning how young female action hero fans negotiate the anorexic ideologies of their favourite narratives. What I found, and what I hope this dissertation has proven, is that the discourses of post-feminism have entrenched their claws deeply into the collective imagination of what female heroism and empowerment look like, and what constitutes ideal femininity in the twenty-first century neo-liberal context; moreover, that many of these ideals reify the logic of anorexia, which since the nineteenth century has functioned as a dominant western cultural value system aimed at women, privileging the realm of the mind over the body, masculine over feminine, control over emotion, thinness over fatness, and spiritual transcendence over the physical quotidian. Indeed, while the growing appetite for representations of female “strength,” especially in media for girls, has contributed to a burgeoning of female-led action narratives in mainstream culture, these representations continue to be constrained by post-feminism’s paradoxical values, many of which have simply re-packaged longstanding and self-punishing standards of femininity as qualities of female empowerment and heroism. Far from lofty theorization, the anorexic rationalities inherent in these texts are being read, interpreted, and re-imagined by young female fans of the series, who are authoring both fictional and non-fictional expressions of anorexic subjectivity in their fan fiction texts, and illuminating collectively various aspects of the lived experience of anorexia.

I began this project in 2016, in the shadow of President Donald Trump's inauguration, and a corresponding renewed public contempt for women and girls. This time period also saw the dawn of what many are calling the "fourth wave" of feminism; while the first wave of feminism centred on women's suffrage and the second wave focused on women's access to male-dominated spaces, the third and fourth waves emerged as offspring of postmodernity, rejecting the very categories of male/female and positive/negative on which the previous feminist movements relied. Fourth wave feminism has recently been distinguished as a new movement unto its own through its insistence on intersectionality and usage of Web 2.0 technologies to mobilize activism. With prominent third wave voices such as bell hooks lamenting the growth of "lifestyle" feminism (i.e. post-feminism) in the early 2000s, calling for dialogical and accessible feminism for the masses that placed politics (including issues of race, class, sexuality, and masculinity) at its centre, by 2008 the fourth wave had begun to materialise, propagating meaningful feminist politics online and transgressing various barriers to do so. Today, the movement is largely led by young women and female-identified individuals who are responding to the post-feminist myths of female power and the continued realities of sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression in public spaces as high as the Oval Office. While scholarship on the fourth wave is still nascent, as noted in the respective works of feminist critic Melissa Benn, and media and communications scholar Ealasaid Munro, its movement is primarily concerned with the cultural sphere, focusing on issues like media representation (including body positivity and the hypersexualization of female bodies), violence against women (including domestic and sexual violence), and micropolitics of the everyday.

Through its global community of activists who are able to communicate virtually and dialogically, the fourth wave allows individuals to learn from one another, respond to injustice,

collaborate, and form protests almost instantaneously, with practices such as “hashtagging” allowing information to be disseminated quickly amongst the masses. The 2016 Women’s March on Washington, which was initially criticized for its lack of intersectionality and employment of gender essentialism, epitomizes how fourth wave feminist politics are being mobilized by feminist organizers online. Online dialogue between March participants worldwide, of which I was a participant myself, used virtual networks of (mostly) women to expose, and brainstorm solutions to these issues of intersectionality. The fourth wave’s reliance on the internet has also fostered the creation of call-out culture, wherein discriminatory or oppressive practices can be “called out” and discussed in virtual forums. As prominent British journalist and feminist activist Kira Cochrane writes in her book, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (2013), the internet has:

transformed the circulation of feminist ideas. Where once it could be difficult to access feminist writing – the canon tucked away on library shelves, mainstream media largely ignoring or deriding the subject – the storm of feminist blogs and voices online has changed all that. It’s brought thousands of new writers to the fore, and in the process, feminist issues have moved from the margins into the mainstream. (684)

As the number of women in digital spaces continues to increase and new technologies emerge in geographical areas where women have traditionally faced social and political injustices, the sharing of educational resources, activist organizing, and consciousness-raising within the fourth wave will likely continue to grow in the coming years.

Due in part to the work of fourth wave feminist activists, a growing critical engagement with post-feminist ideology has also begun to emerge, with virtual, transnational social justice campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter bringing to the public consciousness

theories of intersectionality and embodiment that place women's own voices at the forefront. Of particular relevance to my research is the growing "body positivity" movement that has developed online in the midst of fourth wave feminism, with a focus on bodily acceptance and defiance against the hegemonic normalization of white, thin, able, cis-gendered, and physically toned bodies. In her article, "Towards a Radical Body Positive: Reading the Online 'Body Positive Movement'" (2014) – a discourse analysis of body positive spaces online – feminist body studies scholar Alexandra Sastre claims that these spaces provide young women (in particular) with "a safe space" to "share stories, and more importantly images, of their bodies" (929) that foster body acceptance and inclusivity. However, Sastre also asserts that in some instances, (like almost all counter-cultural movements), body positivity has been co-opted by hegemonic forces and "transformed into a prescribed set of visual and textual practices [that] re-inscribe, rather than liberate, the body into a rubric of appropriate, self-conscious citizenship" (930). Fashion and fitness models who use the discourse of body positivity to show off their conventionally beautiful physiques via social media – using hashtags like #bodypositive and #selfcare – exemplify the kind of ideological re-inscription of hegemony that Sastre warns against.

Although the body positive movement's various ideological ramifications are thus contentious, and otherwise outside of the scope of this research project, the movement's impact on popular media aimed at girls and young women is undeniable, and significant in the context of New Heroine narratives. While the grassroots body positive movement began online through dedicated websites and social media profiles designed by and for women (e.g. *Herself*, *The Body is Not an Apology*, @EffYourBeautyStandards), its values have slowly made their way into the mainstream, exemplified by companies like Aerie and *Seventeen Magazine* who have pledged to

eliminate photo retouching from their visual communications. The realm of television has also taken a lead in body positive media for girls and young women, with popular programs such as *Girls* (2012-2017), *Broad City* (2014-2019), and most recently, *Shrill* (2019) casting female characters of different shapes, sizes, sexualities, and embodied ways of being as the heroines of their respective stories. Of all of these shows, *Shrill* has been particularly effective at generating discussion about body positivity in mainstream media, as the show's overweight heroine Annie (played by Aidy Bryant) seeks throughout the series to change her life without changing her body. In other words, it is Annie's relatedness – to herself, her friends, and her broader community – that is the focus of the narrative, not the backstory or impetus behind her character's fatness, which is so often portrayed as traumatizing and pathological in media representations. Body positive media for girls and women still has a long way to go in terms of intersectionality – in all of the instances above, for example, the heroine is white, cis-gendered, and middle-class; the movement has nonetheless sparked a new trend of anti-heroines who emphasize the messy, affective and embodied elements of feminine experience, and oppose the tidiness and purity of post-feminism's individualistic, neo-liberal, and anorexic value system, which as this dissertation has argued, defines the figure of the New Heroine. These representations are a step towards combatting the pervasive anorexic messaging that underlies so much of the popular media aimed at girls and young women today, and manifesting the kind of radical body positive movement imagined by Sastre, which is premised “not on particular visual and discursive formations, but on a critical and conscientious engagement with the ways we are expected to understand, perform, and be our bodies” (941).

There are many potential avenues for future research, then, that arise from this dissertation. The first is investigation into the fourth wave feminist counteraction of post-

feminist ideology that is currently unravelling in popular media and culture, specifically through the figure of the body positive anti-heroine, who in my view, functions as a kind of antithesis to the figure of the New Heroine in popular media aimed at girls and young women. The body positive anti-heroine embraces her embodied self – rolls, blemishes and all – and seeks affective balance in her relationships to food, the body, and her community. Another potential area for future research concerns the role of online fandoms within the fourth wave, and its related engagement with anorexic logic. As the work of Chapter 5 begins to suggest, the recent mainstreaming of feminist politics via the internet (not to be confused with mainstream post-feminist ideology) is present within New Heroine fandoms, which mobilize the dialogical and intersubjective capabilities of the fan fiction medium to circulate grassroots feminist media criticism from the ground-up. Indeed, with its emphasis on call-out culture and adoption of the Internet as a dialogical tool, online fan fiction spaces may be explored as microcosms of the fourth wave, offering girls new and effective means to negotiate and resist the anorexic logic that so often underlies mainstream post-feminist texts.

This project's theoretical framework also provides a lens through which other contemporary cultural objects aimed at female children and youth may be interrogated. For example, Mattel's enormously successful horror-themed multimedia doll franchise, *Monster High* – second in the market only to Barbie (Ulaby 1) – promotes its figures as aspirational heroines for young girls ages 6+, and has received widespread acclaim from parents and critics alike,¹ who see value in the brand's emphasis on “celebrating your individual fun freaky flaws”

¹ See Gregory Schmidt's piece in the *New York Times*, “Being a Monster Doesn't Mean Being a Bully, Too” (2011), which frames *Monster High* dolls as tools for young girls' empowerment, as well as journalist Hayden Manders' article in *Refinery29*, “Goth Barbies Are Mattel's ‘It' Girls Now” (2013), which praises the franchise's dark, alternative aesthetics and “aspirational anti-bullying message” (para. 3).

(Mattel 1). However, as the image of Monster High's "Bonita" and "Skelita" dolls in figure 6 begins to suggest, this project's corporeal feminist approach may be useful in examining the full spectrum of the franchise's implications and impacts on young consumers, whose fervent passion for the dolls must be negotiated against what I view as an aesthetic validation of a utopic anorexic subjectivity. This dissertation's framework connecting previously disparate theories of eating disorders, feminism, YA fiction and girl culture may thus be applied within various studies of girls' media and material cultures, potentially expanding the reach of this dissertation's arguments.



Fig. 6. An example of anorexic logic in girls' material culture. "Skelita Calaveras of Monster High Scaris Review"; *Do You Like This Too?*; 25 Dec. 2012, Web.

Finally, this project calls into question the "real life" implications of mediated anorexic logic on experiences of anorexia proper, and how the critical feminist eating disorders framework can be mobilized, not just in theory, but also by practitioners engaging with literal cases of eating disorders. Although this dissertation began by acknowledging that its research

does not aim to offer insights into the etiology of eating disorders or their treatment from a medical or physiological perspective, new research helmed by Su Holmes, a prominent voice in the community of critical feminist eating disorder scholars, suggests a correlation between feminist theories of anorexia and recovery from the disorder itself.² “Feminist therapy” is also surfacing at various eating disorder treatment centres internationally as a means to explore the social and cultural factors that impact women’s mental health and problematic eating behaviours from a feminist perspective.³ Additional research in this area may help to further bridge the gap between the clinical and cultural camps of eating disorders scholarship that currently divide academic and activist circles, and offer insights into how research like mine may fit into the broader context of eating disorder policy and treatment. With continued momentum in this realm of scholarship and activism, perhaps in time, the embodied experiences of girls and young women – fictional or not – will begin to better reflect the utopic vision of body positivity imagined by corporeal feminists and body positive activists alike: a world in which no one need starve for justice.

² Su Holmes et al.’s article “Feminist Approaches to Anorexia Nervosa: A Qualitative Study of a Treatment Group” (2017), presents one of the first studies on the impact of feminist theory in the treatment (rather than etiology) of eating disorders. Through one-on-one qualitative interviews with participants in a 10-week closed treatment group based on feminist approaches, the researchers found that participants’ understandings of the sociocultural context of their eating disorders helped alleviate self-blame and arm the participants against dominant ideologies of gender and the body that informed their disorder to begin with.

³ Examples of eating disorder treatment providers who offer Feminist Therapy include Montecatini residential treatment centre in southern California, The Wellness Collaborative in Guelph, Ontario, and Prairie Owl Psychology & Counselling in Edmonton, Alberta.

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