Wisdom, Mystery, and Dangerous Knowledge: Exploring Depictions of the Archetypal Sage in Young Adult Literature

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The archetypal sage character is a common, though relatively unexplored, character in young adult literature (YAL). Employing a sociocultural, constructivist understanding of archetypes, we unpack features of the sage through an examination of three sagacious characters: the Receiver of Memory in The Giver, *Haymitch Abernathy in* The Hunger Games, *and Anatov in* Akata Witch. *Our analysis reveals how these characters are each marked with physical or behavioral abnormalities, are isolated from society and its institutions, and possess dangerous knowledge of eros* (The Giver), *power* (The Hunger Games), *and identity* (Akata Witch). *They are also depicted as standing in sharp contrast to other, more typical teachers in the intimate relationships they form with students and degree of vulnerability they display. All of these characteristics, we argue, might explain the appeal of the sage character in YAL, as well as its curious absence from our common understanding of K-12 teachers and curriculum. Indeed, we see these characterizations of fictional teachers as raising interesting questions about sagacious mentorship and wisdom in schools.*

The sage character, while ubiquitous in fantasy and young adult literature, is arguably less explored than other archetypes like the hero or trickster (Wilson, 2013). Even so, as Joseph Campbell (1949) suggests, "there is an atmosphere of irresistible fascination about the figure that appears suddenly as a guide, marking a new period, a new stage, in the biography" (p. 55). We agree that there is

something appealing and enduring about the sage character. From Albus Dumbledore to Haymitch Abernathy, adult mentors, fulfilling the role of the archetypal "sage," are a staple of many popular novels in the young adult literature (YAL) genre. These characters often seem mysterious, possessing great power and wisdom that reveals itself as they guide an adolescent protagonist across the threshold from the presumed innocence of childhood through the perils of adulthood (Mayes, 1999). For example, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) relies heavily on Haymitch Abernathy for learning how to survive the arena and how to act in public spaces so she might garner tributes. Without his committed support, the reader is led to believe, Katniss's chances of winning the games would be slim. Such mentorship in of itself is not problematic and is arguably necessary and even lacking for many young people. Yet, it raises some issues that warrant investigation. Here we employ archetypal inquiry, which is useful for cross-examining characters and relational dynamics for common motifs reflective of a shared ontology (Mayes, 1999, 2003). Our interest is in understanding how sagacious mentorship is depicted in YAL and what messages these depictions may be communicating to teachers and young readers about mentoring relationships, forbidden knowledge, and who has and is slated to receive such knowledge.

We begin with a review of scholarly treatments of teachers in YAL, which reveals little explicit discussion of the sage despite its frequent presence in the genre, followed by our critical youth studies perspective on adolescent-adult relationships. We then present our sociocultural, constructivist view of archetypes, followed by an articulation of the sage archetype as framed by Joseph Campbell and others. Our analysis of the sage characters in three texts—the Receiver of Memory in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), Haymitch Abernathy in *The Hunger Games*, and Anatov in *Akata Witch* (Okorafor, 2011)—confirms certain aspects of this adult role and leads to intriguing insights about what we refer to as *dangerous knowledge* and the challenges of incorporating sagacious teaching within contemporary schooling.

LAUDED AND DENIGRATED: TEACHERS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

From the faceless teacher in *Peanuts* to Mr. Holland and his opus, teachers play many roles in popular culture texts, represented in a range of positive and negative ways. YAL probably has even more teachers due to the age of the protagonists that headline these stories. However, teachers in YAL have received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Most of this scholarship aims to identify

"good" versus "bad" representations. In particular, Alexander and Black (2015) analyze the teacher as a cold assessor administering high-stakes testing, while others show that there are wonderful teachers in YAL—such as Mrs. Baker from *The Wednesday Wars* (Schmidt, 2007) who builds personal relationships with her students to support their learning, and Mr. Franka from *Sleeping Freshman Never Lie* (Lubar, 2005) whose English language arts expertise and pedagogical content knowledge allow him to successfully engage students—that work as facilitators that meet high standards of teaching (Boche, 2016). However, these latter teachers are often foiled against poor teachers—such as the considerate Mrs. Scott as compared to the aptly-named authoritarian, Mr. Stern, in "Geraldine Moore the Poet" (Bambara, 2003), and the community-building, supportive Mr. Freeman as compared to the extremely unprofessional Mr. Neck in *Speak* (Anderson, 1999)—in order to highlight how the "good" teachers build positive relationships with students who then flourish under their guidance (Cummings, 2011; Rodríguez, 2016). Employing a Foucauldian framework, Wolosky (2014) examines how discipline and discipleship works in the Harry Potter series. She shows how the disciplinarian, such as Professor Umbridge, worries over power and control, thereby silencing students so that they can internalize theoretical knowledge given to them by the teacher. On the other hand, the professors, such as Albus Dumbledore, who build discipleship amongst the Hogwarts witches and wizards foster inclusivity through inquiry, discovery, and collaboration. Similarly, Gruner (2009) identifies several teachers and mentors in speculative fiction—from the Harry Potter series, the Tiffany Aching novels, and the His Dark Materials series—that either employ humiliation tactics to curtail student thought and action, or employ a form of experiential learning in which students apply theory in authentic practice.

In terms of mentorship relationships, Beauvais (2015) explores how class and giftedness function in Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988). She hints at the notion that giftedness could be considered a magical property in that a child is bestowed the trait similar to how magic is bestowed upon protagonists in fantasy fiction. She considers classism as part of a process that inequitably identifies middle/upper class students as gifted, and these students are chosen, and often liberated from the tedium of normal schooling, by great teachers. Relatedly, Atwood and Lee (2007) demonstrate how the lack of a mentor teacher in prep school literature—particularly, *A Separate Peace* (Knowles, 1959), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974), and *Good Times/Bad Times* (Kirkwood, 1968)—can ultimately lead to the destruction of youth. Such analysis reinforces the commonsensical understanding that youth need adult guidance in order to lead healthy lives. Others (Lewis, Petrone,

& Sarigianides, 2016) show how adolescent-adult relationships depend on the views of youth that adults hold. More positive, healthy relationships occur when adults understand young people as capable and knowledgeable, rather than incomplete and rebellious. Such understandings of youth-adult relationships have a long tradition in Western society, as Davis (2011) shows it was present in Louisa May Alcott's juvenile fiction. Alcott's stories also promote an experiential approach to education, which maps onto how sage characters tend to lead their protégés.

In summary, most of the scholarship examining representations of teachers in YAL highlights great teachers who excel in working with students. These capable teachers, however, often exist in the same pages with poor examples of teachers as a way to show how certain approaches to education, curriculum, and student relationships are more effective. However, this body of work does not seem to identify the roles or types of teachers that populate young adult fiction (the exception is Cummins [2011], who uses Peter McLaren's taxonomy ranging from the liminal servant to hegemonic overlord to entertainer). Our analyses of the sage character contributes to the scholarship by taking a close look at how this type of teacher is both represented and the types of relationships such teachers build with their students.

ADOLESCENT AGENCY IN AN ADULT WORLD

By establishing dependent adult-adolescent relationships, YAL could lead readers to assume that adolescents *need* and *should expect* a wise adult to have a master plan for them. These dependent relationships rely upon various adult characters, such as avuncular substitutes for a lost parent (see Sommers, 2008, for an extensive definition of the avunculate), or with teachers, as discussed previously, or with sages, the focus of our work. From a critical youth studies perspective, this assumption reflects a commonsensical understanding of adolescence as not only a time of development, but also that adults should want to monitor and control adolescent growth so that youth progress slowly and leisurely toward adulthood (Lesko, 2012; Talburt & Lesko, 2012). Further, it re-inscribes the adult-adolescent binary in which the adult is always dominant in the sense that adults are viewed as better decision makers, for example, and "adulthood" is preferred. (O'Loughlin & Van Zile IV, 2014; Tilleczek, 2014). In line with this work, we follow a critical youth studies agenda (Best, 2007), employing components of a youth lens analysis (Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2014), in our attempt to find moments in which this binary can be complicated to demonstrate the multifaceted aspect of relationships built between youth and adults, particularly

recognizing the connection between power and knowledge and identifying how this connection manifests within interpersonal relationships.

In this vein, we selected texts that would be categorized as fantasy fiction, which, due to the nature of the genre, provides a unique opportunity to subvert normed binaries and relationships. Although literary scholars have concluded that, in the end, YA fantasy stories tend to remain conservative in their messages about adolescence, gender, and sexuality (James, 2009; Trites, 2000; Waller, 2009), the sage-protégé relationship seems to be a place in which commonsensical notions of adolescent agency can be disrupted. With the goal of examining such a possibility in mind, we take an asset-based view of youth in that we view them as productive members of society who have agency in an adult world and contribute as much to an intergenerational relationship as the adult. For example, similar to how James (2009) describes how adolescent protagonists in "dead-narrator" stories have to both look back to what they once were while living and look forward to a new existential reality, we understand the adolescent protégé to be grappling with negotiating a tension between who and what they once were before meeting their sage mentor and what they must do going forward upon receiving the sage's knowledge.

ARCHETYPES AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

We assume a sociocultural, constructivist perspective of learning (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1985) and consider narrative as central to how people construct and convey particular understandings of the world (Bruner, 1991; Gottschall, 2012; Hardy, 1975). We also see storytelling as essential to how teachers construct and renegotiate what counts as valid professional knowledge and ways of being in the classroom (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). In light of our constructivist perspective, we base our analysis more upon an archetypal framework originating from the humanistic anthropological tradition (Armstrong, 1975) than from the Jungian psychoanalytic tradition, though we are indebted to both in our effort to define and make sense of the sage character.

Archetypes, as we define them here, are sociohistorical artifacts interwoven within the "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973, p. 39) spun by humans over centuries in an effort to share and shape understandings of self, society, and being. In previous work, we have discussed the systemic dimension of such cultural webs using Charles Taylor's (2002) notion of a *social imaginary* that normalizes social structures through narrative (Lewis & Renga, 2016). We see archetypes as similarly

reflecting normalized roles emerging from humanity's attempt to navigate a tension between a common history, notably our evolution as social and communal beings, and our culturally-specific construction of that history. Like many others, we are moved by how experiences of child-rearing, mentorship, and aging appear to evoke cross-cultural themes captured in stories that can seem consonant with one another, as Joseph Campbell (1949) famously showed of the mythological hero. Even so, we do want to keep cultural particularities in mind, as well as power differentials that may render certain interpretations of archetypal stories (i.e., the Western psychoanalytic lens) as seemingly more valid than others.

THE ARCHETYPAL SAGE

Drawing mostly from Jung, scholars have highlighted and explored the implications of a number of archetypes, including the mother, trickster, and shadow, among others. Our focus in this paper is the sage archetype. As noted in the introduction, the sage is a common feature of many popular stories, especially those in the fantasy genre. Dominque Wilson (2013) helpfully distinguishes the sage from other mythological characterizations—e.g., shaman, priest, prophet, magician—of the wise man or woman. All of these forms, she observes, are similarly portrayed as having wisdom and thus appear as guides to the story's protagonist. The sage, however, tends to be more aloof and often serves as an arbiter between the daily comings and goings of the world and matters of greater spiritual or moral importance. As Wilson explains,

> In some ways the sage's ability and willingness to watch and wait sets him outside the rhythms of everyday life, according to him an almost timeless character whose moral stance and virtues are enhanced by his enduring patience and benevolence. (p. 53)

While the image of a mysterious figuring waiting and watching in the background is compelling, the sage archetype does not make for a great stand-alone story.

Indeed, the sage character shows up primarily as a supporting archetype, usually in relationship to the mythic hero. The hero, arguably the best known and most studied archetype, is above all a vehicle for societal change. She starts her journey by hearing, often ignoring, and then finally heeding a call to engage in what Joseph Campbell (1949) calls the "mystery of transfiguration," in which "[t]he familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit" (p. 51). This need for change becomes evident to the hero as the sage pokes

holes in her understanding of the world, leaving her with no choice but, in Clifford Mayes' (2003) phrasing, "to seek a newer world by seeking a higher wisdom" (p. 106). The hero's desire to pursue this world may be strong, but her vision of it and what it will entail is limited. The sage offers clues, but can come across as puzzling given the challenge of conveying a narrative of such scope and depth. Having access to more than just the present moment, the sage situates the hero in a broader story arc—connecting her to a much larger narrative that will live on, unfolding over generations, even when the hero and her contribution fade from memory (see, for example, Obi-Wan's understanding of the enduring battle between the Light and Dark sides of the Force in the original *Star Wars* [Kurtz, Lucas, & McCallum, 1977] film). Campbell observes how, as the hero starts her journey, she can take comfort in the righteousness of her cause even though the road ahead seems terrifying. And the hero must proceed without assurance of continual guidance; the sage might or might not show up when assistance is most desired. The danger, in other words, must be confronted alone.

Often depicted as old or haggard in appearance, the sage is typically presented as carrying the burdensome wisdom of experience from quests completed ages ago (Mayes, 2003), a living repository of what could be called *dangerous knowledge.* Campbell's analysis of heroic stories reveals how the sage typically offers two complementary pieces of knowledge: 1) clarity regarding the danger ahead and 2) how to thwart that danger. Perhaps most significantly, the sage is also privy to the inherent danger of inciting societal change, or what Campbell describes as "the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world" (p. 40).

Additionally, Jack Graham (2013) suggests that our hunger for an elder archetype reflects our desire for knowledge that has hitherto been locked away and rendered largely inaccessible to most people. Our tendency to embody this locked knowledge in someone wrinkled or careworn shows a common assumption that acquiring such knowledge requires time, experience, and sustained, thoughtful engagement with difficult aspects of the world. It also reveals our assumption that lacking wisdom is a characteristic of young people, who must face life's challenges in order to pass out of childhood (Mayes, 1999, 2003). As our myths suggest, we are inclined to believe that full possession of this dangerous knowledge is the provenance of our elders, and such possession is what distinguishes someone as a sage from merely someone who is old.

Relying upon these theoretical perspectives and grounded in previous scholarship on teacher representations in YAL, we set out to highlight and study the sage character in YAL. This required identifying texts with such characters, teasing out their involvement in the plot, and then considering

similarities and differences in their representation. The following questions guided our analysis:

1. How are sage characters depicted in select YAL texts?
2. What is the dangerous knowledge each sage possesses?
3. What is the nature of the sage's relationship with the young adults in their care? How does it compare to other teacher characters depicted in the YAL texts?
4. What are the potential implications for teachers, students, and schools?

SELECTED TEXTS

Many popular books read by young adults contain characters resembling sages. For this examination, we chose to focus on books intended for a young adult audience with a young adult protagonist. Despite the fact that sages are mostly limited to fantasy and science fiction texts, we wanted to ensure some diversity within the genre (e.g., more than Tolkein-style fantasy) and diversity in the sage depictions given how such characters are not always bearded White men with pointy hats like Merlin, Dumbledore, or Gandalf. We also wanted our sample to include more than White authors, protagonists, and cultural settings. With these criteria in mind, we chose to analyze Lois Lowry's *The Giver*; Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Witch*. The first two, written by White, U.S. women, are set in dystopian futures; the third was written by a woman of color born in the U.S. to Nigerian parents and takes place in present day Nigeria. One of the texts features a male protagonist (*The Giver*), while the others feature female protagonists, one of whom is Black (*Akata Witch*). The principle sage character in each is a man, though *Akata Witch* features a sage who is identified as an African American male; the book also introduces readers to multiple sages, including a woman who is African and afflicted with severe scoliosis. The primary sage-protégé relationships we focus upon in our analyses are the Receiver of Memory and Jonas in *The Giver,* Haymitch Abernathy and Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games,* and Anatov and Sunny in *Akata Witch.*

SAGES AND THEIR MENTORSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

To make sense of the sage characters in the texts, we independently addressed our research questions while reading the books and then discussed our responses, noting the areas of overlap and difference in our respective observations and interpretations. The resulting analysis reflects a

synthesis of the key points that emerged from these discussions. We address the first three research questions here on the representations of the sages, and consider the fourth one in our discussion of the implications of our analyses.

THE APPEARANCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE SAGE

Each of the three principle sage characters identified in the books fit the mythological trend of having their possession of special or uncommon wisdom marked by notable physical and behavioral attributes (Graham, 2013; Wilson, 2013). But each bears this mark in a different way. In *The Giver*, the Receiver of Memory acknowledges to Jonas that he looks old and tired, but he claims that the job has aged him. Unlike others in the community, the Receiver, now the Giver of Memory to Jonas, is worn down by a lifetime of carrying the burden of human memory without the ability to share or discuss those memories. He is eager to be rid of his burden, though a failed effort with an earlier protégé has him anxious, which only adds to the weight he carries. By comparison, Anatov in *Akata Witch* is described less as being old than as physically distinctive, and we sense a timelessness in his demeanor. He is tall, very tall, and also regal.

When Sunny's friends first take her to see him, they enter his thatched-roof hut and her impression is described as follows:

> A man sat in a throne-like chair on the far side of the room. When he stood up, she gasped. He was the tallest man she had ever seen—taller than any Maasai or American basketball player. He was light-skinned with short brown bushy dreadlocks and a small gold ring in his left nostril. (Orkorafor, 2011, p. 47)

In the common expression, Anatov appears larger than life. This description is apt given his capacity to situate life in a larger cosmic narrative, a common characteristic of the sage. But Okorafor adds an intriguing twist to the corporeal presentation of the sage, opting to focus attention on abnormalities or bodily deformities as the source of special juju. Anatov's tallness, like Sunny's albinism, is a source of power in the Leopard world. Similar to the Receiver, his special designation is burdensome in the sense that it affords him an unvarnished view of the world and what he considers its flawed and misguided inhabitants. Such a view is also shared by Haymitch Abernathy in *The Hunger Games*, who has no mystical powers, but has witnessed untold horror firsthand in the murders he committed to win the games and then in the years spent watching District 12's impoverished, malnourished tributes brutally disposed of by more able contestants. He is described as middle-aged and unshaven,

neither old nor physically deformed, but always drunk and wreaking of wine. When we first meet him at the selection ceremony in District 12, Haymitch "appears hollering something unintelligible, staggers onto the stage, and falls into the third chair" (p. 19). As Collins describes him, the man wears his misery and its dark pit of wisdom in his slovenly appearance.

By their physical descriptions alone we might suspect that each lives in isolation, a castaway struggling to fit in. And indeed they each are isolated in the literal sense, living alone on the outskirts of their respective communities as is common with mythological sages (Wilson, 2013). The Receiver, Jonas finds out, is confined behind locked doors in the Annex, a small wing of the House of the Old. His secretary assures Jonas that the locks, nonexistent elsewhere in the community, are to keep out potential distractions. The main room of the Annex has flourishes like unique, wooden furniture and is filled with thousands of books, uncommon in the community. We learn that the Receiver has a female partner, though when she grew old she went to live with the Childless Adults. Even when present, there was immense emotional distance between the couple as he was forbidden from sharing his memory knowledge with her and had to revel in the joys and suffer the agonies alone. Anatov also lives alone in his hut, behind old-West style swinging doors, with visitors required to enter the one marked "out" to signal the wise man's belief that his spiritual intellect encompasses the wider world. Like the Receiver, he has contact with other "elders," but these are sages like himself who also exist on the periphery. He refers to them as friends, something neither the Receiver nor Haymitch claim to have. Finally, Haymitch's isolation in particular is made more acute by his living immersed in Capitol society where he is surrounded by the very people who created his suffering and persist in not only ignoring it but also celebrating it annually during the Games. After winning the Hunger Games he was given a big, fancy house in the Tribute Village in District 12, though he is the only contestant from his district that has ever won the games, so he would live alone if he chose to dwell there.

The physical isolation of the sage is complemented by their living outside of prescribed norms and institutions (Wilson, 2013). For Anatov this is reflected in his being both a Leopard Person living outside of traditional society and its laws and systemic institutions (like racism), and in his being a highly advanced sorcerer who can leverage his revered status to move across Leopard communities. Haymitch possesses a similar freedom of movement. He can enter the Capitol, and is no longer beholden to its oppressive rules governing the districts' production of goods and services. As a victor, he is now expected to counsel the new contestants from his district, though there are no

expectations that he take it seriously. If Capitol leaders had him killed, they would risk jeopardizing the institution of the games and its promise of clemency and special privileges for the victors. The Receiver is also afforded special privileges by virtue of his distinguished position in society. As Jonas learns shortly after his assignment, the role exempts him from the community's many stringent rules: he is allowed permission to ask questions, be rude, and to lie to fellow members of the community; he is no longer required to discuss his dreams with family and can forgo taking daily medications, including the pill that all adults take to suppress sexual desire; finally, he can never apply to be "released" or euthanized by the community. The Receiver of Memory must suffer his burden until death arrives unbidden.

The reason for this isolation from society becomes evident when considering the knowledge each sage possesses—knowledge of danger and also knowledge that would be dangerous if possessed by the general public. All three have experienced the perilous path that their protégés must tread. Only the Receiver seems willing and able to provide his student with close guidance, but even then we see how Jonas must endure his emotional challenges unaided when outside of the Annex and the community. Per the rule, Katniss must, of course, face the killing fields alone while her guide curries favor with wealthy Capitol residents so they will send her crucial supplies, like salve for a wound. Anatov is blunt about his role in educating his young charges with respect to the dangers ahead:

> You will learn about yourselves from me... And I'll send you out there into the world to catch your lessons. Fear? Get used to it. There will be danger; some of you may not live to complete your lessons. It's a risk you take. This world is bigger than you and it will go on, regardless. (Okorafor, 2011, p. 119)

As with other mythological sages (Campbell, 1949; Mayes, 2003; Wilson, 2013), he can see the larger arc of history and, while committed to his students, he is not committed to eliminating the risk. Anatov also promises to provide knowledge of the self, which we see in his teaching them about the special identities accessible to Sunny and her peers as Leopard People. This knowledge of identity seemed qualitatively different from the erotic knowledge offered to Jonas by the Receiver and arguably less central to Jonas's story. Likewise, while Katniss could be seen learning about identity and *eros*, knowledge of these domains was arguably overshadowed by Haymitch's insistence that Katniss gain knowledge of power to save her life and eventually fight the Capitol. Indeed, as we illuminate below, the sages in each text tended to provide their young adult protégés with one form

of dangerous yet vital knowledge.

Identity knowledge in Akata Witch. We learn that, in an intriguing twist on Ralph Ellison's (1952) portrayal of Black Americans as invisible to their White countrymen, Anatov grew up in the U.S. and experienced the frustration of being treated like a foreigner in his own land on account of his dark skin. The problem was compounded by his immense tallness and magical abilities. Presumably, he could not avoid being seen and, using Ellison's term, *bumping* into those who would prefer he remain unseen. He indicates to Sunny and her peers that moving to Nigeria allowed him to feel accepted, though more importantly it afforded him the agency to embrace his many contradictions and to define his identity.

In the same pivotal scene where he forewarns Sunny and his other students of the dangers that lie ahead, Anatov draws the students' attention to the latent power in each of the qualities considered troublesome in non-Leopard society. He pushes them to see how prejudice, coupled with the human tendency to scorn differences in others, deprives most people of wise insight into the processes of being and becoming. This goes for the divinely anointed Leopard People, too, whom he says are still fallible even though they are "the most confident people on Earth and beyond" because of their capacity to embrace uniqueness (p. 113). He then proceeds to call out each of their so-called deformities and to reconstitute them as a foundation for the cultivation of a strong Leopard identity. Sasha and Chichi, he observes, are both troublemakers who are always on the move, so much so that they would be marked with psychological labels (like ADD) and overmedicated in traditional schools. Their gift, he observes, is incredible memory that increases their pace of perception as well as their frustration over the relative slowness of others. He then turns to Orlu, noting the boy's dyslexia and how the boy's teachers had treated it as something of which to be ashamed; but he argues that this presumably negative trait is actually a boon as it gives him a powerful juju for undoing and dismantling the logic of spells cast by evildoers. Finally, he helps Sunny to see the profound implications of her albinism, an affliction that positions her between worlds White and Black, earthly and spiritual. Sunny, he observes, has the remarkable ability of sustaining co-existing identities.

In the text, the central importance of identity knowledge is perhaps best evident in the mask, or spirit face, signifying a Leopard Person's true self. Sunny's spirit face, indicative of her albinism, is "the sun, all shiny gold and glowing with pointy rays" (p. 93). Anatov helps Sunny to discover her

spirit face; though she has to work alone to practice calling upon it at will (see Trites [2000] on how adults often attempt to control adolescent bodies). Such faces are treated as sacred and so personal that they should not be shared with others. When Orlu catches a glimpse of Sunny's spirit face, Chichi admonishes him for looking at her as if she were naked. For Anatov's protégés, knowledge of the self is emerging and the challenge of living with and within competing identities is only just becoming apparent. In their adventure they learn how to leverage the quest for identity to build friendships, change others' perceptions of them (for example, Sunny shows a group of boys that girls can play great soccer, too) and defeat evil. But despite their mentor's sagacious warning, they become overconfident in themselves and inflate each other's egos; this leads them to believe themselves capable of performing dangerous and restricted juju, which threatens to sever their friendship and almost derails Sunny's efforts to acquire the powerful sage Sugar Cream as her special mentor. Indeed, over time Sunny and her peers come to appreciate not only the role they play in other's identity projects but also how the pursuit of such projects can impact others for better or worse. Such social dimensions of identity construction, they come to learn, present the most confounding challenges in coming to fully understand who one is and is becoming.

Erotic knowledge in The Giver. During their initial meeting, the Receiver of Memory explains to Jonas his educational task thusly: "[M]y job is to transmit to you all of the memories I have within me. Memories of the past" (Lowry, 1993, p. 97). Jonas assumes he is referring to his own memories, but the Receiver indicates that he means memories of the whole history of the world. He goes on to explain that he sits alone reliving these memories for the sake of acquiring wisdom to direct the community's Elders in making difficult decisions that could disrupt the blissful ignorance sustained through Sameness. As one example, he recalls how the community approached him about a plan to expand its population size; after accessing painful memories of resource depletion and starvation, he advised against it. The Receiver acknowledges the huge burden of his role, which he compares to a sled going downhill, gathering a frightening amount of momentum. Jonas doesn't understand the comparison, so the Receiver transmits the first memory—of snow—by placing his hands on the boy's back. The transmission is zero-sum, with each memory acquired by Jonas being forgotten by the old man. Significantly, Jonas does more than take the sensory details of each memory; he also takes its emotional imprint as well, notably joy, pain, and desire. After receiving his first memories, the boy begins to have dreams that awaken in him a sense of longing for imagined futures and the possibilities

awaiting just over the horizon. As Lowry describes Jonas's experience of this sensation,

> He was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach the something that waiting in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That it was welcoming. That it was significant. (p. 112)

This experience of *eros,* or "passionate desire" (Garrison, 1997, p. 1), begins forging for Jonas attachments to people, places, and situations along with attachments to values he had only known as intellectual abstractions. His heart thus switched on, he is presented with powerful insights but also enormous challenges.

Jonas *feels* the memories he is given, which stirs his desire. Indeed, memories occupy our imagination as embodied perceptual knowledge of the world, felt impressions of particular experiences that we then yearn to replicate or avoid (Renga, 2017; Smith, 2009). Aroused by his feelings, Jonas begins to entertain possibilities in ways others in the community cannot. As he sees past the Sameness, he increasingly desires to make choices, such as what color tunic to wear. But the Receiver prompts him to consider the dark side of choice and free will and the dangers of making the wrong choices. He shows the boy extremely painful memories resulting from human foolishness and arrogance, like death on the battlefield. Sharing such memories brings the Receiver some comfort. It is a comfort that will be denied to Jonas once the Receiver passes, a dim future taking shape as the boy yearns to discuss the vast, turbulent, yet engaging emotional world with those he loves. Over time, Jonas comes to understand that the real burden of memory is not the erotic knowledge itself but the community's injunction on sharing it and sharing in it with others. In a poignant illustration of the ecstasy and agony that awaits him, the Receiver gives Jonas his favorite memory of a warm family gathering; flushed with joy, Jonas returns home and asks his parents if they *love* him, to which they correct him on his use of a vague, ambiguous, and vacuous term like love. To open up his family and community to love, Jonas risks severely disrupting the calm and predictability of a world devoid of desire.

Power knowledge in The Hunger Games. A former winner, Haymitch knows how the Hunger Games are played and the importance of adhering to the rules of political spectacle, where symbolic language and drama are strategically employed through the media to shape public opinion (Smith, Miller-Kahn, Heinecke, & Jarvis, 2004). He projects a cynical view of the whole system, but is nonetheless keenly aware of it and the power of the Capitol's state-run news broadcasts for

maintaining a rigid social hierarchy and obedience from Panem's peoples. Haymitch begins his mentorship with a lack of confidence in his protégés, mainly because he has seen so many fail. His initial skepticism gives way to interest once he realizes that Katniss possesses not only hunting skills but also a captivating steeliness that is likely to win converts to her cause. The unassuming Peeta, too, shows signs of a hidden strength and romantic side that could play well to the crowds. In a pivotal scene, Haymitch and his charges size each other up on the train ride to the Capitol. Over their first breakfast, Katniss asks her mentor for advice and he wryly replies, "Here's some advice. Stay alive" (p. 56). He then laughs, and Peeta slaps the glass of wine from his hand, shattering it on the floor. Haymitch retaliates by punching the boy in the jaw, prompting Katniss to thrust a knife in the table to keep the man from taking another drink. Instead of escalating the confrontation, Haymitch sits back impressed. Seemingly convinced of their potential to shoulder the burden of his knowledge of power, he agrees to stay sober enough to guide them if they heed his advice unequivocally.

From there, Haymitch starts their education in how to leverage the Capitol's vast resources to increase their advantage in the Games. When Peeta goes to ice his bruise, for example, he tells the boy to leave it visible to show his toughness to the public. The sullen sage, we learn, is a master of deception. His drinking is undoubtedly an effort to drown his sorrow, but as the story unfolds Katniss begins to see that it also gives the impression that he is incompetent and therefore dismissible as a threat to the Capitol. One of his first pieces of advice for her is to avoid resisting the Capitol's makeover team, who will mold her appearance for presentation to viewers. He knows it will annoy her, though he also knows the advantage of a compelling first impression. Resistance, he signals to her, needs to be exhibited wisely and purposefully. Indeed, his primary lesson for Katniss is that the public will only provide gifts to contestants that connect with the viewing audience. Spurning their desire for such connection will only hurt her chances.

Able to see the Hunger Games in a larger narrative of oppression and control, Haymitch knows that the Capitol's use of imagery to manipulate truth is its primary source of power, which makes it its primary weakness. Image is everything. At one point, he expressly forbids his charges from revealing their most lethal talents as they train for the Games. Following this advice, Katniss hides the fact that she's an ace with a bow until a private audience with the Gamemakers, whose apparent ambivalence prompts her to defiantly shoot an arrow expertly into their suite. She is thus awarded the highest mark of the twenty-four contestants, an honor that will ensure interest among

the Capitol's powerbrokers but also ensure attention from her fiercest opponents in the arena. Haymitch sees potential in the image of strength Katniss projects. But it is an image she struggles to embody as someone loathe to self-promotion. Haymitch works to develop her knowledge of how power operates in a world of pageantry and spectacle. To be likable as a rebel, he shows her, she must sustain a productive tension between hostility and hopefulness in the heroic portrait she presents to the public.

The ultimate deception that Haymitch orchestrates is Katniss's romantic relationship with Peeta, an act that she struggles with but which endears her to Capitol viewers. The appeal, he understands, reflects the viewers' smoldering desire for redemption in the face of impossible odds and, as Katniss will learn later, a growing distaste throughout Panem for the Capitol's oppressive social order. Haymitch thus notes with approval how Katniss and Peeta held hands as they were paraded before the Capitol. "Just the perfect touch of rebellion," he remarks (p. 79).

From then on he insists that they build intrigue in the nature of their relationship by always sticking together and showing small but tantalizing signs of mutual fondness. The strategy takes on special significance in the Games when Katniss nurses a wounded and feverish Peeta back to health in a cave and the two of them kiss for the camera. The Capitol audience is so smitten with the young lovers that their fortunes in the Hunger Games increase dramatically; more significantly is how the lovers' defiance of the Game's sacrosanct rule of one-remains forever alters the institution of the Hunger Games and the Capitol's projection of omnipotence.

TEACHER-STUDENT, ADOLESCENT-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

In hero tales throughout history the sage provides one-on-one mentorship to the hero. In all three texts analyzed, this dynamic of an intimate mentor-student relationship is evident. In *The Giver*, the Receiver spends hours alone with Jonas passing on the memories and discussing their erotic and emotional meaning and implications. Haymitch is ostensibly responsible for guiding both Katniss and Peeta as they enter the Hunger Games, but early on he sees more promise for success in Katniss's strength and ferocity than in her partner's docility and compassion. In fact, he pushes her to play to the Capitol viewers' fondness for romance by urging her to demonstrate loving affection for Peeta so she might save his life. Finally, Anatov provides mentorship to the four friends in *Akata Witch*, though each is eventually taken under the wing of one of four highly advanced sorcerers; toward the end of the book Sunny must prove herself worthy of mentorship by the revered sage

Sugar Cream, a frail but immensely knowledgeable woman hunched over by severe scoliosis.

Additionally, the types of relationships are based upon the particular views of the adolescent protégés these sages hold. These sages clearly view their students as highly capable of achieving the goals and overcoming the obstacles set before them. For example, early in his tutorship, the Receiver gives Jonas intense emotional memories because of his surety that Jonas will be able to understand the impact of such memories. Similarly, once Haymitch sees potential in Katniss, he sets high expectations for her training and success in the Games. Anatov provides the most autonomy for Sunny and her peers, as he sets them off to complete tasks with the confidence that they will be able to use their camaraderie and varied skills to overcome the dangerous obstacles each task involves. In these ways, the sages in these texts view the youth under their tutelage through an asset-based lens, which differs from the pejorative deficit-based lens that many adults view adolescents (cf. Lesko, 2012).

The sages are not the only educators portrayed in the texts. Parents play a small but crucial role in each story. Katniss, we learn, was initially taught hunting and outdoor survival skills by her deceased father. Sunny's parents are successful professionals who constantly hound her, police her actions, and even abuse her to keep her on the straight and narrow path. Of the three protagonists, Jonas's parents' educational impact is perhaps the most visible and significant to his story arc. Significantly, they are not his birth parents, and received Jonas from the Elders to raise in accordance with the community's strict guidelines. In this way, they are more like stewards or guardians who look out for his emotional well-being and offer support and guidance. They are, like every other member of the community, servants of the greater good and their concern for their children is less about providing loving nurturance than policing the children's adherence to the rules. The fact that the Receiver has little interest in directing his behavior is something that Jonas must overcome so they can openly discuss the memories—something crucial for his education.

Similar to the parents, professional teachers depicted in *The Giver* and *Akata Witch* seek to control and explicitly direct the children and young adults in their care. The teaching approach in both books is didactic, with an education amounting to the direct transition and acquisition of knowledge and skills. Students in *The Giver*, for example, are expected to read and memorize the rules for their new occupational roles. In both stories, teachers use corporal punishment to correct student behavior. A key difference between the sage and the teachers in these stories is the kind of knowledge being conveyed by each. Teachers mostly provide skills for professional work and expect

the memorization and application of information that is rather inert. Knowledge provided by the sages is much richer. At one point Jonas tells the Receiver that his teachers are very knowledgeable. The old man replies by claiming that his teachers "know nothing," to which he adds,

> Oh, your instructors are well trained. They know their scientific facts. *Everyone* is well trained for his job. It's just that ... without memories it's all meaningless. They gave that burden to me. (Lowry, 1993, pp. 132-133, emphasis in original)

The Receiver possesses a key for unlocking the meaningfulness of the facts, notably their emotional and erotic valences. Anatov and Haymitch similarly possess important keys for converting information to wisdom in ways that typical teachers do not or cannot. These other teachers, in contrast to the sage characters, clearly view the young protagonists with a deficit- based lens.

Finally, it is noteworthy that all three sages demonstrate a degree of vulnerability not found in the other teachers depicted. They exhibit a casualness that stands in stark contrast to the detached professionalism of the teachers (for more on this contrast, see Mayes, 2003). This is especially evident in *The Giver* where the overbearing state requires complete acquiescence to and habitation of its prescribed occupational roles. Even the Receiver's radical knowledge is confined to his role. Such rigid professional rules are intended to maintain order and control of students, something of little interest to the Receiver or the other sages. Of course, the sages also seem uninterested in caretaking and assuming responsibility for their charges well-being, something that is certainly a concern of parents and teachers. Rather, the sages tend to rely upon an experiential learning rather than a rote or didactic approach to the education of their protégés, even when that approach puts their charges in direct danger. This again demonstrates their relative lack of concern for surveillance and control that often dominates teacher-student, adult- adolescent relationships in contemporary schooling (O'Loughlin, & Van Zile, 2014). The sages also guard their vulnerability and only reveal it once they decide a young person is worthy of mentorship. Such vulnerability appears to be crucial to their capacity to convey the wisdom of their dangerous knowledge. Jonas, it seems, needs to see the Receiver's pain to grapple with the implications of difficult memories; Katniss needs to see behind Haymitch's incompetent façade to appreciate the need for her own façade. These three stories suggest that, if traditional teachers cannot do their job without a veneer of authority derived from an institutionally sanctioned role, the sage cannot do his job unless that veneer dissolves.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SAGE ARCHETYPE FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Our analysis of the sage, while admittedly limited by a relatively small sample of texts, offers several intriguing insights on contemporary schooling and the role of K-12 teachers. First is the allure of the sage archetype. In *The Giver*, the role of the Receiver is mysterious; most of the community do not know what he does or why he matters. The mystery creates an aura to the role that is framed as honor or reverence, but we learn that it actually serves to shield the Receiver from divulging his dangerous erotic knowledge to the public. The sorcerers in *Akata Witch* are not shunned by society, but they choose to keep their powerful knowledge a secret out of fear of the havoc it could wreak on a selfish populace inclined to greed, profiling, and prejudice. And The Capitol maintains a short leash on the Hunger Games victors, who possess an intimate understanding of weakness and how to exploit it. The allure, then, might actually be for the unlocked knowledge possessed by the sage than for the sage himself.

In the real world, as in the three fictional stories, there are powerful forces aligned against the dissemination of knowledge of power, identity, and desire. For example, efforts by teachers in Arizona to provide Chican@ students with *precious knowledge* of their Mexican American heritage and the injustice of racial oppression has been met with stiff resistance from White lawmakers (Garcia, Urrieta, & Bybee, 2015; Sargent, 2011). Similarly, schools often deny students agency or complicate their efforts to navigate the complexities of identity construction; while White students proceed along a privileged ontological pathway toward a cultureless identity (Perry, 2001), their peers of color are forced to reconcile a personally meaningful and productive racial identity with an academic identity that is often narrowly defined and unaccommodating to cultural differences (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Howard, 2003; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). And a robust literature discusses the resistance to frank and open discussion of unsanctioned desire in public schools given how engaging stakeholders' desires risks subversion of dominant norms and destabilization of the systems maintaining order and control (Renga, 2017; Kelly, 1997; Logue, 2012; McWilliam, 1996; Pignatelli, 1998; Tolman, 2012; Zembylas, 2007).

To allow the sage archetype and its knowledge to inform teaching requires a willingness to engage with such dangerous knowledge in K-12 classrooms and school communities (Mayes, 1999). For some that undoubtedly sounds appealing, even necessary; for others, less so. While we find compelling reason for accepting the sage's invitation to push the boundaries of knowledge and

reinvigorate schools through the "release again of the flow of life" (Campbell, 1949, p. 40), we suggest that doing so must begin with earnest and mutually respectful conversation between educators and the communities they serve regarding such knowledge, how it is viewed, and what barriers—cultural, religious, historical, etc.—may be blocking or mitigating its dissemination. Avoiding such conversations could prove problematic. These and other YAL texts affirm what is arguably well understood by parents and teachers, that adolescents inevitably encounter and acquire knowledge of self, *eros*, and power as they grapple with, among other things, who they are, who they might become, their sexuality, and bullying. An honest and wise sage can provide sound, accurate, and effective guidance, though not necessarily security.

Second, we find it troubling that the sage characters in the chosen texts and most YAL texts, for that matter, are male. This follows an archetypal tradition of discerning the sage (male) from the crone (female; Graham, 2013), with the crone often portrayed as using her wisdom for evil or at least for self-serving purposes (e.g., *The Giver's* Chief Elder). It also furthers a paternalistic narrative that assumes that, to enter public life, children must break from the nurturing mother to receive guidance from the world-wise father (Mishra Tarc, 2015). By affirming these gender stereotypes, YAL may convey a false message to young readers that only men can offer wise guidance when it comes to dangerous knowledge. The fact that the proportion of women teachers declines as one progresses from elementary to secondary school and into college and graduate school (cf. Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014), where one is perhaps most likely to have sage-style mentorship, arguably feeds this perception.

Finally, depictions of sages in YAL could perpetuate the idea that only special students—singular, gifted, or anointed individuals like Katniss, Sunny, or Jonas—should expect such one- on-one mentorship. Campbell (1949) points out that mythmakers throughout history and across cultures seem hard pressed to accept the possibility of ordinary people becoming heroes; the hero is thus assumed to have been born special. All three books reinforce this emphasis on exclusivity and uniqueness as a prerequisite for sagacious mentorship. Such intimacy, they imply, is fantasy—the very genre that most sage characters are found in YAL. Indeed, U.S. schools have long sacrificed the closeness of apprentice-style relationships for the sake of efficiency, and have arguably established a meritocratic Hunger Games whereby students compete to achieve distinction and stand apart from or even atop the crowd (Labaree, 1997). Finding a wise elder to take a vested interest in one's education is arguably a challenge for most youth, and we worry that depictions of the sage in

YAL risks confirming that such relationships are reserved only for the most naturally gifted or most troubled students.

CLOSING THOUGHTS ON VULNERABILITY AND RISK

Though underrepresented in scholarly discussions of teachers and their depiction in YAL, the sage is a fixture of many popular novels for young people. Our analysis suggests that such characters are usually marked as different, live isolated lives, and possess the power of particular knowledges that are locked away from the broader community. Sages form intimate intellectual and caring relationships with students and exhibit a degree of vulnerability that is uncommon among typical classroom teachers. If we were to entertain the possibility of sagacious mentorship in public schools, we would arguably need to become comfortable with a less efficient system of schooling. We would also need to allow for unpredictability and uncertainty as students gain greater access and agency to really engage with the complexities and risks of identity, *eros*, power, and other kinds of dangerous knowledge. Drawing the attention of teachers and students to the sage in YAL is therefore a risky proposition. But then, as revealed in the books we analyzed, ignoring the sage and sagacious wisdom is likely to be riskier.

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