

Singular yet Shared:
Willful Heroines and their Willful Communities in Young Adult Fantasy

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ABSTRACT

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The psychological theory of narrative identity posits that we create our identities based on a narrative life-story, and that adolescence is a pivotal moment in this process. Literature is one of the most familiar examples of narrative, so what, then, does the literature adolescents read teach them about identity as they construct their own narrative identities? What kinds of characters are portrayed and what can we learn about the adolescents influenced by those characters? This thesis is interested in these questions specifically as they relate to contemporary adolescent girls, who often grow up reading young adult (YA) high fantasy novels written by women, about women, and for women. Using Sara Ahmed's theory of the willful subject, this thesis theorizes the protagonists depicted in YA high fantasy novels as willful heroines who are constructed in resistance to oppressive, patriarchal societies which seek to control them. Through developing methods of willfulness specific to their individual, intersectional identities, these heroines are able to take their fates into their own hands and begin to imagine alternatives to the hierarchical systems in which they are trapped. The willful techniques they cultivate to defy their respective worlds are influenced by their gender, race, sexuality, class, and experience with imperialism. However, in order to be successful in imagining and eventually building a better world, a willful heroine must be supported by a community of fellow willful subjects. By analyzing five recent YA high fantasy novels—Sarah J.

Maas's *Throne of Glass* (2012), Holly Black's *The Cruel Prince* (2018), Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015), Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), and Marie Rutkoski's *The Midnight Lie* (2020)—this thesis reveals how intersubjective and intersectional willfulness is fundamental to any female identity that wants to not only survive but overcome a patriarchal society. As it concludes, this thesis envisions a new generation of women raised on YA high fantasy novels who build willful communities in order to transform the world around them.

“The will signifies that it is better to leave
the right place than to stay in the right place
because you are unable to move on your own.”

Sara Ahmed

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INTRODUCTION.

WILLFUL WOMEN ON THE PAGE AND IN THE WORLD

I don't remember the first young adult novel I read, but I do remember their bright spines lined up on the library shelves. I was twelve when I first began to visit the YA section regularly. The books' covers were colorful, their titles printed in eye-catching fonts on top of images some marketing team had determined appealed to teenagers. At the bottom of each spine was a sticker provided by the library declaring the book's genre—the fantasy sticker had a unicorn on it, and I often fell asleep staring at the stacks of unicorns on my nightstand.

Somebody had decided that the YA novels should not be stored in the children's section, so instead they were kept on the other side of general fiction, in a back corner flanked by desks the local students from the public high school used during finals week. At first there were only two massive, floor-to-ceiling shelves forming an L-shape in the corner, with a waist-high shelf across from them storing manga and graphic novels. Over the years the section has grown and expanded; the entire study area of the library is now interspersed with shelves of YA fiction, carefully catalogued by long-fingered librarians. I remember feeling a strange sort of pride stepping into the YA section while my younger brother was escorted to the children's section with its pastel paint and short shelves and pile of toys in the corner; but there was shame also as I skittered by the older teenagers hunched over textbooks in the study section, though I don't know I would have known to call it shame then.

As I grew older and began to earn money from babysitting and summer jobs, I visited the Barnes and Noble at the local mall instead. The YA novels were kept in a back corner here, as well, but there were no desks nearby with fellow teenagers whose imagined judgment made me antsy. There were rarely other people at all in this section of the store, and most people who did come through didn't stay long. Those who remained for longer than a couple minutes would sit on the floor and leaf through the pages of multiple books before they finally left with one (or several), and though I never spoke to them, I felt a sort of kinship with them. I imagined that our shared consumption of the same stories forged an understanding between us that didn't require speech.

After ten years of dedication to a genre, I would like to believe I know it better than most. I've followed YA fiction through its trends, read dystopias trying to recreate Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008) and paranormal romances imitating Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005) and urban fantasies like Cassandra Clare's *City of Bones* (2007). When I was fourteen, I read *Throne of Glass* (2012) by Sarah J. Maas, and though I'm sure I'd read high fantasy (*The Lord of the Rings* is probably the best-known example of this subset of the fantasy genre) before then, *Throne of Glass* is the one that stuck with me. I followed the series and its dramatic, beautiful, sarcastic, often-ridiculous, all-powerful heroine through my years of high school and all the way into college (the seventh and final massive volume of the series was finally published in the fall of 2018). In that same period, though my tastes in literature changed and matured, I continued to return to YA high fantasy.

What is it about this particular genre that has captured my attention for so many years? Certainly some of it is nostalgia—opening a YA high fantasy novel reminds me of the electric, euphoric obsessions I often developed as a young adolescent with fantasy worlds and the characters and stories that populated them. But when I look back at my original, well-worn copies of the *Throne of Glass* series, its heroine, Celaena, pictured on the covers staring mutinously forwards, swords and daggers and bows and arrows and swirling magic in her hands, I know it's something more.

The third book in the *Throne of Glass* series, *Heir of Fire* (2014), was released when I was fifteen. The beginning of this installment finds Celaena at her lowest point, wracked by grief for lost friends and lost loves as she begins to reclaim her heritage. It took me several months to finally pick it up and several weeks to finally finish it, as I was distracted by my own adolescent woes after starting a new school and attempting to make new friends. I don't remember the exact moment when I finally reached the climax of the story, but I do remember the feeling in my chest as I pressed a hand against my sternum, eyes jumping across the page as Celaena, on the verge of death, has a vision of the many people she's lost in her short life, including the identity she's hidden from the world since she was a young child. They tell her to get up, to fight, and she emerges from this vision literally transformed:

Her cheek against the moss, the young princess she had been—Aelin Galathynius—reached a hand for her. “Get up,” she said softly.

Celaena shook her head.

Aelin strained for her, bridging that rift in the foundation of the world.

“Get up.” A promise—a promise for a better life, a better world.[...]

“Get up,” someone said beyond the young princess. Sam. Sam, standing just beyond where she could see, smiling faintly.

“Get up,” said another voice—a woman’s. Nehemia.

“Get up.” Two voices together—her mother and father, faces grave but eyes bright. Her uncle was beside them, the crown of Terrasen on his silver hair.

“Get up,” he told her gently.

One by one, like shadows emerging from the mist, they appeared. The faces of the people she had loved with her heart of wildfire. (467)

I remember having to stop reading for a moment so I could pace a couple of circles around my bedroom, energy racing through my blood. As Celaena—now Aelin—rose to face her foes in battle, I wanted to go out and lead armies like her, to feel magical fire at my fingertips as she did and reinvent the world like she swore she would.

It is easy to look back at myself in these moments and laugh. Of course I wanted to be like Celaena; of course I wanted to be a lost magical princess who wins the heart of a loyal faerie warrior-prince, spits in the eye of evil, and restores balance to her world. What teenage girl, living an ordinary life which nevertheless felt—as life often does for teenagers—impossibly difficult, wouldn’t want that? And yet, there is more happening in this moment than I was aware of at the age of fifteen, ideas and messages that I received and interpreted even as my conscious mind was consumed with imagining myself into Celaena’s place. At this moment, Celaena is nearly beaten down and overwhelmed by a world which has been working against her from the beginning, a world which has traumatized her, sexualized her, objectified her, weaponized her, forced her into making impossible choices in order to survive. And yet, with the support of those who she has

lost, who have made her journey possible, she rises. She sees that “promise for a better life, a better world,” and reaches for it. She steps into and embodies her full identity, defies the society which would rather she stay complacent, and sets out to create “a world so brilliant and prosperous that when she saw [those she loved] again in the Afterworld, she would not be ashamed” (Maas, *Heir of Fire* 469). This defiance, this fearlessness, this possibility of collective transformation is what captured me all those years ago when I first opened *Throne of Glass*, and it is these qualities in the many YA high fantasy novels that have come after that draw me back to the genre over and over again.

The Subversive Potential of YA Fantasy

What I didn't know as a teenager consuming novel after novel, subsuming myself in fantasy worlds and among powerful young heroines, was the impact these stories would have on my identity development. Psychologists have been studying identity formation in adolescence for over four decades. They've classified it in stages and performed studies demonstrating how early positive identity formation can influence later life and development (Meeus 75). One increasing field of study is narrative identity, which suggests humans construct part of their identity based on a narrative life story; much of that story develops in adolescence. It may be that adults “tend to over-represent events from adolescence and emerging adulthood in autobiographical memory” because their narrative life story began to develop in earnest during this time, and it was then that they became a true independent, subjective being living within their own narrative and creating their own life (Meeus 89).

The concept of narrative identity leads inevitably to literature, as it is one of the most familiar examples of what a narrative might look like. This begs two questions: (1) what stories are adolescents actually reading? And (2) what are those stories teaching them about what narratives and, perhaps more importantly, what the identities at the center of those narratives look like? Books read by adolescents generally fit into the young adult (YA) genre, which is usually targeted towards adolescent audiences from ages 12 to 18, though it is also often read by older readers (Cart).¹ The YA genre has changed significantly since adolescent readers were first recognized as a distinct publishing market in the 1960s, and the production of YA novels has increased dramatically in the past two decades (Waller 9; Cart). As the market has expanded, many subgenres have appeared, among them anything from realistic fiction to paranormal romance. As it turns out, I was not alone in my love of YA fantasy as an adolescent. According to data from 2014, fantasy is second in popularity only to adventure novels (many of which probably would be classified as fantasy anyways), with about 45% of adolescent readers interested in the genre (Milliot, “Children’s Books”). In 2018, juvenile and YA novels about science fiction, fantasy, and magic sold over 20 million copies (Milliot, “Cooking and Sci-Fi”).

One cannot attempt to take a critical standpoint towards YA novels without acknowledging their somewhat contentious cultural and critical value. Joanna Webb

¹ YA as a genre is difficult to define. Allison Waller points out that books “*become* young adult texts” when they are consumed by and marketed towards young adults; in this way, books that may not have been written with adolescent audiences in mind are adopted as young adult stories (16, italics in original). Though YA is a real publishing genre as well as a conceptual genre, it is still difficult to determine what exactly is included in it, as adolescent interests have evolved and so the genre’s boundaries have, in turn, fluctuated.

Johnson notes that YA literature often “hangs precariously from the lowest rung of the literary ladder. Few research universities acknowledge children’s and YA literature as a field worthy of rigorous study” (141). There have been numerous articles published in various locations speaking against YA and especially against YA as read by adults.² Though I would argue many (though certainly not all) YA novels are as challenging, interesting, and ripe for analysis as any so-called high-brow literature critics choose to dissect and adults choose to read, that is not the purpose of this thesis. I am interested not in whatever judgments we can make about the adults who read YA but in what these stories tell us about contemporary adolescents. As Allison Waller, building off of Michel Foucault’s ideas about discourse and its influence on culture and power structures, argues,

fictional portrayals[...] are more powerful than official voices in representing ideas of what adolescence constitutes because of their pervasiveness in modern society and their special relevance to teenage culture.[... B]y producing adolescence in a variety of ways that appear to be natural and innate, discourse helps to replicate those norms in the expectations and actions of future individuals. (7)

In other words, teenagers are as much constructed by the literature, film, television, and other media they consume as they construct and influence their representations in popular media. This fits with my understanding of YA literature and the characters portrayed in

² See Ruth Graham’s article “Against YA,” for example, in which she claims that “YA books present the teenage perspective in a fundamentally uncritical way.”

that literature as influencing adolescents as they create their own narrative identities.³ By understanding the teenage protagonists of popular YA novels, we seek to understand the teenagers who grow up with them as role models.

And it is certainly an interesting time to be a teenager. The five books I examine were all published within the past ten years in the United States, a tumultuous decade for every American living it, not to mention the teenagers attempting to find their footing in a culture that continues to be at odds. We have whip-lashed from having our first Black President in office to electing a racist, sexist, and fascist reality star. Systemic racism continues to be entrenched in American culture as police officers murder Black men and women, even as movements like Black Lives Matter rise up against injustice. The #MeToo movement and the Women's March across the country in 2017 continue to expose the work that needs to be done to address sexism and misogyny. Queer rights activists have gained ground with the federal legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, but many queer and especially trans people still face violent intolerance and heterosexism. Immigrants and refugees remain at the forefront of American politics as children crossing at our southern border with Mexico are separated from their families and kept in cages and the American government refuses to take in Syrian refugees. Statistics suggest that nearly half of teenagers suffer from some form of diagnosable mental disorder (Merikangas et al.). It is perhaps never easy to be a teenager in any time period, but how is one supposed to figure out who one is—by most accounts one of the

³ A study by Jessica Kokesh and Miglena Sternadori of the impact of YA novels on adolescent girls indicates that teenagers are indeed identifying with and internalizing the characteristics they see represented in books, though many of the characteristics Kokesh and Sternadori identify as influential are negative stereotypes of female characters (155).

central purposes of adolescence—when the world around one is in seemingly constant conflict and confusion? Many realistic fiction novels written for adolescents have set out to address the many issues and difficulties contemporary teenagers face, from police brutality against people of color in Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (2017) to obsessive compulsive disorder in John Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017).

It would perhaps be logical to center my analysis around these realistic fiction novels—after all, many literary critics claim the only sort of teenage fiction worth analyzing is what Peter Hollindale calls “the adolescent novel of ideas,” or “books which ‘grow the mind a size larger’” and are therefore probably political and/or philosophical (86). Many would say only realistic fiction for adolescents can achieve these two qualities, as these novels are supposedly more directly applicable to “real world” issues because they take place in realistic contexts. I have chosen, however, to focus on YA fantasy—specifically high fantasy,⁴ whose stories take place in worlds entirely separate from our own—for several reasons. The first is that it is, as previously mentioned, widely popular among teenagers, and of course readers can only be influenced by literary narratives if they actually read them. The second is that fantasy as a genre does something entirely different from what realistic fiction can do. Rosemary Jackson, building on both psychoanalytic theory and Tzvetan Todorov’s genre theory about the fantastic, describes fantasy as being able to both express and expel desire:

⁴ This subset of the fantasy genre would fit into what Tzvetan Todorov calls the “marvelous,” or when “supernatural events provoke no particular reaction in either the characters or the implicit reader” (54). Its best-known examples are probably J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1936) and *The Lord of the Rings* series (1954-1955), or the popular HBO television series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019).

The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’. The movement from[...] expression as manifestation to expression as expulsion, is one of the recurrent features of fantastic narrative, as it tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, recovering its dark areas. Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. (4)

Here, we see fantasy as seeking the limits of the dominant culture, of overturning and interrogating it and exposing the “dark areas” we often do not see. One common criticism of fantasy—especially of high fantasy—is that it is mere escapism. Stepping into another world, completely imagined and separate from our own, is assumed to be a simple stepping away from reality. However, as Jackson reminds us, “Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (8, italics in original). Like any literature, fantasy is not produced in a vacuum, and its building blocks are based at least partly in reality.

That being said, fantasy, especially high fantasy which often includes mythical creatures and magic systems that allow characters to control the elements, to speak to animals, or even to raise the dead, is quite obviously not reality. No one would open the pages of Maas’s *Throne of Glass*—with its demons summoned from another realm and

its magic sealed from the world by a tyrannical king—and believe the world depicted there to be ours. This is another advantage to the fantasy genre, especially when the target audience is children and adolescents. Maria Nikolajeva explains, “The fantastic mode allows children’s writers to deal with important psychological, ethical and existential questions in a slightly detached manner, which frequently proves more effective with young readers than straightforward realism” (61). This is not to say that teenagers are unintelligent or incapable of considering important questions in realistic contexts. It is simply that fantasy acts as a subversive method of exposure to the political and/or philosophical ideas many critics claim only exist in realistic teenage fiction. An adolescent reader is set down in the middle of an unfamiliar world of magic which nevertheless retains familiar qualities and is then forced to recognize and reconsider those familiar qualities in a different context. Issues such as sexism, racism, and homophobia are often amplified (especially given that many high fantasy novels are set in worlds meant to mirror actual historical societies when sexism, racism, and homophobia were even more pronounced), and the structure of the narrative, focalized usually through one or two characters and therefore encouraging the reader to identify with these protagonists, brings the adolescent reader into close contact with ideas and situations they may never have considered previously or to such an extent in the real world.

What exactly, then, are these subversive ideas which push the limits of the dominant cultural order that adolescents are unwittingly exposed to in the fantasy books they consume? The truth is that YA fantasy has not always been (and still sometimes isn’t) particularly subversive or ground-breaking. Stories that belong to this genre tend to

fit into the basic structure of the traditional hero myth,⁵ which “inscribes male dominance and the primacy of male enterprises” and so usually includes central characters who are exclusively white, straight, cisgender, and able-bodied men (Hourihan 68). Though YA fantasy has grappled with significant questions about power, growing up, and morality, the only serious departure it’s made from the traditional hero myth has been that many of the protagonists in more recent YA high fantasy novels are female (Sutton). This is not a coincidence: statistics suggests that adolescent girls are more often frequent readers than adolescent boys, and so YA authors (the majority of whom are women) have stepped up to meet the demand for heroines after literal eons of mostly heroes at the center of much of the world’s stories (Scholastic; Weinberg and Kapelner). Though it is certainly commendable to put a young woman at the center of a YA high fantasy story and to have mostly women topping the YA best-sellers lists, the lack of other types of representation (in realistic teenage fiction as well as in fantasy) in both characters and authors is glaring. And the importance of representation, of recognizing oneself within the pages of the books one reads, especially for children and adolescents, cannot be understated. Deepa Dharmadhikari writes of the disconnect of growing up speaking Marathi and Hindi with her family but reading books in English which were rarely by Indian authors or about Indian characters—“I grew up with half a tongue,” she explains (16). *The Young Adult*

⁵ Joseph Campbell has theorized at length about the idea of the hero myth or monomyth and outlines its basic structure as follows: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (28). Experiencing some sort of adventure or conflict, successfully triumphing, and then completing the journey having achieved something—whether power, personal development, or some other tangible or intangible symbol—is typical for YA high fantasy novels.

Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association, states that one “of the chief values of young adult literature [lies] in its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages” (Cart). And yet for years, a huge proportion of teenagers have been unable to do so.

It is for this reason that several grass-roots movements and organizations have developed to address the lack of diversity and representation in children’s and YA literature. In 2014, several YA authors began the non-profit organization We Need Diverse Books after the hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks began circulating on Twitter. Its mission statement is to “[put] more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of children” and it envisions “[a] world in which all children can see themselves in the pages of a book” (“About Us”). In 2015, another YA author began the hashtag #OwnVoices on Twitter “to recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from that same diverse group” (Duyvis). The #OwnVoices movement demands not only characters in YA and children’s literature representing marginalized identities but authors who share those same identities being the ones to write about them. Though there is certainly significant progress to be made, with the birth of these movements and others, diverse representation in children’s and YA literature has begun to increase. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been collecting statistics on children’s books written by and/or about people of color since the 1980s. In 2013, the year before the founding of We Need Diverse Books, only 7% of the books surveyed were written by people of color and 8% were written about characters of color; in 2019, those numbers increased to 24% and 29%, respectively (CCBC). According to YA author Malinda Lo, who’s been collecting data on YA literature with

queer representation since 2011, queer representation has increased as well. In 2013, Lo found only 29 books published by mainstream publishers that included LGBTQ+ characters or that were about LGBTQ+ issues; in 2019, that number had nearly tripled to 84, though it is notable that representation of transgender, genderfluid, and nonbinary characters especially continues to lag behind (“2013 LGBT YA”; “A Decade of LGBTQ YA”). Though there clearly remains much work to be done, as a significant number of marginalized groups remain underrepresented or not represented at all and many novels limit themselves to depicting only one identity category at a time, YA and children’s literature is slowly becoming more and more representative of the extensive diversity amongst contemporary teenagers.

With this increase in representation, YA literature has been able to cover more and more interesting ground and address a variety of subjects adolescents from ten years ago would probably have had difficulty finding within the pages of their books. Teenagers building their narrative identities can now find more characters whose identities match their own and whose stories challenge them to think in new ways. And, as we’ve discovered, YA high fantasy is capable of placing these characters and stories in new and unfamiliar contexts, asking its adolescent readers to reconsider questions about power, ability, identity, gender, race, sexuality, class, and, of course, magic.

Willfulness, Willful Subjects, and Willpower: A Theoretical Grounding

Given that YA high fantasy is written mostly by women, about young women, and for young women, I am particularly interested in what these stories say about gender and its intersection with other forms of identity, in how the heroines of these stories

grapple with their individual identity development, and in how this affects the experiences of contemporary adolescent girls (like me not too many years ago). If these are the books teenage girls have as their examples of narrative and identity as they create their own narrative identities, then what exactly are these books saying to and doing for girls?

Anyone who has been paying attention to popular culture over the past decade will be familiar with the modern “bombshell,” who, writes Jeffrey A. Brown, is far more likely than the “sexy bombshells of the past” “to be actually lethal—to take men’s lives with a gun or a sword—than to merely ruin men through their passions” (4). The beautiful, dangerous, and usually well-armed action heroine (from teenage revolutionary Katniss Everdeen to comic book superheroines like Wonder Woman) has gained increased popularity in film, television, and literature, and this is the type of female protagonist whose narrative is often centered in popular YA high fantasy novels. This new character archetype has forced critics to reexamine questions of gender and femininity as more and more female characters “[assume] a masculine-identified role within a genre (or a range of subgenres) deeply rooted in masculine fantasies of empowerment” (Brown 5). But, as Margery Hourihan notes, “[t]he trouble with a dualism is that if you simply turn it on its head it is still a dualism. Inversion is not the same as subversion” (205). It is possible that the action heroine may only invert a binary and stereotypical construction of gender, simply replacing a male actor or character with a female one and making the new heroine “little more than [an] honorary [man]” as she is given the traditional masculine qualities—“prowess, courage, aggression, determination, dominance”—the hero myth has been reifying for thousands of years (Hourihan 68, 3).

Or perhaps, as Brown argues, “[t]he increased visibility of these modern action heroines is a progressive change and models for viewers and readers an image of strong femininity, as well as a belief that women can in fact be their own heroes” (6). Of course, the action heroine still faces objectification, sexualization, and fetishization, but this new image of “strong femininity” is certainly a dramatic departure from the largely passive and sidelined female characters previously found in this type of storytelling, who were “not ‘characters’ at all but symbols of events in the [male] hero’s psyche” (Hourihan 156).

Whatever your thoughts on the action heroine—or the teenage action heroine in particular, with which this thesis is concerned—it is clear that critics struggle to interpret this new character archetype, and continued argument over whether she merely inverts or successfully subverts gendered representations in the hero myth does not seem to bring us any closer to an answer to this question. It is for this reason that I ask not whether the construction of the teenage action heroine challenges traditional ideas of femininity and gender but instead how she is positioned in resistance to the society in which she is placed. In other words, I am more interested in the *actions* the teenage action heroine takes against the dominant cultural order of her world. I interrogate the ways in which this type of heroine opposes the structures of power of her patriarchal society, regardless of whether she subverts or reinforces gendered stereotypes, and how her placement as a symbol of rebellion and defiance influences and represents adolescent girls.

To this end, Sara Ahmed’s explanation of willfulness and the willful subject in her book *Willful Subjects* acts as an alternative paradigm for understanding the particular teenage action heroine found at the center of most YA high fantasy novels. Ahmed

defines willfulness largely in terms of action, as “persistence in the face of having been put down, where simply to ‘keep going’ or to ‘keep coming up’ is to be stubborn and obstinate” (2). She writes of willfulness as active resistance, “as the capacity or potential to enact a ‘no,’ the potential to not be determined from without, by an external force” (10). “Enact[ing] a ‘no’” becomes crucial for a willful subject to directly challenge her society’s attempts to control and oppress her. Willfulness is also vocal: in the context of politics, it often means “to be willing to announce your disagreement, *and to put yourself behind it*” (134, italics in original). Ahmed genders the willful subject when she explicitly connects the concept to what she calls “feminist killjoys: willful women, unwilling to get along” (2). She writes that willful subjects are often children and often female, and that those labeled as willful are placed in a position of negation, in a position of “*not*, as not meeting the criteria for being human, for instance” (17, 15, italics in original). A judgment of willfulness can thus be a method of othering, of separation from the dominant cultural order that decides what constitutes humanity. Additionally, willfulness is not necessarily a choice: “[f]or some, willfulness might be necessary for an existence to be possible” (160). Willful subjects, and especially willful young women, are therefore persistent, vocal, minoritized individuals who fail to fit into the roles into which society tries to force them. Not only do willful subjects fail to fill these roles but they do so *actively*—they do not simply say “no” but “enact” it—and because there is no other method of survival. Willfulness, then, involves active resistance towards a society and the agents of that society who, by trying to “[determine a willful subject] from without,” represent a perpetual threat to a willful subject’s very existence. Willfulness often develops and evolves in response to the particular circumstances of the willful subject as

she fights to survive, and so each willful subject's techniques of willfulness look different depending on the different ways the oppression she experiences manifests.

Because willfulness involves challenging the dominant culture, it is also connected to authority and power: Ahmed calls it “a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given” (1). Willful subjects exist in opposition to those who have authority, who are in positions of power. In his book *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault defines power as a series of “force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power” which are always “unstable” (93). Power “is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another”; “it comes from everywhere” (93). Through Foucault we see power as stemming from the relationships and interplays (“force relations”) between individuals and between structures. Cultural and societal norms are therefore a Foucauldian example of power, and those who exist outside a norm, who refuse to be “determined from without,” could thus be considered a threat to society's collective power. As Ahmed writes, “Willfulness might be a conversion point, how a potential is converted into a threat” (11). Willful subjects who actively resist their societies and the roles those societies dictate they must fill become threatening to the power of the dominant cultural order. Resistance, however, as Foucault writes, “is never in a position of exteriority to power”—resistance to authority from willful subjects always comes from within the system as they search for new methods to exist in their world and take power for themselves (95). Though they cannot access the power of the dominant culture, willful subjects can develop what Ahmed calls “willpower” (7). Developing willpower means taking one's own fate into one's own hands. This process of not only rejecting and

resisting being determined by an external force but actively *determining oneself*—by controlling one's own body, one's own situation, one's own future—becomes a willful subject's ultimate form of power.

As will become evident in the subsequent chapters, willfulness and willpower in YA high fantasy novels are fundamentally linked to identity. How willfulness is enacted changes depending on the identity of the individual willful subject, and developing and creating space for that personal identity to continue to exist is what unlocks willpower. With willpower, willful subjects are able to do more than simply resist the societies which attempt to oppress them; by taking control instead of being controlled, willful subjects render visible an alternative to the existing system. They are able to imagine a world where their identity will be able to not only survive but thrive, and they can then actively work towards building this world. In the five YA high fantasy novels I have chosen to examine, willfulness is necessary for the survival of the heroines at the centers of these stories; they are willful not entirely by choice but because not being willful would often mean death. In developing their individual identities and forms of willful resistance, they are able to cultivate willpower and take their fate into their own hands. Armed with willpower, these heroines are able to envision alternatives to the dominant cultural order of their respective fantasy worlds. Many set out to overturn the pre-existing system and establish a new one, though some fail to envision an alternative or even fall back into the damaging, hegemonic cycles that already exist. Though not all of the heroines presented in these five novels are successful in willfully transforming their societies, they each suggest that developing willful techniques specific to one's personal identity are essential for any young woman who hopes to endure in a patriarchal society,

and that doing so creates at least the possibility for empowerment. Whether or not this empowerment comes to fruition, as we will see, often depends on whether or not a willful heroine acts alone or in cooperation with others.

The Willful Mentor and the Company the Willful Subject Keeps

Though taking one's fate into one's own hands and actively determining oneself is an important element of developing willpower, constructing an internal, stable identity that remains completely uninfluenced by any external force is impossible, even for fictional characters. A willful subject may exist in direct opposition to the dominant cultural norms of her society, but she still continues, just by opposing those norms, to be influenced by them. And, of course, identity is in constant flux from moment to moment as we continue to evolve and change. For this reason, my interest in the identities of these YA high fantasy heroines is less related to the supposedly stable individual identity categories we might recognize from contemporary identity politics—gender, race, sexuality, etc. Though the representation of these identities remains important for the individual stories in which they are found and for the contemporary adolescents exposed to them, I'm more interested in *how* exactly these heroines carve out space for themselves and the particular groups they represent, and *who* exactly influences this process. Just as no piece of literature is produced in a vacuum, no heroine develops uninfluenced by the women around her.

To this end, though this thesis focuses on individual willful heroines, it also focuses on the women who surround and enable the willful journeys of these heroines, fellow willful subjects who I call "willful mentors." As Ahmed writes, "the will has also

been understood as what connects humans to all other things” (5). Willfulness is thus a method of connection as much as it is a method of empowerment—indeed, connection and empowerment often go hand-in-hand. Willful mentors model techniques of willful defiance, support willful heroines in the development of willfulness, and enable the acquisition of willpower and the imagination of alternative worlds. Many of these willful mentors are, perhaps unsurprisingly, mothers; as Virginia Woolf famously wrote, “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (75). Adrienne Rich reflects in her book *Of Woman Born* on the importance of mother-daughter relationships: “Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood” (225). Rich explains the kind of nurturing daughters would like from their mothers:

[W]e want courageous mothering. The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. For a mother, this means more than contending with the reductive images of females in children’s books, movies, television, the schoolroom. It means that the mother herself is trying to expand the limits of her life. *To refuse to be a victim*: and then to go on from there. (246, italics in original)

Here, Rich demands a mother who actively defies and resists her society, a mother who is willful. This is the sort of mother who acts as a willful mentor to her daughter, a mother “who want[s her] own freedom” and the freedom of her daughter, a mother “who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her” and so “demonstrate[s] to her daughter that these possibilities exist” (247).

But not all mothers or mother figures do this—as Rich writes, some mothers make their daughters “the vessels of another woman’s self-denial and frustration” (247). When a willful heroine’s mother or mother figure becomes an agent of the dominant oppressive culture, the willful heroine is forced to look elsewhere for a willful mentor, to find a different woman who can “illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities”; these willful mentors may be sisters, friends, or lovers. With time, the willful subjects in these stories learn to support each other, and their willfulness becomes interdependent and intersubjective so that seeking and using willpower requires connectedness and cooperation. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde envisions a world in which “interdependence” facilitates “that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being” (26). It is not just an individual willful subject who “bring[s a new] future into being,” but a community of willful subjects who does so.

But willful mentorship operates outside the context of these stories as well. I began this introduction by considering narrative identity and the question of how the narratives and identities to which teenage girls are exposed in books impact their own development into, in many ways, willful subjects. In this way, the heroines themselves and the authors who write them into existence are willful mentors for the young women who read these books. Karen Rowe writes of women in folklore who weave, often simultaneously, both tapestries and stories: “women as storytellers have woven or spun their yarns, speaking at one level to a total culture, but at another to a sisterhood of readers who will understand the hidden language, the secret revelations of the tale” (57).

Thus women storytellers are understood as revealing secret truths to the other women who consume their stories, as passing on willful legacies for the next generation to inherit and inhabit. The act of writing about a willful heroine becomes an act of, to quote Rich again, “illuminat[ing] and expand[ing]” an adolescent reader’s “sense of actual possibilities.” By constructing willful heroines, YA high fantasy authors become willful mentors to their young readers, exemplifying and enabling willfulness and willpower for an entire generation of women. These authors ask their readers to read willfully, to put themselves into the shoes of willful heroines, embody the resistance those heroines perform against patriarchal and oppressive societies, and take that resistance with them into their everyday lives.

The Willful Heroine in YA Fantasy

In order to explore these questions of gender, identity, willfulness, and collective resistance among adolescent girls, I examine five recent YA high fantasy novels, all written by women and all the first in a series,⁶ which critically engage with these ideas: Sarah J. Maas’s *Throne of Glass* (2012), Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince* (2018), Sabaa Tahir’s *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015), Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), and Marie Rutkoski’s *The Midnight Lie* (2020). These novels share many features, namely that each one centers on one or multiple willful heroines and that each is

⁶ It is important to note that the stories of these heroines do not end with the endings of these novels. Each heroine continues to develop and change, as do her willfulness and her willful community, as her respective series continues. Maas’s *Throne of Glass* series, Black’s *The Folk of the Air* trilogy (of which *The Cruel Prince* is the first), and Tahir’s *An Ember in the Ashes* series are all complete as of March 2021. Adeyemi’s *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy (of which *Children of Blood and Bone* is the first) and Rutkoski’s *The Midnight Lie* duology are still ongoing.

set in a fantastical world completely distinct from our own. Their protagonists experience brutal trauma at the hands of oppressive, patriarchal systems, participate in incredible violence, and make morally questionable decisions. They also forge powerful friendships, fall in love, and discover their own transformative potential as they seek justice and equity for themselves and for their communities. Critical scholarship on contemporary YA novels in general but especially on YA high fantasy novels is limited,⁷ and so this thesis hopes to fill that gap and shed light on what these stories can tell us about defiant, resistant, *willful* women and the change they can and do enact.

We will begin in chapter 1 with Maas's *Throne of Glass* and Black's *The Cruel Prince* in order to better conceptualize what a willful subject looks like, how she develops willfulness and willpower, and how her personal sense of identity mediates this development. *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince*, however, present heroines who are neither intersectional nor intersubjective, and both novels raise questions about how successful a lone willful subject can be in imagining and creating change in her society. For this reason, the remaining chapters examine willful heroines whose identities *are* intersectional and intersubjective. Chapter 2 examines Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, which engages with questions of colonialism, imperialism, race, and ethnicity in addition to gender, and which centers on a heroine who becomes empowered by developing her ability to speak, by building on the legacy of other willful subjects, and by reaching out to

⁷ Scholarship on the five particular novels I have chosen is also limited. There is some on Maas's *Throne of Glass* (for example, Katherine Cruger's "Men are Stronger; Women Endure: A Critical Analysis of the Throne of Glass and the Mortal Instruments YA Fantasy Series"), but almost none on Black's *The Cruel Prince*, Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, and Rutkoski's *The Midnight Lie*. There is more scholarship on Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, discussed in more depth in chapter 3.

form a community. Exploring Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and its messages about race, racism, anger, and magic in chapter 3 will further reveal the importance of a community of willful subjects in successfully transforming hegemonic societies, as Adeyemi focuses on two Black heroines who can only take control of their own fates and the fate of their world through their combined willfulness. Finally, in chapter 4, an analysis of Rutkoski's *The Midnight Lie* will uncover the dangers of a willful subject who lacks community and intersubjectivity, as Rutkoski's queer heroine becomes willful through embracing desire but is unable to successfully step into the queer utopia offered to her. The willful heroines presented in these five novels and the individual and collective techniques of willfulness they develop are raising a new generation of young women who resist and defy the dominant order to create space for themselves and thereby take their future into their own hands. Inspired by these heroines and their authors as willful mentors, this new generation will build communities of willful subjects that will be able to collectively envision and realize new and alternative worlds.

When I first began to read YA high fantasy novels as a young adolescent, I could not have articulated why they felt so urgent and necessary, why the sounds of their spines cracking open felt as if they reverberated and stretched. I could not have explained how they influenced my own developing identity, the way I thought about and understood the world, the connections I was establishing and the communities I hoped to build. Through this thesis, I unearth exactly what it is about these stories that have captured and held my attention for so long, as well as what we can learn about the willful young women who exist both within their pages and in our everyday lives—how they develop, how they

struggle, how they resist, how they defy, how they fail, how they reach out towards others, and how they transform their worlds.

I.**THE LONE WILLFUL HEROINE*****Willfulness and Identity in *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince****

They like to tell her to be quiet, but she is not. They like to tell her to sit down, but she prefers to stand. They like to tell her she can't, but she does anyway.

She goes out into the woods to imagine fairies. This makes them happy. They imagine she is building fairy houses in empty tree stumps, and they buy her fairy cookbooks so she can make fairy cakes with her easy-bake oven, and for her birthday she gets wire and mesh wings she can wear on her back when she's out between the trees.

She does not touch the cookbook—it gathers dust in the corner of her room. Fairies neither want nor deserve cakes, she declares. She takes the wire and mesh wings into the woods and hooks them onto a tree branch. Then she takes her sword (a stick she spent many painstaking hours sharpening with a rock) and slashes at them until they fall into ribbons. She uses the wire to fashion a hilt for her sword. All is not well in her world of Fairyland. The factions of Seelie and Unseelie are at war, and she is the Unseelie army commander. They look to her for guidance, for leadership, for bravery. They hold balls to celebrate her victories, and she arrives in silks with knives hidden in sheaths on her legs. She dances until the sun rises, and then she heads back into battle again, stalking loops around the battlefield as she roars her defiance to the sky.

Years later, she is too old for the woods. She sits at dinner, quiet, and they tell her she can't rest her elbows on the table, so she doesn't. They bring her to the bookstore,

because reading is good for a young woman's mind, and tell her to pick out two books. *Throne of Glass* is purple and blue and black, like a bruise, and she presses it against her chest so they can't see the swords on its cover. *The Cruel Prince* is white and gold, the colors of her old Unseelie army standard, and she presses the back of this one against the back of *Throne of Glass* so they cannot read the synopsis about the girl who wants to be a knight.

She sneaks into the woods in the afternoon and opens her new books, listening to their spines creak as she begins to read. Before dinner, she finds her old sword, the wire rusty after years outside, and rests it against a tree. She suspects she may need it later.

Resisting the Narrative of the Fairy Tale

What exactly does a willful heroine look like, and how does she successfully carve space for her identity, attain willpower, and begin to transform the world around her? Celaena Sardothien from Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass* (2012) and Jude Duarte from Holly Black's *The Cruel Prince* (2018) are examples of heroines who are willful both in order to survive and in hopes of gaining control over their own fate, though they end their respective stories with opposite degrees of willpower. Through examining Celaena's and Jude's journeys, we will see the pivotal connection between identity and willfulness, but both stories will also leave us with lingering questions about a willful subject who lacks community.

Maas and Black engage with the mythology of fairies (spelled "faeries" in both novels) and thus position themselves in the context of fairy tales. Though not all fairy tales involve fairies, certainly most fairies are found in fairy tales. Jack Zipes reads fairy

tales as having subversive potential: “Fairy tales are not unreal; they tell us metaphorically that ‘life is hard,’ or that ‘life is a dream,’ and their symbolical narrative patterns that assume the form of quests indicate possible alternative choices that we can make to fulfill our utopian disposition to transform ourselves and the world” (xiii). Though these stories may indeed ask us to draw comparisons with our own lives and consider what is lacking and can be transformed, Zipes acknowledges that fairy tales also “play an intricate role in acculturation, that is, in forming and reflecting the tastes, manners, and ideologies of members of a particular society” (ix). The transmission of cultural norms and mores means that the messages sent through fairy tales to women have rarely been subversive. As Karen Rowe explains, “These tales which glorify passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a heroine’s cardinal virtues suggest that culture’s very survival depends upon a woman’s acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity” (239). Women in fairy tales rarely demonstrate agency, and when they do, that agency often makes them symbols of evil. *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince*, however, play with the more traditional messages of fairy tales and hero quests. The young women at the center of these stories are willful heroines who are relegated to neither motherhood nor domesticity, who are active and independent, and who constantly resist the narratives into which their oppressive societies attempt to push them.

Sarah J. Maas, now thirty-four, was sixteen when she first imagined Celaena Sardothien into existence. When asked in an interview what originally inspired her to write about Celaena, Maas speaks of her love as a teenager for fantasy and science fiction stories like *Star Wars* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as her “desire to write/read a

book where the heroine [gets] to do all the ‘fun’ things that boys usually get to do: kick butt, kill monsters, save the world” (Writers & Artists). Since her very inception, Celaena has been a willful heroine written into a more traditional fairy tale or hero quest, though it takes her seven books and a literal name-change to finally successfully resist her society in order to transform it. Her story begins in a mine where she has been enslaved by the tyrannical king of the country of Adarlan for crimes Celaena committed as an assassin. Because of her legendary status as a skilled killer, Celaena is forced to participate under a fake name in a contest to choose the king’s new champion, who will be expected to assassinate the king’s enemies. Though Celaena actively defies her society despite its efforts to control and define her—making her a willful heroine—her inability to create space for her identity means she ultimately fails to take her fate into her own hands by the end of this first installment in the *Throne of Glass* series.¹ As the story ends, Celaena remains trapped by the tyrannical and patriarchal society she hopes to resist.

Jude Duarte from Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince* (2018), on the other hand, is a different type of willful heroine. Black draws much of her inspiration from old folklore about fairies, and the brutality of these stories—in which, Black says, fairies might “steal people, trick people, lead them astray, off cliffs and into the water where creatures will eat you”—requires a heroine who can meet that brutality with her own (Barisich).

Though Celaena and Jude share many qualities, including physical prowess in battle,

¹ Notably, Celaena *does* eventually take control of not only her own fate but the fate of her world by the end of the seven-book *Throne of Glass* series, as she ascends to her rightful position as queen and gains incredible magical power that allows her to defeat the forces of ultimate evil. Much of this is made possible by Celaena building a community of other powerful willful subjects as the cast of characters expands over the course of the series.

intelligence, and determination, Jude is a willful heroine who is able to not only successfully escape the cycles of her oppressive society but acquire the means to transform them by the end of the story. Jude's world of Faerieland exists parallel to our own, and Jude herself is a human from our world who has been raised in Faerieland by her adopted faerie father. Because she is a human in a land populated entirely by faeries and because she is a girl in a largely male-dominated world, Jude is minoritized, violently bullied, and constantly told she is lesser than her faerie companions. Over the course of *The Cruel Prince*, Jude begins to actively and willfully resist her society. Through the creation of space for her identity to thrive, Jude manages to envision an alternative to the oppressive world in which she lives, and by gaining willpower, she becomes able to make that world real. Though both Celaena and Jude embody the image of the willful heroine, only Jude, who has more access to her identity, manages to end up in a position of ultimate power from which she can make tangible changes in her society. However, neither heroine has a true viable willful mentor, and the ominous ending of *The Cruel Prince* creates some doubt as to the success of the lone willful subject.

When Identity is Inaccessible: Analyzing *Throne of Glass*

Most of the willful heroines we will see in the following chapters must develop into willful subjects over the course of their stories. Celaena from *Throne of Glass* is the exception—we find her at the end of her development as a willful subject and at the beginning of her attempt to take her fate into her own hands and gain willpower. She has already successfully defied the conventions of her society by becoming an assassin, and a female one at that, and, though the agents of the tyrannical government under which she

lives have tried to “put [her] down” by imprisoning her in a salt mine, she continues to “keep coming up” (Ahmed 2). Her willfulness is also explicitly tied to her identity as a woman, specifically a *young* woman. One of the first things Prince Dorian, Celaena’s sponsor in the tournament to become the king’s champion, remarks on when he first meets Celaena is how “young” “Adarlan’s greatest assassin” is (9). Celaena is also the only woman participating in the tournament, a fact that Maas makes inescapably clear when she writes, “Twenty-three *men* stood between [Celaena] and freedom” (67, emphasis mine). Those who are close to Celaena are aware of her prowess and capabilities, even as those who don’t know her constantly underestimate her because of her gender. Chaol, her trainer and the captain of the guard, remarks to Celaena after one of the contestants taunts her, “You don’t need me to rescue you.[...] You can fight your own battles” (81). After a different contestant mocks her, saying, “You’d be better off on your back, learning tricks useful to a woman,” Celaena throws a dagger straight at the bull’s-eye to prove him wrong and is told by Nox, another contestant and one of Celaena’s new friends, “You’ve got impressive aim.” Celaena asks, “For a girl?” and Nox responds, “No[...] for anyone” (108-9). Celaena’s active and vocal defiance of her society, and especially the men of that society who try to sexualize and belittle her, marks her as a willful subject and a willful heroine from the very beginning of her story.

However, despite Celaena’s willfulness and her attempts to create a space for herself within her society, she is unable to take her fate into her own hands and acquire willpower because she has been stripped of her identity. Celaena’s participation in the contest to choose the king’s new champion is contingent on her using a fake name. Her name and the identity attached to it are of paramount importance to her; the fear the name

“Celaena Sardothien” provokes in others acts as a sort of armor and allows her to perform an exaggerated arrogance to hide her vulnerability and the trauma she’s been exposed to since childhood. We learn that when Celaena was eight, her parents were brutally murdered and she was forced to flee, after which she was found by the “King of Assassins,” a man named Arobynn Hamel, who trained her to become an assassin and acted as her adopted (and abusive) father. Becoming Celaena Sardothien, “Adarlan’s Assassin,” is part of what allowed her to manage this trauma, and she uses name-recognition to instill fear in others so she can gain power over them. Her attachment to her name and the identity it represents is demonstrated during one of the king’s tasks, when Celaena thinks to herself, “I am Celaena Sardothien, Adarlan’s Assassin. If these men knew who I was, they’d stop laughing. I am Celaena Sardothien. I am going to win. I will not be afraid” (118). Her repetition of her name and nickname, as well as the explicit connection she establishes between those names and the reaction the men she faces would have if they knew they belonged to her, exhibit how important those names are to her sense of self. Though she of course retains that identity internally, the lack of external validation of it as she is forced to use a fake name makes it impossible for Celaena to successfully inhabit her full identity and carve out space for herself. This distance from her identity also detracts from her ability to gain power,² as though she can physically best her opponents in combat, it is name-recognition and the fear and power

² Importantly, the name Celaena Sardothien is also not Celaena’s true identity, though this is not revealed until a later book in the series. Celaena finally becomes empowered by coming to terms with the identity she left behind when she was a child. Accepting this identity also means accepting her role as rightful queen of a conquered country, her heritage as a magic-user, and her part in defeating ultimate evil—by taking on this identity and the many forms of power it grants, she becomes able to imagine and build a new and better world for herself and her people.

that come along with it that allow her the ability to control her own fate. Being Adarlan's Assassin is what enabled her to overcome her trauma, step outside of her society's rules, and become a willful subject in the first place; without that title to strike fear in the hearts of those around her, she has no hope of willpower.

Without being able to create space for her personal identity, Celaena's only possible path to willpower is paradoxical: in order to earn her freedom and thus control her own fate, she must win the contest, become the king's champion, and sign her life away to the king's service for four years; she must give up her freedom to gain her freedom. Maas's framing of the story makes any other option impossible—if Celaena were to refuse to participate in the tournament or to lose, she would be sent back to the salt mines where she was enslaved before the story began, and the tyrannical king who rules over Adarlan, the ultimate symbol of oppressive, masculinist power, is established as a figure too powerful to defeat. Though Celaena repeatedly and willfully defies the men against whom she competes in the contest, by winning that contest, she enslaves herself to a different oppressive man. She ends the story just as shackled and limited in agency as she began it, and freedom remains just out of her reach. Unable to assert her identity and create a place for it in her society, Celaena fails to gain willpower and therefore cannot envision or enact an alternative to the oppressive, patriarchal world in which she is trapped.

The Successful Cultivation of Willpower: Analyzing *The Cruel Prince*

Unlike Celaena, who has become a willful subject before her story begins, Jude in *The Cruel Prince* must develop into a true willful subject and learn to resist her

oppressive society in order to cultivate willpower. At first, Jude is, to some extent, trying to fit into the role she is expected to fill in an attempt to belong “properly” to her world, despite the fact that so many in positions of power are telling her she does not belong there at all. In the world of *The Cruel Prince*, humans have two avenues to become officially part of faerie society: they can either marry a faerie or “[hone] some great skill” (10). It is clear that Jude (in part because she is a girl) is expected to marry, but she does not want this—“I want to win my place,” she explains early on (10). Jude hopes to enter the faerie court by taking the path taken more often by men, honing a “great skill,” which for Jude is her ability with a sword. Although Jude refuses to fit into the exact expectations of her world, she still desires to achieve belonging within the preexisting rules. At the same time, that world rejects her every attempt to belong, even within the rules: she is constantly bullied by her faerie classmates, who remind her that she will never be their equal, and she lives under continual existential threat because faeries have the ability to “ensorcell” her into doing whatever they wish, including cutting off part of her finger or forcing her to dance until she vomits (30, 44-5). Jude acknowledges that she does not “yearn” to be their equal, that “in [her] heart, [she yearns] to best them,” but she still wants to beat them at their own game in a faerie tournament where she will declare herself ready for knighthood, an acceptable way for humans to join faerie society. She is willful in her persistence after being “put down” and in her desire to belong in Faerie, but she is willful within the rules and is not yet actively and entirely defiant.

As the story progresses, however, Jude begins to realize the impossibility of her task; she can never truly belong in Faerie because she is human, and additionally the options generally open to humans to join that society are closed to her, so she must

subvert the expectations entirely and become a truly willful subject. Jude has already refused to marry into the faerie court, and when her bid for knighthood to “win [her] place” via skill with a sword is shut down by her adopted faerie father, Madoc, she recognizes that she must look outside of her world’s rules. She tells her twin sister, Taryn, “I thought I was supposed to be good and follow the rules.[...] But I am done with being weak. I am done with being good. I think I am going to be something else” (43). Her decision to leave behind being “weak” and “good” and fight for her place in Faerie outside of the rules is solidified when she visits the human world and finds that she fits in there no more than she fits in Faerie. She has been told she does not belong in Faerie because she is mortal and because she cannot fulfill the expectations of her role as a mortal, but, because she was raised in Faerie, human clothes “are a costume” for her and she has “no marketable skills other than swinging around a sword and making up riddles” (55, 60). After brutally attacking a boy who was trying to flirt with her, Jude remarks to her older sister, Vivi, of the mortal world, “I can’t go back to that world. Look what I would do to it” (64). The realization that Faerie is the place where she *most* (if not entirely) belongs opens the door for her to become willful, step outside of the rules, and begin to envision an alternative to her current society. If she cannot make faeries accept her within the usual rules for humans, then she will make them accept her outside of those rules. She tells her tormentor and nemesis, Prince Cardan,

I am going to keep on defying you. I am going to shame you with my defiance.

You remind me that I am a mere mortal and you are a prince of Faerie. Well, let me remind you that means you have much to lose and I have nothing. You may

win in the end, you may ensorcell me and hurt me and humiliate me, but I will make sure you lose everything I can take from you on the way down. (77)

This is the moment when Jude becomes a true willful subject. This short speech reveals her as active, vocal, and defiant—she uses largely active constructions and repeats “I” and “me” throughout. Jude will no longer be passive or put anything in front of her own needs and desires. She has been “put down” by continuous bullying and threatening by her faerie classmates and her oppressive society, but she is going to persist and defy them anyways. She decides that if she cannot gain acceptance and belonging by fitting into the mold laid out for her by those in positions of power, she will find her own way to belong to this world outside of that mold. Jude refuses to “be determined from without, by an external force” and “enact[s] a ‘no’” in order to take control of her own life and forge her own place in her world (Ahmed 10). This process of willfully creating space for her own identity will allow Jude to take her fate into her own hands, and she will begin to envision an alternative to this world in which she *can* belong.

Jude’s willful defiance of authority and desire for belonging become integral to her character, and they begin to align with her desire for power over her own body and her own future. One of the princes of the court, Dain, asks Jude to be his spy and promises to “make [her] powerful beyond what [she] might ever hope,” and Jude takes full advantage and agrees (86). When her adopted father asks her what he can do to help her, Jude, instead of allowing him to do anything *for* her, demands, “Teach me more[...] More strategy. More bladework. Teach me everything you know” (104). On her first spying expedition, she gets a taste of power and confidence now that she “[knows] what it would take to win” (121). She is aware she is vulnerable to poisons, so she begins to

take them in small doses to build up an immunity so she will “be harder to kill” (150). When she gets in trouble with Prince Dain for revealing too much of her skills and he comes to punish her by threatening to “ensorcell” her into plunging a knife into her own hand, she realizes that if she stops worrying “about death, about pain, about anything,” she “could become something to fear”—and so she plunges the knife into her hand herself (197). This pattern of Jude willfully defying authority and taking every opportunity to control her own body and her own fate culminates when Jude is physically attacked by one of her tormentors. Jude decides, “If I cannot be better than them, I will become so much worse” (210). She kills her attacker, disposes of his body, and tells no one what has happened, carrying the burden of his death by herself. Once she has decided to become a defiant willful subject, Jude is quick to gain willpower, taking her own fate into her hands through her brazen refusal to conform to expectations, to submit to those in positions of power, and to bow to the threats her society makes against her.

Armed with her newfound willpower and continually defiant, Jude takes advantage of the ultimate opportunity: she becomes a kingmaker. At a ceremony in which the old king is due to step down and crown his son (and Jude’s new boss) Prince Dain king, Dain’s brother, Prince Balekin, makes a powerplay for the throne with the help of Jude’s adopted father, Madoc, and slaughters the entire royal family. One prince survives, Cardan, Jude’s tormentor and nemesis.³ Because only another member of the royal family can crown Balekin king, Balekin and Madoc are desperate to get their hands on Cardan.

³ Cardan is also Jude’s controversial love interest, bringing up a host of questions about power dynamics and abuse in romantic relationships in these novels—as well as the effect these types of portrayals have on contemporary adolescent girls—which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Jude, seeing a sudden opportunity to gain even more power and build a better, more mortal-friendly version of Faerieland, defies her adopted father, kidnaps Cardan, and enacts a plan to put him on the throne. She is launched from the (admittedly still dangerous) adolescent shenanigans of her lessons into the real adult world of violent politics. As a young human woman, this is certainly not a role anyone expected her to fill. At the same time, however, this is the moment when she is judged to truly belong in Faerie: her sister Vivi remarks to her, "I'm not sure you'd even know how to be human anymore," and Jude notes that she is "well on [her] way to becoming one of the wolves." She goes on to narrate, "[I]t cost me something to be the way I am. But I do not know what. And I don't know if I can get it back. I don't even know if I want it" (287). Though Jude is uneasy with the dark, violent path willfulness has brought her down, she is loath to leave this path now that she knows it brings her power and allows her not only to control her own fate but to create a world where she can belong. She manages to manipulate Cardan into swearing an unbreakable vow to obey her every command, and so when he is eventually crowned king, he is a puppet king, with Jude holding the strings. Her fellow spies give her the nickname, "the Queen," and on the final page of the book, Cardan rises from his new throne and offers it to Jude (365). Through her willful defiance of expectations and authority in order to create a space for herself, Jude has ended up with willpower, in a position of ultimate power, and with the capacity to transform her society completely.

“This Is What You Wanted, Isn’t It?”: Conclusions

Both Maas and Black construct willful heroines who defy their oppressive societies and do whatever they must in order to survive in worlds that constantly work against them. Celaena and Jude do not fit into the limiting boxes laid out for them by their respective fantasy worlds and by the tradition of fairy tales in the context of which their stories are placed. They, like all women, are not so easily defined, and as they continue to resist their societies’ attempts to control them, these heroines become truly willful. Jude manages to inhabit and carve out space for her own personal identity, thereby acquiring willpower and the means to both envision and enact an alternative to the dominant cultural order. Celaena, on the other hand, is prevented from achieving any measure of true control over herself or her world by her severed connection from her own identity. Both heroines demonstrate that willfulness is at the core of any female identity that wants to persist in an oppressive, patriarchal world, and they become examples for adolescent girls of how to perform willful defiance in order to take their fate into their own hands.

However, neither Celaena nor Jude have true willful mentors. Though Celaena forms a friendship with another female character, Nehemia, over the course of *Throne of Glass* who supports her in her willful defiance, any true alliance between these two young women is rendered impossible when Celaena becomes the king’s champion and the king explains that any attempt on Celaena’s part to resist or defy him will result in Nehemia’s death. Thus, Nehemia’s life and the possibility that the king could end it become limiting to Celaena’s already limited willfulness. Jude also has several women in her life who might be willful mentors—her sisters, her stepmother, the fellow spies she

meets—but the end of the first installment of her story finds her in a position of complete isolation, surrounded by enemies on all sides. *The Cruel Prince* concludes with the implication that the throne may not be exactly what Jude expects it to be, as Jude’s puppet king, Cardan, presents the throne to her and says, “Come, have a seat... This is what you wanted, isn’t it?[...] What you’ve sacrificed everything for. Go on. It’s all yours” (370). Celaena and Jude are thus lone willful subjects who lack true community, and even though Jude clearly has the capacity to enact change from her new position, the ominous nature of the ending of her story brings into question her success.⁴ Though these heroines are certainly willful heroines, they may also be what Jeffrey A. Brown calls “girl revolutionaries,” whose narratives “offer[...] a complex blend of feminism, postfeminism, and an image of civil disobedience against patriarchal/totalitarian control, all presented in appealing terms for a neoliberal-minded audience” (173). This type of heroine attempts to do it all and, positioned in the context of neoliberalism, is hyper-individualistic and focused on self-determination. In these stories, defiance of oppressive power structures and defiance of every person in the world blur together, and willful heroines are left alone and without true connection with other willful subjects.

The lack of intersubjectivity in *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince* parallels a lack of intersectionality. Celaena and Jude—white, cisgender, straight, and able-bodied—are by no means representative of diverse contemporary teenage readers. Willfulness looks different for each willful heroine based on her own specific identity, and in order to

⁴ Jude does seem to enact true change in her society by the end of the final installment in her series, but, interestingly, this is only achieved by working in tandem with her nemesis/love interest Cardan, who flipflops between antagonist and romantic partner throughout the series.

successfully build a narrative identity, teenagers must have examples in which they can see themselves. For this reason, the next chapters turn to willful heroines who do not resemble the white and heteronormative characters who appear in the majority of YA fantasy novels. These willful heroines face different—often interacting—forms of marginalization due to the more intersectional identities they embody and the more diverse and complex fantasy worlds in which they live, and the willfulness they therefore develop is more complicated. The increased intersectionality in these stories is accompanied by a similar increase in intersubjectivity. Though the journeys of these willful heroines in many ways will parallel Celaena's and Jude's journeys, their willfulness will look different as they reach out towards other willful subjects in order to resist patriarchal societies that oppress them based on gender, ethnicity, race, class, and sexuality.

II.

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE WILLFUL HEROINE

Speaking Against Imperialism in *An Ember in the Ashes*

The first time she sits through a high school English class, she decides it must have been dreamt up by a masochist. They are reading *The Odyssey*. One rainy Tuesday afternoon, her teacher asks about Circe, about whether or not she'd been in the wrong when she turned all those men into pigs. No one responds. One boy waves his pencil around in a bored tic and then drops it suddenly, and the dull snap against the plain linoleum floor seems to crawl up the poster-plastered walls and drip back down from the ceiling. After an interminable silence, she raises a tentative hand and explains she's not sure whether Circe was right but that she understands the sorceress's actions—who wants random men running uninvited into their house?

The teacher beams. Her classmates snicker. She stares back down at her desk and wishes she hadn't spoken at all.

For months—for years—it goes on like this. She scribbles her thoughts in her notebook in those endless silences after her teacher poses a question. If she finishes writing before someone finally dares answer, she starts on something else, building on some idea she's scribbled on a green post-it note stuck to one of the pages of her worn school-provided copies. They read *The Lord of the Flies* and she pretends she has no thoughts about its messages about Christianity. Sophomore year, they read *Othello* and she ignores her classmates when they talk about sexual jealousy but refuse to bring up

race. They read *The Great Gatsby* and she says nothing about Daisy, just traces the loops of the word “objectification” with her pen over and over again until the ink bleeds through to the other side of the paper.

Her parents receive report cards overflowing with praise for her well-written and well-reasoned essays—if only she participated a little bit more, each teacher writes. We’d love to hear what she has to say. Instead, she gets more green post-its.

For her sixteenth birthday, her mother buys her a book. It’s a hardback, pristinely new, unlike the paperbacks she’s collected on the shelf next to her bed whose title pages are slowly slipping free from their seams. It’s wrapped in green tissue paper and a bit of glittery ribbon, and she opens it slowly so as not to tear the paper. The cover is red and white and gold and it’s smooth against her fingertips as she turns it over in her hands. Its title is dramatic enough to be in a poem: *An Ember in the Ashes*. She mouths the words to herself. She’s had a hold on it at the library for months, but it always seems to be checked out. This way you’ll be able to write in it yourself, her mother beams—no more green post-its.

She begins reading that night, and she covers its pages in her pen.

Enabling the Subaltern to Speak

Several years before the publication of her first book, *An Ember in the Ashes* (2015), Sabaa Tahir worked as a copyeditor for the Washington Post’s international desk. Like Sarah J. Maas and Holly Black, Tahir’s work is heavily influenced by her love of stories as a child, though the stories Tahir grew up with included jinn and ifrits (supernatural creatures commonly found in Arabic mythology) instead of the westernized

fairies that take centerstage in both Maas's and Black's novels. Unlike Maas and Black, however, Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes* is also inspired in part by a story that came across her copyediting desk "about Kashmiri women whose male relatives were imprisoned by the military and never seen again" (Mason). In an interview with the Washington Post, Tahir speaks of her "isolation" growing up as one of the only South Asian families in a small town in the Mojave Desert (Mason). Her Pakistani heritage and experience with racism make their way into her debut novel, set in a world in which cultural groups influenced by North African, South Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures are violently oppressed by an empire inspired by Ancient Rome, the classical heart of Western culture. *An Ember in the Ashes*, like *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince*, still centers gender as one of its primary concerns, but it also takes up a variety of issues surrounding colonialism, imperialism, ethnicity, and race that don't appear in either *Throne of Glass* or *The Cruel Prince*. *An Ember in the Ashes* is thus more intersectional than our first two novels as it explores the interacting layers of oppression for a woman of color from a colonized culture. As we will see, its willful heroine is also more intersubjective, as she becomes empowered not only through her own development of willfulness but by reaching out towards others.

The heroine of *An Ember in the Ashes* is Laia, who at the start of her story struggles to speak. The paradigm of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" explains why Laia experiences such difficulty speaking up for herself. In her essay, Spivak seeks to expose the manner in which European and Western scholars, in an attempt to supposedly let the subaltern speak for themselves, end up constructing and objectifying the subaltern as "other." Because the subaltern subject has

been externally defined and exists only as counterbalance to European and Western subjects, the subaltern is rendered mute and unable to represent themselves. A subaltern subject literally cannot speak for themselves because their very existence depends on a culture which actively oppresses them—they are set up as “the Self’s shadow,” where the “Self” is European and Western culture (Spivak 281). The term “subaltern” in post-colonial studies refers to colonized populations who are unable to access the power of the dominant (usually imperial) culture, whether due to social, political, or geographical reasons. Laia in *An Ember in the Ashes* fits this definition of the “subaltern,” as she belongs to a culturally distinct group called the Scholars which was conquered by the Roman-inspired Martial Empire 500 years before the start of the novel. Laia is also, of course, a young woman, which adds to the layers of othering which, according to Spivak, should render her mute. Spivak writes, “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (306). The “third-world woman” is silenced in the face of patriarchy and imperialism, and Spivak contends that “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (307). Laia, who is constructed as a gendered and racialized other by the imperial power in her fantasy world, should be, according to Spivak, unable to speak for or represent herself.

This is indeed true as *An Ember in the Ashes* opens, and Laia as “other” is literally unable to speak when faced with the Martial Empire, the symbol of oppressive, patriarchal, and imperial power in her world. Laia’s parents were leaders of the Resistance—an underground group of Scholars who actively work against the Martial

Empire—until they were captured and killed along with Laia’s older sister when Laia was a child. When the story begins, Laia lives a quiet life with her grandparents and her older brother, Darin. Laia struggles to speak even when just confronting Darin, “chok[ing] on the words” to berate him when he sneaks out of the house (5). The stakes of Laia’s inability to speak increase when Martial soldiers (called legionnaires and led by an elite officer called a Mask for the silver mask melded to his face) arrive to raid her family home. Violent raids are everyday occurrences in the Scholar district of the city of Serra—Laia remembers a couple “sold into slavery three weeks ago” and “a ninety-three-year-old man who could barely walk[...] executed in his own home” (8). The threat of this oppressive power is only increased for women. When the Mask enters Laia’s home, he singles her out immediately, objectifying her for his own sexual gratification in part because she is a Scholar woman and therefore disposable: “To him, I’m not someone’s family. I’m just a thing to be subdued, used, and discarded” (14). Faced with this gendered and racialized threat, Laia is frozen and cannot “enact a ‘no,’” either physically or vocally (Ahmed 10). She tries to tell herself to fight but instead “sag[s] and let[s] him pull [her] along” by the hair (14). Laia describes being “ensnared” by fear, and “can’t manage more than a whisper” when the soldiers ask her a direct question (15). After their grandparents are murdered, Darin manages to attack the soldiers and give Laia enough time to run. She is torn between her desire to help her brother and the overwhelming threat of sexual violence and death in the form of the Martial soldiers, who Laia knows with certainty will rape and kill her. Unable to “enact a ‘no’” and with absolutely no power in the situation, Laia has no choice but to run, though she is overcome with guilt at leaving her brother behind: “My brother is still fighting, and his screams slice right

through me. I know then that I will hear them over and over again, echoing in every hour of every day until I am dead or I make it right. I know it. And still, I run” (19). The driving force behind Laia’s transformation into a willful subject will become this desire to “make it right.” At first, this involves only making up for what she believes to be an abandonment of her brother, but as the story continues and Laia reestablishes a connection with her people, “mak[ing] it right” will grow to include righting the injustices the Scholars as a whole have faced for generations.

When her story begins, Laia, as a “sexed subaltern subject,” is unable to speak or represent herself. Her path to willful resistance thus lies in learning to speak, but, as the daughter of Resistance leaders, resistance to her oppressive society is also connected fundamentally to her family. Laia finds a willful mentor in her deceased mother, Mirra, and begins to consolidate and create space for not only her own identity but the identity of the Scholar people as a whole. By embracing her connection to her family, Laia embraces her own role in the collective resistance of her people, and it is this recognition of intersubjectivity and community that allows Laia to take her fate into her own hands. Her fight to save her brother becomes representative of the fight to save the Scholar people as a whole, and in attempting to overturn the established order so the Scholars can thrive, Laia is able to envision an alternative to her society and escape the Martial Empire in the hopes of creating that society. In *An Ember in the Ashes*, the subaltern can and *does* speak, but only through the creation of community. Spivak argues that “the possibility of collectivity itself is persistently foreclosed through the manipulation of female agency,” but in *An Ember in the Ashes*, Laia *is* able to build a collective by resisting the manipulation of her agency, acquiring willpower and so taking control of her own future

(283). Empowered by a familial and cultural community, Laia ends up in a position from which she can not only speak but transform her world.

Comparing Collective Identities

The previous chapter of this thesis demonstrated the fundamental relationship between identity and willfulness: willful resistance is made possible by the creation of space for one's identity. However, the identities depicted in *Throne of Glass* and *The Cruel Prince* are neither intersectional nor intersubjective, and both leave us with questions about whether the singular willful subject, regardless of whether she acquires willpower, can be successful in generating change in her society. *An Ember in the Ashes* also makes evident this connection between identity and willfulness, but the identities it deals with are more collective. Collectivity and community can be powerful tools of empowerment, especially for women of color—as Audre Lorde explains, interdependence allows us “to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (“The Master’s Tools,” 26). But not all collectives are productive, a fact which Tahir illustrates in *An Ember in the Ashes* when she sets up a comparison between Laia and another (partially) willful subject, Helene.

The structure of the narrative of *An Ember in the Ashes* invites us to compare Laia to two other characters. The first is Elias, the source of the second first-person narrative voice in the story. Elias is a young Mask who has decided to desert the ruthless Blackcliff Academy, where Masks are trained, on the verge of his graduation.¹ However, Laia's true

¹ Elias is, in many ways, the opposite of Laia—from the very beginning he is resistant to his oppressive society (despite having been brought up, against his will, in a position of power within it) and is willing to act out that resistance by leaving the Martial Empire

foil in the story is Helene, Elias's best friend and also a Mask on the verge of graduation. Helene is willful in many ways that Laia is not. The most potent example of this difference is perhaps that Helene, unlike Laia, is able to "enact a 'no'" against sexual violence and misogyny: when another Mask grabs Helene's hair (paralleling when Laia is grabbed by the hair by a Mask during the raid at the beginning of the story) and makes a sexually suggestive comment towards her, Helene draws a knife on him and threatens to "relieve [him] of [his] manhood" (77). But Helene is also in a position of privilege compared to Laia—while Laia is a Scholar (a group inspired by Middle Eastern cultures) and relegated to the bottom of her society in part based on her darker skin color, Helene is a member of the white Martial upper class (inspired by Ancient Roman culture). In a fantasy world explicitly in conversation with both the historical imperialism of the Roman Empire and more modern Western imperialism in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, race is obviously centered in the narrative, and Laia's experience as a woman in a patriarchal society is intertwined with her experience as a woman of color who is marginalized because of her race in a racist society. As Spivak explains, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as woman is even more deeply in shadow" (287). This layering of oppression complicates any comparison between Laia and Helene's varying levels of willfulness. Comparing the ways their respective willful journeys end, however, is more productive: while Laia is able to eventually escape and fully resist her society, Helene remains trapped within it. Though Helene certainly has power and some form of will, she does not

behind. This thesis is concerned with willful young women, however, so we will set Elias, a willful young man, aside.

have willpower as Ahmed defines it—her fate is not within her own power. Laia, on the other hand, in developing her willfulness in the form of her voice as she reconnects with her familial history, manages to take her fate and the fate of her people into her own hands as she learns to “enact a ‘no.’”

What, then, separates these two women? Why does Helene, who seems to have all the power and the will, fail to cultivate willpower? Why does Laia, who begins the story with no power and no will, successfully acquire it? The difference lies in their respective experiences of collective identity. Both Laia and Helene are “determined from without” by the Martial Empire, but while Laia begins to identify with and assert her connection to the Scholars, Helene’s identity continues to be enforced externally by the dominant culture of the Martials (Ahmed 10). Helene’s compliance with the Martial Empire and its expectations of her identity is symbolized by her mask. All Masks are expected to wear a silver mask at all times which, after several years, adheres permanently to their faces. Elias describes his own mask, which has not yet fused with his skin, as “sit[ting] atop my face, separate and foreign, hiding my features as well as my emotions” (10). Helene’s mask, on the other hand, “clings to her face like a silvery second skin, and [Elias] can see the slight furrow in her brow as she looks down at [him]” (10). Helene’s mask renders her faceless and identical to every other Mask, literally without a face or identity of her own. She is here part of a collective identity, but it is an unproductive collectivity, as it demands strict adherence to this society’s violent rules and norms—the punishment for any deviance from these norms is clear in this first introduction to Helene and Elias, who are literally hunting down a deserter who, when caught, will be brutally whipped and left to die. However, the mask’s melding with Helene’s skin means it does not quite fully

disguise her emotions; she retains some identity but it is hidden and perverted beneath the collective identity the Martial Empire is attempting to enforce. Helene's journey throughout the novel will find her caught between the identity she retains beneath her mask and the demands of the mask itself, or, in other words, the identity that is forced on her by her training and her society. In the end, though she enacts some resistance, Helene is unable to escape the Martial Empire because she, like Celaena in *Throne of Glass*, has been severed from her personal identity.² Laia, on the other hand, retains her identity and so does escape. Though Laia's identity, as we will see, also involves collectivity as she embraces her connection with her family and her people, the collective she will create appreciates the value of individual difference and so can better generate productive change.

Becoming Willful by Reaching Out

Laia's willful journey begins with a paradox: though she must learn to speak in order to resist her society, she is put into a position in which speaking is not only prohibited but will result in possible bodily harm, and any speaking she does do is for the benefit of someone else. After fleeing from her family home, she goes in search of the Resistance in hopes that they can help her find and free Darin, who's been captured by the Empire for interrogation. Laia has already resolved that, if she has any hope of helping her brother, she can no longer stay silent: when one Resistance member initially

² Interestingly, Helene at the end of the third installment in Tahir's four-book series actually tears her mask off to symbolize her break with the established order of the Martial Empire, reclaiming her identity so she can join Laia in her quest to build a new and better world.

rejects her request for help, Laia narrates, “Maybe before the raid, the chill in his eyes would have silenced me. But not now. Not when Darin needs me” (56). Silence is no longer an option, not when Laia knows Darin, her only remaining family, is in danger. However, silence also becomes necessary when Laia is asked to go undercover as a slave to spy for the Resistance in exchange for their help finding Darin and so enters the house of the Commandant, the sadistic leader of Blackcliff Academy. Masquerading as a slave puts Laia in a position of continued existential threat—she’s branded and whipped repeatedly by the Commandant and is regularly sexually harassed and threatened with assault by various Masks—but it is also this position that allows her to feed information back to the Resistance in order to save her brother.³ Additionally, this role demands Laia be both silent and vocal—silent when she’s gathering information and vocal when she’s passing it on to the Resistance—and so complicates her ability to develop her own voice. Speaking out of turn in the Commandant’s household can result in serious, potentially lethal punishment, and any speaking Laia *does* manage is in the service of the Resistance. Though Laia is becoming more willful as she develops her voice through what few opportunities she has, she certainly has not acquired willpower; her fate is not yet in her hands and, as both slave to the Commandant and spy indebted to the Resistance, she continues to be “determined from without.” In order to take her fate into her own power, Laia must become truly vocal and begin to speak for herself.

Unlike Celaena and Jude in the previous chapter, the process of representing herself and asserting her own identity is not a solitary endeavor for Laia but is

³ Marginalization here is paradoxically a potential opportunity for empowerment and resistance.

fundamentally related to her connection to her family—particularly the memory of her mother—and her people. In the introduction to this thesis, I established the role of “willful mentors” in the journeys of many of these willful heroines. Laia finds her willful mentor in her deceased mother, Mirra. Mirra, nicknamed the “Lioness” when she led the Scholar Resistance, was certainly a willful subject before her death (67). When Laia is dragged off by Martial soldiers during the raid at the beginning of the story, Laia notes that Mirra “would have fought. She’d have died rather than face this humiliation. But I can’t make myself move” (15). Laia continually compares herself to Mirra—“I’m weak in a way she never was,” Laia laments at one point—and sees her struggle to perform any sort of defiance against her society as an inability to take up her mother’s mantle as a willful subject (69). However, Laia’s relationship with her mother is complicated. Though Laia admires Mirra and the code, called “Izzat,” she lived by as the leader of the Resistance—“fighting for freedom, protecting the innocent[...] loyalty to [the Scholar] people above all else”—she is also aware that Mirra, had Laia’s father not stopped her, would have abandoned her children for the Resistance (54).⁴ While Mirra was loyal “to [the Scholar] people above all else,” Laia is loyal to her *family* above all else. Though Laia hopes to become more willful like the Lioness, her initial motivation is not necessarily saving the Scholar people overall, as Mirra’s was, but is rather saving just her brother. Reconciling the disconnect between the bravery and willfulness Laia idolizes in her mother and Mirra’s apparent lack of loyalty to their immediate family, a loyalty

⁴ In this instance, traditional gender stereotypes are simultaneously challenged and replicated: Mirra as a leader of the Resistance is in a position which women do not often occupy in hero quests and fairy tales, but the expectation that Mirra should remain with her children (and sacrifice her work to do so) reinforces the idea that women should be in a domestic role.

which Laia herself feels intensely, will become central in Laia's journey. Though her relationship with her mother's techniques of willfulness is complicated, it is nevertheless true that Laia, unlike Jude and Celaena, does not become willful without the influence of other willful subjects. Her ability to willfully resist is fundamentally connected to her relationship not only with her mother but with her family in general. As the story progresses and Laia becomes both more vocal and more willful, she will begin to see the value in her mother's desire to liberate their people, but, unlike Mirra, Laia's willful resistance will remain grounded in her connection to her family.

Laia's identity and loyalty to her family are immediately challenged upon her arrival at Blackcliff Academy. There, Laia meets the Commandant, who tells Laia, "You have no name. No identity. You are a slave. That is all you are. That is all you will ever be" (114). Laia is called only "Slave" by the Commandant and discovers that the other Scholar slaves who work in the household have been stripped of their names, as well (114). The Commandant attempts to make the identities of Laia and the other slaves inaccessible in the hopes of preventing any resistance or empowerment—a technique that might have worked if Laia's sense of identity, like Celaena's or Jude's, were singular. Laia's identity, however, as we have seen, is connected fundamentally to her family and is therefore intersubjective. The Commandant attempts to isolate Laia from any sense of community as well when she shows Laia a wall covered in "the faces of every Resistance fighter [the Commandant's] hunted down, every Scholar [she's] jailed and executed" (115). This threat is intended to sever Laia from her own people by implying what will happen to her should she remain loyal to them, but it only reinforces Laia's connection to her people, her family, and her identity. Laia recognizes her parents' names up on the

wall, and “anger rises in [her] like a sickness. I want to turn around and attack the [Commandant]. I want to scream at her. *You killed my mother[...] and my sister[...] and my father.[...] You took them from me. You took them from this world*” (116, italics in original). Instead of scaring Laia into compliance, the Commandant’s flaunting of what she’s done to Laia’s family and people only serves to build up her willfulness and her desire to resist the Commandant as a symbol of the oppressive Martial Empire. The connection between Laia’s personal identity and her family enables her to remain willful even as the dominant culture attempts to block her access to empowerment and techniques of resistance. It is this same connection and intersubjectivity that will support Laia as she learns to be vocal and begins to take control of her fate.

Building a Collective

Laia’s connection to her family has already begun to act as a gateway to a strengthened connection with her people, but she begins to further consider her own role in resisting the oppression of the Scholars when she learns more about her brother. Laia discovers in her spying that Darin was stealing Empire secrets in order to help the Scholars rise up in rebellion. She is told by the Empire insider who’s been helping Darin that Darin’s “destiny is to rise, to help his people overthrow their oppressors” (286). With this knowledge, Laia’s drive to save Darin takes on new meaning, and suddenly not only her brother’s life but the fate of her people is at stake. This emboldens her, and she begins to take more risks when the Resistance asks her to help plan an attack on Blackcliff Academy. When Laia is caught by a Mask during one of her attempts at reconnaissance, she resolves that this time will be different from the raid in her family home: “It won’t be

like before, like during the raid when I let that Mask drag me about my own house like some dead thing. This time, I'll fight. Tooth and nail, I'll fight" (307). Though she is unsuccessful in physically resisting the Mask, Laia's willingness to fight back, to "enact a 'no'" both physically and vocally, marks a significant change from her earlier silent passivity. When she wakes from what she believes to be fatal injuries, she worries, "if I die, Darin dies. Izzi remains in Blackcliff forever. Nothing in the Empire changes. Just a few more Scholars sent to their graves" (315). Saving Darin has taken on new significance, both literally, because Darin may be able to enable a more successful Scholar rebellion, and symbolically, as his fate—and Laia's and her friend Izzi's—becomes representative for all the Scholars like him, crushed under the boot of the Martial Empire. Laia recognizes her own role in the shared resistance of the Scholars, wherein she can effect change on a large scale simply by saving the people who are important to her. Here, Laia is building a collective Scholar identity which enables her to become more and more willful, but importantly, this collectivity appreciates the value of the individual, whereas the collective built by the Martials strips away individual identity. As Lorde explains, "difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" ("The Master's Tools," 26). As Laia continues to build a community of individuals which actively resist the Martials using their own respective techniques of willfulness, she becomes truly empowered and acquires the means to empower others.

As she works to create space for both her own identity and the collective identity of her people, Laia becomes increasingly vocal and resists not only the Martial Empire but all structures of unproductive power in her society. In a conversation with Elias, to

whom she has grown close over the course of the novel, Laia experiences “a hot anger” at every institution and person who’s tried to control her and continues, intentionally or not, to perpetuate the oppressive system—the Commandant, her parents, her brother, the Resistance leaders, and, most of all, “the Empire and its iron-fisted control over every aspect of our lives. I want to defy all of them—the Empire, the Commandant, the Resistance. I wonder where such defiance comes from, and my armet feels hot suddenly. Perhaps there’s more of my mother in me than I thought” (370). Here, Laia successfully inhabits her mother’s willful spirit as she embraces defiance of not only the oppressive Martial Empire but other forms of unproductive power, including the Resistance, which Laia has discovered does not entirely retain her mother’s ideals. Once again, Laia’s willful resistance is not singular but closely connected to the resistance of her willful mentor. Later, after Elias is sentenced to execution for breaking Martial rules, Laia enacts and vocalizes this defiance when she directly challenges (despite threat to her life) an Augur, one of the Empire’s mysterious prophets, declaring to his face, “Your rules are twisted” (398).⁵ Soon after, she does the same to the Resistance when it is revealed their leader, Mazen, had never intended to help her and has, in his desire to destabilize the Empire, accidentally played right into the Empire’s hands. When Mazen refuses to tell Laia where Darin is being kept prisoner, she actually draws a knife on him and threatens

⁵ A significant portion of the book is dedicated to Elias’s part of the story, as he unwittingly becomes a contestant in a series of trials to determine the next emperor of the Martial Empire despite his initial plans to leave the Empire behind. He finally breaks with the Empire when they try to force him to kill Laia as part of one of his trials, and Elias is sentenced to death as punishment. Laia and Elias serve as an interesting example of willful subjects who are often willful in order to save each other from existential threats, but, again, as Elias is a willful young man, an analysis of this dynamic is beyond this thesis’s scope.

to “slit [his] throat here and now” (406). She narrates, “I have no fear in this moment, only rage for everything Mazen has put me through” (406). These actions would have been anathema to the Laia from the beginning of the story, who choked on the words whenever she tried to challenge anyone and offered no resistance when she was beaten and threatened. This Laia is like the Lioness—vocal, defiant, and willful—but Laia has not embraced her mother’s legacy entirely. Where Mirra would have abandoned her family in favor of the Resistance and its ability to serve the Scholar people as a whole, Laia represents a new generation of willful subjects who remain loyal to family and recognize the importance of saving just one person. Instead of making the same mistake as the Resistance, who, in a failed attempt to sow chaos in the Empire, have actually sealed their own destruction and thus rendered themselves unable to fulfill their central purpose of saving the Scholar people, Laia chooses a different path. She remains focused on saving Darin, partially because she refuses to let her only family die but also because Darin symbolizes the ordinary Scholar who nevertheless has the potential to change the course of his people’s history. Of course, in choosing this path, Laia herself has become one of these ordinary Scholars with incredible potential to enact change. As Laia participates in this collective but individual-oriented resistance, she is able to see beyond the unproductive cycles of power even the Scholar Resistance has been trapped in and can envision a better world.

The end of *An Ember in the Ashes* finds Laia liberated from anyone who would attempt to control her as she takes both her fate and the fate of her people into her own hands. Keenan, a member of the Resistance to whom Laia has grown close and who explains he was unaware of Mazen’s betrayal, offers to help Laia find Darin, who they’ve

discovered is imprisoned in the most highly secured prison in the Empire. Keenan tells Laia, “I’ll take care of everything. I promise,” but Laia “take[s] no comfort in what he [says...] Once, I’d have wanted that. I’d have wanted someone to tell me what to do, to fix everything. Once, I’d have wanted to be saved. But what has that gotten me? Betrayal. Failure. It’s not enough to expect Keenan to have all the answers” (411). Instead of waiting passively for Keenan to save her and take her along with him to save her brother, Laia takes matters into her own hands. She comes up with a plan to save Elias—who knows the Empire from the inside and will therefore, she thinks, be able to better assist her in saving Darin—from execution. As Laia prepares to enact her plan, she remembers the day of the Martial raid on her home: “That day, I thought my world was ending. In a way, I was right. Now it’s time to remake my world. Time to redo my ending. I put my hand to my [mother’s] armlet. This time, I will not falter” (424). Laia here literally decides “to remake [her] world” and “to redo [her] ending.” Drawing on her mother’s legacy of willfulness symbolized in her armlet, Laia takes control of her own fate and—as a representative of the individual Scholar who can accomplish large-scale change—the fate of her people. Laia has completed her transformation into a willful subject; she is no longer “determined from without” but actively represents herself, and she has learned to “enact a ‘no’” both vocally and physically, to resist and defy those who would control her. Crucially, it is intersubjective identity that has enabled this transformation. By recognizing the importance of a willful community as well as the individual willful subject, Laia’s willpower promises to be more successful than the previous generation’s forms of resistance as she sets out to envision and build an alternative to her society.

“Into Freedom”: Conclusions

Spivak has asserted that the subaltern cannot speak, but in the world of *An Ember in the Ashes*, Laia learns to speak by resisting the Martial Empire’s attempts to define and manipulate her; she constructs her identity based on the Scholar’s idea of the Scholar and not on the Martial Empire’s idea of the Scholar. Though she is a racialized and gendered other, Laia is able to represent herself because it is not only her voice but the voice of the Scholar people as a collective which speaks. Like Celaena and Jude, Laia’s willfulness becomes a method of survival in the face of an oppressive power that hopes to destroy her, her family, and the threat they represent to the power of the dominant imperial culture. However, unlike Celaena and Jude, Laia’s willful journey is complicated by her experience with racism and imperialism, and thus her willfulness looks different. For Laia, willfulness is connected to her family and eventually her people, and she must build on these connections in order to learn to speak and willfully resist the Martial Empire. It is the creation of space not only for her own identity but for the collective identity of the Scholar people which allows Laia to liberate herself from the hegemonic cycles of her society, and with her newfound willpower, Laia sets out to create a world where she and her people can thrive. As her story ends, Laia successfully rescues Elias and secures his help in saving Darin. She and Elias escape the Academy together, and though they are heading into “uncertainty,” “into the unknown,” they are also heading “into freedom” (446). Though Jude in *The Cruel Prince*, who becomes essentially a queen, may end her story with ultimately more power than Laia, the ending of *An Ember in the Ashes* is far more hopeful, as Laia is not a lone willful heroine. She has the support of a community of

burgeoning willful subjects, and it is this community which will continue to assist her in transforming her world as her story continues.⁶

In reading Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, we have seen the value of interconnectedness and intersubjectivity, as well as how willfulness looks different for intersectional heroines in intersectional stories. However, though the building of a collective is important in *An Ember in the Ashes*, it is not yet fully realized, as we only see hints of the future community Laia is working towards. Additionally, Laia's willful mentor, her mother, is deceased, and so her influence on the formation of Laia's willfulness is tempered by distance and memory. In the next chapter, we will see the impact of two willful heroines who become each other's willful mentors and work together to build a community in real-time in order to resist systemic racism and return magic to a barren, unjust world.

⁶ Indeed, Laia and the community she builds successfully overturn the established system by the end of the fourth and final book in the series and usher in a new order in which the Scholars are seen as equal to the Martials.

III.

THE PLURAL WILLFUL HEROINE

Anger and Magic Challenge Systemic Racism in *Children of Blood and Bone*

She is angry when she wakes. She is angry at breakfast. She is angry as she rides the bus to school.

She has U.S. history first period, and she sits in her uncomfortable chair, its ridges digging into her back, and takes furious notes as her teacher drones on about Reconstruction. *Reconstruction*. As if there was anything in the pre-Civil War United States one would want to construct again. *Re* is the wrong prefix. They should have chosen *de*, or just gotten rid of the prefix entirely and made something new. But, she supposes, even then Americans clung to their precious exceptionalism with both hands.

Second period she is in physics class and she watches a pendulum swing back and forth, over and over again, as she counts in seconds how long it takes before she swears she can see it start to slow down.

Third period she arrives at the computer lab in the library to work on her English essay about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. She wonders, not for the first time, why Mark Twain chose the word “adventures” to describe this particular story, and she stares at the billboard on the wall that explains how to stand up to a bully until her teacher appears behind her and snaps that she needs to get to work.

Across the library, in the other computer lab, is another girl. She is in photography class, using the school-funded Photoshop subscription to splice together images from the local news. She is consumed by her task until the bell rings, and then she gathers up her backpack with all its colorful pins and squeezes out into the hallway with the rest of the school.

She has precalculus fourth period, and as her pencil scratches across graph paper recording the proof someone several hundred years ago discovered for this particular theorem, her mind begins to wander. When she looks around at her fellow classmates, she is sad. Their faces are blank. They lean chins into hands and hide yawns behind their binders. They flick surreptitious glances towards the clock above the whiteboard and then peer guiltily back at their teacher.

During fifth period, there is a school-wide assembly to talk about protests. Two days ago there was a sit-in in the north parking lot. People made signs and wore buttons and lay down on the pavement. The principal, with his ill-fitting suit jacket and poorly knotted tie, stands at a hastily erected podium and speaks to his students and faculty. She feels sad for him, too. He doesn't understand. His jowls swing dangerously from his cheeks and his small eyes narrow even further and she feels the stirrings of anger in the bottom of her stomach.

They meet at the tiny bookshop downtown. They are both tired from the school day, tired from the assembly and the indignant faces that looked down at them from up on the auditorium stage. The walk from school into town is not short, but it's manageable. In the back of the bookshop is a shelf labeled young adult fiction, and on it

is one copy of a book called *Children of Blood and Bone*. It's been turned so its cover faces outward, and both girls are sucked forward by the woman on its front, her skin ebony, her hair like white fire, her eyes undaunted. They reach for it at almost exactly the same time, and then laugh uncomfortably when they realize there is only one copy. We can share it, one suggests, and insists she doesn't mind. The other smiles, tugs on the ends of her hair, and agrees.

The Willful Potential of Anger, Magic, and Community

In the Author's Note at the end of her debut novel, Tomi Adeyemi writes, "Although riding giant lionaires and performing sacred rituals might be in the realm of fantasy, all the pain, fear, sorrow, and loss in this book is real" (526). *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) is explicitly about race and racism, and it puts Black characters at the center of its narrative. In an interview with NPR, Adeyemi speaks of her experience growing up reading and eventually writing science fiction and fantasy stories in which all the characters were white: "I had internalized at a really young age that black people can't be in stories. And that became, black people can't be in your imagination. I couldn't exist in my own imagination" (Donnella). The lack of representation in these novels became an active erasure of the existence of Black people and Black stories. As she continued to write, Adeyemi began to realize most of the fantasy stories she was consuming and creating were about oppression, but that the oppression that was represented was fictionalized when there was, in fact, actual oppression that didn't need to be fictionalized. She explains, "It's one thing to be erased, but[...] you are literally telling our stories without us.[...] Fantasy and sci-fi, they are all stories of oppression, but

largely erase the people in our contemporary society that are actively being oppressed” (Donnella). *Children of Blood and Bone* is thus Adeyemi’s attempt to write Black people back into their own narratives. When her characters speak of racism in their fantastical society, they are also speaking of the continued racism in the contemporary United States. When one of Adeyemi’s heroines, Zélie, tells another lighter-skinned character, “They built this world for you, built it to love you. They never cursed at you in the streets, never broke down the doors of your home. They didn’t drag your mother by the neck and hang her for the whole world to see,” we should be hearing the echoes of real Black Americans who still live in a system built to work against them (313).

Children of Blood and Bone has received more critical attention than any of the other novels discussed in this thesis. Part of this is due to the fact that children’s and YA literature in general but especially fantasy that focuses on people of color is difficult to find. Zetta Elliott brings together several scholars’ perspectives to elucidate this problem:

The “trouble” with magic, as it is represented in much of children’s literature, is that it appears to exist in realms to which only certain children belong.[...] As Nancy Tolson observes, “Multicultural adolescent books found in most classrooms are historical fiction, realistic fiction, or nonfiction—reserving the luxury of fantasy for young white characters” (44). African Canadian speculative fiction author Nalo Hopkinson suspects that the publishing industry “was and is eroticizing black people as victims, as though that is our value to the world” (101-2). Walter Mosley concurs, yet adds that, “if black writers wanted to branch out past the realism of racism and race, they were curtailed by their own desire to document the crimes of America. A further deterrent was the white literary

establishment's desire for blacks to write about being black in a white world, a limitation imposed upon a limitation" (406). (17)

This layering of limitations and expectations for Black authors and Black stories makes Adeyemi's novel significant, as it challenges these conventions by being a fantasy story inspired by Nigerian mythology (instead of the Western mythologies often utilized in traditional high fantasy novels) and which decenters whiteness by virtue of being populated by only characters of color. Scholars like Ebony Elizabeth Thomas see it as part of a "flowering of imaginative stories for young people from Black perspectives all over the globe" (286). Critics have noted the way in which Adeyemi uses her debut novel to explore Black experiences and interrogate white supremacy. Marvin John Walter reads *Children of Blood and Bone* as using "the discursive nature of the human and the other to speak up against the othering and subsequent oppression of minority groups" (3). Laura-Victoria Stoica examines how Adeyemi redefines the Black female body in the context of war and Afrofuturism, arguing that "the Black author's ultimate task is to restore the ability of the Black Female Body to *feel*" (47, italics in original). Critical scholarship has centered on the anti-racist and anti-totalitarian messages of *Children of Blood and Bone*, its interpretation of Black identity, and its exciting break with previous examples of YA fantasy stories which have largely ignored people of color. All of the arguments these authors have made are true, but I would add that *Children of Blood and Bone* fits into a larger trend in YA high fantasy of willful heroines and willful collectives. The paradigm of willfulness brings Adeyemi's stance against racism together with her exploration of Black female identities. By reading Adeyemi's two heroines as examples of willful subjects, we can see how the specific identities of those heroines—and thus the specific

willful techniques they each develop—and the community they build together allow them to resist their racist, patriarchal society.

Whereas in the worlds of *Throne of Glass*, *The Cruel Prince*, and *An Ember in the Ashes*, magic is inaccessible as a tool of empowerment for our willful heroines, in Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, magic becomes a primary method of willfulness, though not the only method. Magical powers are a common trope in high fantasy novels, and they function as especially empowering for heroines in YA fantasy, as magic is often “associated with pivotal moments in girls’ lives[... and] produces material effects such as saving lives, restoring order to fragmented communities, and destroying or limiting the power of evil figures” (Bradford 111). However, magic often fails in *Children of Blood and Bone*, and so both heroines—Zélie and Amari—must additionally draw on their rage in order to resist their oppressive, racist society. In her famous address entitled “The Uses of Anger,” Audre Lorde speaks of the anger of Black women and other women of color. She views “[a]nger [as] a source of empowerment we must not fear to tap for energy rather than guilt” (283). Anger and magic are both presented as valuable techniques of willfulness in *Children of Blood and Bone*, but they are not enough for our willful heroines to successfully take control of their futures. They must rely directly on each other in order to attain willpower; thus, *Children of Blood and Bone* expands on the intersubjectivity we saw represented in *An Ember in the Ashes*. In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde writes of the importance of community and interdependency among women in general and especially among women of color. She explains, “Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to see new ways to actively ‘be’ in the world

generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters” (26). Community is crucial in order to “see new ways to actively ‘be,’” and this is reflected in *Children of Blood and Bone* as Zélie and Amari combine their willfulness in order to imagine and build a new and better world for themselves and their people. For both Lorde and Adeyemi, anger and interdependency are two primary techniques of resistance against oppressive, patriarchal societies, as well as mechanisms to transform those societies. In *Children of Blood and Bone*, we see anger and interdependency in action, as Zélie and Amari work together to defy their society so they can create a new one.

Adeyemi centers two heroines in *Children of Blood and Bone* on two different but intersecting willful journeys. Both heroines have grown up as gendered and racialized “others” in a world dominated by lighter-skinned individuals, and they face continual threat because of this positioning as outcasts. The first heroine, Zélie, locates willful resistance and empowerment in anger and, eventually, magic as she works to assert her right and the right of her people to exist in a racist society designed to oppress them, but her willfulness begins to falter when she is stripped of that magic and anger. It is at this point that the second heroine, Amari, must step in to support Zélie’s willfulness with her own willful resistance as she creates space for her own identity and takes on the responsibility of changing her world. Though both heroines are individual willful subjects, they also act as each other’s willful mentors. Thus in *Children of Blood and Bone*, though individual willfulness is developed through rage and magic, willpower is cultivated through active interdependence, community, and intersubjectivity. Only through their cooperation can Zélie and Amari develop willpower and begin to envision and construct an alternative to this fantasy world fractured by systemic racism.

Willful Subjects in Parallel

Our first heroine, Zélie, is typical of the willful heroines one finds in YA fantasy novels: she is determined, intelligent, and skilled in battle, and she is constructed as a gendered “other,” though her status as other is complicated by her race. Zélie is a divîner, a group of people who once possessed magic and who are now oppressed in the kingdom of Orïsha. Divîners are described as having darker skin than those in positions of power; immediately, Adeyemi centers race in her narrative and sets up a system of privilege that puts lighter-skinned individuals above those with darker skin. Divîners are systemically oppressed through increased taxes and frequent raids after most of their adult magic-wielding population was murdered in a mass genocide eleven years before the start of the story. In the opening scene, Zélie is called “maggot” in the midst of a training session—“That word. That miserable, degrading slur” (6).¹ Before Zélie can respond to this slur, her training session is interrupted by Orïshan soldiers coming to collect taxes because, they claim, “maggot rates” have increased (9). When Zélie challenges them, calling the increased taxes robbery, it becomes clear that in this world, as in many other YA fantasy worlds, the sexualization and objectification of women is common. Like Laia in *An Ember in the Ashes*, Zélie is subjected to increased sexualization and objectification because of her race. One of the soldiers grabs Zélie: “‘You may not have any money.’ The guard digs into my back with his knee. ‘But you sure have your fair share of maggots.’ He grips my thigh with a rough hand. ‘I’ll start with this one’” (11). Though Zélie is resistant to the blatant injustice of the divîners’ situation and refuses to stay

¹ Here, Adeyemi establishes clear parallels with the usage of racist slurs targeting Black Americans in the historical and contemporary United States.

silent, it is difficult for her to remain as unaffected by the attempt at racialized, sexual intimidation as she would like: “I want to scream, to break every bone in [the soldier’s] body, but with each second I wither. His touch erases everything I am, everything I’ve fought so hard to become” (12). At the beginning of the story, Zélie is in some ways already willful—she is resistant, vocal, and able, in specific situations, to “enact a ‘no’”—but she has no control over her own fate, no willpower as Ahmed defines it, as she continues to be controlled, sometimes even literally “erase[d],” by the dominant, oppressive culture (Ahmed 10). Throughout the novel, Zélie rises up against her oppressors through the use of magic and anger as she works to overturn the race-based class system imposed on her people. Zélie’s path to willpower, though, lies not only in her own willfulness but in the willfulness of another.

Zélie’s counterpart is Amari, the second of the three narrating characters.² Amari is a princess and because of this has been raised in an entirely different, privileged environment from Zélie’s. However, the two girls are similar in several key ways: they are both trained in physical combat and, critically, they both face varying levels of discrimination based on skin color—they are both racialized and gendered others. In our introduction to Amari, she reflects on the gossip she’s heard from the noblewomen around the palace, including that Amari is “far too dark to be the king’s” (32). Unlike Zélie, Amari has been so far unable to willfully resist her oppressive society in any capacity, as for Amari, being controlled by the dominant culture includes being controlled by her parents, the king and queen of Orïsha. Amari’s domineering mother

² The third narrator is Inan, the crown prince of Orïsha, Amari’s older brother, Zélie’s controversial love-interest, and the conflicted antagonist of the story.

“rarely allows [Amari] to leave the palace” (33). Amari sits silently through a conversation in which her mother and the other noblewomen make racist remarks about the diviners, including repeatedly referring to them as “maggots,” which has already been established as an offensive slur. Amari notes that when her mother compliments one of the noblewomen on looking “regal,”

the word “lighter” hides behind her lips. Like the regal oloyes who can proudly trace their lineage back to the royal families who first wore Orisha’s crown.

Not *common*, like the farmers who toil the fields of Minna, or Lagos’s own merchants bartering their wares in the sun. Not *unfortunate* like me, the princess Mother is almost too ashamed to claim.[...]

“You must share your beauty regimen with Amari.” Mother places a cold hand on my shoulder, fingers light against my dark copper skin. “She lounges in the gardens so often she’s beginning to look like a farmhand.” Mother laughs, as if a horde of servants don’t cover me with sunshades whenever I step outside. Like she didn’t coat me with powder before this very luncheon began, cursing the way my complexion makes the nobility gossip that she slept with a servant. (36, italics in original)

Here, we see the racial discrimination ingrained in Orishan society in action, in which those with lighter skin are considered closer to royalty and those with darker skin, even princesses, are looked down on as lower-class “farmhands.” Amari, like Zélie, is powerless in the face of this ingrained, systemic racism and is forced to endure painful beauty regimens intended to lighten her skin, such as a “cosmetic concoction” she

describes that includes vinegar (36). This initial introduction to Amari sets her willful journey up to include resisting not only her oppressive and racist society in general but her dominating parents in particular, who act as symbols of that society. Amari's defiance of both her parents and her society begins early on in the story when she steals a magical scroll from her father which can activate the latent magic of the diviners. Her willful journey will have a familiar trajectory as she becomes more and more resistant over time, but its ending will be unfamiliar, as Amari's newfound willfulness will be combined with Zélie's in order to create space for their identities together and imagine a new world.

Seeking Willful Mentors

As is the case with Laia in *An Ember in the Ashes*, mother-daughter relationships are central in *Children of Blood and Bone*; Zélie's own mother is a possible willful mentor, though Zélie must eventually look elsewhere when her mother's techniques of willfulness fail her. Zélie's mother was a powerful maji (a diviner with activated magic) who was murdered along with all the other adult maji during the Raid, when the king of Orisha took advantage of magic mysteriously disappearing to conduct a mass genocide. Magic has not returned since, but the diviners continue to be oppressed, marked as able to wield magic (if magic were still around) by their white hair and darker skin. Zélie remembers her mother's white hair as "an untamed crown that breathed and thrived" (1). Here, Adeyemi equates magic (indicated by white hair in this universe) with both willfulness (a refusal to be tamed) and power (a crown). Zélie's idolization of her mother is attached specifically to the magic her mother wielded and the willpower it granted her. Because she no longer has access to magic—her mother's primary method of

empowerment—Zélie must seek alternative methods to follow in her mother’s footsteps and take control of her own fate. After the soldiers leave Zélie’s training session in the first scene of the novel, Zélie’s teacher, Mama Agba, tells Zélie that she is beginning to look like her mother: “The resemblance is frightening when you yell. You inherited her rage” (18). Zélie is here positioned as taking up her mother’s legacy of defiance through anger—an anger, as Lorde writes, “of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting” (“The Uses of Anger,” 278). Zélie cannot access her mother’s willpower through magic, but that magic “feeds off... rage,” and so Zélie looks to anger in order to develop willfulness (79). Later, when Zélie’s latent magic is activated by the magical scroll Amari has stolen from her father, Zélie begins to follow more directly in her mother’s footsteps and embrace her magical legacy. However, Zélie’s relationship with her mother is obviously limited because the Orïshan government has structurally and deliberately disrupted this matrilineal connection through the genocide which took Zélie’s mother’s life. Both of Zélie’s mother’s techniques of willfulness are stripped from Zélie towards the end of the story, and she must turn to an alternative—interdependence—in order to resist her society. Though Zélie’s mother may be her first willful mentor, Amari, who is a living and still-developing willful subject, also acts as Zélie’s willful mentor as the story continues and the two heroines begin to enable each other’s resistance and capacity for transformation.

Unlike Zélie, Amari’s mother is not a viable willful mentor; as we have already seen, she is an agent of the dominant culture and actively participates in Amari’s oppression, forcing Amari to look elsewhere for willful mentorship. Amari’s mother is

racist, controlling, and abusive, refusing to allow Amari to eat what she wants, preventing her from leaving the palace, and forcing her to endure painful beauty regimens intended to lighten her skin. When Amari runs away from the palace, her mother is more worried about Amari's brother (who's been sent to retrieve Amari) dying and leaving Amari to take the throne than about Amari herself. Though this depiction is fairly one-dimensional, as Amari's mother takes on a stereotypical "evil stepmother" role,³ it is nevertheless true that Amari has no willful legacy to inherit from her mother and must seek a willful mentor elsewhere. Though she already has some of the characteristics we've come to expect from willful heroines—she is intelligent, fairly determined, and even trained in physical combat like Celaena, Jude, and Zélie—Amari is still "determined from without," has a limited ability to "enact a 'no,'" and does not yet possess willpower (Ahmed 10). Amari will find her willful mentor in Zélie, just as Zélie finds a new willful mentor in Amari, and their interdependence and combined willfulness is what will empower them to together overturn the racist class system which continues to persecute the divîner people.

Zélie's (Backwards) Willful Journey

In some ways, Zélie's willful journey is opposite in trajectory to the willful journeys of our other willful heroines. Though not entirely a willful subject, as she is still

³ Karen Rowe, analyzing female roles in traditional fairy tales, explains, "The authoritarian mother becomes the obstacle which seems to stifle natural desires for men, marriage, and hence the achievement of female maturity" ("Feminism and Fairy Tales," 242). Amari's mother is certainly "authoritarian" and stifles Amari's "achievement of female maturity"; in this way, the queen plays a stereotypical female role. However, she does not prevent a movement towards men and marriage but instead prevents a movement towards independence and willfulness, and so in this way is atypical.

largely “determined from without,” Zélie begins the story, as we have seen, fairly willful, and this initial willfulness allows her to act as Amari’s willful mentor from their very first meeting. Given Zélie’s earlier resistance to the soldiers despite sexual and racialized intimidation, it is no surprise that, upon running into Amari in the marketplace in the capital city, Zélie is unable to ignore the plea for help from a girl who finds herself in existential threat from Orisha’s oppressive system. Amari’s “eyes fill with a terror that is all too familiar. Because when [the soldiers] catch her, it’s not a matter of whether she’ll die, it’s only a question of when: On the spot? Starving in the jails? Or will the guards take turns passing her around? Destroy her from within until she suffocates from grief?” (58). Zélie recognizes a fellow woman on the verge of racialized, gendered destruction at the hands of the system Zélie tries constantly to resist and so of course is compelled to help her: “It doesn’t matter if I can help. I won’t be able to live with myself if I don’t” (58). The two girls race away from the soldiers who hope to catch Amari and retrieve the stolen magical scroll, and when Amari falters and freezes when faced with guards at the city gates who refuse to allow them to leave, Zélie leaps into action and attacks. They almost manage to escape, but Amari falls at the last second. Though Zélie knows it would be safer to leave Amari behind, “the despair in [Amari’s] eyes pulls [Zélie] back,” and she runs back through the gates once again to prevent Amari from falling victim to their society (65). Thus, at the story’s opening, it is Zélie’s willfulness that enables Amari’s resistance of and escape from the oppressive system in which she is trapped. In this way, Zélie acts as Amari’s willful mentor, modeling what willfulness towards Orisha’s hegemonic society can look like, even as Zélie herself continues to develop her own techniques of willfulness through anger and physical combat.

Once Zélie reclaims the magic she's wanted for so long, gaining access to another of her mother's primary methods of willful resistance on top of the rage she was already using, Zélie's development into a willful subject accelerates. Her mission—to bring magic back to Orïsha and so enable the diviners' collective rebellion—is a fundamentally willful one, as she hopes to overturn systemic racism and build a new world for her people. Zélie's magic is activated as soon as she touches Amari's scroll, and she realizes the difference magic would have made during the Raid of eleven years ago. She imagines her mother being able to successfully “enact a ‘no’” towards the Orïshan soldiers: “With a guttural cry, Mama tears the chain from her neck and wraps the black links around the remaining guard's throat.[...] With magic, she's still alive” (79). Though Zélie clearly understands the willful resistance magic enables, she is at first worried she will not be able to take on the monumental task before her, that she's “not strong enough” to return magic to the world, despite the fact that she believes the gods have chosen her (93). However, when she arrives at an ancient diviner temple and reconnects fully with her magic, Zélie begins to move past her fear and recognize both how powerful magic truly is and how it can liberate her people from years of systemic racism: “We *need* this ritual [to bring back magic]. It's our only hope. Without it, we'll never get power. The monarchy will always treat us like maggots” (166-7, italics in original). Zélie's connection to the gods is reestablished, enabling her to bring magic back for the entire diviner population, and she describes the onslaught of magic as “breathing for the first time” (170). Magic here begins to free her from the suffocation of the oppressive Orïshan empire, and Zélie recognizes the potential it has to free the rest of her people, as well. Though many of her doubts remain, Zélie begins to embrace the willfulness magic enables, specifically trying

to imitate her mother's forms of magic as she draws on her few memories of the rituals her mother performed. Armed with anger, magic, and a strengthened connection with her mother and her people, Zélie sets out to actively resist her society and free her people. Amari notes, "Despite [Zélie's] obvious fear, she still fights. No one allows her to run away" (238).

Though Zélie is willfully resistant as she continues to take up her mission, her willfulness is complicated by her experience as a racialized "other." As Amari points out, Zélie willfully fights through her fear, but partially because she has no other choice—she is not "allowed" to run away. Some of this lack of choice stems from the fact that Zélie has supposedly been selected by the gods to bring magic back, but most of it comes from Zélie's positioning in Orisha's racial hierarchy. In a conversation with Amari's brother, Inan, who's been sent to hunt Zélie and Amari down, Zélie reveals the constant fear she feels throughout her life. Inan insists that magic is "the root of Orisha's pain" and should not be returned to the diviners, and Zélie fires back, "Our lack of power and our oppression are one and the same, Inan. Without power we're maggots. Without power the monarchy treats us like scum!" (311). Here, Zélie equates lack of magical power with racial oppression.⁴ Magic, a primary technique of willfulness in this world, is thus necessitated by Orisha's race-based class system. Because that system presents itself as an active threat to the very existence of the diviner people, Zélie has no choice but to

⁴ Though Zélie seems to be referring to magical power here, it is important to note the deliberate ambiguity of the word power. Zélie could easily be speaking of the lack of more intangible forms of power experienced by Black Americans in the contemporary United States, who are denied legal rights, the ability to vote unhindered, equal representation, and a variety of other forms of power. Throughout this scene, Zélie seems to be speaking about racial discrimination in the United States as much as she's speaking about it in Orisha.

become willful and return magic to the world; there is no alternative. As Ahmed writes, “For some, willfulness might be necessary for an existence to be possible” (160). If Zélie were to give up being willful, she would be destroyed by the systemic racism ingrained in Orïshan society. Zélie goes on to narrate her fear and despair in the face of this injustice:

I am always afraid. It’s a truth I locked away years ago, a fact I fought hard to overcome. Because when it hits, I’m paralyzed. I can’t breathe. I can’t talk. All at once, I crumple to the ground, clasp my palm over my mouth to stifle the sobs. It doesn’t matter how strong I get, how much power my magic wields. They will always hate me in this world. I will always be afraid. (312)

Zélie in this passage laments that she will *always* be hated and afraid, even if she is empowered by magic: thus, willfulness, or at least willfulness as Zélie has so far developed it, is set up to fail. It would be easy to read this moment as just another instance of Zélie’s doubt, not unlike moments earlier in the story in which she worries she will not be able to complete the task set before her, but given the fact that Zélie’s magic *does* fail her soon after this conversation, I argue it has a different significance. The techniques of willfulness Zélie has so far used have been her mother’s—mainly anger and magic—but they are not enough for Zélie to acquire willpower. At the same time, though, willfulness is necessary for Zélie and the diviners to continue to exist in this world. Zélie, then, must seek another technique of willfulness which will allow her and the other diviners to not just merely exist but successfully resist and transform Orïsha.

This quickly becomes evident when Zélie is captured, stripped of her magic, and tortured—her willfulness as enabled by magic begins to falter, and she must once again turn to alternative methods of empowerment. When Zélie is cut off from her magic, she

falls back on her rage and determination in order to remain resistant. Zélie proclaims to King Saran, who has appeared to personally torture her for answers, “Your mistake wasn’t keeping us alive. It was thinking we’d never fight back![...] Magic or not, we won’t give up. Magic or not, we *will* take back what’s ours!” (416, italics in original). Prince Inan narrates, “while I can barely breathe, Zélie rises. Defiant and fiery as ever” (417). This defiance quickly fades, however, when the king begins to torture Zélie and uses a knife to carve the word “maggot” into her back. Even after Inan, Amari, and Zélie’s brother manage to help Zélie escape, Zélie still cannot manage to access her magic. She tries to use her old determination and anger towards the oppressive system—the willful techniques that got her through before she regained her magic—in order to complete her quest. Zélie says to her companions, “They cut ‘maggot’ into my back[...] We’re going. I don’t care what it takes. I won’t let them win” (459). It is clear, however, that much of this is bravado; Zélie explains, “I feel a hint of the old fire that used to roar louder than my fear. But its flame is weak now; as soon as it flickers, it’s blown out by the wind” (480). The “flame” of the anger that fueled her resistance before she activated her magic, and that continued to motivate her even after, has gone out. Both of her mother’s forms of willfulness—magic and rage—are rendered inaccessible as Zélie struggles to come to terms with the trauma she’s experienced. Zélie cannot acquire willpower as a lone willful subject using her current willful techniques. This moment, as Zélie falters, on the verge of falling victim to her society, is when Amari steps in, becoming Zélie’s new willful mentor and presenting a new method of willfulness—community and intersubjectivity—which will allow the two heroines to envision and create change in their world.

Amari's (Forwards) Willful Journey

From the beginning, Amari is unsure of her place in the mission to return magic to the world, especially in comparison to Zélie's central role. This desire to prove, both to herself and to her companions, that she belongs on this mission encourages Amari to become more and more willful. Amari was unable to enact resistance in her life as a princess, in which she was verbally and physically abused by her parents and the Orïshan nobility, but she begins to embrace willfulness as her journey with Zélie continues. Faced with the diviners she's been taught to fear, Amari begins to undo the brainwashing she experienced at the hands of her father, who taught her magic—and thus the diviners who wield it—is dangerous and so must be eradicated. She is inspired by Zélie's stubborn tenacity and is determined to follow in the footsteps of her new willful mentor. When Zélie captains a ship in a gladiatorial ship battle to retrieve the sunstone, one of the magical objects they need to bring magic back to Orïsha, Amari is at first paralyzed: "After all these years, I still can't. Nothing has changed. I cannot move. I cannot fight. I can only stand still" (247). This changes when Zélie is threatened and nearly killed; in a moment of instinct, Amari stabs Zélie's attacker, saving Zélie—and thus the entire diviner cause. Zélie's brother, Tzain, offers Amari the opportunity to leave the mission behind when she is disturbed that she may have to kill again, but Amari refuses, "swallow[ing] the part of [her] that wants to give in" (263). Tzain tries to tell Amari, "Just because you can fight doesn't mean you're meant to," and Amari, angered at the reminder of a past in which she was always controlled by others, shoots back, "'Tzain, do *not* tell me what I am meant to do!' His words stab like a needle, locking me back inside the palace walls.[...] No more. I have lived that life before.[...] Now that I've escaped, I

shall never return. With my escape, I must do more” (263-4, italics in original). Here, we see an Amari who seeks to break free from Orïsha’s hegemonic system, including her parents and the palace in which she grew up. She begins to embrace resistance to the life she’s left behind and the society in which she was trapped. Though it is Zélie’s willfulness that drives the beginning of the story, Zélie’s willful mission to restore magic to the divîners and enable their uprising quickly becomes Amari’s mission as well, as Amari, inspired by her willful mentor, embraces her own role in their quest and becomes more willful.

However, it is in Zélie’s absence that Amari’s willful spirit truly begins to thrive as she makes it her personal mission to undo what her father has done to the divîners. Amari takes responsibility for the pain her father has caused to divîner families across Orïsha, resolving she “will be the one to fix it”: “How many families has Father left like this, broken beyond repair, mourning their dead? How many times will I *allow* him to do it again?” (264, 406, emphasis mine). When Zélie is captured, Amari spearheads a plan to contact divîner rebels, activate their latent magic, and rescue Zélie from the king’s clutches. When the rebels at first refuse to follow her, Amari declares her intentions to not only right her father’s wrongs but to do so from a position of ultimate power: “I am Princess Amari, daughter of King Saran, and...’ Though the words have never left my lips, I now realize there is no other choice. I cannot let the line of succession stand in my way. ‘And I am the future queen of Orïsha’” (429). Here, Amari directly resists the conventions of her society that decide she, as the youngest child and a young woman, cannot sit on the throne. She promises to overturn the established order, return magic to the divîners, and end their oppression. When she charges into the fortress to save Zélie

and runs into Inan, Inan can see the change in her: “I don’t recognize my sister at first. The Amari I know hides from her sword. This woman looks ready to kill” (446). Amari has been literally transformed, ready to kill when she was before afraid to, willing to do whatever she must to save her willful mentor and right the wrongs her father has committed. As Zélie’s ability to willfully resist is subsumed by trauma, Amari steps to the fore to take up the willful mantle her willful mentor has had to put down.

When Zélie and Amari later bond over their shared fear of King Saran, they are simultaneously singular willful subjects and a willful collective. Zélie explains that she used to believe Amari “weak” for the fear Amari held for her father, but after being tortured at his hands, Zélie now understands that fear (483). Amari reassures Zélie that she felt the same way after she first fled the palace, but it was Zélie who “told [Amari] to get herself together and stop being such a scared little princess” (484). In other words, Zélie acted as Amari’s willful mentor, enabling and encouraging her to resist the king and the oppressive power he represents. As a result of this encouragement, Amari has become willful: as she thinks back on arriving to rescue Zélie from the king, “[t]he memory of Father’s rage flares, yet what I remember is the weight of my sword in my hand” (484). Instead of being cowed by her father’s anger and the threat it represents, Amari thinks only of the challenge and defiance she presents to him with sword in hand. Now, as Zélie’s willfulness falters, Amari will act as *Zélie’s* willful mentor: Zélie asks, “So is it my turn?[...] Is this where *you* push *me*?” (484, emphasis mine). Indeed, when Zélie reveals that she can no longer access her magic, it is Amari who insists that they will find a way, that Zélie is capable of succeeding in their mission. Here, their roles have fully reversed, as Amari takes on the role of willful mentor and enables Zélie’s willfulness as

Zélie edges closer to giving up and giving in to their oppressive society. As they fall asleep together, they are not individuals but a collective “we” united in a single purpose. Amari remembers the beginning of their journey: “The odds were against us then. Reality told us we would fail. But again and again, *we* fought. *We* persevered. *We* rose” (486, italics mine). Though Zélie and Amari are individually willful, they also represent a willful community as they support and enable each other’s willful resistance. Magic and rage alone may not be enough to empower them to bring about change in their society, but their cooperation and intersubjectivity will.

“We Rise”: Conclusions

In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde asserts the importance of a community of women with different strengths: “For difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (26). As *Children of Blood and Bone* ends, we see these differences within a collective in action, as Zélie and Amari make use of their own individual techniques of willfulness to empower each other and so together become able to transform their world. Zélie, Amari, and their small band of rebels meet with steep resistance upon arriving at the sacred island where Zélie is to perform the ritual to bring magic back. When Zélie’s father, who’s been captured by Orïshan soldiers, is killed, Zélie once again uses rage and magic to rise up against her society, as “[t]he blackest part of [her] rage finally has the power it’s always craved” (503). Even as she draws on rage to re-access her magic, she draws on “the power of [her] ancestors,” as well, as the ritual connects her to an entire community of diviners, including her mother (517). This

community is what facilitates Zélie's ritual, but it is Amari's willfulness which allows it to be successful. To do so, Amari makes use of her own techniques of willful resistance, mainly empathy for the "pain [of] every poor soul ended by [her] Father's life" (510). As Zélie performs the ritual, Amari engages in battle with her father to distract him from Zélie's efforts. Amari declares to her father, "You raised me to fight monsters.[...] It took far too long to understand the real monster was you" (512). Here, we see Amari at her most willful, defying not only her abusive, brutal father but the man who symbolizes Orisha's racist, oppressive system. Amari manages to stab her father, and as he dies, she whispers to him, "Do not worry.[...] I will make a far better queen" (514). Thus Amari destroys the old way of life and clears the way for a new one that she and Zélie will create. Throughout this final scene, Amari and Zélie are wholly interdependent even as they act independently. Zélie plays to her strengths, completing the ritual only she can perform to empower herself and the entire divîner people, and Amari plays to hers, defeating her own father and symbolically destroying Orisha's damaging cycles of power. Neither would be successful in envisioning and creating a place for themselves and their people without the other. As the story ends, Zélie and Amari step into a new world together, with not only their own fates but the fates of the entire nation of Orisha in their hands.

In Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*, willfulness is enabled by rage and magic, but willpower is achieved through interdependence and cooperation. As Lorde writes, "the strength of women lies in recognizing differences between us as creative, and in standing to those distortions which we inherited without blame but which are now ours to alter. The angers of women can transform differences through insight into power"

(“The Uses of Anger,” 283). In other words, it is through anger and the acknowledgement of difference that women will be able to build a community and create change. Adeyemi takes up Lorde’s mantle and translates her own anger over the underrepresentation of people of color in fantasy novels into action, writing Black people back into their own story. Within that story, Zélie and Amari use their anger—anger over systemic racism, over traumas no children should have to experience, over a system that not only has failed them but continues to work against them—and, with each other’s support, turn that anger into transformation. By relying on each other’s distinct forms of willfulness, Zélie and Amari establish a community of willful subjects who can overturn the ingrained injustice in their society and carve out a place for their people. Though we in the United States may not have access to magic to enable our willfulness, we certainly have access to anger and community, and *Children of Blood and Bone* challenges us to use that anger to forge connections and willfully resist so that we might envision and create a new and better world.

Children of Blood and Bone solidifies the importance of community and intersubjectivity in a willful subject’s success. A lone willful subject, especially when faced with overlapping types of oppression, will find it difficult to transform her world, but multiple willful subjects who have formed a community and can build on each other’s individual techniques of willfulness have a better chance of taking their own fate and the fate of their world into their hands. In our next novel, intersubjectivity will again be crucial; however, this willful heroine suggests not only that a lone willful subject may not be successful but that a lone willful subject who has lost community may actually reify the structures of power she had hoped to resist.

IV.

THE DETACHED WILLFUL HEROINE

Failing to Envision Queer Utopias in *The Midnight Lie*

The library's selection is limited—there are only just over 9,000 books, most of them donated from the collection of old Mr. Thomas after he died several years ago—but the shelves are tall and the aisles between them narrow. She goes there after cross country practice to do her homework. She finds one of the desks in the corner (far from the sight of the librarian at the small circulation desk), leaves her backpack on the chair, and then squeezes in between the shelves. It's like being inside a forest. She trails her fingers along the book spines and pretends they feel like leaves. She can tell which section she's in based on the feeling of the spines—the oldest flake away gently against her fingertips, and these are the ones that came from Mr. Thomas's collection. He was an unlikable old man, but people said he'd had good taste in books. His collection furnishes the fiction and philosophy and poetry sections: Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, Milton, Freud, Wordsworth, Kant, Dante, Fitzgerald, Poe, Hemingway, Chaucer. She traces their names on the spines.

The other sections of the library are less full and the spines are less damaged. These are her favorite sections because no one comes to them, and she can sit with her back against one shelf and her shoes against the other and read without worrying someone will report her to the librarian. There are two shelves in the children's section that face each other where nobody ever goes. The slip of paper on the side of one shelf

proclaims it dedicated to young adult fiction. Every once in a while, a new book will appear there, though she's sure the section is shrinking—more books disappear with each complaint lodged to the library board by a concerned parent. Some books have vanished while she was halfway through reading them.

One afternoon there is another girl sequestered between the shelves. She's pretty, ethereal almost, like a girl from a story, and she looks up when she hears the sound of approaching feet. They stare at each other—one dark-haired, the other blond—until the dark-haired girl smiles like she knows a secret and returns to her book. She is there every day for the next three weeks.

It's a Thursday when the school counseling office passes out a questionnaire and the students are asked to start considering their future. For a moment, she thinks about the dark-haired girl and listens to the scratch of pencil on paper as her classmates circle answers to questions about college and future careers. When the bell rings, she stuffs the questionnaire into her backpack. It's due tomorrow. Her parents will know how to fill it out.

The leaves are falling as she walks to the library, and her gym bag with her cross country clothes swings against her legs. She finds the dark-haired girl in her usual spot, sitting with her knees up and a book balancing on her thighs. She turns a page, the soft brush of fingers against paper seeming to echo along the walls, before looking up. It's new, she says, and closes the book. Its dust jacket is green and cream, "The Midnight Lie" traced in silver on its cover. She offers it up, saying she has another she should finish first. Soon they are sitting next to each other, silent, elbows brushing each time

they go to turn a page. They pretend the questionnaire, with its inquiries about the future, about the paths they may take in opposite directions, isn't burning holes in their backpacks. There is only the library and the hush of disappearing books and spines disintegrating slowly like decomposing leaves.

Willful Desire and Queer Utopia

So far, we have seen willfulness in the context of imperialism, colonization, and race; we have seen willfulness in competition between women and in friendship among women; we have seen willful subjects reach the heights of ultimate power and willful subjects whose success lies in simply surviving. *The Midnight Lie* (2020) by Marie Rutkoski shows us willfulness in the context of sexuality and a rigid class system, willfulness in a romantic relationship between two women, and a willful subject who seems to achieve ultimate power but can only do so at the cost of her own identity. Here, though our willful heroine attempts to create space for her identity and establish connections with other willful subjects in order to develop willpower, that connectedness and interdependence fails. *The Midnight Lie* ends with a question about the dangers of a willful subject without identity, without connection, and without empathy.

In an interview about the release of *The Midnight Lie*, Marie Rutkoski speaks of the parallels she sees between herself and her heroine, Nirrim, who “doesn't follow the script that society has written for her” (Jarema). As José Esteban Muñoz argues in his book *Queer Utopia*, “Queerness is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). This is true for both Rutkoski and her heroine, who choose to be in queer relationships and, in so doing, Rutkoski explains, “realize that there

are actually many different scripts” (Jarema). Queerness enables the recognition that the (heteronormative) “script” written out by society is inadequate, that there are other scripts—other worlds—that can be accessed. Muñoz contends, however, that the point of queerness is not necessarily to actually reach those alternative worlds or scripts but to keep imagining them: “queerness is primarily about future and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon[... I]f queerness is to have any value whatsoever, it must be viewed as being visible only in the horizon” (11). The ability to continue to visualize queerness as always on the horizon depends fundamentally on relationality—“the understanding of queerness as collectivity”—and imagination (11). Muñoz locates “failures of imagination” in “antirelationality and antiutopianism” (18). To fail to imagine, then, is to reject collectivity and intersubjectivity as well as the hope for and the possibility of an alternative world, a queer utopia. Though the heroine of *The Midnight Lie*, Nirrim, is empowered to envision a better world by willfully embracing queer desire, her eventual rejection of community and her inability to fully imagine a queer utopia results in the collapse of both her own identity and her ability to truly transform her society.

Nirrim is a member of the lowest class (called the “Half Kith”) in the fantasy city of Ethin in a country called Herrath. In our first introduction to her, she describes herself as “a good, quiet girl” (2). Indeed, upon first glance, her life seems “quiet,” if not perhaps “good”: she works at a small bakery owned by her adoptive mother, Raven, in the Ward, the section of the city walled off for the Half Kith and which they are not allowed to leave. Life is grim within the Ward, where its residents are forbidden to wear colorful clothes, are allowed only to eat plain food, and are routinely arrested and forced to give

up a “tithe”—the tithe may be hair, blood, or, in the case of one old woman to whom Nirrim brings food, even an eye. It is clear almost immediately that this society is more dangerous for women than for men; Nirrim informs us that many women keep their hair long because it’s an easy tithe, and she implies the possibility of sexual violence when she explains, “The militia could take things from women they didn’t usually take from men” (12). When anyone asks why things are the way they are, the Half Kith’s response is, “It is as it is” (10). Though Nirrim claims she is “good at managing expectations[...] by not having any,” it is clear she is frustrated living in a world in which she is so limited (6). She describes the common Half Kith saying—“It is as it is”—as “like a threadbare cloth worn so thin you could see light and shadow through its fabric” (10). In other words, there is little to cover the obvious flaws in this world unless one deliberately chooses to ignore them.

Nirrim is already involved in willful work, resisting the oppressive society in which she lives—she helps Raven make illegal passports that allow the Half Kith to leave the Ward to join the rest of the city—but this is not necessarily a result of her own willfulness. Nirrim has a gift for forgery, but she does not use it by choice. She is obsessed with pleasing others, particularly Raven, whose approval and love she craves: “My good girl, Raven sometimes called me, and I was always so proud, and thought that maybe if I was good enough, she would adopt me as her true daughter” (50). The desire to please others extends past Raven, though. Nirrim is involved in a romantic relationship with Aden (a boy also implicated in the forgery operation) only because “[s]ometimes it can feel so good to give someone what they want that it is the next best thing to getting what you want” (24). When she is later arrested, Nirrim tries to please the judge by

submitting passively—“I know what I am. I don’t deserve anything”—even as she wonders, “What made him so different from me, aside from his birth?” (43). She is caught in a perpetual struggle between the “good, quiet girl” she claims to be, who seeks to please anyone at her own expense, and the reflection she sees in her bedroom window, a “girl who was afraid of nothing” (26). It is this “girl in the window’s reflection” who decides to chase after the Elysium bird—a symbol of luxury only the High Kith (the highest class) are allowed to possess—which is loose in the Ward, thereby beginning the action of the story as Nirrim takes her first willful steps (27).

For Nirrim, willfulness becomes possible through desire, and wanting becomes her method of resistance. The beginning of the story finds her both forbidden and unable to consider her own desires, and emotional abuse and manipulation force her to repress her identity. Nirrim’s mother figure, Raven, as one of the agents of Nirrim’s oppressive society, is inaccessible as a willful mentor, and so Nirrim finds her willful mentor elsewhere, in a girl named Sid. As Muñoz writes, “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel past the quagmire of the present” (1). In *The Midnight Lie*, Nirrim only begins to recognize the limits of her world, “to see and feel past the quagmire of the present,” as she enters a queer relationship, falls in love with Sid, and begins to give into her desires, not only for Sid but for a better world. Through the development of her own identity and the connection she establishes with Sid, Nirrim becomes capable of imagining an alternative to her oppressive society. However, she refuses to escape that society and follow Sid into the possibility of a queer utopia Sid hopes for them both; instead, Nirrim remains convinced she can fix her own world. When her relationship with Sid collapses, Nirrim falls back into what Muñoz calls

a “failure of imagination” which results in both “antirelationality and antiutopianism.” Nirrim’s fixation on correcting her world results in her complete loss of identity, empathy, and intersubjectivity, and in this context her willful resistance, though it results in ultimate power, becomes dangerous. *The Midnight Lie* serves, thus, as a cautionary tale of what willfulness without identity and community looks like, and as a warning that sometimes the only way to resist one’s oppressive society is to leave it.

Willful Wanting in the Context of Abuse

Few of our willful heroines have had positive and ongoing parental relationships—in keeping with one of the classic YA tropes, parental figures are generally either dead, distracted, or opposed, sometimes violently, to their children’s forms of resistance. Nirrim is no different: we learn that she was abandoned as a baby and grew up at an orphanage until she was taken in by Raven when she was twelve. Raven, it becomes clear, is both emotionally and physically abusive. Nirrim informs us, in a scene tellingly devoid of quotation marks, of the many “skills” Raven has imparted to her, including to “be quiet,” which Raven teaches Nirrim by sitting on a chair “positioned[...] so that the tip of one leg [of the chair] rested on the web between my thumb and index finger. It didn’t hurt, but I saw right away how it soon would. Now, my girl, not a sound. [Raven] lowered her weight onto the chair” (14, 15). Though parental abuse is certainly not something new to the YA fantasy genre—as we have seen, Celaena in *Throne of Glass* was brought up at the hands of an abusive “master,” and Amari in *Children of Blood and Bone* experienced physical and emotional abuse from both her parents—Rutkoski in *The Midnight Lie* is the first in these five novels to present a heroine who has not yet realized

the extent of the damage this relationship has done (and will continue to do). Nirrim still believes that everything Raven does is to help her: “When she lost her temper, and hurt me, she was always so tender afterward, as though I were her treasure. It felt so good that it was almost worth being punished. And didn’t parents correct their children, so that they would learn?” (87). Nirrim wants so badly to be loved, to have a family, that she is willing to endure almost anything, and she expects others to do the same: when she meets Sid and first learns of Sid’s parents’ plans to force her into a heterosexual marriage she doesn’t want, Nirrim says she only believes it’s wrong “for [Sid’s] sake”—“I would do anything for a mother, a father” (79). Additionally, Rutkoski draws overt parallels between Raven and the senseless rules that dictate the Ward. Though hair is usually taken as a tithe by the militia, it is Raven who cuts Nirrim’s hair, claiming not having an “easy tithe” will force Nirrim to stay out of trouble. Raven also hits Nirrim with an oil lamp, leaving a burn on Nirrim’s cheek that parallels the rash she imagines on her cheek from the beard of a soldier who tries to rape her. Nirrim is thus the first of our heroines who must become willful not only in the context of an oppressive society but in the specific context of a parallel oppressive, abusive relationship she has not yet recognized as harmful.

The parallels between Nirrim’s oppressive society and the oppressive relationship in which she is trapped suggest that if she has any hope of envisioning and creating a new and better world, Nirrim must resist not only her society—as our other willful heroines have done—but also her relationships. The people who surround Nirrim refuse to allow her to desire anything for herself, and so Nirrim’s willful resistance involves learning to desire. There is no space for Nirrim’s own identity and desires within her abusive

relationship with Raven. Raven demands Nirrim put not only Raven's desires first but the entire Ward's. Whenever Nirrim dares to question Raven about their forgery operation, Raven reminds her, "Remember: there are people who need our help" (91). Later, when Nirrim determines to leave the Ward, Raven invokes the responsibility Nirrim feels towards her people when manipulating Nirrim with her feelings towards Raven fails: "Even if you care nothing for me," Raven says, "how can you abandon everyone who depends on you? [...] You know as well as I do [...] that if you leave, lives will be ruined" (191-2). Through repeated emotional manipulation, Raven has created an unequal balance of power so that Nirrim's wants and needs come second to everyone else's. Nirrim frames any choice she makes for herself as a "betray[al]" of Raven, as "selfish" (97, 192). This subordination of her own desires has carried over into other relationships, as well. The first time we meet Nirrim's first romantic partner Aden, Nirrim "pretend[s] that [Aden's] hunger [is her] hunger" when he kisses her (24). In this moment, she literally replaces her own desire with Aden's, and she eventually sleeps with him to fill "the quiet," or emptiness, inside her (24). Nirrim has not been allowed to create an identity for herself, so she looks for it in other people. Narrator Nirrim, reflecting on the story from the present moment, explains, "I pity who I was then: a girl riven by her mistake, beholden to the needs of others, and trained to diminish her own. I was a snake that had not learned to strike" (120). In order to develop and create space for her own identity, Nirrim must learn to willfully resist the "training" she's experienced at the hands of Raven, Aden, and others. In this world, "[w]anting illuminates everything you need, and how the world has failed you" (289). Nirrim must learn to want; this is the only way she can become willful and "learn to strike."

Nirrim's abusive personal relationships necessitate her resistance to them and to her society through desire, but they also create the necessity for a new willful mentor. As we have seen with Laia in *An Ember in the Ashes* and Zélie in *Children of Blood and Bone*, willful mentors are often mothers or mother figures, but Nirrim's mother figure, Raven, is obviously not a viable willful mentor, as she is an agent of Nirrim's continued oppression; not only does Raven attempt to "determine [Nirrim] from without," but she also represents an active threat to Nirrim's existence (Ahmed 10). As with Amari and Zélie in *Children of Blood and Bone*, Nirrim must look to other willful young women to find her willful mentor, but unlike Amari and Zélie, Nirrim's willful mentor is also her romantic interest, Sid. Sid thus becomes involved in Nirrim's willful journey in a unique way. Not only does she serve as an example for Nirrim of what a willful subject looks like and can do, but she also becomes the object of the desire which enables Nirrim to become a willful subject. Like Zélie and Amari, who must rely on each other's willfulness in order to attain willpower and transform their society, Nirrim comes to rely on her connection to and desire for Sid in order to create space for her identity and envision an alternative to the oppressive cycles of the city of Ethin. While both *Children of Blood and Bone* and *An Ember in the Ashes* have suggested the importance of community and interdependency between willful subjects in order to create change, *The Midnight Lie* will offer a vision of what happens when that interdependency is developed but then becomes inaccessible.

Sid as Willful Mentor and Object of Desire

Nirrim first encounters Sid in prison after being arrested for possessing the Elysium bird, and Sid is immediately willful in ways that Nirrim is not. When Nirrim is threatened with sexual assault by a soldier in the prison, she is, as usual, ready to subordinate her own desires to someone else's and submit to violence, insisting to herself, "the kind of tithe he was imagining was no more than what any woman in the Ward might have to pay" (46). Sid, however, refuses to let this happen and intervenes not only by calling out to the soldier but by commanding he scrub her cell and bring her wine. When the soldier tries to threaten Sid with physical aggression, she points out his wedding ring and promises to tell his wife of his actions. Sid exemplifies the willful subject in this introductory moment: she is persistent, vocal, and able to "enact a 'no'" (Ahmed 10). She also challenges society's expectations of her as a young woman. On their first meeting, Nirrim believes Sid to be a young man because of her close-cropped hair and traditionally male dress and so first uses the pronouns he/him to describe her. However, when they are finally released from the darkness of the prison and can see each other clearly, Nirrim recognizes Sid to be a woman and switches to describing her with she/her pronouns. The initial confusion over Sid's pronouns reflects a "conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*," revealing gender as both "performative" and a social construct (Butler 179, italics in original). This is yet another way in which Sid challenges the conventions of her society, as her rejection of gender norms forces the recognition that the concepts normally used to categorize that society are fabricated and inadequate. Most importantly for Nirrim, though, whose willfulness will hinge on wanting, is that Sid is also willful in her desires. Homophobia and heterosexism are

ingrained in the society of the Ward¹—in a flashback to Nirrim’s childhood in the orphanage, Nirrim remembers being told, “Girls are not meant to sleep with girls[...] Boys do not sleep with boys” (73). Sid, however, as a lesbian woman, resists any attempt by this society to control and dictate her sexual desires. Her sexuality and gender presentation in this deeply homophobic society mean she ends up functioning both as willful mentor to Nirrim and as object of Nirrim’s willful desire.

Sid is also a foreigner, and her unique perspective as a complete outsider to Herrath jumpstarts Nirrim’s willful journey as Sid begins to encourage Nirrim to want. Sid asks questions Nirrim has spent her life avoiding:

“*Why* are there kiths? *Why* are some people made to live behind a wall?”

I hunted in my mind for the answer, but hit only blank resistance, as smooth and blind as stone. “I don’t know.”

“It’s strange that you don’t know.”

“It is?”

“Yes. You should know your own country’s history[...] Don’t you *want* to understand why you live the way you do?”

Did I? Sid’s questions stirred a sheer, shallow fear within me. I thought about moments when I made a passport for someone else and contemplated making mine. I thought about when I had decided to return the Elysium [bird].

Each time, it felt like I might turn into smoke. Like if I took a step that I could not

¹ Notably, homophobia is not common in the entirety of Ethin’s society—as becomes clear later, queer relationships are accepted in the glittering world of the High Kith, where desire is king. Nirrim learns later that homophobia has been deliberately encouraged in the Ward to ensure the Half Kith continue to have children, whose magic (as is discussed later in the chapter) the High Kith use to fuel their luxurious lifestyles.

take back, the person I knew myself to be would evaporate. I would no longer recognize myself. (59-60, italics in original)

The first of Sid's questions are not entirely new to Nirrim; she's been asking them since the beginning of the novel, but they've always been brushed aside by Raven. Early in the story, Nirrim asks, "Why must the Half Kith stay in the Ward?" and Raven's response is to sidestep the question and remind Nirrim of the indebtedness Raven expects Nirrim to feel—"I took you in[...] gave you a home" (10). Here, Nirrim's abusive relationship with Raven unites once again with the oppressive nature of their society to keep Nirrim in the dark. Because she's so intent on pleasing her adoptive mother, Nirrim allows this to happen and tries to buy into the Half Kith saying, "It is as it is." She never thinks too hard about the history of the Ward and is instead focused on its reality, a reality in which she walks past the militia saying to herself, "You are nothing[...] No one[...] Yes, I thought. I am unimportant. Insignificant" (18). Because Nirrim has spent her life learning to ignore her own questions about her society and to literally diminish herself as a being by trying to be nothing, Sid's first questions do not disturb her and instead "hit only blank resistance." Sid's next question, however—"Don't you *want* to understand why you live the way you do?"—has a different effect. The emphasis on "want" is significant; theoretically, the question should not be so different from the first two Sid asks, but for Nirrim, who has never been allowed to want anything, it provokes "a sheer, shallow fear." Nirrim is asked to consider what she wants—to leave the Ward with her own passport, to keep the Elysium bird for herself—but the idea of actually doing what she wants makes her feel as if she'd "no longer recognize [her]self." A Nirrim who follows the path of her own desire would be completely opposite to "the person [she knows

her]self to be,” and, because she has not been allowed to create any sort of identity for herself, that Nirrim who desires is “smoke.” Nirrim’s path to an identity that is not “smoke” lies through willful desire—she must figure out not only what she wants but how to take it for herself.

Sid, as both willful mentor and object of desire, plays a key role in this in several ways. The first is that she asks Nirrim to consider her own wants in a variety of contexts. When Nirrim first comes to Sid to request Sid take Nirrim with her outside the Ward, Sid asks, “what exactly do you *want* me to do with you?” (186, emphasis mine). This prompts Nirrim to think to herself, “Does a coward always have to be a coward? Was it so wrong to *want* something, whether I deserved it or not?” and she then responds, “I *want* you to stay in the city for a month” (186, emphasis mine). By asking Nirrim what she wants, Sid here has forced Nirrim to reconsider both what her desires are and whether those desires are valid. As Nirrim has grown up being told her desires are not only invalid but insignificant, this opens up an entire new world of possibilities to her. This new world is in part metaphorical, as Nirrim begins to, as Sid says, “[take] what [she] want[s],” but it is also literal, as Sid brings Nirrim with her out of the Ward and they enter the High Kith quarter of the city, where wanting and desire are at the forefront of everyone’s minds (225). In the world of the wealthy and spoiled High Kith, Nirrim begins to see the power of desire and wishes that her people back in the Ward, who are expected to want nothing, had the same luxuries. At the same time, however, her desire for Sid herself is growing. When Nirrim goes to a dressmaker to have more appropriate clothes made for her, the dressmaker says, “Tell me what you want[...] and I will make it happen.” Nirrim thinks to herself, “I want my liar [Sid...] I want her mouth. I want her perfume to rub off

on my skin like bruised grass. A bubble of longing rose into my throat” (234). Though Nirrim has been attracted to Sid since they first met, it is not until Sid transports her to the High Kith section of Ethin that Nirrim becomes able to accept that attraction. Her embracing of queer desire becomes yet another way of resisting her society, of overcoming the “training” she’s experienced to diminish her own desires, especially any desire she experiences for her own gender. The culmination of this desire occurs when Nirrim finally says to Sid, “I want you,” and they begin a sexual relationship (73). Thus, though Sid acts as Nirrim’s willful mentor by modeling willfulness and encouraging Nirrim to consider her own wants, Sid plays an equally important role as the object of Nirrim’s desire as Nirrim begins to resist her oppressive society.

After embracing queer desire, Nirrim becomes a true willful subject and begins to take her fate into her own hands. Upon waking the morning after she and Sid sleep together, Nirrim leaves immediately to go speak to the printer to make herself a new passport which will allow her to move even more freely through the city—something she’s wanted since the beginning of the story. She finally confronts Aden and refuses his sexual advances for the first time. Aden blames Sid for Nirrim’s change, and when he reminds Nirrim that queer relationships are “against the [Ward’s] law,” Nirrim responds, “Then I’ll continue to break it” (293). This Nirrim, in direct resistance to her oppressive society, is completely opposite from the Nirrim of the beginning of the story, who actually turned herself into the authorities after breaking the law by trying to take the lost Elysium bird. Nirrim even goes to confront Raven, who she has discovered has a house in the Middling (the middle class) quarter of the city and has been using their forgery operation not to help people but for profit. Though Nirrim falls back onto old habits at

first—“[o]bedience was a familiar act in a deeply unfamiliar situation”—especially when Raven refers to Nirrim as her daughter for the first time, Nirrim defies each attempt at emotional manipulation: “You used me,” she says when she first sees Raven, and then “You lied to me” as their conversation continues (Rutkoski 298, 299). When Raven calls her “a wicked, deceitful girl,” Nirrim snaps, “Then don’t cross me, or I will cross you. I am not who I was. You expect that as soon as you threaten me, I will do what you want. No more” (303). Nirrim now embodies the willful subject with willpower—she is vocal after years of silence, she is persistent and defiant after years of submission, and she refuses to let her oppressive society or her oppressive, abusive relationships define her after years of following their rules. She is taking control of her own life and her own body. And it is desire, specifically queer desire, as well as the small community Nirrim and Sid have created, that have enabled this transformation. As she resists her society, Nirrim begins to hope for a better one, and she and Sid set out *together* to discover the answers to the questions both women have been asking since the beginning: why is the class structure in this society so rigid, and why are some people forced to live inside the Ward? By discovering the answers, Nirrim hopes she, with Sid by her side, will be able to liberate her people from oppression.

Willfulness Without Connection

Up until this point, Nirrim’s willful journey has been comparable to those of our previous willful heroines. She has learned to willfully resist her society with the guidance of a willful mentor, and, by creating space for her identity, she has begun to take her fate into her own hands and conceive of an alternative to that society. At the end of *The*

Midnight Lie, however, Nirrim's path begins to deviate, and though she ends the story in a position of willpower and ultimate power, she does not intend to use that power to transform Herrath and instead chooses to reify the oppressive cycles of her society. This process begins when Sid leaves and their interconnectedness collapses. Sid is discovered by someone sent to bring her home, and she finally reveals her true identity after lying to Nirrim about it repeatedly—Sid is a princess from a foreign land, and she is expected to return to her country to fulfill her duty. Though Nirrim has always known Sid lies liberally and has in part admired her for it, Nirrim, who is now aware of the respect she deserves in a relationship, is devastated that Sid has not told her the whole truth. Even when Sid confesses her love for Nirrim, Nirrim rejects her. Throughout the story, as Nirrim has learned to embrace her own desires, she has simultaneously begun to recognize that she possesses the magical power of convincing people lies are truth. For a moment, she considers using these newfound powers to make Sid stay—"I could make her always mine"—but quickly rejects the possibility; unlike Raven or Aden, who refuse to release Nirrim, Nirrim knows how to let go of the ones she loves (328). Sid attempts to convince Nirrim to come with her, painting a utopic picture for Nirrim of what their life could be like together away from the restrictions of Herrath. She begs Nirrim to "be with [her]," but Nirrim cannot visualize what this would look like (330). Nirrim insists that in Sid's country, "I will have no place. I will know no one and nothing. I will have nothing to call mine" (329). Nirrim cannot see herself in this world where she could be happy, and she remains fixated on changing things in Herrath, even as Sid reminds her, "It's not your duty to change the world. It's dangerous to try" (330). Nirrim's "failure of imagination," to borrow Muñoz's terms, is both "antirelational" and "antiutopian," as her

inability to imagine this queer utopia in which she and Sid could embrace queer desire together results in the disintegration of her relationship with Sid and thus the intersubjectivity that originally enabled her willfulness and potential for willpower. Though Nirrim desires Sid, she cannot bring herself to desire the world Sid offers her, as Nirrim believes that that world will fail. Muñoz writes that “[t]he eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process” (10). Nevertheless, Nirrim is unable to share in Sid’s hope for a queer utopia because she cannot imagine it, and so, now alone, Nirrim looks to address what she knows—Herrath—instead of what she cannot imagine.

Sid, who has empowered Nirrim to be willful throughout the story, is gone, but Nirrim continues with her plan to find out the truth of Herrath and free her people of tyranny; in order to fulfill this purpose, she performs a willful but completely selfless act and chooses to give up her sense of self, a decision that, ironically, the desire-less Nirrim of the beginning of the novel would have made. Nirrim uses her newfound magical abilities of convincing people lies are truth to walk into the Keepers Hall, where she hopes to find answers to her many questions about Herrath. She graduates from convincing those who would stop her that she’s merely a councilman to impersonating the Lord Protector, the ultimate authority in Herrath, and begins to feel an unfamiliar sense of superiority.² Nevertheless, Nirrim holds fast to her purpose—to save her people

² Nirrim feels the potential her new powers grant her and becomes “suffused with a feeling I was not at first able to name, because I had never felt it before. Superiority. I had never felt able to make people do what I wanted. Now it was so easy. If I wished it, it was so. If someone resisted, I needed only to twist their memory to make them obey” (338). Though Nirrim refrained from using her new abilities to manipulate Sid, she leans into these abilities now that Sid is gone, and this manipulation ironically parallels the manipulation Nirrim has experienced throughout the novel at the hands of Raven and

—and discovers that the High Kith have been feeding off the magic of the people of the Ward in order to fuel their luxurious lifestyles. Before she can take action and “explain the city’s history to the Half Kith so that we can seize the source of magic”—in short, lead a rebellion—the Lord Protector himself arrives (348). He warns Nirrim her rebellion is unlikely to be successful, eerily echoing the Half Kith saying as he notes, “Ethin is as it is,” but he agrees to allow Nirrim to leave in exchange for a “tithe [of] something precious... [y]our heart” (348). He explains that he doesn’t mean the physical organ but rather “what humans mean when they say *heart*: your delectable mix of worry and awe and love. I mean what makes you *you*” (348, italics in original). The heart here is the core of Nirrim’s sense of self or, in other words, the identity she has spent the entire novel trying to figure out. It also includes her emotions, notably “worry” and “love,” two emotions fundamental to empathy. When Nirrim asks what she will become if she gives up this essential part of her, the Lord Protector responds, “Who can say?” (349). At first, Nirrim (willfully) refuses, even when the Lord Protector threatens to torture her into giving in, but then she thinks of Sid. Nirrim wonders “what I would be if [Sid] had never come here. A stone, maybe. A cloud, floating over everyone, part of nothing. A gust of wind, trying to burrow into warm places” (352). If it were not for Sid’s arrival, Nirrim would have remained a passive, inanimate object, unable to engage in the world around her no matter how hard she tried. Nirrim knows that Sid “would say, No. Don’t surrender yourself. Your goodness, your light, everything that makes me love you.” “But,” Nirrim laments, “she was not here[...] What good was a heart, if it hurt so much?” (353).

Aden. Nirrim has learned not only to embrace what she wants but also how to make other people *do* what she wants, a power she will take full advantage of later when her willfulness turns dangerous.

Without Sid, Nirrim has no need of her heart, of her identity, of herself; she is once again not a subject but an object. And so Nirrim chooses to give up the self she does not believe she needs. Though this act is certainly willful, as it is done with the intention of liberating her people so they can resist and transform their oppressive society, it is also an act that once again subordinates Nirrim to everyone else, the position she has been in since the beginning of the story. Without the interconnectedness Nirrim had developed with Sid, Nirrim's own identity withers and her desires and emotions once again become irrelevant.

Through this willful but self-sacrificing act, Nirrim gains true willpower as well as ultimate power, but without identity, interconnectedness, and empathy, Nirrim falls back into the cycles of oppression of Herrath. The epilogue brings us to the present moment as the narrative tense switches from past to present. Narrator Nirrim tells us, "I see this story perfectly, its moments cut crystal in my mind. I remember how this story, like a great, sheer bowl, bore a sea of emotion—my guilt, my loneliness, my longing. I remember little rivulets of delight, the warmth of love. But I do not feel it anymore. I feel light. Empty. Pure" (355). Nirrim has no emotions or empathy anymore, and she has once again been emptied of identity. The superiority she began to feel earlier when she used her magic to break into the Keepers Hall comes back in full force as she walks through the city: "I stare back at the people who stare at me, daring them to cross me. None of them do. I wish they would. They call out questions as though it is evident by my face that I have the answers. Maybe they are not so stupid after all, yet none is worthy of my reply" (356). She brushes aside anyone who is not useful to her, even her friends, because "[t]here is no power in them, not like there is in [her]," and she "[needs] powerful allies

for what [she] want[s] to accomplish” (356). One of Nirrim’s former friends demands of Nirrim, “who do you think you are?” and Nirrim responds, “I am a god[...] and I am your queen” (356). Instead of Nirrim allowing her people to choose for themselves, to become willful subjects in their own right and transform their society together, Rutkoski sets Nirrim up as a new dictator, fulfilling the role of the old Lord Protector.³ Without her sense of identity and without her connection to Sid, Nirrim’s willfulness becomes no different than that of the oppressive government, or the abusive adoptive mother, which she sought to willfully resist. Nirrim’s willful resistance has—like the other willful heroines who have come before her—led her into a position of power, with command not only over her own fate but over the fate of her world, but she remains trapped within her society. She may have the potential to transform it, but without Sid or her identity, that path becomes impossible.⁴

“I Do Not Feel It Anymore”: Conclusions and Lessons

I began this thesis with the argument that through developing techniques of willful resistance and creating space for their individual identities, willful heroines become empowered to both envision and generate alternatives to their oppressive societies. By examining Celaena from *Throne of Glass* and Jude from *The Cruel Prince*,

³ Foreshadowed by her impersonating him when she first breaks into the Keepers Hall to discover Herrath’s secrets.

⁴ Of course, Nirrim’s story is not yet complete, as the sequel to *The Midnight Lie* has yet to be released as of March 2021. Though the ending of *The Midnight Lie* certainly suggests that Nirrim is unable to enact change without identity or community, it remains to be seen whether in the next book she will be able to regain her sense of self, reestablish her relationship with Sid, and imagine and reach for the queer utopia Sid originally offered to her.

we saw how willfulness and identity reinforce each other, and how willpower becomes inaccessible without a strong sense of identity. However, these heroines and their stories are neither intersubjective nor intersectional, and both Celaena and Jude lack willful mentors or any sort of community to support them, leaving questions about whether willpower can be successful when limited to only one individual. With Laia in *An Ember in the Ashes*, we saw an intersectional and intersubjective heroine, as well as the importance of cultural and familial connections in reinforcing willpower. Zélie and Amari in *Children of Blood and Bone* expanded on the importance of community in general to demonstrate the importance of community specifically between willful subjects, and how willful heroines can support each other in order to attain willpower and the ability to transform their society. It is not only the creation of space for an *individual* willful identity but the creation of space for a *community* of willful identities that enables willful subjects to enact change and overturn the hierarchical systems which attempt to contain and control them.

Based on its similarities to these other stories, *The Midnight Lie* should have continued with this trend. As Nirrim learns to desire in general and to desire Sid in particular, she should cultivate a type of intersubjectivity different from what we have seen before—a romantic one—and in so doing acquire the means to envision and reach for a new and better world. Desire, especially queer desire, as Nirrim’s willful technique, should (and initially does) empower her, suggesting queerness’s ability to, as Muñoz argues, “[let] us feel that this world is not enough” and that there is something better out there (1). However, as we have seen, though Nirrim does become a willful subject and take her fate and the fate of her world into her hands, she is unable to imagine the queer

utopia Sid offers her. With the resulting loss of Sid, intersubjectivity, and community, Nirrim gives up her own identity and in turn loses her ability to empathize, leaving her in a position of ultimate power from which she will reify the tyrannical structures of power that have plagued her world since the start of the novel—perhaps Nirrim’s ultimate resistance in this case would have been to leave Herrath entirely, to seek Sid’s queer utopia. *The Midnight Lie* can thus be read as a warning of the dangers of the willful subject who lacks identity, empathy, and, most of all, connection with others. It is not the individual willful subject who will transform her society—in fact, the lone willful subject may be in danger of falling back into the cycles of oppression she had hoped to resist. Instead, it is a community of willful subjects who will be able to enact this transformation. As Audre Lorde writes, “Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (“The Master’s Tools,” 26).

Of course, *The Midnight Lie* and the other novels discussed in this thesis still leave us with many questions, especially when we look to transport these messages about identity, community, willfulness, and willpower out of the realm of fantasy and back into the real world. Though we, like the willful heroines of these five novels, live in an environment where sexism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression exist, we don’t have access to magical powers to confront them. We can’t develop battle techniques in order to symbolically defeat tyrannical kings and usher in new and better social orders. We can’t draw our knives or heft our swords or ready our magic and overturn entire systems of entrenched injustice and domination with our family and friends and lovers by our sides. How does one willfully resist one’s society in

the real world? How does one develop a community of willful subjects to envision and enact change? How does one acquire willpower and transform one's world outside the bounds of a young adult high fantasy novel?

CONCLUSION.

THE ECHO OF CRACKING SPINES

Before the book club, each of them thought they were alone. It's one of the first things they discuss at the first meeting—how they'd each go to the library or the bookstore and imagine they must be the only person in the entire world reading this particular book. Of course they all knew this was illogical. Many of the books they were reading were bestsellers and critically acclaimed, and legions of devoted fans wrote gushing, fanatical reviews on Amazon, on blogs, on various social media platforms... And yet opening one of these books, whether the spine was cracking for the first or the hundredth time, felt like a singular experience, as if no one had ever done it before. It was exhilarating, but it was also lonely.

And then they saw the poster tacked to the empty corkboard just outside the cafeteria. It was hand-drawn (Lily took credit for the color scheme and the neat bubble letters), and it proclaimed that there was going to be a book club meeting on Wednesday evenings at Webster Public Library. Beneath the date and time of the first meeting, there was a list, printed in careful black Sharpie (courtesy of Thea), of the books they might read: *Shadow and Bone* by Leigh Bardugo, *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Maas, *Red Queen* by Victoria Aveyard, *An Ember in the Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir, *Strange the Dreamer* by Laini Taylor, *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black, *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi, *The Midnight Lie* by Marie Rutkoski. Of those students who bothered to read the poster, only a couple dozen actually recognized the books, and of those couple dozen,

only a handful felt their hearts race in their chests as their eyes traced the familiar titles. They are the first to arrive at the meeting that first Wednesday evening, though there are also several attendees who felt only mild recognition or who didn't recognize the titles or authors at all.

The meeting is held in the library basement. The building is built into the side of a hill, so there's a door to the outside and several small windows on one wall through which the light from dimmed streetlights streams. It's an industrial-looking building, barely attractive with all its cement and sharp corners, but the inside is well-furnished with floor-to-ceiling shelves and a sprawling circulation desk. The basement is supposed to be a meeting space for clubs such as this one, but clubs such as this one rarely last long in this town. The walls are lined with folding tables littered with stray books from the last community book drive. Lily and Thea set up an ambitious twenty plastic chairs in a misshapen circle in the center of the room. Not every chair is filled, but once Lily and Thea are seated, there's only seven empty, scattered throughout the group. They take this as a victory.

They begin the meeting with introductions. Lily stands from her chair, sweeps her hair over one shoulder, and announces her name (Lillian, but she prefers Lily), her favorite author (Sabaa Tahir), and her favorite genre (high fantasy, naturally). Thea stands next (Thea; Leigh Bardugo; high fantasy, as well, though she also enjoys historical). They proceed slowly around the jagged circle. There's Anna who's obsessed with Maggie Stiefvater and Marta who prefers urban fantasy but is curious to try something new. They are mostly but not exclusively girls. They are all young, their round

faces bright and nervous, and many of them fiddle with glasses perched on the edges of their noses or the zippers of JanSport backpacks.

The conversation is stilted at first. Many of them are reluctant to speak. They are shy and unsure and most have spent the past several years hiding their noses in books, though what they've been hiding from varies significantly. Slowly, they are drawn out and encouraged to participate—for some, Lily's ebullience stirs a matching animation, and for others, Thea's dark, thoughtful eyes quiet their fears. They talk of the silence of the library or the bookstore when they go to pick out a new book, creeping around on the tips of their toes as if stepping too loudly will draw the entire world's attention towards them. They talk of smuggling books into classes and walking down hallways with one eye fixed in front of them and the other down at the story unfolding across the page. They talk of the characters who feel like friends, of the characters who feel like enemies, of the characters whose deaths made them cry and wear black for three days as if in mourning (this from Lily, whose melodramatic tendencies are quickly becoming an inside joke). The conversation moves gradually towards a discussion of their first book—something none of them have ever read before, Lily demands, before Thea reminds her that might be difficult. Caroline suggests it should be something foundational to the genre (“like *Lord of the Rings*?” asks Leo, and they all laugh), but Jana wants to read something new so they can make up their minds about it before anyone else does.

They settle on *Girls of Paper and Fire* by Natasha Ngan. A couple of them have already read it, including Thea, but they have so many thoughts they want to discuss that they're more than happy to read it again. They all file out of the library basement and into the damp mid-spring air chattering about where to find a copy. Leo recommends a couple

library ebook apps, and several of them make faces, proclaiming their energetic allegiance to hard copies. Anna declares she absolutely *has* to be able to make marks on the page, so she'll be heading to the bookstore to buy herself a copy. Lily disperses them with a reminder that they should have read the first five chapters by next week, and they all head in different directions, some to mount bikes, some to the parking lot to retrieve their cars, some to catch the bus, some to parents idling by the curb.

Wednesday night book club slides into their routines as smoothly as a sword slides out of its sheath. They lament together the lost potential of a newly dead character, they seethe over a particularly pointless plot twist, they debate back and forth what it means that so many of these protagonists fulfill their destinies through violence. Sometimes they sit quietly as one person talks, raging about their parents or school or society in general and how they wish they could live within the pages of one of these stories instead.

It's Jana who first proposes the petition to the school board to diversify the high school English curriculum. Lily brings her laptop to the next meeting, and they all gather around her chair as she balances it on her lap and tries to turn their overlapping ideas into coherent sentences. "We, the Book Club of Magical Revolution, demand that the books we read in our English classes prepare us for the real world." That doesn't mean they should get rid of Shakespeare, Caroline makes sure to say, and the others groan. Thea nods sagely and reminds Lily to write that they just don't want to read so many old, dead, straight white men.

The petition is at first met with outrage, not because the request is unreasonable but because of the list the book club has attached at the end with some of their recommendations. Many of them are young adult novels, and one teacher slams a hand down on his table at the staff meeting and declares that if it's not on the AP Literature test, it should not be taught in a classroom. But the high school principal is excited—it's rare that students want to get involved like this, she gushes at the meeting—and determines that a change must be made. They're not going to stop teaching Shakespeare or Mark Twain or F. Scott Fitzgerald, she assures the group when the AP Literature teacher's face contorts, but maybe they should add in some contemporary authors, or even some old ones whose stories are not traditionally taught to high school students. It's a small victory when, at the start of the next school year, several of the book club members stream into the library basement Wednesday night waving school-provided copies of Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. "Now we just have to get them to teach fantasy," Marta announces.

They grow up eventually. Lily and Thea are among the first to graduate, but they return to the book club when they're home from college with new thoughts about how to read and understand these novels they've loved for so long. At the start of each new school year, someone tacks the old poster back up on the corkboard outside the cafeteria. The list of titles in Sharpie at the bottom grows a bit each time, and new members arrive with new plans and ideas. They host bake sales so they can buy young adult novels to donate to local charities, and they organize small protests when concerned parents attempt to have certain books removed from the library. They sit in their plastic chairs in

their misshapen circle—even more misshapen now that there’s more than twenty chairs in it—and talk about which YA novel was the one that first sucked them in, the one that changed their life.

It is the longest lasting club the Webster Public Library has ever hosted inside its basement. Its members disperse slowly across the country and around the world. They become political leaders and found non-profit organizations and teach in schools.

They still read. When they open a new book, the sound of the spine cracking seems to echo, as if many books are being opened at once. It is still a singular experience, but it is also a shared one.

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