

Cyborgs, Wolves, and Aliens, Oh My: Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles* and
Diversity in YA Fairy Tale Retellings

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ABSTRACT

The following study is interested in questions of diversity and inclusiveness in Marissa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles*, a tetralogy of best-selling young adult fairy tale revisions comprised of *Cinder* (2012), *Scarlet* (2013), *Cress* (2014), and *Winter* (2015). Scholars have expended significant energy defining the fairy tale, tracing its history and development, and analyzing 20th-century adult fairy tale revisions informed by second-wave feminism. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to young adult fairy tale revisions of the 21st Century and less still on *The Lunar Chronicles*. This study begins the work of filling that gap. Through a close reading of *The Lunar Chronicles*, I argue that Meyer's tetralogy is an influential, complex, and thematically comprehensive example of an ongoing shift away from feminist fairy tale revisions for adults toward young adult fairy tale revisions that focus on diversity and inclusiveness. My project begins with a chapter situating Meyer's work in the context of existing fairy tale scholarship and the burgeoning emphasis on diversity in contemporary American culture and young adult publishing. The following three chapters provide, respectively, a close reading of *The Lunar Chronicles* focused on racial identity, gender and sexuality, and disabilities. In showcasing more recent YA fairy tale retellings, the final chapter seeks to draw some tentative conclusions about the continuing importance of diversity and inclusiveness in an evolving genre of reimagined fairy tales for a young adult audience.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In her bestselling young adult science fiction tetralogy *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012-2015), Marissa Meyers reimagines four classic fairy tales: “Cinderella” (*Cinder*), “Little Red Riding Hood” (*Scarlet*), “Rapunzel” (*Cress*), and “Snow White” (*Winter*). Meyer’s work continues a tradition of revising traditional fairy tales. Disney’s Princess franchise of reimagined fairy tales has essentially defined the genre for generations of American children, while Angela Carter’s adult fairy tale revisions challenged its patriarchal orientation in the wake of second-wave feminism. In my detailed textual analysis of *The Lunar Chronicles*, I argue that Meyer’s tetralogy is a relatively early, influential, and comprehensive example of a developing wave of specifically young adult fairy tale retellings that reflects a growing focus on issues of diversity and inclusiveness in 21st-century America. My project begins with a chapter that places Meyer’s work in historical context, focusing on the development and definition of the fairy tale and presenting a brief overview of previous approaches to fairy tale revision. In the next three chapters, I analyze *The Lunar Chronicles* as it complicates questions of, respectively, race, gender and sexuality, and disability. My project concludes with a brief overview of young adult fairy tale retellings of the last decade, exploring how the genre continues to engage with questions of diversity and inclusiveness.

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Chapter One

The Diverse and Inclusive Fairy Tales Retellings of Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles*

"Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." Neil Gaiman¹

In 2012 Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, the first book in what would become *The Lunar Chronicles*, was published to immediate acclaim. The novel soon became a *New York Times* bestseller, as did the subsequent volumes: *Scarlet* (2013), *Cress* (2014), and *Winter* (2015). By 2015, the four novels had established Meyer as a major figure among YA authors. *The Lunar Chronicles* is an early and influential example of contemporary young adult² fairy tale fiction that revises traditional fairy tales (such as those of the Brothers Grimm) and popular 20th-century retellings (principally those of the cultural juggernaut of Disney) in the context of the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion throughout American culture—an emphasis that began to gain steam with the founding of Black Lives Matter in 2013 and became a burgeoning movement following the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

In prior decades, fairy tale retellings had rarely engaged with questions of diversity. Disney's Princess franchise, with rare exceptions—such as *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)—were, it might be safely be said, snow white. Popular fairy tale novels of the 1990's and early 2000's were similarly pale, heteronormative, and ableist. These texts include Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted* (1997), *Fairest* (2006), Robin McKinley's *Spindle's End*

¹Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 2.

² I will be using the abbreviation YA throughout the paper to refer to this.

(2000), *Rose Daughter* (1997), *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of the Beauty and the Beast* (1978), Jessica Day George's *Sun and Moon, Ice and Snow* (2008) and Shannon Hale's *The Goose Girl* (2003), *Rapunzel's Revenge* (2008).

Meyer's work embodies a break away from such white-centric, heteronormative, and ableist stories. In a 2014 interview, Meyer commented that she wanted *The Lunar Chronicles* to take place in "different parts of the world...because I wanted the series to have a global feel, in part because the issues the characters are facing are big global issues." As the series developed over the three years following the publication of *Cinder* in 2012, Meyer's focus on diversity and representation became more explicit and intentional. She noted that over time she has "become more aware of diversity, including a diverse range of characters."³ In 2015, she asked interviewer Sam Maggs, "why *shouldn't* Snow White be a woman of color? Or any other princess, for that matter?"⁴

She wasn't the only person in the YA community asking that question. The hashtag #WeNeedDiverseBooks, started in 2014 by Ellen Oh and Malinda Lo as a response to an all-white, all-male panel at a YA panel at BookCon,⁵ indicates this awareness of the need for diversity in YA fiction generally. The hashtag garnered interest from other authors, publishers, and general readers and quickly turned into a three-day event called "Diversify Your Shelves." The hashtag took off on April 29th, 2014 and became officially 'trending,' leading to the establishment of the We Need Diverse Books non-profit, which "advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all

³ White Caitlian, "Q&A: Marissa Meyer Talks Fairy Tales and Feminism," *Bustle*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/13837-the-lunar-chronicles-marissa-meyer-talks-feminism-in-fairy-tales-inside-info-on-the-series-finale>.

⁴ Sam Maggs, "Interview: Marissa Meyer on *Winter's* Woman of Color Snow White & YA Representation," *The Mary Sue*, November 10, 2015, <https://www.themarysue.com/interview-marissa-meyer/>.

⁵"About Us," We Need Diverse Books, Accessed April 10, 2023, <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

young people.”⁶ We Need Diverse Books quickly changed the conversation and language around YA literature, not even a year later inspiring the hashtag #ownvoices, which was started by science fiction and fantasy YA author Corinne Duvyis.⁷ The hashtag was used to identify and market books representing marginalized groups that were written by an author who shared that identity.

Despite the popularity of #ownvoices, in 2021 We Need Diverse Books released a statement about their decision to quit using the hashtag as they found that it “has since expanded in its use to become a ‘catch all’ marketing term by the publishing industry” and, as a result, raises issues due to the vagueness of the term, which has then been used to place diverse creators in uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations.”⁸ Instead, We Need Diverse Books is encouraging the use of more specific hashtags when marketing and advertising a diverse book, simply using the #WeNeedDiverseBooks hashtag along with hashtags like #BlackAuthor, #disabled, #DecolonizeYourBookshelf, #SharingIndigenousStories, and more.⁹ The use of these hashtags and identifiers in bookstores like Barnes and Noble, school libraries, public libraries, and more has helped normalize diversity conversations among younger adults and patrons. These young individuals have increased their demands for such books and are using hashtags to search for and promote diverse books on social media platforms. This shift in American culture and the resulting production of inclusive and diverse texts for American young people shows how the fairy tale has in the last ten years begun to evolve to reflect the social environment it occupies.

⁶“About Us,” We Need Diverse Books.

⁷“#OwnVoices: Diversity in Children’s and Young Adult Books,” Orange County Library System, Last modified June 27, 2022, <https://libguides.ocls.info/ownvoices/about>.

⁸Alaina Lavoie, “Why We Need Diverse Books Is No Longer Using the Term #OwnVoices,” *We Need Diverse Books*, June 6, 2021, <https://diversebooks.org/why-we-need-diverse-books-is-no-longer-using-the-term-ownvoices/>.

⁹ JoAnn Yao, “Replacing #OwnVoices: Promoting Diverse Library Books with Specificity,” *We Need Diverse Books*, March 18, 2022, <https://diversebooks.org/replacing-ownvoices-promoting-diverse-library-books-with-specificity/>.

Working within the fairy tale definition established by scholars such as Jack Zipes, Carl Lindahl, and Maria Tatar, this thesis offers a close reading of Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles* that illuminates its status as an early example of this shift in emphasis. *The Lunar Chronicles*' length and complex storyline provides a comprehensive look at a variety of diverse and inclusive elements (race, gender, sexuality, and disability) in a single text. (Other recent retellings tend to center on only one or two marginalized identities.) Further, unlike Zipes and Tatar, who largely focus on adult fairy tale retellings in the context of 20th- and 21st-century feminism, this thesis will focus on contemporary fairy tale revisions for young adults. As a long-time consumer of these texts, as the author of a previous thesis focused on the YA battle royale narrative formula, as a young person familiar with the publishing industry as the child of a freelance fiction writer who works frequently in New York publishing, and as a fledgeling publishing professional poised to enter Columbia University publishing program, I am well suited to provide such a reading. Moreover, because YA texts are broadly neglected by academic critics, this analysis begins the work of filling a gap in the ongoing scholarly discourse about fairy tales and fairy tale revisions.

The rest of this chapter situates my close reading of Meyer's work in the context both of the fairy tale's historical development as understood by other scholars and of the contemporary social justice movement's demand for diversity and inclusion. From there, the thesis breaks *The Lunar Chronicles* down in terms of racial identity, gender and sexuality, and physical and mental disabilities. Specifically, Chapter Two, "Hybridity: Wires, Wolves, and Shells," examines how *The Lunar Chronicles* tackles questions of racial identity. Chapter Three, "Gender and Sexuality: Cyborgs, Androids, and the Body," focuses on *The Lunar Chronicles*' depictions of gender and sexuality. Chapter Four, "Disability: Lunar Madness, Wires, and Blindness," turns to Meyer's

depiction of both physical and mental disabilities. In concluding, Chapter Five, “Retelling and Reclaiming: The YA Fairy Tale in 2023,” showcases more recent inclusive and diverse YA fairy tale retellings as an indication of the inclusivity and diversity to be found in the segment of the YA publishing industry devoted to fairy tale revisions. This close analysis of an early, comprehensive, and important YA fairy tale retelling is intended to direct the attention of scholars to a body of contemporary fairy-tale revisions too often neglected by academic critics.

Defining the Fairy Tale

Defining the term “fairy tale” is difficult because of its various usages in our cultural setting. The term is used with beginnings (a “fairy tale wedding”) and endings (a “fairy tale ending”). It can also express a state of naive delusions (a “fairy tale world”). Whatever the term means we seem to use it when something is idealized. Carl Lindahl locates the coinage ‘fairy tale’ in the 19th Century, when an “established literary precedent, age-old oral tradition, and current fashion merged.”¹⁰ In regards to this claim, we can understand how the term “fairy tale” is a product of cultural and social contexts.

The stories themselves originate from an oral tradition and are “considered to be the natural and spontaneous expression of illiterate or semi-literate peasants.” They reflect the lives of the people who told them. According to fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, they are closely “tied to the rituals, customs, and beliefs” of communities and “fostered a sense of belonging and hope.”¹¹ Fairy tale scholar Elizabeth Harries agrees, noting that such stories have “elements of folk tradition and magical or supernatural elements [and]... a certain, predictable structure.”¹²

¹⁰ Lindahl, “Definition and History of Fairy Tales,” 12.

¹¹ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

¹² Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time: Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

The transition from oral fairy tales to written fairy tales is associated with the Brothers Grimm (German, *märchen*), Charles Perrault (French, *conte de fées*), and Hans Christian Andersen. The Brothers Grimm, the authors of *Children's and Household Tales* (1812-58), now popularly known as *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, are especially important. Their anthology features popular fairy tales such as "Cinderella"¹³ and "Little Red Riding Hood." The belief that the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* are texts meant for children, however, is, according to Harries, a result of "mistaken romantic notions: that fairy tales are relics of a culture's early beginning, and that children are beings who trail...from that ideal, mythic past to which only they have unmediated access."¹⁴ In his 1939 lecture "On Fairy Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien also objects to the misconception of "a natural connexion between the minds of children and fairy-stories" that he finds to be "at best an error of false sentiment."¹⁵

In evaluating *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Lindahl seems to agree. He identifies six key elements of the fairy tale, which aren't geared solely toward children. Fairy tales are 1) set in a time long ago and in a place far far away, 2) contain magic, 3) contain symbolic objects that represent poetic images, 4) exhibit stereotypical characters, 5) highlight good and evil in extreme terms, and 6) end with a just result for each character and a happily ever after.¹⁶ However, Lindahl points out three additional elements of the fairy tale that are not key, but are commonly seen. They often 1) center on children or adolescents, 2) who evolve from adolescents to married

¹³ Although originally written by French author Charles Perrault, The Grimm Brothers' version is most commonly thought of due to their collections' overwhelming popularity.

¹⁴ Harries, *Twice Upon a Time*, 11.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories." In *Tales From the Perilous Realm*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1997), pg

¹⁶ Lindahl, "Definition and History of Fairy Tales," 12-3.

adults by the end of the story, 3) while transitioning from the real world to the magical world and back.¹⁷

These last three characteristics dominate the fairy tales we have today, especially the Disney films, indicating a shift toward an audience of children. Cultural studies scholars Lynda Haas and Shaina Trapedo claim that “Disney is responsible for Western culture’s basic perceptions about the fairy-tale genre” as the corporation “borrows, appropriates, and revises the tales” before dispersing them and making “their version[s] pervasive.”¹⁸ Disney’s first full-length animated fairy tale adaptation, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) laid the groundwork for its future animated films and the ‘Disney Princess’ franchise by drawing from “features based on tales from the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault.”¹⁹ As Disney’s film adaptations of fairy tales became cultural icons, many critics struggled with the “original elements that Disney’s early fairy tales” kept in their films, particularly “the patriarchal view of the world and implicit lessons about gender roles.”²⁰

The criticism of Disney’s representations of gender and the patriarchy led to another evolution of the fairy tale: the fairy tale rewritten for the adult. This evolution is marked by the 20th Century’s second-wave feminist movement, which inspired the first major shift in the written fairy tale and its readership since the Victorian period. The relationship between second-wave feminism and fairy tales is rooted in the famous Lurie-Lieberman debate, which took place during the 1970’s. Alison Lurie argued for the opportunity of female empowerment in fairy tales. In response, Marcia Lieberman protested that women in fairy tales are characterized by

¹⁷ Lindahl, “Definition and History of Fairy Tales,” 13.

¹⁸ Linda Haas and Shaina Trapedo, “Definition and History of Fairy Tales.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-tale Cultures*, ed. Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, et. al (New York: Routledge, 2018), 178.

¹⁹ Haas and Trapedo, 180.

²⁰ Haas and Trapedo, 181.

patriarchal ideologies.²¹ The resulting scholarship has, to a certain extent, ascertained that fairy tales are misogynistic in nature and a source of the stereotypical passive fairy-tale heroine. The academic discourse also spilled over into popular culture and literature.

We see this most clearly in the works of Angela Carter, who penned *The Bloody Chamber* (1979),²² a collection of fairy-tale retellings that came to be a key part of “generational influences on both feminist and more general approaches to fairy tale.”²³ These feminist fairy tales, as scholar Christy Williams explains, “critique and reject their source tales’ gender ideology, and at times offer alternative ways of being.”²⁴ Here we see the beginning of the trend of intentionally retelling the fairy tale in a way that undoes, revises, and reshapes the ‘classic’ fairy tale to contemporary cultural and social standards. The 21st Century has seen a similar evolution geared towards a YA audience.

The Lunar Chronicles: A Summary

To examine how Marissa Meyer’s *Lunar Chronicles* is an inclusive and representative example of that evolution, we must have a general understanding of the story arc of the four novels. Set in the Third Era, a century after World War IV, the story takes place during a pandemic that coincides with the beginning of a war between Earth and Luna, a moon colony that has been officially recognized as its own country. The people of Luna—“Lunars”—have genetically mutated. These mutations enable them to manipulate another person’s bioelectricity—to ‘glamour’ them using mind control to impact their actions, thoughts, and

²¹ Allison Craven, “Feminism.” In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-tale Cultures*, edited by Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, et.al (New York: Routledge, 2018), 66.

²² *The Bloody Chamber* is geared towards an adult audience, often featuring explicitly sexual themes.

²³ Craven, “Feminism,” 66.

²⁴ Christy Williams, *Mapping Fairy-tale Space: Pastiche and Metafiction in Borderless Tales* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 4

perceptions. This mutation, known as the “Lunar Gift,” is coveted in Luna. Individuals born without it are called “shells” and are removed from their families at birth by the government, which uses them for horrific science experiments. If someone does have the Lunar Gift and doesn’t utilize it, they will descend into Lunar Madness, which causes them to hallucinate and slowly go insane.

The story follows Cinder as she discovers that she is the exiled heir to the Lunar throne. Over the course of the four novels, Cinder gathers a host of friends, each one a reinvented figure from a traditional fairy tale. Scarlet and Wolf are drawn from “Little Red Riding Hood.” Cress is a reimagined version of Rapunzel, Winter a reinvented version of Snow White. Together they work to overthrow Levana, Luna’s illegitimate tyrant queen. The story ends with Cinder’s ascension to Luna’s throne, where she signs a treaty ending the war and distributes Levana’s secret antidote, bringing the pandemic to an end.

The novels don’t wholly conform to the fairy tales Meyer draws her cast of characters from. But the arc of the story echoes a fundamental fairy tale trope in its focus on an orphaned ruler who discovers her true heritage and is restored to her throne, bringing to an end her usurper’s reign of terror, and restoring justice to her kingdom. In developing this plot, Meyer employs all of the characteristics Lindahl attributes to fairy tales. At the same time, she reinvents the fairy tale in the context of growing cultural emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, and influences the legions of inclusive fairy tales that follow.²⁵

²⁵ Some notable recent texts are Kalynn Bayron’s *Cinderella is Dead* (2020), Brigid Kemmerer’s *A Curse so Dark and Lonely* (2019), Lauren Pohl’s *The Grimrose Girls* (2021), and Alix E. Harrow’s *A Spindle Splintered* (2021).

Chapter Two

Race: Wires, Wolves, and Shells

“The series has long been celebrated for centering the stories of princesses of color—Cinder is Asian/Caucasian, while Winter is black—and for its representation of mental illness, now those women are actually on the covers in the (human and cyborg) flesh.” – Natalie Zutter²⁶

Although Marissa Meyer herself has acknowledged that diversity and representation wasn't at the forefront of her mind when she started writing *The Lunar Chronicles*, she does note that over time she has “become more aware of diversity, including a diverse range of characters.” She adds that the diversity seen in the book first began with her desire for the series to take place in “different parts of the world...because I wanted the series to have a global feel, in part because the issues the characters are facing are big global issues.”²⁷

In *The Lunar Chronicles*, Meyer sets up various spaces to explore and push back against racial hierarchies and stereotypes. Meyer breaks her characters into three distinct “racial” categories: cyborgs/androids, Lunars, and humans. In Meyer's world, humans with different phenotypes are not considered different racially; the important distinctions are terrestrial origin and hybridity. Part of Meyer's point is to show how these categories often intersect, meaning that many of the characters take up hybrid identities that further complicate our understanding of racial diversity within the series. One of the key hybrid identities that helps illustrate the

²⁶ Natalie Zutter, “Marissa Meyer Reflects on Her Iconic Lunar Chronicles Series,” *Den of Geek*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.denofgeek.com/books/marissa-meyer-reflects-on-her-iconic-lunar-chronicles-series/>.

²⁷ White Caitlian, “Q&A: Marissa Meyer Talks Fairy Tales and Feminism,” *Bustle*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/13837-the-lunar-chronicles-marissa-meyer-talks-feminism-in-fairy-tales-inside-info-on-the-series-finale>.

complexities of racial identity can be seen through Cinder, who is both human, Lunar, cyborg, and Asian.

Cyborg Prejudice: The Physical and Mechanical Body

The cyborg category is the first one readers encounter in *Cinder*. The opening line of the book introduces Cinder as a non-human by stating that “the screw through Cinder’s ankle had rusted.”²⁸ This line manages to establish her cyborg-self, but also provide an opening to make her relatable and human. When Cinder removes her foot she realizes that ““a sense of release hovered at the end of those wires—freedom.”²⁹ Cinder’s relationship with her cyborg identity is complex as she finds freedom in removing a foot that is too small for her, but takes pains to cover up her cyborg self, going so far as to always wear gloves that cover her hands that disguise her metal hand.

Cinder’s understanding of herself as an othered figure is further perpetuated by her stepmother telling Cinder “you are *not* human,”³⁰ forcing her to realize that “legally [she] belonged to Adri. She had no rights, no belongings. She was nothing but a cyborg.”³¹ In fact a cyborg is by definition a hybrid of machine and human. Her stepmother continuously erases her human half by pointing out that while Cinder might have once been human she isn’t “even human anymore.”³² When Cinder protests that she is human, Adri responds ““No, Cinder. Humans cry,” before trying to prove her point by telling Cinder to cry over her dead stepsister.

²⁸ Meyer, *Cinder*, 3.

²⁹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 3.

³⁰ Meyer, *Cinder*, 280.

³¹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 281.

³² Meyer, *Cinder*, 279.

In the future fairy tale space that *The Lunar Chronicles* exists in, cyborgs are further dehumanized through the Cyborg Protection Act, which was instituted following “a series of devastating cyborg crimes [that] had caused widespread hatred and led to catastrophic riots... The protests may have been prompted by the violent spree, but they were a result of generations of growing disdain.”³³ Under the Cyborg Protection Act, cyborgs don’t technically qualify as citizens, once again emphasizing the othering of the cyborg as a racial category. As Jill Coste points out in “Allegorical Diversity in Fairy-Tale Dystopia,” the Cyborg Protection Act “evokes the Jim Crow-era laws that segregated Black people under the premise of separate-but-equal and legalized the marginalization of Black bodies.”³⁴

Meyer establishes this parallel in the second chapter of *Cinder*, when Cinder and Iko, her stepmother’s android servant, mourn that they can never try the sticky buns at the market as “Chang Sacha didn’t serve cyborgs,”³⁵ a sentiment reminiscent of American segregation before the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, which banned discrimination in businesses based on race, religion, gender identity, or nationality.³⁶ Meyer addresses the issue of cyborgs as a marginalized race through Kai, the prince of the Eastern Commonwealth and Cinder’s version of Prince Charming, who slowly comes to comprehend his own bigotry, noting that he had “studied [the Cyborg Protection Act] when he was fourteen years old. He had agreed with the laws. He’d been convinced... that they were so obviously *right*.”³⁷ As Prince Kai grapples with his own

³³ Meyer, *Cress*, 306.

³⁴ Jill Coste, “Allegorical Diversity in Fairy-Tale Dystopias,” in *Race in Young Adult Speculative Fiction*, edited by Meghan Gilbert-Hickey and Miranda A. Green-Barteet (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2021), 66.

³⁵ Meyer, *Cinder*, 19.

³⁶ “Legal Highlight: The Civil Rights Act of 1964,” United States Department of Labor, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/civil-rights-center/statutes/civil-rights-act-of-1964#:~:text=In%201964%2C%20Congress%20passed%20Public.hiring%2C%20promoting%2C%20and%20firing>

³⁷ Meyer, *Cress*, 306.

prejudices and acceptance of the marginalization of cyborgs, readers see social change that reflects the change brought about in America with the Civil Rights Movement.

In the third novel of the series, *Cress*, Prince Kai finally addresses the racism cyborgs face by disbanding the cyborg draft that forced cyborgs to undergo scientific experimentation in the hope of discovering a cure for Leutomosis, the pandemic that is ravaging Earth. Following this announcement, Cinder realizes that “with one speech—not three minutes spent behind the podium—Kai had begun to unravel decades of cyborg prejudice.”³⁸ Meyers depicts the movement towards social change accurately, ensuring that readers understand that changing the law doesn’t alone eradicate racism. Cinder realizes that “it wouldn’t solve everything, of course. There was still the Cyborg Protection Act that claimed cyborgs as property of their guardians and limited their freedoms. But it was something. It was a start.”³⁹ Global change isn’t seen until Cinder herself takes the throne as the new queen of Luna and uses the negotiation of peace treaties to request that “all laws regarding cyborgs be reexamined, and we be given the same equality and basic rights as everybody else.”⁴⁰

The large-scale move to dismantle the legal structures that marginalize cyborgs can’t be done by Prince Kai or any other world leader in *The Lunar Chronicles* because they do not share the oppressed cyborg’s racial identity. When Cinder acquires the throne and requests the eradication of discriminatory laws against cyborgs, Meyer uses the fairy tale adaptation to emphasize that real social progression must include the oppressed. This reflects real world scenarios where social progression is marked by the empowerment of marginalized people, as

³⁸ Meyer, *Cress*, 313.

³⁹ Meyer, *Cress*, 313.

⁴⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 787.

with the election of the first Black president of the United States, the first female vice president of the United States, and more.

Lunars: Fear of the Unnatural Evolution of Humans

The second racial category that we see in *The Lunar Chronicles* is that of the Lunars, “a society that had evolved from an Earthen moon colony centuries ago, but they weren’t human anymore.”⁴¹ Because they exist in this liminal space between humans and aliens, the Lunars encounter racism from the people of Earth. The people of Earth see Lunars as dangerous, evil, enemies. Cinder emphasizes the racism the Lunars face through her own expression of their otherness. Through Cinder’s perspective, we learn that they can “alter a person’s brain—make you see things you shouldn’t see, feel things you shouldn’t feel, do things you didn’t want to do. Their unnatural power had made them a greedy and violent race.”⁴² Cinder’s condemnation of the entire race exposes her own prejudices. Her emphasis on their powers as “unnatural” when they are, in fact, a result of genetics, highlights the fear of those powers.

This overwhelming fear is centered on the fact that these powers can be used to mind control and influence others. Racial categories are often distinguished by a fear of otherness that is usually observed through skin color or religion. Fundamentally, however, Lunars are human because they descend from humans who colonized the moon. Despite this, the fear of the power Lunars could have over the people on earth has created a racism reminiscent of America before and during the Civil Rights Movement. Cinder also refers to Lunars as “those savages” and when

⁴¹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 43.

⁴² Meyer, *Cinder*, 43.

she learns that there are Lunar fugitives on Earth, she has such a visceral reaction that the mere thought “nearly had her running for the sink.”⁴³

The political tensions and fear between the Lunars and Earthens is expressed through the notion of immigration. Prince Kai is working to establish a peace treaty between Luna and the Eastern Commonwealth, meeting with the Lunar queen, Levana, to talk about alliances expressed through marriage. When Queen Levana first visits the Eastern Commonwealth, we learn about the “Interplanetary Agreement of 54 T.E., Article 17,” which “states that no party of the agreement shall knowingly shelter or protect Lunar fugitives.”⁴⁴ Preventing the immigration of Lunars protects the people of Earth from being mind controlled by the Lunar gift. For the people of Earth Lunars are capable of taking over and controlling the individual person and, as a result, the larger population. Earthens see Lunars as both illegal aliens and literal aliens. Here Meyer plays on the contemporary use of the word ‘aliens,’ which has “superseded any mention of the extraterrestrial” and now refers to “someone belonging to a foreign country or nation.”⁴⁵ Dr. Michael Lechuga, a professor at the University of New Mexico who studies migration studies, media studies, and rhetoric, notes that

the figure of the ‘alien’ was created in popular media and in immigration policy to perpetuate a colonial fiction about race in the United States... today’s U.S. immigration policy and today’s ‘alien’ invasion films are both narrative myths that try to create a subjective ‘alien’ which is made out to be a threat to American citizens.⁴⁶

Because of the overwhelming negative connotation of aliens in our contemporary American culture, we respond to the political set-up in Meyer’s future Earth with recognition and anxiety.

⁴³ Meyer, *Cinder*, 171.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Cinder*, 208.

⁴⁵ Marissa Lucero, “‘Alien:’ Tracking its story throughout immigration history,” Last modified September 22, 2021, <https://news.unm.edu/news/alien-tracking-its-story-throughout-immigration-history>.

⁴⁶ Lucero, “‘Alien.’”

Levana claims that the Eastern Commonwealth is violating Article 17 of the Interplanetary Agreement when she sees a Lunar among the people gathered outside of the Emperor's castle to protest her arrival, chanting "*No moon queen!*" and waving signs that read "WAR IS BETTER THAN SLAVERY! WE NEED AN EMPRESS, NOT A DICTATOR! NO ALLIANCE WITH EVIL!"⁴⁷ The protestors further highlight the fear and racism the people of earth have towards the Lunars, evoking strong connotations of race when referring to "slavery," a source of conflict in American history.

The Lunar fugitive that Queen Levana sees and uses to accuse Kai and the Eastern Commonwealth of violating Act 17 is none other than Cinder—who has recently learned that she is not just racially othered by being a cyborg, but is also a Lunar. Cinder discovers her Lunar identity through her cyborg identity, when her stepmother forces her to join the cyborg draft in exchange for monetary compensation, commodifying her. Cinder is further commodified when she is tested and experimented on in the hopes of discovering a cure for the plague. The doctor running her tests, Dr. Erland, reveals the extent of her otherness. He provides data on her cyborg identity, pulling up a holographic diagram of "a girl full of wires" that exposes her to the cyborg parts of herself she was unaware of, such as her "four metal ribs [and] the synthetic tissue around her heart."⁴⁸ These scans inform her that she is "36.28 percent not human" and highlight the extent of her cyborg-ness. The tests that determine Cinder's cyborg-to-human ratio also allow Dr. Erland to reveal her true identity. He informs Cinder that "from your blood samples I have deduced that you are, in fact, Lunar."⁴⁹ Considering Cinder's feelings of fear and disgust towards the Lunars, it is unsurprising that she responds negatively. Her response to being Lunar is tied

⁴⁷ Meyer, *Cinder*, 202.

⁴⁸ Meyer, *Cinder*, 82.

⁴⁹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 175.

into her own understanding of herself as a cyborg. She cannot separate the two marginalized identities. She is horrified to find that she is both “cyborg *and* Lunar. One was enough to make her a mutant, an outcast, but to be *both*?... Lunars were a cruel, savage people. They murdered their shell children. They lied and scammed and brainwashed.”⁵⁰ Cinder’s internalized racism towards Lunars doesn’t quickly go away. However, over an extended period of time she learns that her Lunar identity does not conform to the racial stereotypes she has bought into her entire life. Part of this comes from her own personal growth and self-awareness, but also from her interactions with other Lunars.

The third book *Cress* complicates the intersection of race and Lunars. Just as Earthens are racist towards Lunars, Lunars have their own structure of racism. Lunars are categorized into two races: Lunars and Lunar shells. Dr. Erland explains the difference to Cinder when she claims she can’t be Lunar as she doesn’t have the genetic mutation that allows her to brainwash others. He informs her that “not *all* Lunars are born with the gift. They’re called shells, which is a slightly derogatory connotation on Luna.”⁵¹ In acknowledging the derogatory implications of being a Lunar shell, Erland minimizes the extent of racism that Lunar shells are subjected to. The racist ideology of shells is manifest through Queen Levana’s policy of “non-gifted infanticide.”⁵² The mass-murder of children born as shells is inherently racist, resonating with the Holocaust, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Cambodian Genocide. The act of killing Lunar shells as soon as they are born is steeped in dehumanizing language. Dr. Erland notes that Queen Levana’s inability to control shells is “why she continues to have them exterminated.”⁵³ We often use the

⁵⁰ Meyer, *Cinder*, 178.

⁵¹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 176.

⁵² Meyer, *Cinder*, 176.

⁵³ Meyer, *Cinder*, 179.

term of extermination when we talk about getting rid of bugs and animals that we see as harmful.⁵⁴

Through the character of Cress, the main character and Rapunzel figure of the story, Meyer delves further into the complexities of racism against Lunar shells. Cress is a Lunar shell and is well-versed in what truly happens during the non-gifted infanticide. When removed from their parents a few days after their birth, shells aren't actually killed, but brought to "lava tubes that had been converted to dormitories" and used for "some sort of experiments."⁵⁵ Cress doesn't yet know the true purpose of the infanticide laws. They are "a means of putting [shells] into seclusion and harvesting their blood," which is used to engineer the plague, Letumosis, that is ravaging Earth.⁵⁶

The non-consensual and harmful experimentations that Lunar shells undergo can be seen in American history through the medical experimentation on African-Americans. Medical ethicist Harriet A Washington's book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006) focuses on building a "comprehensive history of the racial research wars," including unethical and racist medical experimentations on Black individuals.⁵⁷ Lunar shells are taken from their parents under the guise of 'infanticide,' which corresponds directly with Washington's claim that "fraud is often a traveling partner of racially abusive research."⁵⁸ The specific use of the racialized body of the child as a vehicle for scientific experimentation without proper disclosure to participants'

⁵⁴ I think of how we would call an exterminator out to my home when I was a kid to help prevent and remove the dangerous Black Widow spiders that would live in our garage. The language of extermination also evokes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, when Kurtz writes "Exterminate all the brutes."

⁵⁵ Meyer, *Cress*, 153.

⁵⁶ Meyer, *Cress*, 496.

⁵⁷ Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present*, (New York: Anchor, 2006). <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=736921&scope=site>.

⁵⁸ Washington, *Medical*.

legal guardians actually happened in America in the 1990's at Columbia University. This Columbia scientists targeted Black children and told their parents that the study was essentially a "series of interviews and tests" that would help parents discover if their children had "any medical problems."⁵⁹ Unknown to the parents, their children were specifically identified through an illegal disclosure of Black children in juvie that had younger siblings.⁶⁰ The tests were not geared to see if their children had medical issues. Instead, the Columbia scientists "sought to investigate whether violent behavior might run in families" by administering fenfluramine, a drug that they believed "could suggest a genetic basis for aggressive or violent behavior in boys."⁶¹

Being told that your child is receiving free healthcare is obviously very different from being told your child is going to be killed. However, fraud is the issue here, not the nature of the fraud. In both cases parents are being misled. Like the parents of Black children who were lured into the Columbia study, Lunar parents have no clue that their children are actually being experimented on. Just as Cinder is turned into an object, a commodity, owned by her stepmother and sold into the cyborg draft, Cress is valued not as a human being, but as a scientific specimen that can be exploited as a matter of government policy. The commodification of shells is further highlighted through the revelation of a "black-market demand for shells."⁶² Cress is taken by shell traffickers. When her traveling companion and love interest Thorne realizes she has been taken, he engages with the traffickers and learns that "they weren't talking about Cress at all. They were business associates, discussing merchandise."⁶³

⁵⁹ Washington, *Medical*.

⁶⁰ Washington, *Medical*.

⁶¹ Washington, *Medical*.

⁶² Meyer, *Cress*, 285.

⁶³ Meyer, *Cress*, 286.

In the second book, *Scarlet*, we learn that Lunar shells aren't the only Lunars being exploited. A second group of Lunars, like Wolf, Scarlet's love interest, are being genetically modified by scientists who combine their Lunar DNA with wolf DNA. These lupine Lunars do have the Lunar gift, making them twice-removed from the humans they evolved from. The lupine Lunars are "creatures that had been only an experiment in [Queen Levana's] parents' time, but had become a reality under her rule."⁶⁴ Because they have "the intelligence of men, the instincts of wolves, [and] the pliability of children," Levana uses them to create the perfect army.⁶⁵ She dehumanizes (or perhaps, delunarizes) the soldiers, calling them "beasts," "creatures," and "scientific creations."⁶⁶ The Lunar shells are commodified as specimens; the lupine Lunars are weaponized, a further commodification.

The institutions of racism within Lunar society and Earthen society once again parallel the institutionalized racism that defines American history and, unfortunately, even our contemporary cultural moment. Contextualizing issues of race within the genre of science fiction enables readers to better engage with the systems and structures that dominate our own world. Meyer has taken real-world issues around immigration and race and transferred them to a futuristic setting that removes readers from our contemporary moment in order to enable them to better understand the dangers of such oppressive structures.

Those oppressive structures are expressed differently, however, in *The Lunar Chronicles*. Physical appearance is one such difference. While discrete as "races," the cyborgs and Lunars transcend racial categories as they exist in contemporary reality. Both cyborgs, Lunars and Earthens can be Asian, white, or Black, among other ethnicities. Coste argues that Meyer's

⁶⁴ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 438.

⁶⁵ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 438.

⁶⁶ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 438.

books “eschew whiteness in favor of multiculturalism—it’s unremarkable for characters to be of variable ethnic descent and skin color.”⁶⁷ Meyer intentionally shifts away from the Eurocentric depictions of fairy tale heroines through the characters of Cinder and Winter, who are canonically white in the Western imagination. Disney’s “Cinderella,” for example, established the princess as a beautiful blonde, blue-eyed, white woman in the Western canon. Meyer “destabilizes the American notion of who Cinderella is” by setting the story in the futuristic China known as the Eastern Commonwealth and giving Cinder an Asian heritage.⁶⁸ This choice is intentional, as Meyer notes in a blog post, and draws from her research on the history of the fairy tale “Cinderella.” One of the oldest Cinderella tales is “Ye Xian,” “first recorded in 9th-century-China.”⁶⁹ This “Cinderella” variant is “the direct ancestor to the stories we know from Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.”⁷⁰ Despite her Asian heritage, Cinder’s physical appearance is not focused on her ethnic appearance. She is racially othered instead by features such as her metal hand foot.

The fourth novel, *Winter*, dismantles the American notion of Snow White through the character of the Lunar princess, Winter. Winter is known for her beauty, but she does not embody the Disney image of a fair-skinned princess with lips as red as blood and skin as white as snow. Instead, she is an “impeccable beauty [with] thick hair and warm brown skin, gold-tinged eyes, and rosy lips.”⁷¹ Despite being a Black princess, Winter isn’t presented as a racialized character. Despite this, many critics and fans commented on Meyer’s choice to make

⁶⁷ Coste, “Allegorical Diversity,” 64-5.

⁶⁸ Coste, “Allegorical Diversity,” 64.

⁶⁹ Marissa Meyer, “China, France, Northern Africa: Choosing the Lunar Chronicles Settings,” December 10, 2012, <https://www.marissameyer.com/blog/china-france-northern-africa-choosing-the-lunar-chronicles-settings/>.

⁷⁰ Marissa Meyer, “China, France, Northern Africa: Choosing the Lunar Chronicles Settings,” December 10, 2012, <https://www.marissameyer.com/blog/china-france-northern-africa-choosing-the-lunar-chronicles-settings/>.

⁷¹ Meyer, *Winter*, 46.

Snow White a Black woman. Meyer has acknowledged that when she first started writing the story, she “didn’t think so much about diversity,” but simply wanted a more realistic world that included “characters with a variety of skin tones and ethnic backgrounds.”⁷² Wolf is another example of a racially diverse character. Scarlet describes him as having “olive skin.”⁷³ In a blog post detailing the characteristics of her main characters, Meyer suggests that readers think of Wolf as “Middle-Eastern.”⁷⁴ Although Wolf’s skin color is only briefly mentioned, his mother is described as having “Wolf’s dark hair and olive-toned skin.”⁷⁵ Cinder and Winter are seen as racially different due to their cyborg and Lunar status, not their skin color. Similarly Wolf racially distinguished his Lunar and lupine origins.

Like Scarlet and Cress, Thorne, Cress’s love interest, and Jacin, Winter’s love interest, are described as Caucasian.⁷⁶ Scarlet’s whiteness is distinguished by her “curly red hair, a collection of freckles over her nose, and curves.”⁷⁷ Even Cress’s small stature, which she believes makes her unattractive, is presented in terms of whiteness. Winter tells Jacin that Cress “is small. [and has] Short blonde hair.” In Marissa Meyer’s blog post on her character descriptions Meyer notes that Cress has “pale skin.”⁷⁸

Overall, Meyer depicts a racially diverse cast of characters, unfolding the complexities of race by describing skin colors and physical attributes, while also pointing out that some of them are literally not wholly human, but cyborgs and aliens. In expressing the racial tensions through

⁷² “Marissa Meyer: The world isn’t made of only white people so fictional worlds shouldn’t be either,” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2016/feb/02/marissa-meyer-lunar-chronicles-interview>.

⁷³ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 13.

⁷⁴ Marissa Meyer, “A Guide to Lunar Chronicles Character Traits,” Published July 31, 2014, <https://www.marissameyer.com/blog/a-guide-to-lunar-chronicles-character-traits/>.

⁷⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 298.

⁷⁶ Meyer, “A Guide.”

⁷⁷ Meyer, *Cress*, 46.

⁷⁸ Meyer, “A Guide.”

aliens, cyborgs, and humans, Meyer provides a space where readers can see racial issues relevant to their contemporary culture in a fantasy-setting that allows them to evaluate racism (often unknowingly) outside of contemporary racial categories. Readers are forced to acknowledge that not all Lunars are evil, that cyborgs deserve equal treatment, and that skin color doesn't have to make someone different.

Chapter Three

Gender and Sexuality: Cyborgs, Androids, and the Body

“I think the most interesting things about fairytales is how they bind women to this idea of moral perfection. And not just women but men too...there are these really detrimental ideas that enforce gender roles” – Nikita Gill⁷⁹

While the issues of gender and sexuality in Meyer’s works are not as clear cut as her representation of diverse racial categories, *The Lunar Chronicles* navigates them with subtlety. Through her various characters, Meyer addresses specific issues of gender, identity, and reproduction, while subverting gender stereotypes. These issues are most clearly addressed through Iko and Cinder.

Iko, a bubbly android who serves as Cinder’s sidekick can be read as an example of “transgender representation in the series,”⁸⁰ opening up space for discourse on gender identity and gender expression. Although Iko is an android, we are first introduced to Iko as female, when “Iko wheeled out of the crowd and up to the worktable, her blue sensor flashing.”⁸¹ Despite the emphasis on her non-human nature (wheels and blue sensors), we automatically categorize Iko as a female due to the pronoun “her.” Later in the series, Iko describes herself to Prince Kai as being short, “shaped kind of like an enormous pear, and significantly more pale.”⁸² This

⁷⁹ Jill Zwarenstejn, Tess Griman, “50 Best Nikita Gill Quotes + An Exclusive Interview On Her Book ‘Fierce Fairytales,’” *YourTango*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.yourtango.com/2016295339/instagram-nikita-gill-poems-feminism-empowering-strong-woman-quotes>.

⁸⁰ Christy Williams, *Mapping Fairy-tale Space: Pastiche and Metafiction in Borderless Tales* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2021), 72.

⁸¹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 11.

⁸² Meyer, *Cress*, 435.

description further highlights just how non-human Iko is; however, it contradicts Iko's sense of self. Iko is clearly feminine and wishes to have a female body. The disconnect between the body she is given when she is created and the body she idealizes reveals her gender dysphoria. She cannot reconcile her genderless body with her sense of herself as a woman.

Meyer emphasizes the disconnect between Iko's desire to be a woman and her genderless body. Her femininity is shown throughout the series in her love of dresses, makeup, shoes, and frequent requests for a new body. She first expresses her desires through her interest in Prince Kai's ball in *Cinder*; she dreams of dresses and shoes Cinder could wear. Cinder's not-so-evil stepsister, Peony, recognizes Iko's desire to physically express her femininity, providing her with a "velvet ribbon" that makes Iko so happy that "the light in the room brightened when [she] saw it."⁸³ Peony "tied the ribbon around [Iko's] skinny wrist joint."⁸⁴ Iko becomes so fixated on the ribbon-turned-bracelet that she scans it "with her sensor again and again."⁸⁵

Such gender expression helps Iko feel more connected to her gender identity. She keeps the ball gown meant for Peony and 'plays' dress up in her spare time. At one point, Iko tells Cinder that she is "all dressed up with nowhere to go,"⁸⁶ referring to the pearl necklace she has draped "around her bulbous head and [the] smeared cherry lipstick beneath her sensor in a horrible imitation of lips."⁸⁷ The juxtaposition of the beautiful feminine objects and the emphasis of the way they appear on Iko's genderless form provides insight on the tension between Iko's gender identity and her gender expression.

⁸³ Meyer, *Cinder*, 35.

⁸⁴ Meyer, *Cinder*, 35.

⁸⁵ Meyer, *Cinder*, 36.

⁸⁶ Meyer, *Cinder*, 192.

⁸⁷ Meyer, *Cinder*, 193.

Iko's femininity is not the only reason that she can be read as a transgender character. She actually moves into different bodies throughout the series. By the second book, *Scarlet*, her personality chip has been transferred into a spaceship. Iko's new form is a result of Cinder's stepmother dismantling her android body but without destroying the personality chip that makes Iko, Iko. Cinder finds Iko's personality chip and decides that "she would find another body for Iko. Some other android shell, perhaps—maybe even an escort with their tauntingly ideal feminine shapes. She thought Iko would like that."⁸⁸ Cinder's train of thought not only validates and acknowledges Iko's transgender identity, but opens up the possibility for her to actually transition into the female form that she identifies with. Unfortunately, Cinder isn't able to get an escort-droid body for Iko right away, as she informs Iko when she first puts Iko's chip into the spaceship that the ship is "the first...body...I've been able to find."⁸⁹ Cinder's hesitation about how to define the spaceship before settling on referring to it as a 'body' furthers the reader's understanding of who she is as it is distinct from what she is.

Iko is distraught by her new body, calling herself enormous and hideous. Despite this, Iko's gender identity is once again confirmed when Thorne, who adores his spaceship, the Rampion, refers to the ship as a 'her' and angrily protests against Iko's insult of the ship. This encounter leads to a further confirmation of Iko as a female when she informs Thorne that he is "rather handsome" and flirting with him.⁹⁰ Thorne reciprocates the flirtation, calling Iko "a fine lady" and "the prettiest" and "most gorgeous ship in these skies."⁹¹ While Thorne reassures Iko of her beauty and appeals to her femininity, Cinder tells Iko that her current form "is only temporary" and that they will "get [her] a new body," once again highlighting the idea of

⁸⁸ Meyer, *Cinder*, 287.

⁸⁹ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 156.

⁹⁰ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 157.

⁹¹ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 157.

physical transition to conform to her gender identity. The prospect of such a transition does not relieve Iko's gender dysphoria. Iko complains that being a spaceship makes her feel like "her brain was being stretched in every direction. Like she'd lost touch with her physical body, had detached her brain and was hovering in a nonexistent space between the real and the digital...[she] had never wanted anything but to become more human."⁹²

Iko expresses her desire to have not only a new body, but a female body. She tells Cinder and her friends that in Los Angeles "they have a huge escort-droid outlet store there. I wouldn't mind having an escort-droid body. Some of the newer models come with color-changing fiber-optic hair."⁹³ Cinder thinks of escort-droid bodies as "tauntingly ideal feminine shapes."⁹⁴ In our contemporary parlance, the word 'escort' has sexual connotations. The correlation is suggestive. It highlights Iko's desire to be fully feminine by subscribing to the societal expectations of the female body as it intersects with masculine sexual desire. The idea of expressing herself in these terms is exciting for Iko, who hopes that when Cress joins them on the spaceship, she can "take her net-shopping" and help her "pick out my future designer wardrobe" from a "custom escort shop that has the best accessories and discounted models."⁹⁵ Iko does end up getting her escort-droid body from Thorne, who wins her in a game of cards, thinking "she'd make a nice gift for Iko... For her replacement body."⁹⁶ Thorne's selection of the escort-droid confirms Iko's longing to situate herself in the context of masculine desire. It also expresses his support of Iko's wish to resolve gender dysphoria through a physical transition and suggests a positive reading of the text's depiction of the transgender community.

⁹² Meyer, *Scarlet*, 248.

⁹³ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 190.

⁹⁴ Meyer, *Cinder*, 287.

⁹⁵ Meyer, *Cress*, 84.

⁹⁶ Meyer, *Cress*, 355.

When Iko's personality chip is first inserted into the escort-droid's body, she reacts with joy. "Smothering Thorne's face in kisses,"⁹⁷ she utters a "girly squeal."⁹⁸ Cress envies Iko's "pearly teeth and coppery eyes,"⁹⁹ further validating Iko's femininity. Despite her jealousy, however, Cress recognizes how Iko's transition into the escort-droid's body has reconciled her gender identity and gender expression. She is "happy for Iko, who took more delight in her new body than most humans ever did."¹⁰⁰ Her observation of Iko's joy is key in acknowledging the validity of her transition and reinforces our reading of Iko as the text's transgender representation.

Iko views her 'new' body as her only true form; excitement radiates off of her as she "bounced on her toes" and tells Scarlet that "the captain found me a real body!"¹⁰¹ In calling her current form her 'real body,' Iko confirms her identity as a transgender woman. As the group travels across Luna on their hunt to find Queen Levana and take back Cinder's throne, they encounter numerous battles. During these battles, Iko sustains injuries, leaving her with a "battered body, dead wires, [and] loose parts."¹⁰² Her damaged body impacts the way others see her and hurts her perception of herself. Part of her disappointment stems from her exposed wires, which display her non-human nature, and violate her sense of herself as a human. When Iko encounters a royal guard at the palace she finds herself irate because

she'd gotten used to people looking at her like she was human. Not only human, but *beautiful*. But now she was stuck with a flopping arm and shredded skin tissue and a missing ear, and all this guard saw was a broken machine¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Meyer, *Cress*, 387.

⁹⁸ Meyer, *Cress*, 386.

⁹⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 82.

¹⁰⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 82.

¹⁰¹ Meyer, *Winter*, 284

¹⁰² Meyer, *Winter*, 716.

¹⁰³ Meyer, *Winter*, 717.

When the team finally ends Levana’s tyrannical reign, Cinder offers to give Iko a new body, as her current one is “near-destroyed” and “it would be more cost effective to install her personality chip into a brand-new body. She could have had her pick of any model she wanted.”¹⁰⁴ Although Cinder means well, her comment is insensitive. She doesn’t consider how Iko might feel now that she has transitioned into her ‘real’ body. Iko corrects Cinder’s statement by explaining that “none of her friends’ bodies were disposable, so why should hers be?”¹⁰⁵ Iko here reasserts to Cinder and the reader that her body is her true body because her gender dysphoria “resolves when her body matches her identity.”¹⁰⁶

Iko’s narrative arc adds another layer of inclusivity and diversity to *The Lunar Chronicles*, but it also leads those who read Iko as a transgender woman to ask an important question: what are the negative ramifications of the transgender narrative arc being expressed through the only non-human character? As the demand for more inclusive works occur readers also want the inclusivity to be handled with care. Meyer’s use of an android who is not human, but human-like, as the transgender character perpetuates the idea that transgendered individuals are separate from cisgendered people. Iko’s alienation and separation can be seen as harmful as it reinforces the ‘othering’ of transgender people.

The notion of Iko’s wrong-ness as an android who identifies as a female and expresses human emotions and desires is highlighted when Prince Kai meets Iko and comments to Cinder that ““You don’t see a personality like that every day,” to which Cinder responds, ““she came that way. I suspect a programming error.”¹⁰⁷ The emphasis on Iko’s personality and desires as a possible programming error further dehumanizes her and alienates her body and gender identity

¹⁰⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 809.

¹⁰⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 810.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *Mapping*, 72.

¹⁰⁷ Meyer, *Cinder*, 12.

as a possible wrong-ness. Iko's programming error, also described as a "faulty personality chip,"¹⁰⁸ actually ends up being one of the most crucial things about her, as her personality chip ends up housing the blueprints for a device that would damper Lunar powers without causing Lunar sickness and therefore allow "all restrictions on Lunar emigration be removed."¹⁰⁹ Iko's 'otherness' makes her more valuable and exposes the bigotry of those who treated her as less than human. Despite this, Iko's transformation throughout the series provides space for growth in other characters as they learn to accept and value Iko for who she is. Although Meyer's representation of transgendered people can be read as problematic, she has still made a move that initiated a discourse on how to write and represent transgendered characters. Her work is crucial because it is a stepping stone toward the trend of inclusive Young Adult fairy-tale retellings.

Iko is not the only character in which Meyer explores gender. Her fairy-tale heroines frequently subvert the stereotypical helpless feminine princess often conveyed in popular culture. When exploring the fairy tale expression of gender, we must understand the way in which "fairy tale media is dominated by" American powerhouses such as Disney.¹¹⁰ Meyers explains that her perception of the fairy tale heroine was shaped by Disney and the "heteronormative 'princess-industrial-complex,'" which reinforces the fairy-tale figure of the damsel-in-distress.¹¹¹ Although Meyer notes that she loves Disney, she finds that many of the heroines are "passive participants in their own stories."¹¹² When writing her characters and thinking of the Disney expressions, Meyer explains that "in creating those characters it did end up playing on a lot of gender roles

¹⁰⁸ Meyer, *Winter*, 791.

¹⁰⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 788.

¹¹⁰ Craven, Allison. "Feminism" In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, edited by Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hammer, and Lauren Bosc, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 69.

¹¹¹ Craven, "Feminism," 69.

¹¹² Caitlin White, "Q&A: Marissa Meyer Talks Fairy Tales and Feminism," *Bustle*, February 5, 2014, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/13837-the-lunar-chronicles-marissa-meyer-talks-feminism-in-fairy-tales-inside-info-on-the-series-finale>.

and subversions of these old archetypes.”¹¹³ Cinder’s character plays a lot on gender roles, as she works as a mechanic and people assume she must be male. Prince Kai makes this assumption when he first meets Cinder, informing her that he is looking for Cinder the mechanic and asking “is he around?”¹¹⁴ Kai stereotypes Cinder in his assumption that being a mechanic, a job is seen as masculine, she must be a man. He informs her of this when he notes that “they say you’re the best mechanic in New Beijing. I was expecting an old man.”¹¹⁵ He is not the only one who believes that a stereotypical mechanic is a man, as “most of [Cinder’s] customers couldn’t fathom how a teenage girl could be the best mechanic in the city.”¹¹⁶ Working in a predominantly male-occupied field, Cinder views herself as lacking femininity, constantly covered in grease from her work.

Cinder doesn’t see her job as the only way in which she lacks femininity. She also finds herself to be physically not feminine, believing that if her “body had ever been predisposed to femininity, it had been ruined by whatever the surgeons had done to her, leaving her with a stick-straight figure. Too angular. Too boyish.”¹¹⁷ In aligning herself with the physical image of masculinity, she also reveals that she perceives her masculinity as forced onto her through a life-saving surgery. This surgery is not technically consensual as she was at the brink of death, but for Cinder this surgery is a violation that separates herself from her body. This can be read as a form of sexual violation, but only in the sense of how Cinder perceives it. Cinder’s memory (or lack thereof) and perception are key when reading this as an act of violence.

¹¹³ White, “Q&A.”

¹¹⁴ Meyer, *Cinder*, 8.

¹¹⁵ Meyer, *Cinder*, 10.

¹¹⁶ Meyer, *Cinder*, 10.

¹¹⁷ Meyer, *Cinder*, 34.

Cinder can't "remember anything before the surgery," which is unsurprising as repressed and absent memories are common following an extremely traumatic event.¹¹⁸ What Cinder does remember is the physical trauma of the surgery: "the drug-induced fog, her mushy thoughts. And then there was the pain. Every muscle burning. Every joint screaming. Her body in rebellion as it discovered what had been done to it."¹¹⁹ Although we are aware (as is Cinder when she discloses this information to readers) that this procedure was vital to her survival, Cinder's description of the experience highlights its traumatic nature. It troubles her even years after the procedure was performed. In the last sentence Cinder starts by describing her body as 'her body,' a perception that clearly shifts as she comes into awareness of the violation ("what had been done") and her body shifts into an 'it'. Referring to her body as an 'it' allows Cinder to separate herself from the physical pain and violence that she experienced. In this single sentence readers are exposed to the destruction of Cinder's link between her body and her identity. As conveyed through her earlier belief that whatever femininity she may have had is destroyed by her surgery, Cinder sees the surgery as a violation that disconnects her mental self from her physical self.

When understanding how Cinder perceives the surgery as a violation that strips her of her femininity, our perception of her job as a mechanic is further complicated. Cinder is used to hearing comments similar to Kai's because no one understands exactly how a teenage girl can be the best mechanic in New Beijing. Cinder's skill is, after all, directly correlated with the surgery that she perceives to strip her of her femininity and leave her with a body to take care of. Although Cinder's cyborg identity isn't a complete secret, she would never willingly "broadcast the reason for her talent."¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Meyer, *Cinder*, 99.

¹¹⁹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 101.

¹²⁰ Meyer, *Cinder*, 10.

Despite the cyborg surgery stripping Cinder of her perceived femininity, Dr. Erland informs her that her “reproductive system is almost untouched,” which is uncommon because “lots of female cyborgs are left infertile because of the invasive procedures.”¹²¹ The word ‘invasive’ has violent connotations, further adding to our understanding that this unwilling surgery was traumatizing and unwanted. Just as victims of acts of violence and assault are often told to be thankful that they are still alive or did not experience more severe injuries, Cinder is told she should be thankful for the outcome of her violation.

Dr. Erland tells Cinder, “you should be grateful your surgeons took such care,” perpetuating society’s conviction that a woman’s value lies in her reproductive capacity, another way the text highlights the commodification of women. The surgeons’ decisions to preserve her ability to reproduce shows that they reduce her to a female body, rather than recognizing her as a human being. This complicates our understanding of the surgery stripping her of her femininity. We can easily question how Cinder’s femininity can be reaffirmed through the surgeries’ preservation of her female reproductive organs, while stripping her of her perception of herself as a woman.

The lack of surgical consent is clear. Prince Kai realizes that despite having Cinder’s medical records, “they didn’t know who had approved her cyborg surgery.”¹²² When Kai’s advisor, Torin, responds that cyborgs had a choice when they consented to the surgical alterations, Kai is outraged, questioning how they could believe that “an eleven-year-old had a choice about anything.”¹²³ In taking away Cinder’s right to consent, changing her body, and impacting her perceived femininity, her surgery can be read as an act of physical assault. When

¹²¹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 116.

¹²² Meyer, *Cress*, 308.

¹²³ Meyer, *Cress*, 308.

outside of Cinder's perspective this becomes less clear as the reader understands that the surgery saves her life. Kai acknowledges the lack of consent and how, despite the surgery saving her life, it shouldn't automatically qualify as her consent to partake in the cyborg draft. Cinder is angry with her body and constantly hates how the cyborg identity makes her an outcast, furthering our understanding of the impact of the violence her body was subjected to.

Over time Cinder is able to become more comfortable with her body, something that is partially due to Prince Kai proving that he finds all of her romantically (and sexually) attractive. Kai acknowledges some of her cyborg parts, including her cybernetic hand. While examining it he "pressed his lips to her knuckles. The plating had no nerve endings, and yet the touch sent a tingle of electricity along her arm."¹²⁴ This brief moment highlights the importance of Cinder's perception of her body as it signifies that even the parts of her that literally can't feel are still tied into her sexual identity, furthering her perception that the surgical changes didn't strip her of her femininity, just reshaped parts of her body. Despite this Cinder will always have complicated feelings about the violent surgery that shaped her relationship with her body. After all, just as surgery implanted wires can't be removed, the sense of physical violation Cinder feels due to the surgery cannot be easily forgotten.

If we are to read Cinder's lack of consent to her cybernetic surgery as an act of physical violence, we have to consider the implications of the surgeries Wolf was forced to undergo. While Cinder's surgery cannot be clearly read as an act of sexual assault, Wolf's experiences can be clearly read as a metaphor for rape.¹²⁵ Queen Levana recruited children and forced them to

¹²⁴ Meyer, *Cress*, #.

¹²⁵ In November 20, 2012 Meyer released a novella called *The Queen's Army*, which follows Wolf as he is taken by the Queen, forced to undergo genetic engineering, and is turned into a weapon for Levana to use. Although we don't focus on the novella in this paper, it provides details on what Wolf's experience was like as he adjusted to the procedures and lifestyle he is forced into. Even without this novella Wolf's experiences can be read as an act of rape as they are detailed in the four main texts of the series.

undergo genetic engineering in order to make them lupine soldiers. These children did not consent, but were forced to give consent by people using the Lunar gift to control them. Wolf has no choice in his first surgery, but is forced to undergo a second surgery after being taken hostage by Queen Levana. He doesn't consent to this second surgery and wakes in a panic, thinking "not more needles. Not another tank. Not more surgeries."¹²⁶ His fear of continuing to undergo trauma is overtaken by his horror at what the surgery has done to him. When he touches "his mouth. His nose. His jaw" his body responds by "convuls[ing] with horror."¹²⁷ Against his consent, Wolf is turned into "one of the queens monsters;"¹²⁸ with a "protruding nose and jaw,"¹²⁹ "enormous teeth...monstrous hands...[and an] inhuman slope to his shoulders."¹³⁰ Just as Cinder views her femininity as stripped away by her cybernetic surgery, Wolf is stripped of his sense of humanity, something which is further highlighted by the fact that after his first surgery he refuses to go by his Lunar name, Ze'ev Kesley, and takes on the moniker Wolf.

Just as Cinder subverts feminine stereotypes through her job as a mechanic and not being a damsel-in-distress, Scarlet also is a non-stereotypical fairy tale heroine. Scarlet is always armed with a gun her grandmother gave to her. Little Red Riding Hood might have been taught to be afraid of strangers, but Scarlet was taught to shoot strangers. Her grandmother warns her that "*You just never know when a stranger will want to take you somewhere you don't mean to go*" before teaching Scarlet how to shoot and to always carry the pistol, tucked against her lower back.¹³¹ Scarlet and her grandmother own a farm and Scarlet is used to manual labor, once again pulling her away from the role of the soft, delicate female. She pulls the gun on Wolf multiple

¹²⁶ Meyer, *Winter*, 545.

¹²⁷ Meyer, *Winter*, 546.

¹²⁸ Meyer, *Winter*, 546.

¹²⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 711.

¹³⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 764.

¹³¹ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 25-6.

times, and she makes good on her threat to shoot Wolf in his left arm, “blood...seeping into the cloth of his sleeve. But it wasn’t a deep wound. The bullet had only grazed him,”¹³² proving that her using the gun isn’t just an idle threat.

While Scarlet and Cinder break the mold of the damsel-in-distress, Cress is more attuned to gender roles and expectations. Cress romanticizes Thorne as a hero with the inability to “resist a damsel in distress. And she was nothing if not in distress.”¹³³ Cress' idea of herself as a damsel-in-distress slowly shifts throughout the series, as her naive idea of femininity is born from the fact that she has been trapped in a satellite in isolation for over seven years. Although Cress plays into the idea of being a weak female, as a hacker and technology whiz she follows Cinder and Scarlet in having a skillset more commonly associated with men. Cress doesn’t see herself as strong and competent, but is key to the successful overthrow of Queen Levana. Cress separates herself from the group and willingly allows herself to get captured, proving herself to be a heroine. After her capture, her technology skills and benefit to the group becomes more clear because “only in her absence did Cinder realize how much they’d been relying on Cress.” Following her sacrifice her friends realize that they’d “still be out there if it wasn’t for her. We’d all be captured, but thanks to Cress, we’re not. She saved us.”¹³⁴

Through the retelling of fairy tales, Meyer helps add “new narratives for the passive heroines of the contemporary canon that emphasize gender prejudices of source tales or empower heroines in unprecedented ways.”¹³⁵ Despite this work Meyer does in subverting gender roles for her fairy tale heroines, she doesn’t push back on the heroes (Kai, Wolf, Thorne,

¹³² Meyer, *Scarlet*, 216.

¹³³ Meyer, *Cress*, 29.

¹³⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 179.

¹³⁵ Anne E. Duggan, “Gender,” In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, edited by Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hammer, and Lauren Bosc (New York: Routledge, 2020), 115.

and Jacin) gender stereotypes nearly as much. In fact, in many ways *The Lunar Chronicles* seems to conform to masculine stereotypes. What Meyer does give her male characters is more dimension and complexity—particularly in comparison to the male heroes of the classic fairy tales.

The biggest shift in the gender dynamics can be seen through Kai and Wolf. Kai is reliant on Cinder from the beginning of the series; our first introduction to him is when he actively seeks help from Cinder to fix his android. Cinder’s assistance with his android enables her to come and save Kai multiple times. The first time is when she attends the ball to warn Kai about Levana’s plan to marry him and then kill him. The second time is when she kidnaps Kai to postpone his wedding to Levana. Despite being trained from birth to become the emperor of the Eastern Commonwealth, Kai makes questionable decisions in his desperate attempts to obtain the antidote for Letumosis that Queen Levana is offering him. Although Kai is aware that this almost certainly means his death he still makes the decision to go through with the wedding. Cinder swoops in to save Kai and his country multiple times, breaking down the stereotypical ‘Prince Charming’ figure readers understand he represents. Despite this, Kai doesn’t have any groundbreaking characteristics that push back on our perception of masculinity.

Wolf also pushes back against the stereotypical expectations of an ‘alpha male.’ Of course, Wolf’s character is a literal alpha, a fact that Scarlet doesn’t learn until later in *Scarlet*. However, she researches wolf packs and learns that within the pack there is “AN ESTABLISHED HIERARCHY. AT THE TOP OF THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE ARE THE ALPHA MALE AND ALPHA FEMALE,” and that “MALES WILL ESTABLISH THEIR ALPHA RANK THROUGH RITUAL COMBAT.”¹³⁶ Despite being a physically strong Lunar

¹³⁶ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 115.

Operative alpha, Wolf is shy and uncertain. Meyer notes in her blog that her favorite thing about Wolf is “how [he] walks this line between being brutal and protective, but also shy and awkward.”¹³⁷ This dichotomy of Wolf’s character subverts our gender expectations of the masculine alpha figure.

Thorne and Jacin fit the gender expectations of the male hero the most as they both are competent, confident, and in control. Even when blind, Thorne is capable of holding his own in a gunfight and of rescuing the damsel-in-distress.¹³⁸ Jacin is the definition of protective boyfriend when it comes to Winter, making all of his choices with the purpose of keeping her safe both physically and emotionally. Through a reading of the male characters we can clearly see Meyer focus on disturbing female gender stereotypes and conforming more to gender stereotypes through her male figures. Her conformity to gender stereotypes—and her fidelity to her fairy tale sources is evident in each character's romantic plotline closing with the promise of marriage or a committed relationship. Kai literally asks Cinder if she would consider being Empress; Scarlet and Wolf move back to France together to live and work on her far; Cress agrees to travel with Thorne and they exchange ‘I love you’s,’ while Jacin tells Winter that always be with her and is done “serving everyone else.”¹³⁹ In fact, in a collection of short stories by Meyer (*Stars Above* (2016)) Scarlet and Wolf get married. In February 2022, Meyer’s released a choose your own adventure book where readers get to help Cinder attend her own wedding.

The series ends with the final epigraph “And they all lived happily to end of their days,”¹⁴⁰ which follows the typical ‘happily ever after’ associated with various fairy tales.

¹³⁷ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 462.

¹³⁸ Thorne’s character can be easily compared to Hans Solo from *Star Wars*, highlighting how he meets the bad boy masculine stereotype through his flirtatious nature, witty lines, and his somewhat criminal background.

¹³⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 805.

¹⁴⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 824

Although the promises of marriage and committed relationships are implied to be the cause of this happy ending, this epigraph and these relationships are one way in which Meyer reinforces the stereotypical fairy tale that children are exposed to at a young age. This conforms with Carl Lindahl's sixth key elements of the fairy tale, which has a just result and a happily ever after,¹⁴¹ and the second of the elements often seen in fairy tales where the adolescents become married adults by the end of the story.¹⁴² Despite this and her more conventional male characters, Meyer's contribution of reshaping female representation in fairy tales is still important in terms of inclusivity and follows the trend of influential authors such as Angela Carter, while focusing on a predominantly YA audience. This is one of the reasons Meyer's text can be seen as a trend starter for inclusive YA fairy tales—she takes an already existing trend and redirects it to a new audience and through new genre forms.

¹⁴¹ Lindahl, "Definition and History of Fairy Tales," 12-3.

¹⁴² Lindahl, "Definition and History of Fairy Tales," 13.

Chapter Four

Disability: Lunar Madness, Wires, and Blindness

“Let’s give the Little Mermaid her voice back through sign language;...let the maiden without hands use prosthetics... show that evil does not always wear a disabled face...Let the fairy godmother wave her wand and make it so that communities and societies remove barriers of entry rather than create them.”– Margaret Kingsbury¹⁴³

The Lunar Chronicles explores issues of disability within the scope of the fairy tale, creating an even more inclusive text. Disability is complicated in the ways that it is portrayed in popular media and in how we define it. Disabilities are popularly considered to be visible, such as if a person is blind or in a wheelchair. For the purpose of disability as seen in *The Lunar Chronicles*, however, we will be following the Americans with Disabilities Act’s (also referred to as the ADA) definition. The ADA defines ‘disability’ as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment.”¹⁴⁴

Disability in fairy tales is fairly common. Ann Schmiesing points out that European fairy tales “yields numerous examples...thumb-sized children, dwarfs, blinded stepsisters, wounded soldiers... [and] mute maidens.”¹⁴⁵ In these fairy tales disability is usually “a punishment for malevolent behavior or... a condition that amplifies adversity” and must be solved in order for

¹⁴³ Margaret Kingsbury, “What if the Little Mermaid Learned Sign Language? Thoughts About Fairytales and Disability,” *Book Riot*, April 1, 2020, <https://bookriot.com/fairytales-and-disability/>.

¹⁴⁴ “Disability,” *ADA National Network: Glossary of ADA Terms*, American with Disabilities Act, Accessed February 10, 2023, <https://adata.org/glossary-terms#D>.

¹⁴⁵ Ann Schmiesing, “Disability” In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*, edited by Pauline Greenhill, Jill Terry Rudy, Naomi Hammer, and Lauren Bosc, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 105-6.

the “happy ending to be achieved.”¹⁴⁶ Meyer’s characters who are disabled do not adhere to this trend. Their disabilities are not often magically ‘fixed’ and their disabilities make them more valuable. The three disabled characters in *The Lunar Chronicles* are Cinder, Thorne, and Winter.

Cinder’s disability is connected with her hybrid identity and status as a cyborg. Cyborgs and disability have often gone hand-in-hand. Donna Haraway briefly notes in her groundbreaking *Cyborg Manifesto* that “perhaps paraplegics and other severely handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices.”¹⁴⁷ Here the idea of the cyborg is connected to the notion of ‘fixing’ or supplementing for a disability, the cyborg self simultaneously being othered by their ‘machine’ parts that make up for a disability that would also other them. This definition and the use of cyborgs in Young Adult literature is rapidly shifting as “the hybrid figure of the cyborg—that is neither fully impaired nor fully abled from a traditional perspective—offers a measure of resistance to...society’s notions about disability.”¹⁴⁸ In *The Lunar Chronicles*, Cinder helps shift discrimination against cyborgs and change laws on Earth and Luna. Despite this role, Cinder can also be read as a disabled character as her cyborg identity is what kept her alive following a hover crash.

Her body is massively reconstructed through cybernetic surgery and she doesn't realize the extent of her injuries and the surgeries that repaired them until she sees a holographic diagram of herself that made it look

as if someone had chopped her down the middle, dividing her front half from her back half...her heart, her brain, her intestines, her muscles, her blue veins. Her control panel,

¹⁴⁶Schmiesing, 106.

¹⁴⁷ Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent B. Leitch, (New York: Norton & Company, 2010), 2217.

¹⁴⁸ Yasmine Sweed, “New Directions in Disability Narratives: Cyborgs and Redefining Disability in Young Adult Literature,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 40, no 40 (2020): 191.

her synthetic hand and leg, wires that trailed from the base of her skull all the way down her spine and out to her prosthetic limbs...she had not known about the metal vertebrae along her spine, or the four metal ribs, or the synthetic tissue around her heart, or the metal splints alone bones in her right leg.¹⁴⁹

At this moment Cinder is able to fully comprehend her cyborg self, revealing just how debilitating her injuries could have been without the cybernetic surgery. The surgery that saved her life, the surgery only further identifies Cinder as disabled, as it impacts her ability to function on a major level. One example can be found in her foot that is too small, causing her pain and difficulty walking without the proper part.

Although Cinder's foot can be replaced with one more her size, throughout the series we continue to see her cyborg nature impinge on her ability to function. We see this when Cinder uses her power system to get the spaceship she and Thorne are stealing to work. Although she is able to boost the ship, Cinder drains her own power and is found unconscious on the floor by Thorne, who realizes that "her robotic hand was plugged into the port of an exposed computer panel...her gaze was dark and empty."¹⁵⁰ Cinder is literally unable to repower herself, becoming completely dependent on Thorne's ability to fit "the recharging cord into her control panel."¹⁵¹ Although Cinder has proven herself to be a capable cyborg-teenage-alien-princess, her cyborg body limits her ability to function on her own. Anytime she loses power she becomes completely reliant on someone else to save her life.

The extent of Cinder's cyborg disabilities are seen in *Winter* when Cinder escapes Queen Levana and dives into water. Her control panel immediately alerts her that "liquid immersion [has been] detected" and begins to count down the cut off of her power supply.¹⁵² Although

¹⁴⁹ Meyer, *Cinder*, 82.

¹⁵⁰ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 103.

¹⁵¹ Meyer, *Scarlet*, 105.

¹⁵² Meyer, *Winter*, 460.

Cinder is able to stay awake and try to swim, her cyborg limbs are out of her control and “become nothing but dead weights at the end of her limbs,” further endangering her life.¹⁵³ When Cinder is rescued from the water by Thorne, Iko, Cress, and Jacin, she has to inform them that she can’t walk because “the water did something to [her] interface,” causing her “leg and hand” to not function. We see this scene not through Cinder’s eyes, but Cress’s, which allows readers to understand the extent and complexity of Cinder’s disability.

Despite being ‘othered’ as a cyborg, Cinder’s friends do not see her as anything other than able-bodied, if not more able-bodied due to a robotic hand that can shoot tranquilizer darts and an ability to watch the news in her head. For her friends, Cinder’s disabilities are also her super-abilities that help save the day multiple times. When Cinder informs them of the extent of her disabilities Cress realizes that they were “not in the habit of thinking of Cinder as cyborg—as something *other*. As someone who could just stop...functioning.”¹⁵⁴ Despite knowing she is a cyborg, her friends don’t ‘other’ her (literally in this moment with Cress) until she stops functioning. Here her othering is just as hybrid as her identity; her cyborg racial machine/human identity is complicated by her ability to go from able-bodied to disable-bodied with just a bit of water.

Thorne’s off-color jokes of putting rice in Cinder’s head like one would a “portscreen...after they’d put it through a clothes washer” both highlight her disability and dehumanize her.¹⁵⁵ The language around Cinder’s disability becomes tricky in this scene, as Cinder acknowledges that she “can’t do anything” in her current condition, telling her friends, “I’m broken. I’m literally *broken*.”¹⁵⁶ In a sense, ‘broken’ is the correct term for Cinder’s

¹⁵³ Meyer, *Winter*, 461.

¹⁵⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 469.

¹⁵⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 471.

¹⁵⁶ Meyer, *Winter*, 472.

condition, which is literally that of a waterlogged computer, but it's also a word that further others her and her disability. Iko reminds her that "broken isn't the same as unfixable," using questionable language to equate 'fixed' with being able-bodied. Despite this, Cinder's cybernetic parts, inability to function at times due to those parts, and the perception of her disabled-self through Cress, highlights Cinder as a disabled character who is able to use her disabilities to her advantage, such as having a screwdriver, tranquilizer gun, and stiletto knife embedded in her cyborg fingers. These simple things allow Cinder's character to become more powerful, proving that her perceived disability doesn't impact the worth and ability of her body.

Thorne is another disabled character in the series. Thorne, Cress's love interest, is an adapted version of Rapunzel's nameless prince. In 'Rapunzel,' the prince falls out of Rapunzel's tower face first into thorns that blind him. Thorne is also blinded while rescuing Cress, when Cress's satellite while he and Cress are inside. Thorne isn't aware of his blindness at first. He asks Cress to turn on the lights, leaving her to see that "his eyes were open, but he was looking blankly past Cress's shoulder."¹⁵⁷ When Cress informs Thorne that the lights are on and it's daytime, he desperately asks her if she's being honest with him. When she affirms that he is indeed blind, Thorne remains calm. The only sign of his distress is his shaking hands.

Thorne's sudden disability does not impact his capability, as not even a minute later he is cutting off Cress's hair, "the knife...steady in his hand despite the blindness."¹⁵⁸ He also quickly manages the situation to ensure both his and Cress's safety. He hears her rummaging through the wrecked satellite and gets up to help her, "carefully kicking debris out of his way" and keeping "his hands outstretched until he bumped into her."¹⁵⁹ Thorne's ability to navigate with his new

¹⁵⁷ Meyer, *Cress*, 122.

¹⁵⁸ Meyer, *Cress*, 123.

¹⁵⁹ Meyer, *Cress*, 134.

blindness is somewhat unrealistic, but his emotions towards his blindness give insight into the emotional impact of a sudden disability. He lashes out at Cress when she offers to help him tie her shoes, telling her “I may be temporarily blind, but I’m not useless. I can still tie good knots.”¹⁶⁰ Thorne becomes a positive representation of blindness. He struggles with the emotional elements of sudden blindness, while also being competent to hold his own. Thorne finds a way to survive, crafting a cane from the broken bed frame in Cress’ crashed satellite, proving his tenacity as a character.

Despite his strength, Thorne is also able to express his vulnerability to Cress when he says “I need you to pull yourself together...I’m not exactly in prime form right now, and I am relying on you to be aware and observant...I *need* you.”¹⁶¹ Even with a makeshift cane, Thorne needs Cress to help him navigate the desert. He holds on to her arm, occasionally tripping. Thorne is clearly frustrated by this, telling Cress in a controlled manner that he is “not happy with this turn of events.”¹⁶² Referring to his blindness as an ‘event’ separates Thorne from his disability and accentuates the newness of his disability. After expressing his displeasure at this blindness, Thorne and Cress ‘solve’ his difficulty walking by having Cress warn him when they’re “coming up on a hill, or about to start heading down again.”¹⁶³ Over time his confidence improves and he breaks away from using Cress, walking on his own and falling less and less often.

Confidence is a key aspect of Thorne’s character. He sees himself as handsome and capable, always cracking jokes and flirting. His disability, however, rocks this self-assurance and requires him to build it back up. This relates to our understanding of the disability in fairy tales

¹⁶⁰ Meyer, *Cress*, 136.

¹⁶¹ Meyer, *Cress*, 139.

¹⁶² Meyer, *Cress*, 144.

¹⁶³ Meyer, *Cress*, 144.

as “a test, trial, or temporary punishment”¹⁶⁴ as Thorne’s character has to persevere and survive despite his disability. His disability is also temporary, just as the Prince’s is in “Rapunzel.” Dr. Erland examines Thorne’s eyes and declares the blindness to be the result of “severe optic nerve damage, likely as a result of traumatic head injury,” an injury that can be ‘fixed’ over time with stem cells and restore his vision.¹⁶⁵ Once again the language around Thorne’s disability suggests a lack of whole-ness. Just as Iko tells Cinder she can be ‘fixed,’ Thorne views the restoration of his vision as ‘fixing’ him. Saying that Thorne and Cinder’s disabilities can be fixed indicates that they are broken. Although this language is problematic, it doesn’t take away from the fact that Meyer includes disabled characters. Readers come to understand that Cinder’s definition of ‘fixed’ isn’t the eradication of her disability, but the management of her disability. Thorne’s vision does return over time, his excitement at his ability to differentiate “light and dark. Some blurry shadows,”¹⁶⁶ expressed through the notion of brokenness, informing Cress that “it’s finally working” when he begins to see again.¹⁶⁷

While Cinder and Thorne are physically disabled, Princess Winter's disability is mental—Lunar sickness. Lunar sickness is caused by the refusal to use the Lunar gift, which Dr. Erland informs Cinder “is such a fundamental part of our internal makeup that tempering it can create devastating psychological side effects—hallucinations, depression...even madness”¹⁶⁸—which worsen if the gift isn’t used “for long periods of time.”¹⁶⁹ Princess Winter is first introduced

¹⁶⁴ Beth Franks, “Gutting the Golden Goose: Disability in Grimms’ Fairy Tales,” In *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, edited by James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (Illinois: Southern Illinois University, 2001), 251.

¹⁶⁵ Meyer, *Cress*, 384.

¹⁶⁶ Meyer, *Winter*, 58.

¹⁶⁷ Meyer, *Winter*, 57.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, *Cinder*, 240.

¹⁶⁹ Meyer, *Cress*, 228.

through the perspective of Scarlet, who is being held in a menagerie as Winter's 'pet,' which is actually a tactic for Winter to keep Scarlet safe from her stepmother, Queen Levana.

Scarlet calls Winter crazy as Winter attempts to "play doctor"¹⁷⁰ with her and check on her vitals. When Scarlet calls Winter crazy, Winter tells her "you shouldn't call me that. [The guards] don't like that."¹⁷¹ Confused, Scarlet informs Winter that she is, in fact, crazy so why would the guards care? Instead of Winter responding that she is sane, she tells Scarlet she is crazy and she knows this because

The palace walls have been bleeding for years, and no one else sees it...no one believes me, but in some corridors, the blood has gotten so thick there's nowhere safe to step. When I have to pass through those places, I leave a trail of bloody footprints for the rest of the day, and then I worry that the queen's soldiers will follow the scent and eat me up while I'm sleeping...if the blood was real, the servants would clean it up. Don't you think?¹⁷²

Winter's hallucinations are connected to her Lunar sickness. Readers learn the true extent of her illness in the final book, *Winter*, when we finally get Winter's point of view. The book opens with a hallucination: Winter watching a trial on Luna and slowly turning into ice, her toes "becom[ing] ice cubes...cold as space."¹⁷³ Placing readers directly into a moment that defines Winter's character as mentally ill is similar to Meyer's choice to introduce Cinder through her cyborg foot, forcing readers to understand her hybrid racial identity. Just as Cinder is inextricable from the cyborg identity, Winter is defined by her disability.

Opening with the hallucination of Winter turning into ice not only emphasizes her disability, but allows readers to understand Winter's awareness of her insanity. Winter responds to her hallucinations in the way one might to a panic attack. She engages in positive self-talk,

¹⁷⁰ Meyer, *Cress*, 518

¹⁷¹ Meyer, *Cress*, 518.

¹⁷² Meyer, *Cress*, 520.

¹⁷³ Meyer, *Winter*, 3.

telling herself “*it isn’t real, Princess. It’s only an illusion*” and remembering “to be calm, to breathe.”¹⁷⁴ Winter’s hallucination goes unnoticed, but she knows that it isn’t real because after the ice has covered her eyes and filled her throat, it shatters into, “sharp glittering bits [that explode] across the throne room and [skid] across the floor. No one else heard them. No one else noticed.”¹⁷⁵ Despite no one noticing her delusions, Winter is known for her insanity. She is frequently referred to as ‘delusional,’ ‘hysterical,’ ‘mad,’ ‘insane,’ and ‘crazy;’ defining her illness in terms that readers are familiar with when referring to mental illnesses.

Although the vocabulary around Lunar sickness and mental illnesses is similar, Meyer intentionally did not give Winter a mental illness that is real. In an interview on how Meyer chose to write Winter’s illness, Meyer states, “I decided early on that I wanted Winter’s mental illness to be entirely fictional—not with any connection to existing illness, which is in contrast to how I treat most of my world-building” such as her creation of letumosis, where she “researched diseases and plagues.”¹⁷⁶ Meyer also notes that “mental illness is a sensitive topic” and this logic behind her creation of Lunar sickness was to not “inadvertently introduce any inaccuracies or stereotypes around a real-life illness.”¹⁷⁷

Winter’s illness might not be a real illness, but responses to her illness reflect some of the reactions and perceptions we have around mental illness today. When Scarlet reunites with her friends and introduces them to Winter she is “curled up on her side, facing the wall and drawing little designs into the dust” while singing “*The parakeets sing ta-weet-a-weet-a-weet, and the stars twinkle all the night...and the monkeys frolic a-eet-eet-eet, while the rockets fly by...and the*

¹⁷⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 8.

¹⁷⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 11.

¹⁷⁶ Maggs, “Interview.”

¹⁷⁷ Maggs, “Interview.”

Earth is full tonight, tonight and the wolves all howl, aa-oooooooooh.”¹⁷⁸ The group is unsettled by Winter’s disconnection from reality. Scarlet informs them that “she’s harmless...I’m pretty sure,” highlighting the stigma and fear often associated with mental illness on Luna, Earth, and in our own reality and Earth where being mentally ill makes you a threat.¹⁷⁹

Winter uses her well-known insanity to her advantage, pretending to hallucinate in order to get her guards to leave her alone, even emphasizing her craziness when she is with Scarlet to prevent her guard from getting suspicious about their interactions. Despite playing up her craziness, Winter’s mental health deteriorates throughout the novel, her hallucinations increasing and at the worst possible times. When Winter slips into a state of delirium while trying to recruit Levana’s genetically engineered wolf soldiers to help Cinder, the men want to know “what’s wrong with her.”¹⁸⁰ In her delirious state, Winter hallucinates that they are all wolves and dissociates from herself, wondering “what she’d said that was insane” before viewing herself as a wolf and “turned her own muzzle up to cavernous ceiling and sand, *‘And the Earth is full tonight, tonight, and the wolves all howl, aa-oooooooooh.*”¹⁸¹

After recruiting the soldiers, Winter’s mental health deteriorates quickly, her mind seeming to lose control as soon as she finds herself in the middle of the bloodbath between Queen Levana’s army and Cinder’s revolutionaries. She tells Jacin the extent of her mental break, saying “I am destroyed...I do not know that even a sane person could recover from this. So how can I?”¹⁸² Once again the notion of brokenness and the ability to be whole is evoked

¹⁷⁸Meyer, *Winter*, 285.

¹⁷⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 285.

¹⁸⁰Meyer, *Winter*, 493.

¹⁸¹ Meyer, *Winter*, 494.

¹⁸² Meyer, *Winter*, 724.

through the language of destruction, a narrative move that aligns her cognitive disability with Cinder and Thorne's physical disabilities.

Winter's relationship with her disability is more nuanced than Cinder's and Thorne's, as she has willingly given herself over to Lunar sickness. Winter tells Scarlet, "I haven't used my glamour since I was twelve years old...not since I was old enough to control it. That's why the visions come to me. That's why I'm going mad,"¹⁸³ highlighting the fact that she has willingly chosen "to never again use her glamour, to never again manipulate someone's thoughts or emotions, to never again fool herself into believing such an unnatural use of power could be harmless."¹⁸⁴ Many people can't understand why Winter would use her agency to embrace Lunar sickness and diminish her quality of life. Scarlet, for instance, frustrated with Winter's hallucinations, asks, "why don't you just use your glamour? Why let it drive you crazy like this?"¹⁸⁵ before calling Winter "a mess" because she refuses to use her gift to do "something harmless."¹⁸⁶

Scarlet's questions are not surprising as choosing to go mad is hard to comprehend. But her questions come from a place of ignorance as she assumes that being able-bodied would make Winter normal and, therefore, 'whole.' This misconception accurately represents many able-bodied people trying to make sense of disabled individuals. To Scarlet, Winter's hallucinations are pointless; they don't "make anything better" and therefore have no use.¹⁸⁷ Winter refuses to accept Scarlet's perspective as it doesn't acknowledge the lived experience of Winter. Winter

¹⁸³ Meyer, *Cress*, 523.

¹⁸⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 74.

¹⁸⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 267.

¹⁸⁶ Meyer, *Winter*, 268.

¹⁸⁷ Meyer, *Winter*, 268.

informs Scarlet that she quit using her Lunar gift when she realized she was only doing harm. She tells Scarlet about the incident that changed her mind when there was

A servant who tried to kill herself. I stopped her. I forced her to change her mind. I made her *happy*. I was so sure I was helping her...but all I did was give her more time to be tortured by Aimery...the next time she tried to take her life she succeeded. Only then did I realize that I hadn't helped her at all...that day I swore to never manipulate anyone again. Even if I believed I was doing good—for who am I to presume what is good for others?¹⁸⁸

Winter's perspective on her powers and her choice to do everything she can to avoid manipulating and controlling over others not only stems from this incident, but from her understanding of the tyrannical rule her step-mother has imposed with her Lunar gift.

Winter's choice to not use her Lunar gift and endure Lunar sickness shifts in the middle of a battle with Levana's army, when the queen's right-hand man, Aimery, comes after Jacin, the one person Winter would do anything for. Winter uses her Lunar gift for the first time since she was twelve, taking control of Scarlet and the knife in Scarlet's hand to stab Aimery. Winter's "reality disintegrated" with the first plunge of the knife, leaving her untethered and spinning into her own madness.¹⁸⁹ The chapter following the death of Aimery is one of Meyer's strongest depictions of Winter's Lunar sickness, as readers are thrust into her dissociated mind as she processes her actions. The sentences are short and sharp, reflecting Winter's disjointed state of mind:

a cocoon. An encasement of ice. A spaceship harness strangling her. The belt cutting into her flesh...she struggled harder. Kicked and writhed. And screamed. *Stabbing and stabbing and stabbing and stabbing and...Animal. Killer. Predator. And the wolves all howl aaooooooooooh...*¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Meyer, *Winter*, 269.

¹⁸⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 732.

¹⁹⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 733-5

Winter's inner dialogue ends abruptly, and we don't see her again until after Queen Levana's death.

When we do see Winter next it isn't through her perspective, but Jacin's, as he sits in a chair and waits to "see if she would recover."¹⁹¹ We learn that despite Lunar sickness being caused by not using her gift, Winter's sudden use of it "damaged her mind, quite extensively."¹⁹² As a result Winter is in a hospital room and restrained because "she had often woken up with violent thrashing and clawing...she had become a danger to others and to herself."¹⁹³ The treatment that Winter is receiving fits with our contemporary perception of how mentally ill individuals who are a danger to themselves and others are treated. Images of padded rooms, straitjackets, and padded restraints come to mind. In evoking these images Meyer is drawing from stereotypical perceptions of serious mental illness despite her hopes of not doing so by creating a fictional mental illness.

Even when Winter 'recovers' enough to make her own choices, she is given the option to either stay in hospital "where she could be restrained when her outbursts came" or released, but "outfitted with shock bracelets that could incapacitate her when needed."¹⁹⁴ Winter thinks of the shock bracelets as allowing her an "imaginary freedom,"¹⁹⁵ one that she desperately needs to regain a sense of normalcy. Despite these precautions, however, Winter is not viewed as incompetent or fragile due to her mental illness. There is an understanding that these are steps that are being taken until she is in a better place, not limiting her freedom forever. Even with her shock bracelet and occasional fits, Cinder still asks Winter to serve as Luna's "*first* ambassador"

¹⁹¹ Meyer, *Winter*, 775.

¹⁹² Meyer, *Winter*, 776.

¹⁹³ Meyer, *Winter*, 776.

¹⁹⁴ Meyer, *Winter*, 802.

¹⁹⁵ Meyer, *Winter*, 802.

on Earth where she would “have dinner with fancy people” and prove that “Lunars aren’t all monsters.”¹⁹⁶ By offering Winter this position, Cinder, the new queen of Luna, shows that she sees past Winter’s mental disability.

The offer also shows a deeper understanding of Winter’s condition and needs as she is reassured that she is not required to take the position, because “you need to take care of yourself first.”¹⁹⁷ Prioritizing Winter’s mental health without undermining her capability to have responsibilities is a key element in Meyer’s attempt to destigmatize Winter’s disability. Meyer ends Winter’s narrative with an exchange between Winter and Jacin around the language of disability we have seen echoed in all three characters, that of being ‘broken’ and needing to be ‘fixed.’

Winter volunteers to try a prototype of a device that would allow her to not exercise her Lunar gift without worrying about Lunar sickness. When Jacin mentions his concerns about Winter trying the experimental technology, Winter says “You want me to be fixed, don’t you?”¹⁹⁸ Unlike when Cinder is told she can be fixed by Iko and when Thorne asks Dr. Erland if his vision can be fixed, Jacin responds negatively to Winter’s language, “draw[ing] back as if she’d thrown something at him” and forcefully telling her that she’s “not *broken*.”¹⁹⁹ Jacin’s strong reaction to the language she uses about her disability forces readers to evaluate the relationship between being disabled and being ‘whole.’ While Cinder and Thorne are made ‘whole’ through replacement parts and stem cell surgery, Winter is simply trying out a new technology that doesn’t guarantee any results.

¹⁹⁶ Meyer, *Winter*, 805.

¹⁹⁷ Meyer, *Winter*, 805.

¹⁹⁸ Meyer, *Winter*, 807.

¹⁹⁹ Meyer, *Winter*, 807.

Jacin conveys to Winter that it is not being ‘fixed’ that matters to him; it is her overall well-being. He tells her “‘I don’t care if you see dead wolves and turn into a living ice sculpture when you’re having a bad day. I don’t care if I have an imprint of your teeth on my shoulder. I don’t care if you’re...*fixed*,’ and spitting that final word ‘like it tasted bad.’”²⁰⁰ He assures her that all that matters is that she is “safe and happy,” emphasizing that her disability is not conducive to her ability to live a good life. Winter considers this, acknowledges his statement, and expresses her own belief that participating in the trial could help her achieve that sense of safety and happiness by helping her understand and become “no longer afraid [of her] own mind.”²⁰¹ This final moment with Winter and Jacin is one of Meyer’s strongest depictions of a healthy understanding of both Winter’s mental illness and mental illness as a disability overall. By providing dialogue between the disabled character and their able-bodied partner she highlights negative connotations of language used in discourse on disability without erasing the existence of the disability itself.

Meyer’s range of characters with various disabilities contributes to the text’s status as an inclusive work. Despite strong language equating disability with ‘brokenness’ that needs to be ‘fixed,’ Meyer opens dialogue about disabilities in reality and in fairy tales through the inclusion of these characters. Meyer also emphasizes that disabilities aren’t always visible, and that someone can present as able-bodied or actually be able-bodied while still being disabled.

This representation is made possible through the use of science fiction, which gives Meyer’s space to create cyborgs that represent disability, as well as a fictional mental illness. The use of science fiction and fairy tales as platforms for conversations about disability helps distance readers from their own contemporary conceptions of the able-bodied and the disabled-

²⁰⁰ Meyer, *Winter*, 807.

²⁰¹ Meyer, *Winter*, 807.

bodied so that they can explore how those concepts resonate in contemporary culture and in their own lives.

Chapter Five

Retelling and Reclaiming: The YA Fairy Tale in 2023

“Fairy tales are a common language...[and the] foundation to understanding life and how we fit into it.” – Antonia Markiet²⁰²

As stated in the beginning of this thesis, the overall goal of this project was to provide a close reading of Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles* as an early, influential, and comprehensive example of a YA fairy tale retelling that reflects a growing cultural emphasis on diversity and inclusion in early 21st-century American—an emphasis that is evident in consumer demand for such stories and in the move in American publishing to meet that demand. In Chapter One we worked to define and make sense of the fairy tale before moving to a close reading of Marissa Meyer’s *The Lunar Chronicles*. Chapters Two, Three, and Four, provided close readings of Meyer’s depictions of race, gender, sexuality, and disabilities. The first volume of *The Lunar Chronicles*, published in 2012, was an acclaimed and bestselling bellwether for the diverse and inclusive YA fairy tales that have followed over the last decade.

If posts on constantly proliferating social media platforms are any indication, consumer demand for such retellings seems to be on the rise. Instagram, founded in 2010, and TikTok, founded in 2016, have become the go-to platforms for young adults. But the readers among them also gravitate to platforms such as Uppercase YA and Book Riot, where YA books are promoted, panned, and praised by publishers and readers alike, not to mention YA fiction podcasts such as Hey YA, BN Teen, and Hazel & Katniss & Harry & Starr. Publishers are tight-lipped about sales

²⁰²Elyse Martin, “Twice-Told Tales: Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror 2021,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, April 2, 2021.

numbers, but judging by the bestseller lists and the burgeoning YA sections in Barnes & Noble and other bookstores, there are a lot of such readers. Uppercase YA's Instagram page has created a guide for YA books, including many posts that list over seventy diverse fairy tale retellings. My own informal survey of bookstore collections, blogs with lists of recommended YA fairy tale retellings, and advertisements for new books being released, I have found dozens of diverse fairy tale retellings that have been published since 2012. This is almost certainly an underestimation. Here is one data point: in early 2020, I subscribed to three book boxes (one called FairyLoot), monthly deliveries of special-edition YA titles and assorted other goodies. In the four years since, I have received more than forty books, most of them fairy tale retellings, without a single duplicate title. The well shows no sign of running dry.

One such title is Kalynn Bayron's *Cinderella is Dead* (2020), a standalone novel. *Cinderella is Dead* is a sapphic story that follows Sophia, a 16-year-old who is in love with her best friend, Erin, though she is being forced to attend a ball where she will be 'chosen' by a man to marry him. If a girl isn't selected at the ball within three years, she is forced to commit to never marry and is exiled from the community. In Sophia's hope to overthrow this oppressive patriarchal tradition, she discovers the truth of what happened to Cinderella, 200 years after her death, while unraveling her own Cinderella-esque narrative.

I personally discovered this book on TikTok. *Cinderella is Dead* fans created videos that could be no more than a minute long to convince viewers to read the book, knowing that if the book wasn't presented in an appealing way a viewer would scroll away. The plethora of such videos not only highlighted the popularity of the book; they demonstrated the importance of TikTok in the YA publishing industry, as discussed at the Editors' Picks panel that took place at the U.S. Book Show in May 2021. Kendra Levin, an editor for Simon & Schuster Books for

Young Readers, notes that editors have to be aware of social media and have to “follow the teens wherever they are...[and] be really responsive. The digital space is bigger and bigger.”²⁰³

TikTok has become its own form of marketing, even without an attempt or effort from the publisher themselves. If readers like the book (or hate it), they will make a TikTok about it; these short videos increase exposure for these texts and their authors. I found the book to be advertised by TikTokers in three ways: as a story about Black women, a story about the LGBTQIA+ community, and a fairy tale retelling.

One TikToker (@theritzbooks) started off her video stating that “Cinderella is Dead was another phenomenal book with even better representation” before going on to highlight that not only was the protagonist a lesbian and a Black woman, but that Bayron spends a lot of time “discussing misogyny and the historical abuse of women.”²⁰⁴ The TikTok was only twenty-seven seconds long, but it appealed to its audience by emphasizing the book’s inclusiveness and highlighting the marginalized communities it speaks to. This TikTok also speaks to the relevance of *The Lunar Chronicles*. In her caption, its creator asked for recommendations of fairy tale retellings and indicated that she already knows Meyer’s series.

Bloomsbury, the publisher of *Cinderella is Dead*, created a fifteen second TikTok that sums up the plot while also touting the book's inclusive nature. The summary shows a person pretending to be Sophia’s mom and dad, who are excited about their daughter being able to go to the ball and meet her future husband. It then cuts to a clip with the book and the caption “Sophia:

²⁰³Gilcy Aquino, “U.S. Book Show YA Editors’ Picks: Young Adult Trends and Looking to the Future,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, June 3, 2021.

²⁰⁴ Carissa (@theritzbooks). 2020. “If you have any more fairy tale recs (I know Lunar Chrons), let me know! WLW 🥰🥰🥰#cinderellaisdead #booktok.” TikTok, September 27, 2020. <https://www.tiktok.com/@theritzbooks/video/6877051503232814341>.

likes girls and decides to bring down the entire system instead.”²⁰⁵ The marketing strategy is clear. The book is being touted for its inclusivity and diversity as a fairy tale retelling. Bayron notes that this is quite intentional, saying that she chose to retell “Cinderella” because she has found that:

Princess stories are so prevalent, but they rarely include characters with even one marginalized identity, much less intersectional identities. What does it mean to live in a patriarchal society as someone who is Black and a woman and queer? How do the compounding effects of that marginalization affect the worldview of the protagonist?....“Cinderella” is such an instantly recognizable tale. It was the perfect vehicle to deconstruct concepts of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and misogyny.²⁰⁶

Bayron acknowledges that the fairy tale is a vehicle for diversifying YA bookshelves and that “Cinderella” is so well-known that it is more likely to draw in an audience. Discussions of *Cinderella is Dead* always come back to diversity and how the book speaks both against and with other fairy tale retellings. Bayron also addresses this, noting that “readers enjoy the familiar beats of fairy tales and that’s why we return to them again and again” and that what makes such retellings so special is their role “in conversation with these other retellings. It offers readers a new take on a classic story as well as a chance to see themselves.”²⁰⁷

In this respect, Bayron’s text is not unusual. Re-imagined fairy tales routinely tackle difficult topics, not only race and sexuality, but disability, domestic violence, bigotry, and other forms of abuse and oppression. These reshaped fairy tales encourage readers to think about the oppressive structures of our society. They juxtapose the fairy tale readers think they know (the fairy tale that Sophia believes is the ‘correct’ one) with the ‘true’ fairy tale, which is unveiled as

²⁰⁵ Bloomsbury Books (bloomsburybooks). 2021. “Say no the patriarchy and read Cinderella is Dead by Kalynn Bayron 🍷 #cinderellaisdead #booktok #fantasybooks #bookworm #queerbooks #fyp.” TikTok, March 3, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@bloomsburybooks/video/6945468845494717701?is_from_webapp=1.

²⁰⁶ Melissa Montovani, “Kalynn Bayron: Author of Cinderella is Dead,” *Room Magazine*, n.d., <https://roommagazine.com/kalynn-bayron-author-of-cinderella-is-dead/>.

²⁰⁷ Matthew Todd, “Kalynn Bayron talks about her love of horror and the need for inclusivity,” *The Bookseller*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.thebookseller.com/author-interviews/kalynn-bayron-talks-about-her-love-of-horror-and-the-need-for-inclusivity>.

the story progresses. By unraveling the conventional fairy tale, the reimagined version encourages readers to understand how the ‘original’ narrative shortchanges marginalized communities by expressing only a white, heteronormative, ableist perspective.

Like Natasha Bowen’s *Skin of the Sea* (2021), which reimagines “The Little Mermaid” in the context of African folklore, such fairy tale retellings begin the work of reclaiming and reshaping the white, heteronormative Western canon. In doing so, they trade on tales already familiar to grown-ups and children alike. A *Publisher’s Weekly* article called “Twice-Told Tales: Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror 2021,” quotes a senior editor at Orbit Books, Brit Hvide, who states that we hang on and retell fairy tales and folklore because “we want those comforting tropes...but we can’t just accept things the way they’ve been told to us; we have to turn them over and investigate them in a new way.”²⁰⁸ Kate Nintzel, Executive Editor at Custom House agrees, stating that because “folktales and fairy tales are foundational stories...[writers] can assume a level of understanding with the reader. It gives you space to play with ideas.”²⁰⁹

In other words, comforting fairy tale tropes create a safe space where readers can engage with the subversive material of the story itself. It can be argued that the easiest way to move towards large cultural change is to start by reshaping big cultural elements—like fairy tales—that appeal to a large group of people. Hvide also notes that traditional fairy tales are often “morality stories that reinforce gender stereotypes.”²¹⁰ Reinvented stories, of course, are morality stories, too. But the act of reinvention opens up the familiar to a host of new morals that in today’s market often challenge the old ones. It’s like pouring new wine into old bottles.

²⁰⁸Martin, “Twice-Told.”

²⁰⁹Martin, “Twice-Told.”

²¹⁰Martin, “Twice-Told.”

More and more frequently that fresh water includes YA fairy tales from outside the *Grimms' Fairy Tales* tradition (now the Disney tradition), a further expansion of diversity and inclusivity reflecting our increasingly global world. Such books include fairy tales and folklore from Russia (*The Bear and the Nightingale*, *These Feathered Flames*), the Middle-East (*Thorne*, *The Wrath & the Dawn*), Norway (*Echo North*, *The Seafarer's Kiss*, *Cruel Beauty*), East Asia (*Six Crimson Cranes*, *Spin the Dawn*, *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns*, *Daughter of the Moon Goddess*, *The Crimson Cloak*, *Folklor*), Eastern Europe (*The Wolf and the Woodsman*, *Juniper and Thorne*), Mexico (*Gods of Jade and Shadow*, *Blanca & Rowja*), the Philippines (*A Forbidden Fruit*), Malaysia (*Black Water Sister*), Puerto Rico (*Five Midnights*), Korea (*Nothing into All*), as well as fairy tales from the Jewish tradition (*Ballad & Dagger*, *The Light of Midnight Stars*) and the Hindu tradition (*Daughter of the Sun*).

It's clear that many teen readers are demanding something different; they want and expect to see more from authors, publishers, and society. In January of 2020, Meghan Dietsche Goel wrote for *Publisher's Weekly* about teens in Austin, Texas and their hopes for the future YA industry. The requests have a similar theme. Four of the six teens note their desire for more fairy tale retellings and diverse texts. Ming wants "more retellings of Chinese folklore," while Liri wants "more obscure retellings, not the ones we see over and over again."²¹¹ Colleen voices the vague but pressing demand for "books that address relevant, important issues in life."²¹²

In a compilation of responses from publishers throughout the industry (YA, self-help, university presses, etc.), *Publisher Weekly's* article "Call and Response: Social Justice Books: 2020-2021" gives insight into how publishers are working to meet and fulfill their readers'

²¹¹Meghan Dietsche Goel, "What Austin Teens Want Publishers to Know in 2020," *Publisher's Weekly*, January 3, 2020.

²¹²What this means for Colleen might be different for someone else, but it once again speaks to the larger demand for texts that respond to and reflect contemporary culture and society.

expectations. Justin Chanda, a publisher and senior v-p from Simon & Schuster’s Young Reader imprint, states that “established authors and brand-new authors are writing about their authentic experiences and their hopes for the future—and we have a marketplace that is eager to read and share in their journey. It’s a great time to be in children’s publishing!”²¹³

Other publishing professionals agree. Alison Fisher, an editor at Tor Teen, notes that she has

never experienced any resistance to acquiring a story about a diverse population. In fact, I would say a lot of our accounts are looking for more and more underrepresented stories. That wouldn’t be happening if those books weren’t selling, but I think it’s both a capitalism thing and a very strong feeling about the need to build a global community against, shall we say, other forces that are at work in society right now.²¹⁴

At the beginning of Child Book Council’s Diversity Outstanding Achievement Awards, Carl Lennertz said, “You believe in the movement that is advancing diversity on the page and in the workplace. And it *is* a movement, not a trend. Trends are long and slow and can come to an end. This cannot.”²¹⁵

I hope Lennertz is right. In a Western environment riddled with social inequities and the fight for fundamental human rights, fairy tales give writers and readers a space to communicate clearly with one another. In between the social media posts, news articles, and podcasts, we are able to discover one another through fairy tales. Fairy tales have given us the ability to transcend boundaries; as we reinvent fairy tales to include marginalized narratives, these boundaries continue to expand. Traditional fairy tales too often teach us about happily-ever-afters for their

²¹³ Diane Patrick and Calvin Reid, “Call and Response: Social Justice Books 2020-2021,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, November 20, 2020.

²¹⁴ Sue Corbett, “YA for Changing Times,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, May 17, 2019.

²¹⁵ Sarah Yung, “2019 CBC Diversity Awards: ‘A Movement, Not a Trend,’” *Publisher’s Weekly*, November 26, 2019.

white, heteronormative, and abelist protagonists. The inclusive YA fairy tales of the present push for a happily-ever-after for everyone, no matter their identity.

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