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The Erasure of Love in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

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ABSTRACT: In Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* series (2011–2013), love, or *amor deliria nervosa*, has become the most dangerous disease in the world. Lena, the novel's protagonist, has been told all her life that love is the deadliest of all deadly things and cannot wait to go through the medical procedure that will cure her of it. Without romantic love, relationships are chosen by the government, which pairs heterosexual couples by considering the results of an evaluation. The erasure of love is present in other young adult (YA) dystopian texts. In Ally Condie's *Matched* Trilogy (2010–2012), society bases its decisions on optimal algorithmic calculations, and a person's forever match is determined by probabilities that exclude love. In Anna Carey's *Eve* Series (2011–2013), girls are taught to fear men so that they can be easily manipulated out of romantic relationships and willingly accept becoming breeders for a society decimated by

RESUMO: Na trilogia *Delirium* de Lauren Oliver, o amor, *amor deliria nervosa*, tornou-se a doença mais perigosa do mundo. Lena, a protagonista do romance, durante toda a sua vida ouviu que o amor é a mais mortal de todas as coisas mortais e mal pode esperar pelo procedimento que a irá curar. Sem a possibilidade de amor romântico, as relações são escolhidas pelo governo, que emparelha os casais heterossexuais tendo em conta os resultados das avaliações. A supressão do amor está presente noutros textos distópicos para jovens adultos. Em *Matched* de Ally Condie, a sociedade baseia as decisões em cálculos algorítmicos otimizados e o par perfeito de cada um é determinado através de probabilidades que excluem o amor. Em *Eve* de Anna Carey, as raparigas são ensinadas a ter medo de rapazes e homens, de modo a serem facilmente manipuladas e a aceitarem engravidar e aumentar a população de uma

a plague. More insidiously, in Beth Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011–2013), the inhabitants of the spaceship are drugged to suppress their emotions. By undertaking an analysis of YA dystopian texts, I examine how love is represented in these future totalitarian societies, and the consequences of its erasure. This article critically engages with frameworks that explore romantic relationships as catalysts for political awakening, highlighting the interconnections between rebellion and sexual awakening. Since love is often represented as undesirable to the regimes that go to great lengths to eradicate it from society, I contend that the experience of love in these narratives is essential for social dreaming.

KEYWORDS: YA dystopian fiction, YA Studies, emotions, utopianism, rebellion

sociedade dizimada por uma praga. Em *Across the Universe* de Beth Revis, os habitantes da nave espacial são drogados para suprimir as suas emoções. Ao analisar textos distópicos de YA, exploro a forma como o amor é representado nestas sociedades futuras totalitárias, assim como as consequências resultantes da sua supressão. Esta análise explora criticamente quadros teóricos que discutem relações românticas como catalisadoras de um despertar político, destacando as ligações entre a rebelião e o despertar sexual. Como o amor é frequentemente representado como indesejável para os regimes, que se esforçam por erradicá-lo da sociedade, defendo que a experiência do amor é, nestas narrativas, essencial para o sonho social.

KEYWORDS: Ficção distópica para jovens adultos, Estudos YA, emoções, utopianismo, rebelião

AMOR DELIRIA NERVOSA:**THE ERASURE OF LOVE IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN FICTION**

Emotionless futures are a defining feature of fiction and visual media that depict societies governed by totalitarian governments. The premise of suppression of emotions or emotional restrictions is central to young adult (YA) dystopian fiction, as observed in the following trilogies: Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010–2012), Anna Carey's *Eve* (2011–2012), Beth Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011–2013), and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011–2013). These texts represent authoritarian governments that implement systems of emotional regulation, reflecting and adapting portrayals of emotionless societies found in dystopian science fiction films such as *Equilibrium* (2002), directed by Kurt Wimmer, and *Equals* (2015), directed by Drake Doremus, and novels such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). In these narratives, authorities implement extreme measures to eliminate emotions: they destroy artwork, ban music and literature that might incite emotional reactions in the populations, and resort to medical procedures and neuropharmacological methods to eliminate and/or suppress emotions. Across these narratives, emotions are perceived as the root of all societal conflicts; thus, authorities strive to eradicate emotional depth from citizens' lives to maintain society under their strict rules.

YA fiction often centres the motif of emotional repression around the teenage protagonist to question the morality of a society where emotions are suppressed. Indeed, it uses this motif as a lens through which the adolescent protagonist questions their own humanity in the absence of emotions. As Elaine Ostry notes, in YA science fiction, “losing total control over one’s emotions, or having them controlled for you, puts one’s humanity in question” (2004, 236-37). The question of humanity becomes complex when emotions are either lost or manipulated, a notion that resonates with Sara Ahmed’s suggestion in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* that emotions play a significant role in shaping identity and behaviour, particularly in politics (2004, 12). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed further contends that specific emotional configurations can instigate social and political change: “we need to think about unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome. Unhappiness might offer a pedagogic lesson on the limits of the promise of happiness. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not

end there. Unhappiness is not our endpoint” (2010, 217). While happiness can be interpreted as an acceptance of the status quo, unhappiness can fuel change; that is, unhappiness can be socially and politically transformative. Emotions are framed as a catalyst for critical awareness and potential resistance. Totalitarian governments recognize the subversive power of emotions and enforce laws aimed at suppressing feelings that foster communal bonds or that may incite individuals to rebel against the system. Moreover, “[e]motions, beliefs and knowledge are tools by which humans make decisions” (Hemmingson 2015, 11). Without emotions, citizens lose the ability to make choices or express themselves, becoming automatons of the system in power. The ultimate objective of erasing emotions is to create submissive and obedient citizens.

In the YA dystopian series under analysis, *Matched*, *Eve*, *Across the Universe*, and *Delirium*, the control, suppression, and erasure of emotions serve as a controlling mechanism. Authoritarian forces construct systems and employ tools that not only suppress emotions but also threaten to obliterate love, which is depicted as a source of interpersonal connection and an impulse for rebellion against the oppressive structures. Within this framework, the suppression of romantic love often takes precedence over the repression of other emotions.¹ In YA dystopian fiction, Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz observe that romance “can play a key role in shaping the dystopian narrative and the possibilities for social change enacted in the novel. [It] may advance the political aims of the narrative when a new boyfriend or girlfriend encourages the protagonists to develop a new perspective or embark on a new experience” (2014, 8). Similarly, Nicole Maruo-Schröder emphasizes that “[t]he forbidden love is in many cases a catalyst for revealing the shortcomings of the society the [teenager] lives in; [romance] attains political significance, above all in its function as a boundary transgression and rejection of social control” (2018, 55). Relationships that authorities consider unacceptable lead the protagonists to recognize the inherent injustices within their constrained lives, driving them to question the legitimacy of the societal prohibitions imposed upon them. Thus, the representation of romance in YA dystopias challenges societal norms and fosters critical reflection and action against oppressive systems.

Through an analysis of the first novels of the eponymous YA dystopian trilogies *Matched*, *Eve*, *Across the Universe*, and *Delirium*, I examine the mechanisms by which emotions, particularly love, are suppressed and/or erased within a totalitarian society,

along with the resultant consequences of such erasure. My focus on love is informed by Ahmed's claim that "[l]ove is crucial to how individuals become aligned with collectives through their identification with an ideal, an alignment that relies on the existence of others who have failed that ideal". Ahmed continues, stating that "the pull of love towards an other, who becomes an object of love, can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object" (2004, 124). This examination critically engages with theoretical frameworks that position romantic relationships as catalysts for political awakening and highlight the intricate relationship between rebellion and sexual awakening. I contend that the experience of love is essential for the emergence of social dreaming, the basis of utopianism for Lyman T. Sargent (1994, 4). Positive utopianism² can only materialize through the experience of love, as the narrative's protagonists are motivated to transform their world not solely for themselves and the person they fall in love with, but also for their families, friends, and all individuals yearning to break free from the strict regulations that govern every facet of their lives.

(RE)CLAIMING LOVE, RESISTING CONTROL

In *Matched* (2010), society bases its decisions on optimal algorithmic calculations, and an individual's forever match is determined through probabilities that exclude love. The government, the Society, and its Officials control every little aspect of the citizens' lives: how much someone can eat, how long someone can exercise, whom to marry, and when to die. As an Official says, if people were allowed to choose, "everything would fall apart" (340). This extreme control over someone's choices leaves no time for individuals to question the Society and, consequently, rebel against it.

On her sixteenth birthday, Cassia Reyes attends her Match Banquet, a ceremony in which the Society designates her a partner for life. She is matched with her best friend, Xander, and is initially elated about being paired with someone she knows, as well as the fact that she will not have to abandon her family. In this society, family bonds are severed through marriage since the wife must move to the husband's Province, losing ties with her parents and siblings. After moving away from their home, most do not contact or speak with their families regularly. However, when Cassia views the micro card she

was given at the Baquet, there is an error. Another familiar face appears on the screen: Ky, a boy who has been labelled an Aberration.³ Cassia grows closer to Ky, who teaches her how to write by hand, an activity forbidden by the Society. They fall in love, and Cassia begins to interrogate the Society, gradually losing faith in its decision-making process. Indeed, when an Official confronts her about kissing Ky, Cassia shows the sparks of rebellion:

“Cassia. Do you regret your decision to be Matched? Do you wish that you had chosen to be a Single?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I think people should be able to choose *who* they Match with,” I say lamely.

“Where would it end, Cassia?” [the Official] says, her voice patient. “Would you say next that people should be able to choose how many children they have, and where they want to live? Or when they want to die?” (246)

Falling in love with a boy that the Society deems can never be hers instigates change in Cassia, who was initially a believer in the Society; when the narrative begins, Cassia wants to be part of its societal machine as a Sorter.

It is important to mention that Cassia’s belief in the Society was first shaken by familial love with the loss of her grandfather. In the Society, Elders pass away on the day they turn eighty. At her grandfather’s Final Banquet—a gathering where loved ones and friends reunite with the dying Elder to bid him farewell—Cassia notices how he loses his vitality throughout the day. She later learns that her grandfather’s food was poisoned by the Society, causing his premature death. On his deathbed, Cassia’s grandfather asks her to see the compact he gave her. Cassia discovers that a piece of paper is hidden inside it. When her grandfather gives her back the compact, with the paper safely inside, he tells her: “I am giving you something you won’t understand, yet. But I think you will someday. You, more than the rest. And, remember. It’s all right to wonder” (83). The paper contains a passage from a poem by Dylan Thomas (1914–1953), “Do not go gentle into that good night” (1951). Cassia realizes that the Society forbade the poem because it “tells you to fight” (98). In his last moments, Cassia’s grandfather gives her the possibility to question the Society and its practices.



Arranged, loveless marriages as a means to control and purge love from romantic relationships are common in YA dystopian novels. Joanna Simpson and Bryan Gillis suggest that “[u]nder an authoritarian government, sexual activity and procreation are often rigidly monitored as a way to gain control over the people. This may be done to increase or decrease the population, manipulate the type and/or quality of the individuals being created within that society” (2015, Chapter 5). For instance, in *Matched*, arranged marital unions involve eugenics, matching genes to eradicate genetic differences. At work, while sorting eye colour, Cassia contemplates the possibilities: “Blue, brown, green, gray, hazel—these are all of the options for eye color, even with many ethnicities represented in the population. Long ago there were genetic mutations, like albinos, but those don’t exist anymore” (134). The Society chooses which physical characteristics are desirable in its citizens. In Carrie Ryan’s *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009), Mary, the narrative’s protagonist, claims that “[m]arriage in our village is not about love—it is about commitment”. She explains:

Every year I wonder at the couples pairing up around me. At how my former childhood friends suddenly find partners, bond, prepare for the next step. Pledge themselves to one another and begin their courtships. I always assumed the same would happen to me when my time approached. That because of the sickness that wiped out so many of my peers when I was a child, it would be even more important that those of us of marrying age find a mate. (...) I even hoped that perhaps I would be lucky enough to find more than just a mate, to eventually find love like my mother and father. (4–5)

Although in Mary’s village those of marrying age are instructed by authority, the Sisterhood, to find a partner of the opposite sex, they can still choose someone they might harbour feelings for. Nevertheless, Mary does not have that choice and is forced to marry the brother of the boy she loves. In Amy Engel’s *The Book of Ivy* (2014), in the aftermath of a civil war between two surviving groups of a nuclear war, the dominant government establishes that children from the winning and losing sides would marry each other to maintain peace and control. Ivy, a direct descendent of the leader of the losing side, explains that the practice of arranged marriages is twofold:

There is a practical purpose: people don’t live as long as they used to, before the war. (...) It’s important that we procreate, the earlier the better. The second is even more pragmatic.

President Lattimer's father was smart enough to know that peace only lasts when the unhappy side still has something left to lose. By marrying our daughters to his side, he ensured we would think twice about rising up. (...) The strategy has worked thus far; we have remained at peace for two generations. (Chapter 1)

In these societies, marriage has the purpose of procreating and repopulating a world where human life was almost exterminated by war and/or disease.

As a consequence, arranged marriages endanger the female character's sexual awakening since sexual activity has the single function to reproduce to increase population numbers. However, even procreation may be jeopardized: in *Matched*, Cassia refuses to marry Xander and escapes from the Society to the Outer Provinces in search of Ky; in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, Mary's love interest dies after being bitten by an Unconsecrated, a zombie-like creature that roams the forest surrounding her village; and in *The Book of Ivy*, Ivy and her husband do not engage in sexual activity at all.⁴ This theme reaches a disturbing extreme in Carey's *Eve* (2011), where teenage girls are forcibly impregnated to repopulate society.

After a plague annihilates the human population in *Eve*, The New America rises, and orphan girls are taken to isolated, fenced schools where they are taught to fear men: they attend classes named "Dangers of Boys and Men" and "Manipulation and Heartache". They are warned about the manipulative, conniving, and dangerous ways of men. On graduation day, Eve is confronted with what is expected of her after leaving school. While attempting to escape, Arden, a fellow student at the all-girls school and Eve's sometime rival, tries to make Eve understand that there is something insidiously wrong with the place: "Ninety-eight percent of the population is dead, Eve. Gone. How do you think the world is going to continue? They don't need artists... They need *children*" (Chapter 1). Horrified, yet wanting to uncover the truth, Eve sneaks into the windowless compound where students are taken after graduation to learn a profession, and is confronted with a nightmarish vision and realization:

There were rows of girls in cots, most with massive stomachs beneath the white sheets. A few had their middles bandaged. One had scars that snaked over her side, deep pink and puffy. Across the room, another girl writhed in pain, trying to free her wrists. Her mouth was open, yelling something I couldn't hear beyond the glass.

...



There would only be babies cut out of my womb, ripped from my arms and shuttled somewhere beyond these walls. I'd be left screaming, bleeding, alone, and then plunged back into a dreamless, drug-induced sleep. (Chapter 2)

In The New America, teenage girls are locked up, impregnated by artificial insemination, and forced to give birth as many times as their body allows.

Eve decides to escape and is helped by a teacher, who explains to her how the schools for girls and the forced pregnancies came to be :

The King believed the science was the key to repopulating the earth quickly, efficiently, without all the complications of families, marriage, and love. (...) He thought that if you feared men, you girls would breed willingly without them. And when the first Graduates went into that building, some of them did. (Chapter 3)

At school, fear is drilled into the girls so they can be easily manipulated out of romantic relationships and willingly consent to becoming breeders for a society decimated by disease. As a consequence, in Eve's world, girls are not expected to experience romantic love or sexual awakening. Sara K. Day explores the parallels YA dystopian fiction draws between sexual awakening and social resistance, asserting that "female protagonists have internalized social expectations regarding sexuality and desire; though their trepidation in facing those desires initially reflects that internalization, it eventually gives way to increased confidence and willingness to pursue larger forms of social rebellion" (2014, 88). Eve, as well as Cassia in *Matched* and Lena, the main character of *Delirium*, are initially afraid of facing their desires because of the teachings of the authorities. However, the experience of first love, followed by sexual awakening, changes their views. During her escape, Eve meets Caleb, a boy who lives outside the oppressive regime. Although she is initially wary of him, Eve finds herself trusting Caleb and falls in love with him. The romantic feelings Eve develops reveal to her all the lies she was told, initiating her political awakening.

The merging of sexual awakening and political rebellion is a far-reaching trend in YA dystopian fiction, as well as in YA fiction as a whole. "Political awareness", Clémentine Beauvais argues,

and erotic love follow a similar ascent in the life of the enamoured teenagers: the romantic transgressive focus on the loved object coincides with a political combat: breaking away from the conflicting groups. In other words, the increasing erotic tension between the two teenage bodies is the physical manifestation of a political desire to modify the configurations of their dialectical world. (2016, 62)

In YA dystopian fiction, totalitarian authorities create structures that work to erase (romantic) love, resulting in the non-experience of the romantic awakening that leads to political awakening. Hence, romantic love and sexual awakening are represented as an impulse for female agency and social resistance. In *Eve*, robbing the young girls of the experience of romantic love and sexual awakening works to keep them docile, passive subjects, and suppresses any potential for rebellion.

Although dystopian governments build mechanisms to control and repress love, in both *Matched* and *Eve*, citizens can still experience it. Whether it be romantic, familial, or affectionate love, they can feel it and, if they are willing to, use it to rebel against society. However, Revis's *Across the Universe* (2011) and Oliver's *Delirium* (2011) take a more sinister turn, where any emotion becomes inaccessible.

SILENCING DIFFERENCE AND ERASING THE SELF

In the first novel of Beth Revis's *Across the Universe*, Amy Martin, the main female protagonist, is cryogenically frozen to travel to a new planet, Centauri-Earth, with her family. She is woken up before the spaceship lands on Centauri-Earth to find herself in a society where the ship's inhabitants live under the strict control of its leader, Eldest. ("Eldest", as well as "Elder", are not personal names but roles within the hierarchical succession structure for leadership within Godspeed. "Eldest" is the title given to the leader of the spaceship, and "Elder" is the title of the chosen successor. The individuals in these roles are named after their position and do not have personal names.) To maintain order in the spaceship, named Godspeed, those in control decided to erase individual differences, which they viewed as a cause of dissidence: the ship's inhabitants are all monoethnic, any form of religion has been expunged, and everyone speaks the same language (30). Amy's physical difference (she has red hair, pale white skin, and green

eyes), combined with her ability to think critically, destabilize the order within the spaceship. Her presence influences Elder, the future leader of the ship, to raise questions about the societal system of Godspeed. In contrast to the typical portrayal of female characters in YA dystopian fiction, who, according to Sarah K. Day, “first encounter and learn about the possibilities of social rebellion through their relationships with young men who have already established their own rebellious paths” (2014, 90), Amy emerges as a character who defies the sociopolitical system, thereby giving Elder the option to explore the possibilities of social rebellion. As he confronts the harsh realities of his society, Elder is ultimately compelled to question the societal constraints that have governed Godspeed and rebel against them.

In addition to erasing all differences, to keep the individuals under control, every Eldest mixes Phydus, a drug that suppresses people’s emotions, with the water system. Phydus “ensures that people’s emotions do not override their instinct for survival [controlling] extreme emotions” (337), and it “takes away individual thought” (339). Due to their emotions being strictly controlled, individuals are led into blind obedience. However, not everyone is under the drug’s effect, as the spaceship still needs individuals who can steer it (the Shippers) and others who can produce culture, since those who are under the effect of the drugs (the Feeders) need entertainment. Individuals whose DNA is augmented with the ability to imagine and create are deemed mentally unstable and live in the hospital, separated from the Feeders. As Amy is told when she tries to explain how people behave, “we’re the ones who aren’t normal. It’s us—who can’t focus, who can’t work together, who can’t do Feeder or Shipper jobs—we’re the ones who aren’t normal. We’re the ones who have to take the mental meds just so we don’t go loons” (259). Those who live in the hospital are given Inhibitor pills so they are not affected by Phydus, and because they cannot take direction or follow leadership, they must be kept away from the Feeders, who are always calm and content. The Feeders are nothing more than mindless drones, as Amy describes them.

Through building a relationship with Amy, for whom he develops romantic feelings, Elder begins to suspect that all is not as it seems within the spaceship. Because of Amy, he comes to understand that the mating season is not a natural occurrence and that individuals do not lose their sanity due to overwhelming lust (230, 238); individuals have feelings and individual thought, as opposed to being perpetually obedient and

complacent, blissfully unaware of anything beyond their manufactured happiness (259, 285). After Eldest dies at the hands of Orion, who was once in Elder's place, but due to his reckless behavior Eldest ordered his death, Elder finds himself in control of the spaceship and its dwellers. Instead of continuing the system that controlled and manipulated individuals, Elder decides to govern Godspeed without Phydus, giving Feeders access to their emotions for the first time and granting them free will and the ability to make choices.

Nevertheless, access to one's emotions is not always reversible. In Oliver's *Delirium*, love has become the most dangerous disease in the world and has a scientific name, *amor deliria nervosa*. Lena Haloway has been told all her life that love is the deadliest of all deadly things, and she cannot wait to go through the medical procedure that cures her of it. Without the ability to feel romantic love, relationships are chosen by the government, which pairs heterosexual couples through a formal evaluation that every teenager takes to determine not only possible partners but also their educational future. According to *The Book of Shhh* (short for *The Safety, Health, and Happiness Handbook*), a fictional, sacred, state-sanctioned manual mandated for every citizen, the evaluation's "criteria include intelligence, intellectual and social interests, economic strata, temperament, age, ethnicity, physical health, and general attractiveness" (Oliver 2016, "Excerpts from Part III: The Role and Purpose of Society"). Feelings are out of the equation, and sex also becomes primarily about procreation.

The surgery to cure people of love not only erases romantic love: individuals also lose the capacity for familial and affectionate love, and they lose the ability to experience any emotion. This emotionless state of being has nefarious consequences. On a raid night, Lena sneaks out of her house to warn her best friend, Hanna, who is at an illegal party—a party where teenage girls and boys mingle and can catch *amor deliria nervosa*. In the ensuing madness of the raid, Lena is caught: "The dog has got its jaws around my calf, and I turn and that's when I see him, the regulator with the massive red face, eyes glittering, smiling—*oh, God, he's smiling, he actually enjoys this*—club raised, ready to swing" (218). After being saved by Alex, the Invalid⁵ she falls in love with, Lena contemplates how an Invalid saved her from being beaten by the raider, "[f]rom the people who are supposed to protect us and keep us safe" (221). Without the ability to feel compassion, raiders are vicious and enjoy engaging in violence. The inability to

experience love also has consequences for family unity. Parents raise their children because it is their function, without nurturing feelings for them. As a consequence, some parents even reject their children:

in the absence of *deliria nervosa*, some people find parenting distasteful. Thankfully, cases of full-blown detachment—where a mother or father is unable to bond normally, dutifully, and responsibly with his or her children, and winds up drowning them or sitting on their windpipes or beating them to death when they cry—are few. (7)

Elaine Ostry argues that “[l]osing control over emotions is frightening because, without emotion, especially empathy, a moral base is felt to be impossible” (2004, 237). Unable to feel love, empathy, sadness, anger, shame, regret, or pleasure, individuals are prone to accept society’s indoctrination and have violent, deviant behaviours that are (mostly) not reprehensible due to this lack of emotion.

While most children are raised by emotionally detached parents, Lena experienced a different upbringing. She was raised by an affectionate mother, who went through the surgery multiple times but without success. Lena's understanding of love as painful is the reason she wishes to be cured, as she witnessed her mother’s grief and suffering following her father's death. This awareness profoundly influences Lena's perception of *amor deliria nervosa*, rendering it as something repugnant:

I don’t like to think that I’m still walking around with the disease running through my blood. Sometimes I swear I can feel it writhing in my veins like something spoiled, like sour milk. It makes me feel dirty. It reminds me of children throwing tantrums. It reminds me of resistance, of diseased girls dragging their nails on the pavement, tearing out their hair, their mouths dripping spit. (2)

Lena is terrified of love and wishes to go through the surgery to be happy and safe, a promise the government makes. She seeks to be emotionally detached from her past and, through the surgery, “the past and all its pain will be rendered as smoothly palatable as the food we spoon to our babies” (41), enabling individuals to sever themselves from the memories and the emotions that are such an intrinsic part of their identity and existence. However, Hanna tells Lena: “You can’t be really happy unless you’re unhappy sometimes. You know that, right?” (23). Emotionless, pleasureless happiness cannot be

considered genuine happiness. This view aligns with Ahmed's reflections on the need for unhappiness to rebel. The promise of happiness, as offered by the cure, is devoid of an awareness of unhappiness, and it ultimately confines individuals within a rigid regime that restricts their freedom.

Falling in love with Alex transforms Lena. When Alex confesses his feelings for her, Lena ultimately comes to terms with the emotions she has long dreaded, depicted in a scene that evokes the nuances of sexual awakening:

all the fear I have carried with me since I learned to sit, stand, breathe—since I was told that at the very heart of me was something wrong, something rotten and diseased, something to be suppressed—since I was told that I was always just a heartbeat away from being damaged—all of it vanishes at once. That thing—the heart of hearts of me, the core of my core—stretches and unfurls even further, soaring like a flag: making me feel stronger than I ever have before.

I open my mouth and say, "I love you too." (378)

Through experiencing romantic love, Lena can no longer accept that love is a deadly disease, something terrible she must be afraid of. She questions everything she was ever told by the government, turns her back on society, chooses not to be cured and runs into the Wilds, where she promises to resist (441).

"LOVE OBEYS NO LAWS OTHER THAN ITS OWN"

In these YA dystopian narratives, love is portrayed as fundamentally undesirable to totalitarian regimes, which recognize its potential to disrupt political and societal order. Authorities devise mechanisms to contain love, effectively trapping characters within the system, as the erasure of love creates citizens loyal only to the government. In the absence of love, meaningful connections among individuals—whether romantic, familial, or platonic—are severed, enabling oppressive societies to maintain their authoritarian control.

The experience of romantic love serves as a transformative force for the protagonists of YA dystopian fiction. It is the source of individuality and freedom,

instilling agency in the subjects contaminated by it. Cassia, Eve, Elder, and Lena are no longer passive subjects, mindlessly following the authority's indoctrination. This newfound agency, which emerges from their experience of romantic love, empowers them to challenge and resist the controlling, dehumanizing practices. They discover within themselves the power to disturb society's totalitarian systems, fighting against government-determined marriages, forced breeding, and being stripped, not only of the capacity to love, but to feel any emotion at all. Hence, the novels discussed illustrate how a romantic relationship becomes both a personal and a political act that destabilizes systems of control and reclaims individual agency.

Ultimately, love is represented as fundamental for the construction of a better future. These dystopian narratives assert that the realization of utopian visions and dreams is unattainable without the presence of emotions—especially love—since it is only through such emotional connections that communities can be built. Without the ability to feel, individuals become self-absorbed or exist in a state of daily monotony, oblivious to the injustices perpetrated by their leaders and the extent of the control exerted over their lives. In this context, love is not merely a personal experience but a foundational element of collective resistance and societal transformation, playing a critical role in the pursuit of social dreaming.

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END NOTES

¹ The prominence of romantic love in these dystopian narratives can be attributed to its relationship with YA fiction, wherein romance is particularly pronounced. Adolescence represents a transitional phase characterized by the negotiation of romantic relationships and the exploration of emerging or re-emerging sexuality (Home 2018).

² In *The Utopian Reader*, Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent argue that utopianism can be positive or negative. They state that “utopianism generally is the imaginative projection, positive or negative, of a society that is substantially different from the one in which the author lives” (1999, 1).

³ An Aberration is a status received if the person has committed an Infraction. They are not seen as full Citizens and do not get the privilege of being Matched. Aberrations are usually assigned to the Disposal Department, where they are slowly poisoned.

⁴ Ivy and her husband Bishop eventually consummate their romantic relationship only in the second book of the series, *The Revolution of Ivy* (2015). Across the series, their relationship is depicted as evolving from distrust and a sense of obligation to profound intimacy and affection. As a result, their eventual sexual relationship is characterized by emotional depth, transcending mere physicality and the biological imperative to procreate.

⁵ An Invalid is someone over eighteen who chooses not to be cured as society demands and lives mostly forgotten in the Wilds (Society denies their existence) outside the city’s fences.

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