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ChLA Proposal

From Bystander to Actor: Tracing the Role of Empathy in Provoking Change in Young Adult
Dystopian Novels

Underlying dystopian young adult literature is a thread of activism that, by positioning young protagonists in the texts as bringers of change, invites a similar activism from readers of these texts. Or so we are encouraged to believe. In my paper, I trace a narrative pattern of growing awareness of dystopian tendencies/contradictions that, when coupled with empathy, turns the protagonists of the test-based critical dystopias of Roth's *Divergent*, Lu's *Legend*, and Charbonneau's *Testing* trilogies from politically disengaged bystanders within the dystopian regime to actors who challenge the regime, working within it to implement gradual change. Ethics of care scholar Sara Ruddick acknowledges a similar pattern of "Lucid knowledge, awareness of the pain of others, and stubborn decision" in *Maternal Thinking* (230). I argue that this transition is largely dependent on the empathy that these characters develop through dialogic relationships with others in marginalized positions, through inhabiting those positions themselves, or through the acknowledgment that the hierarchy instilled by the dystopian regime is largely arbitrary.

Critical dystopias are typically defined as reflexive dystopias that address, through the subjectivity of their protagonists, the dystopian tendencies of their respective societies and offer up space for resistance in the promotion of subjugated voices. However, I will argue that by representing those already in privileged positions as bringers of change, test-based dystopias offer a solution to the tension between the agentic individual and the repressive dystopian regime

and emphasize the individual as a catalyst for change, effectively promoting a privileged individual savior and thus running counter to activism in some ways.