The Cyborgian Fairytale: Posthuman Hybridity in Young Adult Science Fiction

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Abstract

A complex blend of both biological and mechanical parts, the cyborg stands as a symbol for posthumanist philosophies. Originally conceived by Donna Haraway in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), the cyborg offers a critique of the dualistic humanist power structure and marks a shift towards a new posthuman ontology. As such, texts for young adults have the potential to unsettle the boundaries between human and non-human. Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), a retelling of the fairytale *Cinderella*, presents teen readers with a relatable cyborg protagonist, Cinder, whose narration highlights oppression within her own fictional world and consequently reveals current inequalities within our own society. However, *Cinder*'s representation of heteronormative gender roles reveals that even texts that feature posthuman cyborg protagonists may inadvertently perpetuate the traditional power imbalance between the fairytale prince and the damsel in distress.

Introduction – the Cyborg in YA Literature

The cyborg is a liminal being. A complex blend of both biological and mechanical parts, it stands as a symbol for the posthumanist abandonment of the "sanitizing taxonomical system of the humanist paradigm" (Borbely and Popa Petra 143). It is the cyborg's liminality that inspires comparison to the experience of adolescence; a liminal period between childhood and adulthood marked by considerable shifts in both body and mind. As such, the cyborg often

appears in young adult fiction in varying forms. Such is the case for Cinder, the titular protagonist from Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), who not only embodies the liminal elements of the adolescent cyborg, but is also cyborgian in form. Through an analysis of Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, this paper seeks to determine how popular young adult (YA) fiction presents the cyborg (both literal and metaphorical), how the fictional cyborg corresponds with identity formation, and whether this connection aligns with the posthumanist movement or regresses towards traditional humanist thinking. The cyborg, an amalgamation of biological and mechanical parts, symbolises the interconnection between the human and the non-human while shifting away from hierarchical humanist thinking. The cyborg of YA fiction is rebellious, and offers writers a way of blurring the boundaries between human and non-human, critiquing the construction of the human subject that is so often reinforced in Western culture.

YA literature is a powerful medium, not only because of the massive growth it has seen since the 2000s (Suico 11), but because it is aimed at an audience who is at a pivotal point in their personal development. This is also an audience who is coming of age in a world where technological advancement has radically altered how we interact with one another, and adolescents feel the full force of the "damaging and anxiety-producing effects of the post-modern condition" due to social media and online self-representation (Hervey 33), bringing assumptions of what it means to be human into question. This paper focuses specifically on how the cyborg (literal and metaphorical) is represented in YA fiction, taking into consideration the hybridity of the adolescent reader – and of how they too can be considered cyborgs.

The cyborg can be considered a "mascot" for posthumanist discourse, symbolising the unstable relationship between human and non-human. Two distinct variations of posthumanism can be defined: popular posthumanism and philosophical posthumanism. Popular posthumanism is largely concerned with "society's fears of biotechnological changes" (Tarr and White xi), often standing in opposition to the transhumanist "techno-optimism and techno-

fetishism" (Åsberg 189) that idolises technology as a means of transcending the binds of the biological human form. Popular posthumanism often supports a fearful – and sometimes negative – view of technology, while philosophical posthumanism critiques the notion of the "Human as a transcendental category" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 66), breaking down the divide between human and non-human and, more specifically, the cyborgian merging of human and machine. In response to *Cinder* and its representation of the non-human, I will reference both popular and philosophical posthumanism.

A motif for posthumanist thought, the cyborg allows posthumanist researchers to "deconstruct and redefine what exactly it means to be human" (Wood 113). It is a borderless amalgam of human and machine; a symbol for human-machine hybridity that positions technology as an extension of the human form. A "cybernetic organism", the cyborg is considered a "world-changing fiction" (Haraway 291) that destabilises the human/non-human divide and brings human primacy into question. An investigation into how the cyborg is presented in YA literature can provide insight into how texts condition readers to view technology and technoculture positively or negatively. Posthumanism in YA fiction "suggests that adolescents need to cultivate a form of hybridity to negotiate our increasingly technological world" (Merrylees 76), and this hybridity can be connected with the malfunctioning of artificial intelligence. Meyer's titular character Cinder is not exception, and in fact embodies hybridity not only in her interactions with the modern world she lives in, but also within her own cyborg body. It is her cyborgian malfunctions that allow her to develop a sense of identity underscored with rebellion against the status quo: a compelling motif common in YA literature.

The YA cyborg can be visualised as both a metaphor for rebellion and a more literal posthuman subject. The modern-day cyborg, defined by its "impure hybrid[isation] of flesh and machine" (Brians 127), is prevalent in contemporary society; so prevalent, in fact, that the human subject can no longer be disconnected from the technological environment in which they

exist. This is particularly true of young adults, who have increasingly grown up in a world dominated by social media and corresponding technophobia. It can be argued that we are already posthuman, and rejection of technology on a technophobic basis is to turn away from the inevitable. Butler argues that "we would be foolish to think that life is fully possible without a dependence on technology, which suggests that the human, in its animality, is dependent on technology, to live" (12-13), alluding to a cyborg ontology that is inseparable from human existence. For Haraway, who popularised the "cyborg ontology" (127) referenced by Butler, we have always been posthuman, and our integration with the non-human is a defining part of our individual identities as human beings. The emergence of the posthuman being can be traced back to prehistoric ages, when humans first started distributing their cognition through tool usage (Mahon 2-4). Therefore, technological advancement can be considered a continuation of human-tool integration that predates history itself. While complete transcendence of the biological human form into an immortal disembodied consciousness is an alarming prospect (and one criticised heavily by philosophical posthumanists like Braidotti and Hayles), a complete refusal of technology as a significant constituent of what it is to be human is equally alarming, and also unreasonable, if technological progress is indeed undeniable. Contemporary YA fiction, particularly works that deal with cybernetics and technoculture, tend towards a somewhat negative outlook on technology. Technophobia, a "fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices and especially computers" (Mirriam-Webster), is more common among older individuals (Nimrod 149), suggesting greater openness to a cyborg-like technoculture among young adults than older adults. Texts written for this younger audience may therefore benefit from a more inclusive and balanced outlook on technology and cybernetics, without actively pushing polarised transhumanist/technophobic ideologies. *Cinder* falls into this category, with its rebellious protagonist walking the boundary between technophobic oppression and posthuman empowerment, experiencing the autopoietic

jouissance of the malfunctioning artificial intelligence. When the cyborg of science fiction breaks code and starts to form its own sense of subjectivity outside of these norms and values, it can be understood as an autopoietic subject shaped according to its "continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 35). The cyborg celebrates the decentring of the human subject and the rise of non-human life (biological or otherwise) known as *zoe* (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 60). Celebrating technology as *zoe*-driven and self-styling contributes to the sense of "awe and wonder" that has long been reflected in children's literature (Jaques 177).

Characterisation in Meyer's *Cinder* calls for an examination of the self-styling cyborg character in YA literature, determining how these characters challenge transhumanist/technophobic thinking. *Cinder* undermines and critiques humanist anthropocentricism by presenting teen readers with cyborg characters and non-anthropomorphic robots with a clear sense of subjectivity and agency. Cinder's hybrid nature brings into question the notion that "valid ontological positions exist only when human consciousness is affixed to a body made of organic matter" (Insenga 58); a belief held both by the fictional citizens of New Beijing and the wider humanist belief system prevalent in contemporary society.

Finding Subjectivity in a Posthuman World

The posthuman cyborg is often conceptualised in alignment with studies in gender and sexuality. As long as "gender" is understood to be a constituent aspect of identity or subjectivity, what gender "means" and how must continually be queried, challenged, redefined, and recast. Doing so offers hope for shifting from the Oxford English Dictionary definition of gender as a noun toward its definition of gender as a verb, to "come into being", without reference to being male or female, masculine or feminine, but instead, as human (Hateley 92).

The posthuman movement suggests that we need to go further, questioning not only male/female and masculine/feminine, but also "human" – because, like "male" and "female", *human* is a limiting concept in itself.

The advancement of technoscience and the associated development of a "technoculture" is regarded "undeniable" (Herbrechter 19) and maintains a steady influence on discourse and ideology in the Western world. Technological advancement and the development of technoculture destabilises the distinction between human and non-human underlying dualistic humanist thinking. While technophobia is often associated with dislike of complex modern technology and cybernetics, fears of technological advancement are not a recent development (Tarr and White xi). This is often centred around a fear of losing one's livelihood in an increasingly automated society. For example, hand-sewers lose jobs to mechanical equipment in the textile industry (Greenhalgh and Rogers 269), farmers turn to technology to maintain crops and raise livestock, and self-serve technology is employed by businesses to maximise profit (Schultze 8). Additionally, we now face the unsettling idea that technology can also have a significant effect on social and political structures. As a result of these concerns, technophobic, anti-transhumanist ideologies begin to emerge, often manifesting in dystopian fiction. YA dystopian texts reflect technophobic concerns directly, grappling with the destabilisation of human "essence". The humanist notion of a universal "human essence" warrants fears about contaminating this essence with "mechanic alienness" (Hayles 288). Therefore, some YA dystopian texts may inadvertently mark a return to technophobic humanist essentialism (*Willful Machines* by Tim Floreen [2015] *Stronger, Faster and More Beautiful* by Arwen Elys Dayton [2018]), rather than moving towards a posthuman future where the intimate connection between human and non-human is accepted rather than feared (*Railhead* by Philip Reeve [2015], *The Illuminae Files* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff [2019], *Rabbit & Robot* by Andrew Smith [2018]). Posthumanism is particularly relevant to today's adolescents

because they are coming of age in a time of great biotechnological advancement, particularly within the realms of social media and cybernetics, and as a result they need to adapt socially in ways that previous generations did not. Ferne Merrylees calls for dystopian texts that encourage understanding and recognition of social systems and the ways that individuals are constructed by the societies in which they live, "allowing adolescent readers a space to explore not only body image and identity creation, but how humans fit within the various and complex systems that make up our posthuman world" (Merrylees 93). While YA dystopian literature certainly encourages deeper reflection on social construction and power structures, it is also important to examine the passive and explicit ideologies within these texts to reveal the ways that they also condition readers. By deconstructing the dyadic language that drives the socialisation of children and young adults, it is possible to determine how narratives critique or endorse the traditional ideologies that constitute subjectivity. These methodologies entail deconstructing the male/female divide within YA fiction, breaking down the notion that gender is a "constituent aspect of identity or subjectivity" (Hateley 92) and examining the ways that YA fiction socialises and conditions the implied adolescent reader in preparation for their entry into the adult world. Texts for young people are concerned with the "identity formation of young protagonists and their progress toward enhanced ways of being in the world" (Bradford and Baccolini 40), using language and storytelling to "exemplify and inculcate its current values and attitudes" (Stephens, *Language and Ideology* 8). Therefore, the power of YA fiction lies in its capacity to influence the construction of identity and subjectivity.

Malfunctioning Machines and Malfunctioning Humans

Simulacra (machines that simulate humans) may be compared to Haraway's cyborg, a hybrid that mixes human genetics and electronics. Despite the impact of Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto", the term "cyborg" was originally linked to the posthuman by Ihab Hassan

(Weinstone 8) in "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" (1977). The cyborg is a visualisation of technological posthumanism and a critical reflection that labels the "boundary between science fiction and social reality" an "optical illusion" (Haraway 291), drawing links between speculative fiction and reality. Haraway's cyborg highlights the importance of creative reflection through science fiction. In the case of *Cinder,* the titular character's sense of subjectivity is built upon the interplay between other characters around her, connecting with Hayles's concept of the posthuman subject "whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 3), undercutting "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others'" (Hayles 4). Shannon Hervey links Hayles's understanding of the posthuman with the young adult "searching for firm foundations in a continuously evolving and fragmented cultural landscape" (Hervey 29). She marks the important shift from individualism towards a hybridised and interconnected journey towards agency, defined by a person's emotional connections with those around them, with the natural world, and with non-human others. A greater understanding and sensitivity towards hybrid identities constituted through connections with other humans, non-human others and the world of cybernetics will allow for wider inclusivity and diversity in texts for young adults.

Hervey also argues that the first-person narratives commonly found in YA literature are inherently individualistic in nature, leading to the humanistic assumption that the "self is central" (Hervey 29-30). For this reason, *Cinder*'s focalisation through multiple characters may remind the reader of the multiplicity of subjectivity, and that, contrary to the humanist belief that "what makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the will of others" (Macpherson 263), it is our embodied, hybridised connection with other humans and non-human others that makes us "human" at all. Hayles's aim to *"show complex interplays between embodied forms*

of subjectivity and arguments for disembodiment throughout the cybernetic tradition" (7, original emphasis) is mirrored by the diverse narration in *Cinder.*

Hayles discusses the connection between humanity and cybernetics in *How We Became Posthuman,* citing the research undertaken during and between the Macy Conferences on Cybernetics from 1943 to 1954 (7), which contends that the information processing systems within the human brain and computers are essentially the same (Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; Von Neumann; Kurzweil). If an intelligent machine is essentially similar to a human being, then placing greater value on a physical body arguably alienates and devalues the intelligent machine – even if these subjects can currently only be found in the world of science fiction. This is not to say that artificial intelligence is inherently good or bad for humanity, or that the materiality and finitude of the human being as we know it should not be celebrated. Examining Braidotti's concept of *zoe*, which emphasises "the non-human, vital force of Life" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 60) at the heart of the posthuman movement, it can be argued that machine learning and self-styling artificial intelligence embraces a kind of *zoe* of its own. Posthumanism "contests the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the 'exceptionalism' of the Human as a transcendental category" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 66). Therefore, in the interest of true posthumanistic egalitarianism, to devalue a consciousness that is "*essentially* similar" (Hayles 7, original emphasis) to that of a human being is a return to the kind of thinking that elevated the anthropocentric subject above others in the first place. Speculative science fiction offers a platform upon which characters who are human or non-human, embodied or disembodied, can interact and grapple with the social norms and ideologies that constitute a sense of identity.

Cyborg Subjectivity in Meyer's *Cinder*

Cinder by Marissa Meyer produces a world in which technology is fluid and changeable, moving beyond its initial designation as a "tool" to become something complex, self-styling

and, most notably, queered. Set in New Beijing, a city built upon the ruins of contemporary Beijing, the text follows the journey of Cinder, a hybrid cyborg who supports her adoptive family by working as a mechanic alongside android Iko. After Crown Prince Kai brings an android to Cinder for repairs, she and the prince develop an uneasy romantic relationship, hindered by Cinder's hesitance to reveal her true nature. Cinder's identification as a hybrid cyborg is destabilised when she learns that she is "Lunar"; a member of an alien race that is vying for control over planet Earth. This, coupled with her machine parts, labels Cinder as a freak and exacerbates the oppression that she already experiences daily. While her hybridity is what ultimately empowers Cinder to overcome the evil Lunar queen, Levana, she is still forced to flee from New Beijing after being outed as a Lunar-cyborg hybrid.

Cinder proposes a broader understanding of embodiment, extending to other intelligences such as hybridised cyborgs and androids. Characterisation in *Cinder* critiques the "exceptionalism' of the human" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 66) by also critiquing the exceptionalism of the biological. It is experimental and speculative in nature, but still offers a way of exploring the human/machine interface without succumbing to technophobic fears or, conversely, succumbing to the notion of technological transcendence. Characters in *Cinder* blend the biological and the electronic and present multiple ways of looking at artificial intelligence in the way that Haraway's cyborg discourages a rejection of science in technology, seeking "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" between machine and organism (Haraway 292, original emphasis). The cyborg refuses "a 'pure' nature, virgin and untouched by man's reason, and 'free' from the interventions of technology" (Brians 127), approaching cybernetics with a balanced understanding of the human/machine divide, as well as acceptance that the human being can already be considered a posthuman cyborg. Haraway herself labels her cyborg a "myth" (293), but it is also grounded in reality. While the cyborg can be considered a feminist, socialist and materialist symbol for independence from "the traditions of 'Western' science and

politics" (Haraway 292), it is also a "social reality" (Haraway 291) ascribed to the intimate connection between humans and their tools and technologies. The cyborg that exists entirely outside of a historically determined ontology may be a myth, but the human subject untouched and disconnected from technology is just as fictional. This highlights the idea that posthumanity is not inevitable, but rather, it is already prevalent; our tools and technologies are an extension of ourselves, and we are, therefore, cyborgs.

There are a growing number of YA texts that present technology as an extension of humanity itself: not something that is inherently dangerous, but as an ever-evolving process that forms alongside and blurs boundaries with humanity. Technology can be considered a "prosthesis", or a "seamlessly articulated" continuation of the human being (Stephens, "Performativity" 8). However, if a machine were to develop its own sense of awareness outside of human interference, the articulation between human and machine may be altered in a fundamental way. The intelligent machine may no longer be regarded as a prosthesis but as a separate subject entirely. In her article "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism", Braidotti describes subjectivity as "a process ontology of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values" (2). The term *autopoiesis* is of particular interest here, where – *poiesis* indicates "the act of making or producing something specified" (Collins Dictionary Online). Braidotti's "auto-poeisis" can also be ascribed to Cinder's growth as a cyborgian subject, undergoing her own means of "self-styling", developing freely and fluidly as a cyborgian subject. Technological autopoiesis and its development alongside the autopoiesis of the human subject may make it hard to separate human and machine, leading to the unsettling revelation that there is "no actual, material self that is distinguishable from the technologies that inscribe us" (Tarr and White 51). Cinder's cyborgian story exemplifies the destabilisation of human and non-human; of flesh and machine. As her flesh and robotic parts blend together – a "deformed cyborg with a missing

foot" (Meyer 261) – Cinder is aware that she can "be anyone. *Become* anyone" (Meyer 261). She blurs the boundaries between human and non-human, and in doing so she experiences a sense of self-styling autopoiesis that can be compared to an adolescent coming of age. The purpose of philosophical posthumanism, and the cyborg as a motif, is "to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 89), abandoning hierarchical human-centric thinking and moving towards an ontology grounded in cyborgian autopoiesis.

Science fiction explores possible outcomes of technological autopoiesis both critically and creatively, offering a glimpse into possible futures in which humanity and intelligent machines co-exist on a complex, interconnected level. Science fiction that presents "born and manufactured" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 89) subjects as equal is of great importance to the posthuman movement because, within the framework of Braidotti's monistic posthumanist ontologies, all subjects can be considered both "born" and "manufactured" at once. Unlike many YA texts that maintain anxieties around cybernetics and technology (*Matched* by Ally Condie [2010] and *Feed* by M T Anderson [2002], for example), Meyer's *Cinder* balances the "potentially subversive and positive attributes" by including cyborg and mechanical characters who represent the "self as an amalgam … in a constant state of revision" (Tarr and White 51). The assertion that "robots are just technological artifacts that we design, manufacture, and use" (Gunkel 53) comes into question when faced with a mechanical subject that has the potential to develop self-awareness. Cinder's household android, Iko, unsettles the relationship between human and machine by transcending her position as a tool and developing a sense of identity. Reducing a self-aware, self-styling entity like Iko to a mere "tool" for human purposes preserves the humanist belief that "that which is categorized as 'human' has the right to control"

(Harrison 5). Determining subjectivity beyond these humanistic limitations depends upon whether a machine can be considered a "who" or a "what":

> In confronting and dealing with other entities—whether other human persons, mere artifacts like a toaster, or the human-looking robots depicted in R.U.R.—one inevitably needs to distinguish between those beings who are in fact moral subjects and what remains a mere thing. (Gunkel 59)

Advanced robotic subjects can only achieve "a level of moral consideration" if humanity extends its current understandings of who can be considered a "moral subject" (Gunkel 79), and this also means moving beyond the assumption that a robotic entity must be human-like to have rights. Non-anthropomorphic mechanical characters like Iko from *Cinder*, TARS from *Interstellar* (2014) and R2-D2 from *Star Wars* (1977–) call for an extension of our understanding of subjectivity and, consequently, our understanding of who can possess rights. As technological advancement edges towards the development of complex, self-aware super-intelligent machines and the singularity draws near (Vinge), it is imperative to explore "the implications AI seems to have for our understanding of human personhood" (McGrath 118). While caution surrounding the autopoiesis of cybernetics and artificial intelligence is warranted, ascribing inherently negative traits to artificial intelligence before the dawn of the singularity marks a return to dualistic, technophobic thinking. Approaching the singularity, a refusal to extend our definition of "personhood" could potentially alienate liminal robotic subjects and deepen the human/non-human divide.

Posthuman narratives within the YA dystopian text often involve acceptance of that which blurs the line between human and non-human, encouraging adolescents to build "ethical and empathetic relations with others" (McCullogh 75) in their own posthuman worlds. Science fiction aimed at young adults helps teens to deconstruct "the act of othering in their own subject formation by posing radical change: within these texts, the author can show the encounter with

the other, and possible results" (Campbell 44). The "other" in this context is often a hybrid being, be it artificial intelligence, androids, or even cyborg amalgamations of human and machine. In the world of Meyer's *Cinder,* the cyborg is presented as "othered" from full-blooded humans. This offers readers an opportunity to examine a fictional – and yet familiar – set of beliefs that constitute what it means to be "human" within the fictional world of New Beijing.

The posthuman in *Cinder* is described by Merrylees as "an expansion of the socially constructed human form into the next evolution of a hybrid being, not only becoming but belonging to something more, whether that expansion is perceived as negative or beneficial" (76). The text acknowledges societal resistance towards posthumanity by placing Cinder within a matrix of oppression, constituted by her identification as both a cyborg and Lunar. A "girl full of wires" (82), Cinder breaches the boundaries of what can traditionally be considered human, both in contemporary society and in Meyer's New Beijing. The non-human subject can be considered "other", not only in the fictional world of *Cinder* but also in reality. YA science fiction has the potential to naturalise and celebrate the "othered" cyborg subject. Stephens uncovers the potential of the child in posthuman YA literature to "challenge our concepts of humanity and posthumanity", asking whether "if such a child performs childhood, and that performativity embodies subjective agency, can it be confidently asserted that she/he/it is not a child?" ("Performativity" 8). The adolescent cyborg, like the posthuman child, holds the power to disrupt the distinction between human and machine, celebrating the autopoietic development of technology and emerging hybrid subjectivities. However, King and Page note that popular science fiction continues to cast technology in a negative light, associating it with a threat to human survival and, in turn, human primacy (King and Page 25). While it is true that intelligent machines pose a threat to human primacy, this does not necessarily constitute a negative of technology – rather, it calls for a posthuman ontology that questions the very structure upon

which the humanist doctrine was built. Texts for young people need not "necessitate either an evolution or devolution of the human" (Stephens, "Performativity" 9) by exacerbating the distinction between biology and technology. In fact, the advancement of technology and the consequent rise of posthuman subjectivity calls for texts that "create possibilities for the emergence of new relationships between human and machine, biology and technology" (9). By focalising through a teen cyborg protagonist, a hybrid of flesh and "the highest technology" (Meyer 116), *Cinder* explicitly critiques the discrimination of othered subjects, and creates the possibility of a world where cyborgs think, act, and feel just like their human peers.

However, regarding the posthuman body, *Cinder* passively marks a return to "ideas of humanity" that "naturalise and hierarchise difference within the human … and make absolute distinction between the human and the nonhuman" (Stephens, "Performativity" 9). The text is progressive in its representation of hybrid identities to an extent; however, Cinder's unstable relationship with her own cyborg body is never fully resolved. Embodiment and materiality are common themes within YA dystopian texts, sometimes presenting the body as a powerful and important site of self-representation, and sometimes presenting it as something volatile and undesirable. Characterisation in *Cinder* is consistent with Seelinger Trites's observation that "many of the strong female protagonists of YA dystopias are psychologically at war with their bodies" (86). Posthumanity in YA fiction is often met with resistance, as posthuman characters "cling to a normative identity espoused by the tenets of liberal humanism in a manner that seems not unlike the 'queer closet' metaphor of those demonized by heteronormativity" (McCullogh 74). Not all posthuman characters in YA fiction manage to break out of this posthuman closet, and if they do, often they still experience ostracisation as a result. For example, while it can be argued that protagonist Cinder in Marissa Meyer's novel of the same name eventually comes "out of the closet" when she is revealed to be a cyborg, it is not of her own volition – she is ousted as a cyborg during her final confrontation with antagonist Queen Levana. While her

hybrid physicality makes her feel "strong" and "powerful" at the end of the text (364), the revelation of her non-human nature ultimately leads to rejection from her love interest and the necessity to flee from her home in New Beijing. Cinder finds her mechanical parts "disturbing" (190) and seeks to hide her true nature from those around her, remaining closeted until the end of the text, when her true nature is revealed when her systems explosively reject the control of Queen Levana. Even then, Cinder desperately tries to "cover her metal hand, stupidly, in case Kai had been too blinded by the flash to notice it" (364), "heart shriveling" in shame when her love interest learns about her hybrid identity. Cinder, therefore, is still ashamed of her hybridity at the end of the first book in the *Lunar Chronicles* series. *Cinder* ultimately falls short of empowering those who are considered "other", associating queerness with something that must either be hidden, or punished with ostracisation.

Cinder's experiences as a teenage cyborg are representative of the transitional time between childhood and adulthood, and the challenges that young adults face during this period. Adolescence is a period where the concept of selfhood is "being formed in dialogue with others and with the physical, social and cultural world" (McCallum 23). During this liminal period of growth and self-styling, young adults face the challenges of navigating the child/adult power structure. It is for this reason that "subjectivity is intrinsic to the major concerns of adolescent fiction" (McCallum 3). One way that YA fiction empowers young adults is by presenting them with a protagonist who is struggling to find agency and subjectivity within the frame of their own family structure. While Cinder's adoptive family is far removed from the traditional nuclear family, it is possible to outline a clear power structure among Adri, the three sisters, and even household android Iko. Adult authority in *Cinder* aligns directly with stereotypes found within traditional fairytales, including the wicked step-mother, the beautiful queen, and the fairy godmother (Merrylees 83). As a result of this dynamic, Cinder finds herself in a constant battle for agency within a strict hierarchical power structure. Adri, who plays the role

of the evil step-mother from *Cinderella*, sits atop of the familial hierarchy, followed by step-sisters Pearl and Peony. Due to her intersectional position as both a cyborg and step-daughter, Cinder occupies the lowest tier of the family hierarchy, alongside household robot Iko, whose subjectivity is never recognised by Adri and Pearl. Adri holds power over Cinder, refusing her the privileges offered to her fully human siblings and keeping Cinder's wages "to spend as she saw fit" (Meyer 24). Cinder cannot fight this, acknowledging that "legally, [she belongs] to Adri as much as the household android and so too did her money, her few household possessions, even the new foot she'd just attached" (24). The sense that a person can be legally owned by another person positions the reader to feel disgust towards Adri, mirroring Cinder's "stomped-down anger" (24) at being treated as an object rather than an individual. Adri's control over Cinder extends to include emotional abuse, perpetuating the notion that cyborgs are less than human by questioning Cinder's ability to feel. She asks: "Do your kind even know what love is? Can you feel anything at all, or is it just … programmed?" (63). The text encourages reflection on whether Cinder's mechanical parts truly make her less human than characters like Adri and Pearl, who are markedly less likeable and relatable than Cinder herself. In the way that critiques of anthropocentricism destabilise the human/animal divide (Butler 13), posthumanism in speculative science fiction like *Cinder* incites a disruption between human and non-human. In order to overcome the challenges of being both cyborg and Lunar and achieve agency, Cinder must first overcome the power structure within her home. The text aligns Cinder's narrative with that of the implied teen reader, who exists in the "transitional time" between childhood and adulthood (Younger xiv), navigating the power structure between child and adult in a quest for agency. The "spark of rebellion" (Meyer 24) that Cinder feels at the beginning of the text stands as a promise to the reader that she will eventually rise to the challenge and overcome the oppression that she faces within her own family, staying true to the familial motifs present in the original *Cinderella* fairytale. Cinder's journey from the

submissive servant to independent rebel may be empowering to teens in the liminal phase between childhood and adulthood. While Cinder's uneasy relationship with her own body is never fully resolved, she does manage to overcome her familial power struggle.

Upon learning that Cinder has been sneaking to the palace, Adri takes Iko apart; a punishment not only aimed at Cinder, but possibly also at Iko. She is perceived by Adri to be little more than a malfunctioning machine with little emotional worth, valuing her solely on her parts and her use as leverage to control Cinder. The text positions the reader to feel sympathy for Iko, whose physical form has been destroyed, and for Cinder, who considered Iko to be a friend and peer. Cinder keeps Iko's personality chip and hopes to find a new body for her friend. She feels that Iko would appreciate a body with "tauntingly ideal feminine shapes" (Meyer 287), revealing a sense of longing in Iko that humanises the non-human. This sense of longing does not devalue Iko's position as a subject, but does maintain the importance of embodiment as a key constituent of an individual's identity. The humanist assumption that the mind holds value over the body is questioned by Iko's desire to enact her own sense of embodied femininity, placing value on materiality and physicality in conjunction with a sense of subjectivity.

Cinder's sense of identity is changeable and intersectional, suggesting a sense of hybridity that corresponds directly with cyborg ontology, largely dismantling the "prevailing binaries existent in the fairytale mythos" (Insenga 62). However, *Cinder*'s representation of gendered characters tends to perpetuate dualistic male/female gender norms. While the text strives to subvert *Cinderella* by situating it within a world very different to that of the classic fairytale, it leaves the heterosexual prince/princess trope untouched. Cinder does not enact femininity in a traditional sense, taking on roles traditionally considered to be "male" – she is a mechanic who wears "filthy cargo pants", a "stained t-shirt" and a tool belt (Meyer 300), contrasting sharply with the "golden gown" of "silk and seeded pearls" that her step-sister wears – but her sexuality

conforms to the male/female dualism that Haraway's cyborg seeks to undermine (Haraway 313). Romantic interests in *Cinder* are strictly heteronormative, excluding LGBTQIA+ identities entirely. Angel Daniel Matos, in his discussion about David Levithan's *Two Boys Kissing* (2013)*,* posits that "YA literature can serve as a powerful tool for identifying and mending the historical, homophobic, and normative damage that continues to haunt contemporary society" (Daniel Matos 59). While Daniel Matos's chapter references contemporary YA in particular, there is no reason that science fiction and particularly dystopian YA cannot stand as a similarly "artful" (59) model for young adult readers. *Cinder* may subvert understandings of what it is to be queer, and of what it truly means to be human, but it also frames Cinder's queerness within a limiting male/female binary structure, excluding and alienating readers who do not fit within heteronormative stereotypes. This omission undermines the purpose of YA literature as "a safe space where young people can read about themselves and discover options, alternatives, and information" (Younger xiv), instead framing gender and sexuality within a limited binary structure. Given the intersectional nature of Cinder's character, and her liminal position as cyborg, Lunar, and female, a truly posthuman rendering of the world of New Beijing may also have taken into account the fluid and changeable aspects of gender. The cyborg can be employed as a powerful literary tool that questions what it means to be human, but it can also question what it means to exist within the boundaries of male/female too, revealing a missed opportunity within *Cinder* to include and celebrate queer identities in all forms.

Conclusion

The cyborg and the autopoietic self-styling machine offer new ways of thinking about what it means to be human. The cyborg as a concept undermines the "troubling dualisms" that have long dominated Western discursive practices, destabilising the human/non-human dichotomy

by blending the technological with the biological (Haraway 313). Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), a retelling of the fairytale *Cinderella*, presents teen readers with a relatable cyborg protagonist, Cinder, whose narration highlights oppression within her own fictional world and consequently reveals current inequalities within our own society. Posthuman characters like Cinder and Iko position the reader to question whether a non-human character truly can be considered less than human, calling human primacy into question. These characters exemplify posthumanist/cyborgian ontology in YA fiction and highlight the need for greater representation of cyborgian characters across the subgenre of YA science fiction. A wider range of characters that fall into this category would present young readers with a compelling metaphor for coming of age, representative of the autopoietic stage between childhood and adulthood. Cyborgian YA also offers a more positive view of the technology that is so deeply intertwined in contemporary adolescents' day-to-day life, offering insight into how one can blur the lines between human and technology with autopoietic agency. Posthuman protagonists in YA often find themselves within a kind of "queer closet" (McCullogh 74), ashamed of their hybrid queerness and at war with their own bodies. Stepping out of this queer closet to embrace their hybridity and feel connected with their own physicality may empower the queered teen reader to move beyond their own particular closet and build a sense of identity with greater freedom and *jouissance.*

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