Papers
Explorations into Children's Literature

Ready Made for the Market: Producing Charitable Subjects in Dystopian and Voluntourist Young Adult Novels

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> The Fatigues all talk like that. Big-Picture-speak, Risa calls it. Seeing the whole, and none of the parts. It's not just in their speech but in their eyes as well. When they look at Risa, she can tell they don't really see her. They seem to see the mob of Unwinds more as a concept rather than a collection of anxious kids, and so they miss all the subtle social tremors that shake things just as powerfully as the jets shake the roof.
> — Neal Shusterman (2007), *Unwind*

> Person after person stood up and talked. Different names, different faces, different voices, but the same basic story. The same basic sermon. If they were pretending to be saints for my benefit they could stop wasting their breath and my time. I was hardly listening, and what I did hear didn't impress me. At least I had an excuse. I *had* to be there. These people were so stupid that they'd made a choice. I couldn't even imagine that. Didn't they have any better place to be, things to do, or people to hang with?
> — Eric Walters (2008), *Alexandria of Africa*

The passages that function as epigraphs to this paper may seem strange bedfellows, not least because the genres of the young adult (YA) novels from which they are taken – dystopian literature and 'voluntourism literature' respectively – seem so unrelated.[1] Yet if nothing else these passages indicate that dystopian and voluntourist YA literatures invest equally in the politics of charity and attendant spectacles of rescue. Dystopian YA almost always depicts and therefore models for its readership young people saving the world. For example, Neal

[1] These novels could just as well be characterised as integrating dystopian and voluntourist modes or tropes into already existing genres. See Bradford, Mallan, Stephens, and McCallum (2008) for a sustained consideration of how both utopianism and dystopianism might operate in such a fashion.

Shusterman's 'Unwind' – a series of four novels set in a dystopian United States where the surgical division or 'unwinding' of unwanted teens between the ages of 13 and 18 has become an accepted practice – celebrates those who rescue and harbour unwind AWOLs, a strategic act that ultimately contributes to eliminating unwinding. Similarly, voluntourist YA literature, so named for its preoccupation with travel and volunteering, celebrates those who help others in need, usually through development work. As a genre that tends toward social realism, it is radically different from dystopian literature, yet it too aims to cultivate an other-regarding ethic[2] for the benefit of young readers. Both genres urge readers to adopt a sensibility and outlook that would most facilitate their transformation from ordinary teens into charitable saviours of the world.

Where the two genres depart is in their setting. Dystopian YA tends to focus on acts of charity in the young adult's own society, one gone terribly wrong. In contrast, voluntourist YA tends to focus on acts of charity overseas. A case in point, Eric Walters' novel celebrates the blossoming of a latent altruism in its Beverley Hills protagonist as she helps to build a school with a group of voluntourists in Kenya. Voluntourism, the industry with which voluntourist YA enjoys a troubling and tenuous connection, is itself oriented toward the 'exotic' – that is, the 'foreign,' the 'distant,' or the 'outside' (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary* 2005). As my brief summaries of the texts suggest, neither Shusterman nor Walters depict charity as a simple black-and-white affair; instead, they highlight the difficulty of seeing the actual persons beyond a self that projects onto

[2] I borrow this term from Volker Heins, who uses it to discuss the role played by nongovernmental organizations in international society: 'to the extent that NGOs are symptomatic for a fundamental change, they signal the shift away from a politics based on national and class interest to a politics based on moral values and emotions. NGOs epitomize the rise of an 'other-regarding' ethic that is increasingly taking hold in Western societies, often cutting across the divide between governmental and nongovernmental forces' (2008, p. 1).

the other: the idea of rescuing unwinds can take precedence over knowing them individually in 'Unwind,' and the desire to conduct oneself ethically in relation to others in *Alexandria of Africa* can be self-serving. The exploration of the complexities of giving on the part of Shusterman and Walters, not to mention other children's writers, should come as no surprise, since much contemporary children's literature continues a long tradition of didacticism designed to cultivate in young people a charitable sensibility in the face of an often uncaring social order.[3] Today, this order is a largely neoliberal one in which the economic imperatives that govern the market are extended to those regimes traditionally thought of as being antithetical to it.[4] Charity, defined as a 'voluntary giving to those in need' (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary* 2005) plays an important role in dystopian and voluntourist YA texts, which more often than not aim to produce kind, benevolent, and tolerant citizens in an era when these qualities seem to have become subsumed by the market. That they often encourage a spirit of giving by smoothing over the contradictions of neoliberalism is a problem. Dystopian and voluntourist YA can proclaim a desire to critique neoliberal imperatives while at the same time capitalising on them in their investments in a

[3] Matthew O. Grenby remarks on a long history of children's stories emphasising the importance of thinking about and conducting oneself ethically before others, beginning with the moral tale in the eighteenth century (2002, p. 185). Motivations for and performances of charity may have shifted dramatically in children's literature since this time, but representations of charity as an unquestioned good alongside the expressed importance of cultivating an other-regarding ethic have been fairly consistent staples of the genre.

[4] I am indebted to Wendy Brown and David Harvey for my understanding of neoliberalism. Brown underlines neo-liberalism's reach beyond the economy, arguing that neo-liberal rationality 'involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player' (2003, p. 2). Harvey argues that '[n]eoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (2005, p. 2). The extension of market values to every aspect of daily life and the rise of the entrepreneurial subject are key to my discussion of neoliberal YA literature in this paper.

deceivingly countercultural individualism; the result is an alluring and magical resolution of the clash between neoliberal ideology, which conceives of a free market, and neoliberal policies and governance that intervene in market processes.[5]

The darker side of dystopian and voluntourist YA is evident in the epigraphs that represent each of the series I take up in this paper. Risa places value on 'parts,' meaning individual teens slated for unwinding, but this sits uneasily next to the 'Unwind' world's fetishization of teen parts. The series' resolution to this central contradiction is to come out on the seemingly sunny side of the individual and the conservative family values that prop it up in the U.S. In Walters' novels, the unique individualism that is supposed to provide the conditions for altruism are belied by the voluntourists' uniform personal origin stories. The series resolves this central contradiction by redirecting its protagonist's neoliberalism into charitable activities. In both cases neoliberal values remain intact. As Shusterman's and Walters' series illustrate, today's dystopian and voluntourist YA texts can end up supporting more than criticising the current order. They nevertheless offer valuable entry points into discussions about charity and the implications of charitable acts for those who find themselves on the receiving end of someone else's good will

[5] Perhaps the most sustained consideration of dystopian YA literature's failings is the volume edited by Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz (2013), in which many of the authors comment on the tendency of YA dystopias to celebrate capitalism. In their introduction, the editors point out that YA dystopias often draw on the conventions of the adventure genre to enable 'wish fulfillment' and the restoration of 'a lost, comforting safety and security […] turning from futurity to embrace a nostalgic past' (2013, n.p.). They elaborate that '[h]owever edgy the covers of these novels may appear, with burned-out landscapes and hip warriors, the didacticism of their content is reminiscent of that of Victorian novels for children' (2013, n.p.). In her own contribution to the volume, Basu argues that for all its pretensions to resisting a dystopian order in which young people are sorted into and encouraged to conform to one of four different factions – erudite, dauntless, amity, and candor – the narrative and its marketing only end up fetishizing the very values that form the basis of neoliberalism. She suggests that *Divergent* is symptomatic of the 'YA dystopia's innate conservatism' (2013, n.p.).

and intentions. Instead of denunciating dystopian and voluntourist narratives outright, then, I draw on analyses of Shusterman's 'Unwind' and Walters' 'Alexandria' novels to explore how, their neoliberalist orientation notwithstanding, they turn a critical eye on the ways in which charity is recruited in service of a highly competitive market in which education alone no longer guarantees gainful employment.

Trading in Acts of Charity: Neal Shusterman's 'Unwind'

Neal Shusterman's 'Unwind' series imagines a future where neoliberalism has run so rampant that 'unwinding,' by which the bodies of teens deemed unfit for adulthood are surgically divided and then sold in a global market, has become a widely accepted practice. Two key moments trigger the establishment of unwinding as an accepted practice in the 'Unwind' world: first, the Second Civil War, also known as 'The Heartland War,' fought between the Pro-life and Pro-choice armies and, second, the development of neurografting techniques allowing every part of a donor body to be used in transplant. Keeping both moments in sight is crucial, since it is science that enables the final solution[6] in Book 1 of the series, entitled *Unwind*. Rejecting views of science as innocuous and apolitical, Shusterman's series makes clear that science may not only help to maintain current dystopias but also create the conditions for new ones. Neurografting enables 'retroactive abortions' of teens on condition they remain technically alive, laying the ground for the Bill of Life, which posits a feasible if horrific compromise between the pro-life and pro-choice sides. (One of the side-effects of this bill are the desperate measures taken by parents who do not want to have to wait until their children become adolescents to rectify an

[6] As my use of the phrase 'final solution' suggests, *Unwind* can be read as a Holocaust narrative. For a more sustained discussion of the novel along these lines, see Susan Louise Stewart's 'Dystopian Sacrifice, Scapegoats, and Neal Shusterman's *Unwind*' (2013).

unplanned pregnancy: they leave their newborn babies on the doorsteps of neighbours, provoking the government to create yet another bill – the Storking Initiative – making it legal to abandon one's offspring as long as they do not get caught.) Teens themselves have no say in whether or not they are unwound. Their parents merely sign an unwind order, at which point the Juvey-cops (the name by which the police responsible for dealing with juveniles are known) remove the unwanted teen from the family home – violently if necessary, but with care not to damage the merchandise they have become – and take them to a harvest camp where they will be fed and exercised before being unwound. The language Shusterman's dystopian society has taken up – 'unwinding' as a euphemism for retroactive abortion; 'Happy Jack' and the eco-friendly 'Cold Spring' as the names of the harvest camps where it is carried out; living in a 'divided state' to describe the experience of being unwound – signal how neoliberal ideology conceals the horror of the order it supports.

Attesting to Shusterman's refusal to reduce charity to a simple giver-recipient relation, three types of giving expose the consequences of adapting compassion to the market:

1. Involuntary organ 'donation' or what Susan Louise Stewart, in her analysis of *Unwind*, calls 'mandatory conscription' (2013, n.p.) in light of the incompatibility of donating, which implies giving something of one's free will, and involuntary activity, which in this case amounts to being forced to part with one's own body;
2. Voluntary unwinds as tithes or 'sacred sacrifice' (Stewart, n.p.); and
3. AWOL unwinds as agents and recipients of charity.

Only this last qualifies as true giving, if we define charity as voluntary giving: many AWOL unwinds become recipients of the charity of others – they could not survive long as fugitives if they did not – and in turn they pay forward the kindnesses paid to them, effectively becoming

agents of charity. The fact that they can be transformed into givers demonstrates the injustice of their unwind orders and, by extension, the importance of creating a social world outside the book in which charity is not an economic imperative. The warm, charitable nature of AWOLs is juxtaposed with a cold and calculating unwind industry that shapes, regulates, and disciplines teen bodies, in large part by threatening them with unwinding if they do not conform. Teens perform 'goodness' not necessarily because they want to, but to avoid unwinding. For six years of their life they endure the threat of retroactive abortion. I place the word 'goodness' within quotation marks to highlight its ideological character: in 'Unwind,' goodness is synonymous with obedience and overachievement, and badness with the performance of an individuality that stands out and therefore threatens to disrupt the high-functioning uniformity of the status quo. In keeping with the conventions of YA, the 'Unwind' novels underline how teens deemed different from the norm are persecuted in the real world outside the book. 'Unwind' appropriately sides with the 'freaks' and the 'geeks' – those who, as the series protagonist, Connor, so aptly puts it, are for one reason or another labelled 'troubled' or 'at risk' (Shusterman 2007, p. 11). In the 'Unwind' world, even 'unwind' becomes another damning label (Shusterman 2007, p. 11). For those to whom such labels have attached, the cost of performing a subjectivity that would feel authentic is too high; unwinding entails summary 'division,' a fate worse than murder, particularly when one considers that the operation requires teens to be fully conscious. Although they are anestheticized, being killed, as the first chilling scene of unwinding makes clear, is preferable to witnessing and experiencing one's own undoing.

The stuff of Shusterman's dystopia is precisely neoliberalism, which promises but often fails to deliver the 'good life' in exchange for the 'right' kind of self-actualization. Readers are supposed

to understand that most of the teens in the series are actually 'good' people who do not deserve to be unwound. Even Roland, who tries to create divisions among AWOL unwinds, does not deserve this fate. Emphasising the wrongness of unwinding, Shusterman introduces us to the operation through Roland, who we are forced to see unwound. Any hate readers may have harboured for this character before he is summarily divided likely dissipates in the face of this scene of Roland's deconstruction. Unwinding itself is an industry whose privileging of profit over people is weakly camouflaged by an official narrative that spins it as a solution to the war. In reality, it merely supports capitalism while also conveniently eliminating those lives deemed no longer cost-effective: the 'unwindable' teen is the teen who has been deemed to have failed to make a good return on their parents' investment. For example, Connor speculates that he is being unwound as a result of his anger management problems and poor grades (Shusterman 2007, pp. 7, 11). Unwinding engenders a new way of thinking about young people: viewed as collections of parts, they no longer qualify as human beings worthy of second chances when the parts cannot be made to act in concert with neoliberal values. The price of being 'bad' is the loss of individuality itself. With a twist of irony, the solution to the war is one that cheapens life much more than abortion, an operation the pro-lifers argue is a form of murder. A nineteen-year-old mother in *Unwind* articulates the irony perfectly: "Funny, but the Bill of Life was supposed to protect the sanctity of life. Instead it just made life cheap" (Shusterman 2007, p. 53). As the status of this mother as a 'storker' implies, the cheapness of life is illustrated not just through unwinding but through the deaths of babies passed on so many times without being fed that they starve to death. Sick or disabled teens are, like Connor and many of his fellow unwinds, also worth more as parts rather than whole, functioning individuals,[7] speaking further to how a

[7] In Book Four, an international parts piracy network functions as a black market that raises the

neoliberal culture places value on teen bodies, fetishising able bodies and throwing out others as so many 'bad parts.' In the face of such an order, how can one do anything but perform a subjectivity that will enable them to earn the right to individuality?

The effects of the neoliberal culture of 'Unwind' on subjectivity are brought home most poignantly in the case of teen wards of the state. For wards, unwinding is an even more impersonal affair than it is for their peers: in place of the explosive scenes of parents bearing guilty witness to the Juvey-cops carting off their teen to be unwound, wards are coldly pressed into a hypercompetitive arena in which they must compete with others to avoid the unwind cutoff line; bad scores in sports, academics, and other activities guarantee one's consignment to the scalpel. If the extension of the market into formerly non-economic domains exposes what Wanda Vrasti dubs the 'fantasy of "caring" capitalism or "humane" neoliberalism,' then the treatment of wards signals how the spirit of competition on which neoliberalism relies needs to be 'stroked' and 'carefully orchestrated' (2013, pp. 29, 34). While Vrasti's characterization of neoliberalism is elaborated within the context of contemporary voluntourism, it applies beautifully to 'Unwind.' The careful orchestration of competitive individualism she describes can be seen in the collection of short stories set in the 'Unwind' world but not part of the series: in 'Unfinished Symphony,' wards jeopardise each other's progress to avoid being unwound. The protagonist of the story, Brooklyn Ward, hacks into the State Home's computer system to move her name up above the cut-off line and another ward's name to the bottom. Otherwise fairly trivial rivalries become loaded in the series' state homes, where populations are regularly culled

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price of teen body parts, making the 'various and sundry products of unwinding worth so much more than the kids themselves' (Shusterman 2014, p. 247).

to fuel an organ harvesting industry reliant upon young, healthy parts. Brooklyn's inward rationalization of her decision to consign another ward to unwinding – '[i]t's not like she would have changed the world' (Shusterman 2015, p. 61) – is doubtless chilling for the series' readers, who know that the ward Brooklyn sacrifices is Risa, one of the main characters who helps to eliminate the practice of unwinding by the end of Book Four.

For teens whose parents designate them as tithes even before they are born, conscription is enabled through a socialisation process that emphasises self-abnegation and submission. The 'tithes,' as they are called, are encouraged to give every second of their lives over to reflecting on how their organs will benefit others, a form of conscription which, as one character points out, disallows the kind of play with which childhood is commonly associated in the United States.[8] Their donation represents an extreme form of the other-regarding ethic that children's and YA texts and the larger neoliberal order helping to produce them aim to inculcate in their readers as a means of extracting good neoliberal citizenship. While most texts for young people do not subscribe to such perverse paradigms of giving – indeed, to do so would place the aim of encouraging the adoption of an other-regarding ethic in peril – they do invite their readers to spend much of their time reflecting on how they may be of use to others. Many texts for young people, and especially those in the dystopian and voluntourist categories, encourage young people to cultivate a kind of self-abnegation, one amenable to a neoliberal economy in which credentialed altruism allows one to be competitive in the job market: moving from books about charity to charitable acts means creating new lines on one's cv. As with tithing in 'Unwind,' the

[8] One character, Lev, makes this explicit in Book Four when he explains that having been tithed from birth he has 'never been a child' (Shusterman 2014, p. 158).

adoption of an other-regarding ethic in the world outside the book can be seen, quite cynically perhaps, as just another cog in the capitalist machine.

Yet 'Unwind' continually challenges the notion that self-abnegation, a quality that underwrites acts of heroism in many YA dystopias, is an unquestioned virtue. In doing so, it challenges some of the codes and conventions that have come to define dystopianism as a genre, trope, or mode in the twenty-first century. It is true, of course, that to some extent 'Unwind''s hero and protagonist Connor is self-abnegating in his quest to eliminate unwinding, but the series never shies away from engaging with the difficulties of self-abnegation in a socioeconomic context where certain kinds of teens – poor, orphaned, or tithed, for example – are conditioned to see themselves as givers while affluent teens are conditioned to see themselves as recipients. The trick is to practice a form of self-abnegation that is in direct opposition to the sacred sacrifices demanded of tithes. The story of Lev, a tithe rescued against his will, is significant in this context since he begins to recognise that the self-abnegation demanded of tithes is part of the same Unwind system from which he has dissociated himself. Indicating the presence of a powerful critical subtext here, even the Pastor assigned to keep him in line does not believe in the self-abnegation he preaches. As in Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, in 'Unwind' self-abnegation functions as a means of control. Paradoxically, self-abnegation is at once the problem and the answer to the dystopian order Shusterman establishes. Overly pliant tithes need to become politically conscious to spark positive social change, but they must also retain the other-regarding ethic that would motivate them to make it. More importantly, tithes must live long enough to make change. Since the self-abnegation they are conditioned to adopt is one that ultimately leads to their undoing, they must

find new ways to look beyond the self if they are to participate in the creation of a new social order.

Truly charitable subjects are therefore necessary in 'Unwind' and arise primarily as the result of unwinds having first become objects of charity: Connor must first rescue Lev to make Lev's transformation into a giver possible. Connor himself becomes a charitable subject only after a sympathetic truck driver offers him a place to sleep in his cab. Connor pays the driver's charity forward, in turn rescuing Lev, who is on his way to a harvest camp, and later a storked baby. Because Connor has already witnessed the tragic consequences of storking as a boy, he knows full well what will happen to the baby if he does not act. This scene is among the most moving in the series as Connor sacrifices an opportunity to get away in order to rescue the baby. (Once again in keeping with YA conventions, he is duly rewarded with yet another opportunity to get away.) The charitable acts in which Connor engages multiply as he challenges an extreme neoliberal order by adopting the same characteristics this order values: he becomes largely self-sustaining and takes the kinds of risks that young people today are encouraged to take in order to make themselves employable in a world where education alone is no longer enough to guarantee one's successful acquisition of the 'good life.' Only his actions are the result of a genuine caring for others and not as part of a strategy to be competitive. Attesting to the inescapability of neoliberalism, Connor and his fellow AWOL unwinds eventually find themselves at the Graveyard, an isolated place in the Arizona desert where retired airplanes are recycled. Voluntarily or not, unwinds are integrated into the business of salvaging airplanes for parts, and in full view of the government, which only allows them to exist because they function as a reserve guaranteeing the high price of organs. There is no place outside of the system where

AWOL unwinds can take refuge. Even when teens successfully evade unwinding, they are recruited to the Unwind system.

The series intimates that unwinding can only be brought down as a result of the actions of young heroes who give voluntarily in ways which, while not removed from the market, allow them to express the kind of genuine individuality the Unwind system disallows. 'Unwind' can in this sense be said to fetishise agency, particularly given its construction of a critical subtext that invites readers to see unwinding as a deplorable and inherently contradictory practice: even as it destroys the individual, the system it serves upholds the individual as sacrosanct. The symbolic recovery of a divided boy – Harlan – through the bringing together of all of the recipients of his parts is one of the most salient expressions of this contradiction. While the recipients who are brought together by the boy's remorseful father – not coincidentally, he is also the Admiral who initially runs the Graveyard – form a community, it is one devoted to worshipping the individual – in this case, Harlan himself. A profound desire for an impossible unity, coherence, and wholeness is shown to be at the heart of the Heartland War. That the individual is the vehicle for recuperating these qualities is made even more clear in the second book, *UnWholly*, in which the parts of several teens are stitched together to make one individual man: Cam. A widespread lust for unwinding in this series goes hand in hand with an often remorseful yearning to assuage parental guilt by bringing back the 'retroactively aborted' in the form of 'rewinding.' The series could, rather ungenerously perhaps, be read as pro-life in its repeated return to the 'unwholly' reunion of formerly divided parts in the Harlan and Cam subplots. These characters, and even Connor himself – unwound by a parts pirate whom he challenges in the fourth book, *Undivided* – prove that the individual continues to live on, however fragmented, after having been unwound.

Undivided concludes not just with a spectacle of saving but also with a romancing of the American nuclear family, which unwinding threatens: Connor takes the stage alongside Risa Ward, the fellow unwind with whom he falls in love, to reassure a crowd on the brink of rioting that unwinding is now illegal. Implausibly rewound after having been unwound, and having succeeded in bringing down the system alongside his fellow AWOL unwinds, he stands victorious over a social order that has by all appearances been successfully rewound to a time when family was viewed as sacred and organ donors were good people concerned about the welfare of others. Perhaps the real tragedy in this otherwise uplifting ending is that only the discovery of a new technology – 3D organ printing – sparks radical social change and not, as one would hope, a paradigm shift that would require genuine self-sacrifice in a world where parts are not readily available as commodities in a global market. Keeping kids whole is nevertheless necessary to produce agential and therefore truly charitable subjects. Significantly, Connor can only 'unwind' the current system after his friends help him to be rewound. The 'Unwind' series in turn invites readers to become charitable subjects, intimating that positive social change hinges on a spirit of giving uncontaminated by the dictates of a market demanding charity and the affect on which it relies be adapted to entrepreneurialism. Correlatively, it does away with the idealised images of counterculture cool in which more popular franchises such as 'The Hunger Games,' 'Divergence,' and 'The Mortal Instruments' tend to trade. The problem with these images is that while they are supposed to signify resistance they actually feed back into capitalism's own fetishisation of a slick, fashion-forward capitalism. The community of unwinds at the Graveyard may resemble a utopia in some respects, but the teens who live there neither resemble the rebelliously and fashionably inked and clad teens of Collins, Roth, and Clare's

series and their film/TV adaptations nor constitute a harmonious whole. Rather, the Graveyard is rife with conflict. Near the beginning of *Undivided*, Risa goes so far as to express antipathy toward the kind of criminal yet heroic behaviour that incites fandom, something for which Connor yearns: 'She never wanted to be some sort of counterculture heroine' (Shusterman 2014, p. 131). Even Connor's tattoo cannot be read as a signifier of counterculture cool, despite his investment in the kind of fandom such an affiliation would incite. The shark tattoo he sports on his newly grafted arm is a constant reminder of how he himself benefits from the system of unwinding he aggressively opposes. In the 'Unwind' world, tattoos can signify complicity with – as much as they can resistance to – the existing order of things. Attesting to the series' frequent reversion to conservative values, their absence can even signify an inherent goodness. At the very beginning of *Unwind*, Connor wears his unmarked skin like a badge of honour: in defense of the injustice of the unwind order he has just discovered his parents have signed, he reflects, 'He never even got tattoos, like so many kids get these days when they're little' (Shusterman 2007, p. 3). Although it remains to be seen what Roger Avary will do with the film adaptation of *Unwind*, the books are much less concerned about recreating 'resistance as a sign value that is ready made for the market' (Mostafanezhad 2016, p. 86) than they are with modelling how teens might adopt an other-regarding ethic with a view to unwinding the system itself. That this ethical action requires teens to adopt the values of the order they are challenging attests, once again, to the perceived inescapability of a neoliberal culture, which, like unwinding, has come to be seen as natural and inevitable.

While the harvesting of teen bodies is not a sanctioned practice in our current neoliberal order, Shusterman's series invites us to think about how teens are being 'unwound' in other ways:

through the War on Drugs, for example, which provides a cover for the sanctioned murder and incarceration of racially stigmatised teens, or, as the series itself makes clear in one of the explicit connections it makes to current phenomena in the United States, in the Troubled Teen Industry, where teens are being abused, tortured and in some cases dying in facilities intended to correct their 'bad' behaviour (Shusterman 2014, pp. 355-357). The multi-million-dollar Troubled Teen Industry comes closest to approximating unwinding: once parents sign their teen up for 'correction' – usually because they exhibit some kind of 'at risk' behaviour such as anxiety, depression, or a refusal to adhere to heteronorms – agents from the facility take the teen away to a 'camp' where often unskilled and uncaring staff subject them to barbaric 'treatment.' Yet Shusterman's series also invites us to read less obviously cruel but equally exploitative treatments of teens as correlatives to unwinding, not least in relation to a neoliberal market that trades in acts of charity. As the explosion of dystopian fictions and activist guidebooks in the children's and YA book industries indicates, young people are increasingly burdened with the responsibility for radical social change even as they are targeted as a prime market for commodified experiences such as voluntourism.

Voluntourism YA Fiction and Neoliberalism

The term I use to describe YA memoirs, novels, guide books, and picture books featuring young people going overseas and volunteering in humanitarian projects – 'voluntourism literature' – is my own. No one else to my knowledge has coined this term as a descriptor of these kinds of narratives, though 'Overseas Selfie' has come to denote a genre of self portraits connected to the

kind of overseas volunteer work in which they engage.[9] The inclusion of the word 'tourist' in 'voluntourist literature' is crucial since the literature it describes necessarily involves what John Urry calls 'the tourist gaze,' a 'socially organized and systematized' (2002, p. 1) way of looking at that which one encounters when away on holiday. Urry points out, however, that '[t]here is no single tourist gaze as such'; rather, the tourist gaze 'varies by society, by social group and by historical period' (Urry 2002, p. 1). What the gazes of tourists have in common are their construction through difference: the tourist experience is defined against 'non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness' (Urry 2002, p. 1). Tourists construct everyday routines, especially those associated with paid work, as mundane in comparison to the activities that take place on holiday (Urry 2002, p. 2). By this definition, tourism and volunteering in humanitarian projects overseas may appear antithetical, since volunteering involves work and volunteers position themselves above tourists whom they interpret as selfish and hedonistic. Yet tourism studies scholars have made a cogent connection between these two activities: Kevin Lyons, Joanne Hanley, Stephen Wearing, and John Neil argue that in a neoliberal world order volunteering begins to look a lot like tourism as it becomes increasingly linked to the gap-year tourism industry and as ethics itself becomes a commodity (2011, p. 369). The emergence of companies, charities, and NGOs catering to gap-year tourists suggest that volunteering has become a commodified experience serving individualism as volunteers integrate their voluntourist experiences into their life narratives. Having 'voluntoured' can connote the successful cultivation of a kind, benevolent, tolerant and cosmopolitan character. In fact, the

[9] Formal attempts to classify voluntourist selfies are scarce, though Lauren Kascak Sayantani Dasgupta defines the Overseas Selfie as one that places the Western volunteer at the centre and the others they are helping in the background, as extras in the volunteer's own personal biopic (2014).

figure of the voluntourist embodies what we might think of as the 'good' neoliberal subject. To borrow Lyons et al.'s description of Generation Y – the generation that has most embraced and participates in gap-year tourism – this subject is a 'confident, well-educated, open-minded, and challenge-seeking multi-tasker […with] a strong work ethic […] and a hunger for overseas travel' (2011, p. 365). It should come as no surprise that contemporary children's and YA texts, many of which invest in a neoliberal ethos, enshrine the voluntourist as a model to emulate.

YA voluntourist literature organises and systematises the gaze of its young readers, encouraging them to see less privileged others as recipients of their charity. Testifying to the tenuousness of the connection it enjoys with the voluntourist industry, this literature is less concerned with conveying the materialistic benefits of voluntouring than with the moral benefits of charitable acts. Young people are not supposed to voluntour to gain traction in the marketplace but to cultivate selflessness. Much literature designed for and marketed to young children, including, as already shown, some examples of dystopian YA literature, already aims to cultivate an other-regarding ethic. Voluntourist YA literature simply builds on this literature to encourage the extension of selflessness into other arenas. The arenas into which this literature expects young people to extend their concern for others are often, though not exclusively, countries in regions such as Africa, Asia, and South America. Accordingly, voluntourist literature's implied readers are more often than not white, affluent inhabitants of North America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, not coincidentally also the richest sources of gap tourists. The rigid divide between geographical regions privileged in voluntourist literature invites young people to see certain international others as the recipients of their charity and not as charitable agents in their own right.

At this point it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the dangers of coining the term 'voluntourist YA literature,' as a genre does not come into being until one names and describes it. What I am calling voluntourist YA literature hardly constitutes a homogeneous or stable genre. Named for its depiction of young people traveling to build character or gain the credentials required to mobilise upward, its origins hark back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when children's literature depicting young people heading out to the furthest reaches of the British empire became an important means of facilitating empire-building. If in older texts children's travel was less explicitly invested in work, the kinds of 'voluntourist' texts produced for and marketed to young people today are much more explicit about their investment in volunteering, suggesting a shift from adventures in empire-building to what we might call adventures in development. These texts almost always picture involvement in non-governmental organizations, institutions that are profoundly neoliberal in their taking over from the state the role of social-service provider. What older and newer texts share is a propensity to highlight the experiential benefits of travel, a strategy akin to the tourist industry, which recruits 'myths of romantic consumerism' to engender a 'market of experiences' (Harari 2014, p. 115).

To be fair, because the young people targeted by the children's and YA literature industry are in many cases too young or not affluent enough to participate in overseas voluntouring, most books inviting them to become altruistic activists focus on how they might spark positive social change within their own communities. When children's books do invite young people to identify as a giver of aid to others abroad, they often represent charity as something that can be done from afar. Isabella and Shin's *The Red Bicycle* (2015) is a case in point. Leo, a white boy who lives in

Canada, donates his hard-earned bicycle to an organization that sends discarded bicycles to Burkina Faso. There the bicycle exchanges hands three times, contributing to the well-being of an entire community. Thus, Leo's initial act of giving engenders a domino effect as the gift is paid forward. The red bicycle itself acts as proxy for Leo, who cannot help the objects of his charity in person. The use of a bicycle as proxy is appropriate, because even as it functions as a reminder of Leo's own lack of mobility it signifies his potential to mobilise onward, upward, and eventually, overseas. Leo's ability to possess and then give away a vehicle of mobility as powerful as a bicycle potentially foreshadows his future role as a voluntourist. At the same time, the bicycle represents the often-taken-for-granted mobility of the white middle class in Canada, suggesting that the nascent genre of voluntourist literature needs to be understood within the context of a neoliberal world order in which voluntourism is fast becoming a rite of passage among young, affluent and, more often than not, *white* people in just such countries.

Charity as Commodity Activism: Eric Walters' 'Alexandria' Novels

Eric Walters' *Alexandria of Africa*, the first of two novels dedicated to the fictional voluntourist experience of Alexandria Hyatt, follows Shusterman's series and, indeed, much of children's literature, in its investment in agency as Alexandria participates in a Child Save initiative to build schools in Kenya on the orders of a judge who thinks that forced community service overseas might cure her of her predilection for shoplifting and vandalism. The novel is narrated in the first person by Alexandria herself as she embarks on a moral journey through her physical travel to and work in Kenya. Alexandria embodies the kind of nonconforming teen in which Shusterman's series locates the seeds of a charitable sensibility, though her troubled nature is directly linked to her affluence: as her resemblance to Paris Hilton suggests, she is rich, more akin to the teens who

populate series such as Sara Shepard's 'Pretty Little Liars' than the teens of Shusterman's series. The difference is that while Shusterman's series takes place mostly in rural America, Walters' novels take place in Beverley Hills and Kenya. Another key difference between Walters' and Shusterman's series is how parents treat their teens: parents respond to teen problems with unwind orders in 'Unwind' – repeating an earlier tendency in YA literature to demonise adults[10] – but they tend toward the opposite extreme in the 'Alexandria' novels, pulling strings to get wayward teens out of trouble. In the first chapter of *Alexandria of Africa*, for example, we learn through Alexandria's first-person narrative that her father, as a result of his legal connections, has once again gotten her off the hook for her crimes. 'We both knew,' she admits, 'we all knew – that my last trip to court was no big deal, just a slap on the wrist' (Walters 2008, p. 3). If 'Unwind' represents giving as something that can and should be more evenly distributed and agential, in the 'Alexandria' novels giving is always the purview of middle- and upper-class inhabitants of the United States, as well as Britain, from which some of Alexandria's fellow voluntourists hail. The recipients are impoverished inhabitants of Kenya, a country coded in the text as a radically impoverished space in direct opposition to wealthier countries. Much voluntourist YA literature and activist guidebooks endorse this dichotomy, assigning agency to privileged inhabitants of regions such as North America and Europe and passivity to receivers who are almost always located in Africa and other regions deemed in need of aid. As Vrasti points out, the privileging of such regions in the voluntourism industry owes much to European colonialism and the nineteenth-century Grand Tour, of which the 'voluntour' is a contemporary version, though this figure tends to be less focused on education and exploration than the Grand

[10] Stewart goes so far as to assert that 'young adult dystopian novels are nothing less than the problem novels of the past reframed as dystopian fiction of the future' (2013, n.p.).

Tourist and more invested in sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical consumption (2013, pp. 1, 7). Throughout her book, Vrasti highlights how young people use voluntourism as a means of acquiring the kind of outwardly benevolent and risk-taking character valued in a neoliberal economy. The developing nations effectively function as mobile classrooms in which the feelings for others that may help to motivate voluntourism are transformed into a currency supplementing education in an era when an increasing number of people have university degrees. The foregrounding of Alexandria as an involuntary participant in these novels has the added effect of constructing the global South as a venue for the rehabilitation of teens struck with so-called 'affluenza,' the controversial name that has begun to be applied to teens whose affluence supposedly disables them from behaving in socially responsible ways. As in 'Unwind,' agency is once again at issue, only here it conveys the message that one's concern for the needs of others should not be something foisted upon them, but rather, readily embraced, if not initially, then over time and in response to actual encounters with the objects of one's charity.

Their support of the troubling North-South dichotomy on which voluntourism relies and the ways in which voluntourism colludes with neoliberalism to instrumentalise affect and an accompanying other-regarding ethic, however, indicate that there are some serious problems with the 'Alexandria' novels.[11] The plot of the first novel is innocuous enough: *Alexandria of*

[11] Although it is not within the scope of this paper to engage a postcolonialist reading of Shusterman's series, it must be noted that it too reinforces pernicious North-South dichotomies in its orientalist depiction of Asia. In 'Unwind,' the worst kinds of unwindings occur in countries such as Burma under the control of the Dah Zey, or 'Flesh Market.' The horror of this market is brought home in 'Unnatural Selection,' a story in *Unbound* in which an American teen, having left the United States for Thailand where unwinding is illegal, finds himself incarcerated by the Dah Zey. Whatever horrors readers might have imagined with respect to the Dah Zey, which is

Africa models the successful transformation of an unwilling participant into a willing one, thereby implying that readers might do the same: if Alexandria can become a 'good,' global citizen, then presumably so can anyone. Predictably given her selfish character, which she reveals at the beginning of her narrative, Alexandria resists learning the lesson the American legal system demands of her: she convinces herself that the Child Save person assigned to meet her at the airport in Paris can be persuaded to take her shopping before boarding the plane to Nairobi – after all, Alexandria is 'very good at getting […her] own way' (Walters 2008, p. 39). Once in Kenya, she attacks Nebala, the African guide who is to take them to the Child Save compound, labeling him 'a weird African transvestite' out to rob her (Walters 2008, p. 48); and she is immediately disappointed when the country fails to live up to Disney's *The Lion King*: the Africa she encounters is replete with 'rutted, rotten, red roadway[s]', shacks, and conglomerations of people who have nothing better to do than 'wait or walk' (Walters 2008, p. 53). Later she criticises the fashion sense of Renée and other Child Save volunteers and complains about having to volunteer in the first place. In the face of these displays of extreme disrespect for Kenya, Kenyans, and her fellow volunteers, it is hard to believe Alexandria will ever be able to turn her attitude around. She does, however, reveal the same spark of inherent altruism on which readerly identification with young protagonists depends in Shusterman's 'Unwind' series. She is genuinely affected when Renée informs her the necklace she is wearing would cover the cost of a new well – 'The words jabbed at me like a punch to the stomach' (Walters 2008, p. 113) –and she is similarly unsettled when she realizes that privilege trumps smarts when it comes to going to prestigious, Ivy League universities: 'There was so much that

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mentioned throughout the series but never depicted, are inevitably proven to be tame in this story. As the narrator quips, Burma is the 'heart of darkness' (Shusterman 2015, p. 158).

I'd never thought of, that I'd never needed to think about' (Walters 2008, p. 225). Alexandria gradually develops a political consciousness, though just how much she is truly changed by her experience in Kenya is questionable when, at the end of the novel, she offers to take a Mustang instead of a Mercedes for her birthday so that the difference can go to building a hospital in Kenya. Exacerbating this weak ending is the white saviour narrative cementing Alexandria's transformation: Alexandria steps up to help a Kenyan woman in labour, using her limited driving experience to help save her and the baby she is carrying. When Alexandria, the woman, and the woman's husband finally arrive at the clinic and are told that treatment can only be extended to clinic patients, Alexandria uses her white privilege and sense of entitlement to help save her again: 'If you don't help this woman right now and something happens to her, I will make sure that you will lose your job, that you will lose your licence to be a nurse, and I'm going to make sure you are put in jail! Do *you* understand *that*?' (Walters 2008, p. 190). While Alexandria's actions are laudable, the narrative itself fails to move beyond the kind of plot that Teju Cole (2012) associates with the White-Saviour Industrial Complex. In *Alexandria of Africa*, Africa provides the stage on which white, upper-class American altruism is practiced for the benefit of young readers.

The novel and its sequel, *Beverley Hills Maasai*, nevertheless offer valuable insight into the frequently vexed relationship between young people and charity in the twenty-first century. What helps redeem these novels is precisely what irritates their readers, namely: Alexandria, whose stabs at humour, while most of the time misdirected, take voluntourism to task.[12]

[12] A quick glance at some of the comments on goodreads.com, for example, is telling as to *Alexandria of Africa*'s failure to encourage sympathetic identification with its protagonist.

Alexandria rightly identifies the Child Save program as one that relies too heavily on Change-the-World slogans and the types of white, liberal, middle-class teens who would wear socks with sandals, safari shorts, bandanas, and t-shirts blatantly advertising their noble purpose in Africa. It may be difficult to identify with Alexandria's over-the-top affluenza despite the novel's use of the first-person – a strategy that normally aims to recruit readers to the protagonist's side – but it is difficult to argue with her critiques of Renée and like-minded volunteers, who in spite of their noble intentions frequently resemble the worst clichés of the voluntourist industry in their cult-like 'bland sameness,' pretentiousness, and self-righteousness (Walters 2008, p. 67-8). Although Alexandria's reading of the group as such is in large part accidental – at the same time she identifies the problems with the white, liberal culture that attaches to international development work she cannot understand why the volunteers she meets might *choose* to go to Kenya – her peculiar brand of humour enables scathing critiques of an industry that often hinders more than it helps the recipients of its charity.[13]

Beverley Hills Maasai represents an attempt to bring Kenya 'home' to the U.S., where it is expected that stay-put Americans will follow Alexandria's example. Nebala, the guide whom Alexandria attacked upon her arrival in Nairobi, returns with two other Maasai warriors who hope to win a marathon to raise money for a new well in their village. Clad in robes and carrying shields, the Maasai appear out of place and out of time to the Americans, who routinely subject

[13] Carlos M. Palacios explains that 'while a volunteering framework possibly facilitates cross-cultural connections at deep emotional levels, the authority and responsibility vested in the volunteer roles might be unjustified, as foreign students do not necessarily have the capacity to deliver aid or transfer skills and knowledge' (2010, p. 867). Jim Butcher and Peter Smith concur, arguing that 'the impacts on local people are often assumed, rather than researched' (2010, p. 33).

them to the tourist gaze. Indeed, the Maasai's clothing and demeanour is the primary source of humour in the novel, as evidenced by their outrageous proposal to take Alexandria's mother as a wife to add to their 'other wives' and their attempt to kill the neighbour's Siamese cat (Walters 2010, pp. 49, 127). Ironically, the comedy of these scenes comes at the expense of the Maasai warriors, whose only narrative function is to showcase Alexandria's newfound respect for Africans. Her defenses of Nebala and his fellow warriors in the face of American ignorance and prejudice become overly repetitive by the end of the novel, yet as with *Alexandria of Africa*, Alexandria is instrumental in exposing the dark underside of a voluntourist industry that exists more for the benefit of young people in countries such as the United States than it does for those it proclaims to be helping. Recalling the conclusion of the preceding novel, Alexandria points out how she had become, as a result of her participation in voluntourism, 'the most annoying, pretentious, obnoxious person imaginable' (Walters 2010, p. 80). In anticipation of the possible counter-argument that she was like this before her trip to Kenya, she admits: 'And believe me, I could have been accused of the same faults before I went away, only in a different way' (Walters 2008, p. 80). Alexandria here identifies that which connects her pre- and post-Africa selves, namely: the annoying pretentiousness that can accompany white privilege, whether this privilege be located in Beverley Hills or transplanted to Africa, where it parades as humanitarianism. Alexandria recognises early in her voluntouring experience that something is amiss about a program that flies Americans to Kenya to build a school when money might be better spent on hiring locals with the appropriate skills. Alexandria's scathing critiques of voluntourism's sloganeering commodity fetishism and yet her increasing openness to Kenyans make *Beverley Hills Maasai* a valuable contribution to debates about representations of charity in young people's texts and cultures in a neoliberal era.

Conclusion

Shusterman's 'Unwind' series and Walters' 'Alexandria' novels offer two examples of how YA fiction invites young people not only to cultivate an other-regarding ethic but also to transform themselves into 'good' global citizens. While 'Unwind' draws on conventions of fantasy and s/f, and the 'Alexandria' novels social realism, both stage worlds in which young people are needed to save the day. Newly empowered as a result of their growing ability to see the 'bigger picture', young people evoke hope by the end of each series. These works ably express the contradictions at the heart of neoliberalism and the difficulty of escaping its seductive net to imagine a new form of social organization. They suggest that whether we like it or not, we live in a society in which charity is commodified to project the illusion of a kind, tolerant, and benevolent neoliberalism. I nevertheless remain skeptical about the ability of either series to cultivate the kind of critical literacy that might help to spark the design of new, more equitable worlds. Neither series manages to offer any real solution to the central contradictions they represent beyond the magical solution embedded in their retreat into the family and the conservative values embedded in this institution in the United States. In keeping with the home/away/home pattern that Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer identify as being central to children's literature (2003, p. 197), 'Unwind' and the 'Alexandria' novels take their protagonists far from home only to bring them back home, a site, which, due to its association with the family, symbolises the recovery of the moral and emotional certainties that neoliberalism in its various guises seems to have placed in peril. One of the reasons for these homely turns is the need to provide hope at the end of what might otherwise be rather bleak narratives: the 'Unwind' world is all the more horrific for how it mirrors our own, and the results of global inequities are nowhere more evident than in the Kenya

Alexandria confronts on her rehab tour. Bringing readers back 'home' helps to satisfy the rigorous demands of YA presses and provides some reassurance that despite real-world horrors one always has the option of folding oneself back into the comfort of the family hearth. The problem is that even this option might disappear in a world in which neoliberal capitalism continues to run unchecked. Perhaps what is needed most right now are not books that begin the difficult process of imagining alternatives only to rewind us back to an imagined past, but rather, books that take greater risks by modelling present and future worlds, which, while not perfect, inspire us to take a radically different direction.

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