In preparation for the ARCYP round table “Participatory Ontologies and Youth Cultures,” Stuart Poyntz issued an outline of its conceptual framework: “Beginning in infancy, young people now grow up learning the language of consumer media culture through a constant diet of screen images, audio messages, and text-based communication that compete with schools and families as primary storytellers and teachers in youths’ lives.” As Poyntz notes, young people’s engagement with media culture is scarcely a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, the rise of social networking and the ready availability of new technologies have significantly enhanced young people’s capacity to produce and to circulate texts and products. This paper focuses on a novel whose narrative is structured by exactly the processes of production and circulation to which Poyntz refers: M. T. Anderson’s 2002 novel *Feed*. I analyze the novel’s treatment of human agency in a dystopian future America, where young people are implanted with “the feed,” a computer chip which connects them with a global network of “images, audio messages, and text-based communication” that Poyntz referred to. Secondly, I consider how the novel itself positions readers to engage with Anderson as an author whose public identity has been carefully shaped through his media appearances and especially his website.

**Consumerism and Its Discontents**

In the future USA that is the setting of *Feed*, children are supplied with “the feed” by a powerful corporation, FeedTech Corp, which acts as a conduit for advertisements and infotainment. Through data mining, corporations monitor people’s thoughts and emotions, using such information to engineer desires for products and experiences that accord with consumers’ profiles. The novel both thematizes corporate power and consumerism, and also positions
readers to engage with questions about human agency in a world where individuals are bombarded with information about products and services, but denied knowledge of political and ideological contexts. In his essay in this forum, Darin Barney points to the distinction between participation and politics, arguing that many of the claims made for the liberatory effects of participation fail to hold up under critical scrutiny. I would argue that texts that draw attention to the processes whereby societies enforce conformity to socio-political norms can situate readers as subjects who attain a degree of critical distance from narratives and characters, a critical distance that enables critique. In *Feed*, for instance, readers are situated outside the core group of main characters and are positioned to observe how these characters are formed as docile subjects. Denied an education, the young people of *Feed* are trained not as citizens but as consumers, while shadowy political forces seek to undermine the corrupt world of the novel. In effect, then, the dystopian setting of *Feed* is a state of emptiness where the young are offered consumerism as a substitute for participation in citizenship.

Readers and audiences bring to texts repertoires of knowledge and values and operate as subjects within a variety of discursive styles and modes. But as Norman Fairclough points out, the term “subject” refers both to the role of the person exercising agency in the world and to the situation of one who is subjected by others (39). Texts for children and young people are deeply implicated in processes and practices of socialization; likewise, their authors are implicated in the unequal power relations which characterize negotiations between adults and children. In many cases, authors announce their ideological positions in speeches and written commentary on their writing. But all writing for children carries ideological freight, whether explicit or implicit, and is informed by taken-for-granted and naturalized cultural norms that, as Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer note, “carry the greatest ‘potency’ with unreflective readers” (152). A key focus of scholarly investigation is precisely how subject positions are constructed, and the extent to which texts engage young readers and audiences as active participants in meaning-making.

The narrative of *Feed* hinges upon the relationship between two teenagers, Titus and Violet. Titus is the first-person narrator, identified through a style of language that combines Californian youth English with invented idioms:

> We went to the moon to have fun, but the moon turned out to completely suck.

> We went on a Friday, because there was shit-all to do at home. It was the beginning of spring break. Everything at home was boring. Link Arwaker was like, “I’m so null,” and Marty was all, “I’m null too, unit,” but I mean we were all pretty null,
because for the last like hour we’d been playing with three uninsulated wires that were coming out of the wall. (3)

The term “unit,” used as a form of gendered address (boys are units, girls unettes), signals how individuals are envisaged by FeedTech Corp: as revenue-generating components in a global economy. Supplementing Titus’s account of his friends’ attempts at escaping the emptiness of their lives, the novel incorporates snatches of language emanating from his feed: advertisements, pop songs, product descriptions, and Twitter-like chat from other characters.

A pivotal moment in the narrative occurs on the moon, when a hacker attacks Titus and his friends, disrupting their access to the feed. Violet is more susceptible than the other young people to this attack because, when she was an infant, her parents resisted the idea of implantation, so that her feed is less securely established than those of her friends. From this point Violet seeks to disrupt the feed by pretending an interest in random products so that the FeedTech Customer Assistance component of the corporation is unable to develop a reliable consumer profile for her. She hopes that in this way she will become invisible. However, when the “software/wetware interface” (170) of her feed breaks down (resulting in physical and mental collapse), FeedTech Corp refuses to repair it (on the grounds that she is not a committed consumer) and by the end of the novel she is comatose and near death.

This grim scenario is mediated to readers in part through Titus’s perspective, which is set against other discursive strands, such as messages from the hacker organization, the Coalition...
of Pity, and news items about a global struggle in which the USA wages an isolationist campaign against the Global Alliance. A key narrative strategy is that Titus is presented as an unreliable—and at times unlikeable—narrator, so that he does not readily invite reader identification. As Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons note, Titus adopts the position described by Zygmunt Bauman as that of the bystander, one of those who “see evil and hear evil . . . , sometimes speak of evil, but do nothing at all or not enough to arrest it” (17). For instance, when his friends make fun of Violet’s nonconformist behaviour, he fails to defend her; when she is near death and seeks his support, he deletes the thought messages she sends and then tells her that he has not received them.

As Bauman notes, bystanders are trapped in the borderlands between moral and legal responsibility, and it is here that the novel positions readers to negotiate some of the complexities of ethical decision-making in a globalized world. Titus and his friends attend School™, which is run by the corporations and which focuses on training young people how to be consumers. In contrast, Violet’s father, a college professor, has home-schooled her, teaching her to read and write and how to critique texts and cultural practices. The novel incorporates a number of episodes where Violet’s access to discursive possibilities is compared with the impoverished language (and thought) of Titus’s friends. In one such episode, the Coca-Cola company has announced a promotion where “if you talked about the great taste of Coca-Cola to your friends like a thousand times, you got a free six-pack of it” (158), and so the friends have resolved, Titus says, to “rip off the corporations, which we all thought was a funny idea” (158) by talking incessantly about Coke.

Although Titus’s use of “we” makes a claim for group consensus, the narrative strategy of incorporating characters’ chat destabilizes any such assumption. As the group members sit awkwardly before beginning their discussion, Violet chats Titus: “This is like when I was twelve, and we had this slumber party and agreed to show each other our boobs. I think we finally just gave up and watched America’s Unlikeliest Allergy Attacks” (160). From this point it is clear that Titus is torn between group norms and his consciousness of Violet’s resistance to them, and this strategy creates an opportunity for readers to occupy a subject position from which they observe characters from some distance. At first, conversation is constituted by advertising language: “Anyone up for the great taste of Coke?” and “There’s nothing like an ice-cold Coke” (160). But the girls in the group are lukewarm about the task: “Loga said, ‘Coke, it’s really good, almost as good as Pepsi.’ ‘Unette!’ said Marty. ‘Almost? You just lost us one! The fuckin’ count just went down’” (160). Violet further disrupts the group’s bid for free Coke by reflecting on the processes whereby individuals are
She was saying, “Sometimes I try to think back to the first time I ever had Coke. . . . If something’s an acquired taste, like, how do you start to acquire it? For that matter, who gave me Coke the first time? My father? Who would hand a kid a Coke and think, ‘Her first one. I’m so proud.’ How do we even start?”

There was a long, silent part.

Then Marty said, “Yeah. That may have cost us a few. Hey, how about the great foaming capabilities of Coke?” (161)

The silence that greets Violet’s reflection, and a subsequent incident during which two of the girls in the group criticize her use of “stupid, long words that no one can understand,” render her so uncomfortable that she insists on returning home (164). This occasions conflict between Titus and Violet during which she discloses the fact that her feed is beginning to fail.

In broad terms, readers are positioned during this episode to note the disjunction between discourse and behaviour: rather than “ripping off the corporations,” the boys conclude that “all this talking about the great taste of Coke” has made them thirsty, so they decide to go out and buy some (162). Readers may also be differentially positioned to note the gendered nature of exchanges, evident in the way the boys drive the project and the girls merely go along with it. But the girls’ lack of commitment does not imply a female solidarity, as is evident in their resentment of Violet’s “stupid, long words.” Nor does Violet constitute a focalizing character with whom readers might align. Although she fills the role of the misfit protagonist common in dystopian texts, she is
the object of narrative rather than its subject; and it is possible to read her infatuation with Titus as a proxy for her desire to experience everything (including sex) before she dies. The “Coke” episode exemplifies the novel’s distancing strategies, which encourage readers to try out a variety of subject positions, weighing up one against another. While it exposes the extent to which characters are interpellated by the feed, it is arguable that the novel flatters readers into a sense of their own insightfulness as they see what characters cannot.

Authors and Their Audiences

*Feed* positions its readers simultaneously to advert to and to critique the processes whereby young people are inducted into consumerism. At the same time, the novel is itself a product marketed to young people and to the adults (parents, teachers, librarians) who mediate texts to them. A significant component of marketing in the field of children’s literature focuses on authors, who are often involved in publicity campaigns directed toward educational institutions and encompassing events such as book signings, festivals, and Book Weeks. Increasingly, authors for young people produce themselves as personalities through social media including personal websites, blogs, and Twitter. Such interventions materially alter concepts of “the implied author” as they are outlined in traditional forms of narrative theory, where the implied author is treated as a product of the act of writing, much as Wayne Booth describes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “However impersonal he [sic] may try to be, his [sic] readers will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values” (71).

Far from constructing pictures of authors based on their fiction, young readers look to author websites for images, biographical information, news, and promotional material. Nor is a fiction of “neutrality” sustainable when author sites routinely include speeches, blogs, and manifestos. Anderson’s website, located at <http://mt-anderson.com>, artfully conjures up an impression of the author, with headings and visual effects that evoke a wry, self-mocking reflexivity. The home page incorporates playful headings: “His Books,” “Him,” “He Talks & Talks,” “More Gimmicks,” and “Electro-Aetherial Mail” (email), while virtual gears and pulleys create the illusion that this sophisticated website relies on vintage machinery. These effects produce the author almost as though he is a protagonist in one of his own novels.

A noticeable feature of Anderson’s website is his deployment of narrative and linguistic strategies that seek to persuade readers that he is on their side; that he understands them and shares their preoccupations. The “He Talks & Talks” section links to a number of Anderson’s talks and publications. In “On Octavian Nothing and Terry Pratchett,” he decries the (naïve)
claim of writers who say “that their characters talk to them,” pointing to his consciousness that his characters are “constructions.” Later, he presents an interpolated narrative in which he and his girlfriend are making a chicken pot pie while listening to “some Baroque trio sonata,” and he describes his sudden realization that “Octavian would love this. . . . I mean, the poor guy could really use a break. I’ll give him a plate of supper and a soda pop.” Anderson’s reference to his girlfriend and to the cozy domestic scene where they cook together while listening to Baroque music conjures up a world calculated to appeal to his readers, who might imagine themselves as adults living similar lives. His insertion of Octavian Nothing into this setting draws attention not to a postmodern mix of the fictive and the real, but rather to his own fondness for the character he has created and, by extension, to his engagement with young people.

To critique what might seem like an unguarded, charmingly frank moment of self-revelation on Anderson’s part may seem cynical and harsh. But the website is so patently directed toward the construction of Anderson the author that it invites analysis of its rhetorical and discursive features. In his reflections on Feed, for instance, Anderson refers to his memories of his experience as a teenager, when “I was irritated at the way companies tried to sell me things.” This reference to his young self is then swept into a description of how consumer media culture positions “us,” where Anderson’s use of first-person plural implies a readership conscious of the ways in which “ads and tv shows and movies are showing us images of the high life, playing on our desire to belong” (Feed). The socially conscious, politically aware readership suggested by this passage is at once prone to the influence of corporate communication and resistant to it, much as Anderson describes himself.

A telling aspect of Anderson’s self-production is that he sets himself apart from mainstream culture. Thus, he notes that, while he himself is part of the “system of desire” that proposes norms for individuals’ aspirations in late capitalism, he also resists these norms: “I still can’t get out of my head the images of who I’m supposed to be. (For my current age: the picket fence; the lawn; holding some daughter up toward the sun; strapping my tykes into the SUV)” (Feed). Born in 1968, Anderson was in his early thirties when Feed was published; in his notes on the novel, then, he produces an image of himself that departs from the bourgeois, suburban figure he conjures up (picket fence, lawn, tykes, SUV). By constructing himself in opposition to this imagined figure, he invites young readers to align with an adult who resists mainstream norms. Moreover, Anderson distinguishes himself from parents and teachers whose lives may resemble those of the bourgeois figure he constructs.

In Feed, adults are represented in ways that correspond to the binaries Anderson suggests in his
website reflection on the novel. Most adult characters, including Titus’s parents, are thoroughly subjected by corporate rhetoric, living vacuous lives focused entirely on consumerist pleasures. Their aspirations for their children are dictated by their desire for social status; for instance, Titus’s friend Link is so called because his family, “really old and meg rich” (186), invested in the costly enterprise of cloning him from the bloodstains on Lucy Todd Lincoln’s cloak following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, thus ensuring that their son is genetically superior to other cloned individuals. For all their consumerist trappings, Titus’s parents are discontented and unhappy; at the end of the novel it is revealed that his father is having an affair with the Vice-President of Sales at his company, so that the narrative ends with the expectation of familial instability. The only other adults to figure in the novel, apart from the unhappy, status-obsessed parents of Titus and his friends, are the shadowy activists who perform destructive acts and Violet’s ineffectual father, whose discursive habits identify him as an ivory-tower academic whose only mode of resistance is, as Violet says, to “speak entirely in weird words and irony, so no one can simplify anything he says” (137).

In contrast, the author implied by Feed and constructed through Anderson’s website occupies a critical distance from mainstream society, positioning young readers to see him as an exceptional adult, one who does not conform to mainstream norms. It is arguably a weakness of Feed that the novel’s representation of adults is far less nuanced than his depiction of Violet and Titus, collapsing into binaries that seem to echo those depictions of the “generation gap” that were common in the 1950s and 1960s, propelled by J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye and sustained in
the work of YA novelists such as S. E. Hinton and Paul Zindel. By constructing adults as hopelessly embroiled in the destructive practices of their society, the novel suggests that the ideal adult is one with whom young people might align themselves—that is, the kind of adult constructed throughout Anderson’s website.

**Conclusion**

The novel ends with a scene in which Titus visits Violet, who is unconscious and close to death. He tells her “little pieces of broken stories” (296), fragments of information about the possibility of war between the USA and the Global Alliance, about the riots that have begun to erupt in malls across the country, about the Japanese saying that “life is like walking from one side of infinite darkness to another, on a bridge of dreams” (296–97). His last communication with Violet takes the form of the text of a movie trailer in which a “meg normal guy . . . meets a dissident with a heart of gold” (297), the two fall in love, and they “learn how to resist the feed” (298). Titus’s story resembles a Hollywood feel-good fantasy “rated PG-13. For language . . . and mild sexual situations” (298), having no explanatory status beyond his futile desire for a happy ending.

This farewell scene is followed by a sequence in which the feed recognizes Titus’s emotional state and proposes a consumerist antidote:

> Feeling blue? Then dress blue! It’s the Blue-Jean Warehouse’s Final Sales Event! Stock is just flying off the shelves at prices so low you won’t believe your feed!

> Everything must go!
> Everything must go!
> Everything must go!
> Everything must go!
> Everything must go! (299–300)

Neatly combining the persuasive language of advertising with a reference to the bridge of dreams over which Violet is about to cross, the novel here positions readers as observers of a scene for which the narrative has prepared the way through its emphasis on the hegemonic power of corporations.

It may be, as I have suggested, that *Feed* too readily accedes to Anderson’s promotion of an author figure who is on the side of the young and who resists cultural norms. Nevertheless, this novel is one of many contemporary texts that invite a critical and participatory style of reading. In doing so, it encourages readers to reflect on the consumerism and the neoliberal politics of their own time and to imagine the “what-if” implications of a world in which these tendencies dominate political and economic life. In doing so, it functions as a critical dystopia, implying through its imagining of a dysfunctional future how human subjects might make ethical choices.
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