

“Nothing to do but be borne and steered”¹:

Unpacking Feminist Scripts in Elana Arnold’s *Damsel*

Jenna Spiering and Nicole Ann Amato

ABSTRACT

Feminism in novels marketed for young adults often reflects the values of a popular feminism that relies on individual and personal means of empowerment, rather than critiquing or seeking to dismantle systems of domination. In this paper, we illuminate frameworks and methods for engaging students in careful readings and evaluations of texts marketed as feminist, through an analysis of Elana Arnold’s feminist fairy tale, *Damsel* (2018). Drawing on theoretical frameworks of popular feminism, feral feminism, and theories of becoming, the authors use Critical Content Analysis to explore several tenets in contemporary feminist thought in order to analyze Arnold’s text and its themes of

1 (Arnold 66)

Jenna Spiering, PhD, is an assistant professor in the School of Information Science at the University of South Carolina. Her research focuses on children’s and young adult literature, and specifically graphic novels and issues of censorship and selection of LGBTQ materials. Her recent publications have appeared in *Study and Scrutiny: Research in Young Adult Literature*, *Knowledge Quest* and *School Libraries Worldwide*.

Nicole Ann Amato is a PhD candidate in the Literacy, Language, and Culture program at The University of Iowa, where she teaches courses in children’s and adolescent literature to pre-service teachers. Nicole’s research interests include young adult literature, comics and graphic novels, and feminist criticism. Her recent publications have appeared in *The Journal of Language & Literacy Education*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *The ALAN Review*.

empowerment and liberation, domestication and ferality, and the discursive and material conditions of becoming. The authors argue that complex understandings of feminist frameworks can move readers toward more robust critique of the various forms of feminism that can be found in young adult literature, and suggest that this novel offers pathways for interrogating complex feminist scripts in young adult literature.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring semester of 2020, a group of English Education students read and discussed Elana Arnold's Michael Printz Honor book, *Damsel* (2018), in a monthly book club dedicated to reading and responding to young adult literature (YAL). The Printz Award "honors the best book written for teens, based solely on literary merit" (ALA), and we (the authors) devoured the story and were eager to talk about all the peculiar and particular moves Arnold made with language, imagery, and narrative structure. However, many of our students resisted the novel, arguing that Arnold's feminist messages were too – as one student claimed – "on the nose". They repeated phrases such as 'heavy-handed', 'in your face', and 'hit over the head'. One student, who identified as a fantasy nerd, remarked with frustration in their voice:

I thought the whole thing was half-baked. The settings, the characters. I didn't like any of them. I just didn't think that anything ever got... everything felt very surface level. No part of it really ever dove in beyond 'here's your generic kingdom.' And even though this is kind of a flipped script kind of thing, it was still like a very generic, kind of flip the script.

Another student remarked:

If you want the metaphor to make sense in their head and like really get it into their head, you have to make it super clear. [...]. For us, it seems super, super obvious, but maybe for other less developed readers, it wouldn't feel so obvious.

Although we honor our students' responses to the novel as valid, we felt that they were somewhat problematically stuck in a space that reflected a desire to critique Arnold's craft rather than consider the extent to which the story is a product of the cultural moment we live in. Additionally concerning to us was the way their claims about the novel's heavy-handedness devolved into deficit assumptions about the types of feminist messaging that youth need. We worried that this line of thinking contributes to reproducing definitions of feminism rooted in popular feminism and misogyny – tales of empowerment and 'girl power' – without questioning and critiquing the systems that maintain the status quo. As such, we

chose to undertake our own Critical Content Analysis (CCA) of the novel to explore the potential of reading *Damsel* through a variety of feminist lenses. This article is not, therefore, a report of a reader-response research project, but rather a critical exploration stemming from an intriguing classroom experience. Nevertheless, we suggest that our reading has pedagogical implications, since it is our opinion that when central tenets of contemporary feminist theories are brought to bear on this text, readers are better equipped to understand how Arnold is constructing a text informed by particular, and sometimes limited, feminist ideologies.

Although we have questions and concerns about the various types of feminist ideologies brought forward in this novel and its marketing, we also realize our students were missing some foundations in feminist histories. For example, in small groups, our students considered the question, ‘is this a feminist text?’ One group defined a feminist text as having four characteristics: a strong female lead, a woman who has agency, passes the Bechdel test, and characters who go beyond stereotypes. While we do not dispute these can be entry points for discussing feminism in a novel, they locate feminism within individual characters, rather than exploring systems of power. We believe our students’ resistance to the text reflected their frustration with monolithic renderings of feminism within young adult literature, a trend documented in scholarship. For example, Eliane Rubinstein-Avila uses tenets of Critical Race Feminism to analyze feminist tropes in YA, and argues books marketed as feminist feature an overwhelming number of white, middle-class, and heterosexual protagonists who fail to see sexism as a systemic problem and write off sexist behavior as the fault of the individual (371). Although *Damsel* centers white, heterosexual protagonists, we also think Arnold’s text illuminates the systemic roots of sexism and misogyny.

In thinking about how to engage students with feminist critiques, Roberta Seelinger Trites asks, “How can I explain that feminism is not an off/on, yes/no, feminist/sexist binary switch?” (“Teaching Feminisms” 51). In this article, we hope to join scholars, like Trites and Rubinstein-Avila, in providing an approach that might help students move beyond narrow and dualistic understandings of feminism by illuminating frameworks and methods that engage readers in careful readings of texts marketed as feminist, such as *Damsel*. We argue that more complex understandings of various feminist frameworks would help readers critically examine their swift dismissal of a book they perceived as didactic and as a simplistic re-telling of the damsel-in-distress narrative. Complex feminist frameworks can push students towards more robust critiques of how feminism is positioned in texts marketed to youth audiences (Priske). The following research questions guided our inquiry:

- What types of feminist ideologies are circulating within Arnold’s *Damsel*?
- How do contemporary feminist frameworks encourage more nuanced readings of young adult literature marketed as feminist?

DAMSEL AND FEMINIST THEORIES

Damsel is the story of Ama, our protagonist and ‘damsel in distress’. Seemingly rescued from a dragon by Prince Emory, Ama has no memory of her life before waking up in Emory’s care. After rescuing Ama, Emory takes her back to Harding, a kingdom where he will serve as King with Ama, his queen, once they are married. Arnold intentionally leaves the reader, alongside Ama, in the dark about what happened when Emory conquered the dragon. Ama’s identity is a mystery to herself and the reader. She is expected, as tradition dictates, to marry Emory and become pregnant with his son. Ama must remain subservient to Emory’s desires, pleasing him sexually and remaining docile and contained within the kingdom’s walls. Throughout the novel, Arnold uses euphemistic language and plot twists to unveil the mystery of Ama’s arrival in Harding. As her wedding nears, Ama slowly regains her memories, revealing she was the dragon Emory conquered. Ama kills Emory, eats his heart, and flies away from Harding as a dragon. Our analysis of Elana Arnold’s *Damsel* is informed by three feminist frameworks: popular feminism, feral feminisms, and material feminist theories of becoming. We will briefly outline each framework and its relevance to our analysis, before setting out a list of tenets based on the frameworks that guided our close readings.

Popular Feminism

Discourses and practices of feminism are ‘popular’ when they are mainstream and accessible beyond academia. However, a feminism that is popular in the sense of being admired or well-liked is not the kind of feminism that seeks to critique and dismantle systems of domination; instead, popular feminism relies on individual and personal means of empowerment. In her book *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Sarah Banet-Weiser traces how visible expressions and practices of popular feminism are intertwined with, and help to maintain the invisibility of, misogyny: the structural forces built into laws, policies, and normative behaviors that allow for the continued use of popular expressions such as “boys will be boys” and “the way things are” (3). Popular feminism is not disruptive to capitalism because being empowered is rooted in economic success at the expense of others. A popular feminist is an economic subject, not a feminist subject. We live and teach in a moment where buying t-shirts, mugs, pins, and stickers with labels such as ‘Feminist AF’ or ‘Wild Feminist’ are commonplace. To declare oneself a feminist through clothing and accessories is a testament to the movement’s popularity as a commodifiable identity. Additionally, Banet-Weiser contends: “[t]he most visible popular feminism is that within the arena of consent: it consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalist ‘success’” (16).

Damsel is an example of a popular feminist text: a race-evasive battle of the sexes set in a medieval kingdom whose white ruling class maintains its power through heterosexual marriage, child-bearing arrangements, and corporal punishment. Similar to popular feminism is the concept of ‘white feminism’, a feminist ethos that centers white women’s experiences to the exclusion of Black women and women of color (Kendall). White feminism views gender equality as “anchored in the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it” (Beck xvii). Scholars argue that white feminism works in service of maintaining white supremacy. In *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*, Ruby Hamad defines the archetype of a white damsel as “one of racial purity, Christian morality, sexual innocence, demureness, and financial dependence on men [...] A privilege, yes, but a perilous one, for to step off this pedestal meant no longer being regarded as a ‘woman’” (92). Ama, our protagonist, is an example of Hamad’s archetype: she is negotiating power, agency, and liberation from a place of precarious privilege, a privilege not afforded to the other women in *Harding*. Ama’s final return and transformation to a dragon underscores Hamad’s point that a refusal to participate in the archetype of a white damsel is to forgo status as a woman. This archetype of white damsels in distress is pervasive within the market of youth literature, particularly fantasy novels, in which whiteness is centered without calling attention to it: whiteness remains unnamed (see Thomas).

Damsel’s popular feminist messaging is most visible in its peritext, marketing, and reviews. The dust jacket is filled with author endorsements, summaries, and captions that explicitly market the book as “furiously feminist” (a phrase used in Claire Legrand’s endorsement). In fact, the novel’s feminism is so visible, both in the peritext and the framing of the text itself, that our students expressed consistent annoyance and exhaustion from what they saw as Arnold’s overt and didactic messaging. However, we argue that Arnold uses language, imagery, and narrative structures to make misogyny visible and absurd to the reader. By analyzing Arnold’s narrative choices through a lens of popular feminism and popular misogyny, we suggest Arnold is not attempting to communicate or prescribe to readers a singular, or even popular, type of feminism. Instead, Arnold is offering readers a story that highlights the absurdity of patriarchal systems.

Feral Feminisms

Feral feminism is a “call to untaming, queering, and radicalizing feminist thought and practice” (cited in Montford and Taylor 5). The word feral is often used interchangeably with wild, untamed, undomesticated, and untrained, implying a ferocious, vicious, or savage state of being. Furthermore, “[f]eral is a term humans deploy in fairly arbitrary ways, most often to mark off certain animals as killable” (Wadiwel and Taylor 85). To be named ‘feral’ is not an indication of a natural state of being; rather it is a state of being deemed a threat to humans

and must therefore be fixed or exterminated. Historically, white supremacist imperialist patriarchies deployed words like feral, savage, and uncivilized to justify colonization, genocide, and enslavement. In his book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, Jack Halberstam writes: “[w]ildness names simultaneously a chaotic force of nature, the outside of categorization, unrestrained forms of embodiment, the refusal to submit to social regulation, loss of control, the unpredictable” (3). Halberstam argues that the language of “wild” maintains colonial and racial hierarchies through violence (9) and suggests that “wildness disorders desire and desires disorder” (7). A feral theory recognizes that humans ultimately decide who is or is not feral, who is and is not desirable to the goals and wants of those in power, and who will eventually be named disordered. A feral theory requires us to name these distinctions and consider the extent to which being ‘feral’ or ‘wild’ has liberatory possibilities.

Throughout *Damsel*, Arnold uses animal imagery to explore how humans exert and maintain power through domestication practices. The relationships between humans and animals are mirrored in the dynamics between Emory and Ama. We draw from scholarship using feral feminisms to analyze the relationships between humans and animals as a way to explore Arnold’s commentary about patriarchal values, rape culture, and consent.

Material Feminist Theories of Becoming

Many scholars who study feminist YAL suggest that a feminist text features a protagonist who, in using their voice to establish agency and subjectivity, has been “liberated from inevitably growing into passivity” (Trites, *Waking Sleep Beauty* 11). In her book *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children’s and Adolescent Literature*, Trites revises and extends earlier claims, noting feminism is “too complex to be reduced to a formula as simple as being feminist because they feature a ‘strong girl’” (119). Rather, Trites draws on theories of material feminism to suggest the necessity of exploring the relationship between language and embodiment when conceptualizing a feminist subject: “[h]ow girls and young women use language and how they interact with their environment affect how they perceive themselves in an ongoing process of intra-activity that affects their becoming” (58). Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Rosi Braidotti, Trites suggests ‘becoming’ is not a process of growth, but rather an ongoing process of desire where “identities shift and merge” with the subject’s material and discursive realities; as a result, gendered bodies are created and sustained through these dynamics (12). As we will show in our analysis, Ama moves between various identities: a dragon, a damsel in distress, a queen in waiting, and a dragon again. Ama’s material world informs all the ways in which she ‘becomes’: her embodied knowledge and memories work with the way Emory and the inhabitants of Harding discursively define her.

Tenets of (Some) Critical Feminist Theories

How do material feminist theories of becoming, combined with feral feminisms and popular feminism, allow readers to more carefully explore the feminist tensions in Arnold's novel? What does studying Arnold's choices in language, imagery, and narrative structure through these frameworks reveal about the affordances and limitations of labels such as feminist? In the following sections, we re-read Arnold's choices through these lenses to illuminate how our students' responses to the novel may have been constrained. To help us in this project, we drafted the following list of tenets informed by our three theoretical frameworks.

1. Empowerment within capitalistic systems of domination maintains the status quo.
2. Misogyny and patriarchal norms are largely invisible and maintained through revisionist history and unquestioned social norms practiced by all genders.
3. The relationship between domestication and fertility is constructed and practiced by those in positions of power to suit the needs of humans.
4. Feminist/feminism are neither fixed nor stable discourses but are (re)created within political, cultural, and historical moments.
5. Becoming a feminist subject requires an analysis of how discourse and material conditions shape perceptions of the self.

METHODS

We use CCA to analyze Arnold's novel, influenced by Kathy Short's argument that CCA "differs from content analysis in prioritizing a critical lens as a frame for the study, not just as part of interpreting the findings or citing scholarship in a lit review" (5). As already outlined, we use frameworks of popular feminism, feral feminisms, and material feminist theories of becoming to analyze how Arnold is constructing a feminist text and how youth readers might engage with feminisms in literature. By studying *Damsel* with these purposes in mind, we hope to complicate and nuance what it means when a text (and its author, publishers, and/or readers) claim the label feminist.

The analysis of this paper began after reading the book aesthetically and discussing it informally with each other. We then employed a systematic approach to identifying feminist scripts in the book and theorized about how these scripts could become subjects for inquiry with (youth) readers in educational settings. We use the term 'feminist scripts' to refer to ideas and passages in the novel that students either read as feminist or took up as examples of anti-feminism. We do not conceptualize feminist scripts as a stable discourse shared by all readers, but rather a discourse already circulating among readers and influenced by their complex and contradicting sociocultural knowledges. As we read, we marked passages that spoke to the following questions:

1. Where do familiar feminist scripts circulate in the novel?
2. Who has power in this novel? (Which women have power?)
3. What roles do women play in the novel?
4. What roles do animals play?

After marking these passages, we analyzed them together closely, applying the feminist frameworks and situating those readings within the context of the larger novel. A significant goal of CCA is for the “researcher to transform conditions of inequity” (Short 1), and to this end, we engage in this analysis with young adult readers to identify how feminist scripts function in their own lives. For example, we believe these feminist theories could support readers in making sense of both the celebration and critiques of the United States electing its first woman Vice President, Kamala Harris.

In the following sections, we organize our analysis according to three thematic tensions that surfaced after re-reading the novel through our theoretical tenets: empowerment and liberation, domestication and ferality, and memory and knowledge. Woven through each analysis section is transcript data from our students that underscore the tensions that gave rise to their responses.

“I COULD HAVE BEEN A GOOD RULER. A JUST RULER, EVEN.”³: EMPOWERMENT AND LIBERATION

Empowerment rhetoric is often used in feminist discourses to celebrate the individual successes of a seemingly liberated and agentic subject. A popular feminism asks readers to critique how empowerment rhetoric makes the maintenance of the status quo invisible. As we suggested earlier, Arnold uses language, imagery, and narrative structure to make this maintenance of a patriarchal system visible and absurd to her readers. The kingdom of Harding, Ama’s new home and the land she is destined to rule as Queen after marrying Emory, is a deeply patriarchal society. Emory and the Queen, among others, consistently remind Ama that women in Harding are the property of men. Ama’s primary responsibility is to birth a son and provide pleasure for her king, and she is expected to be pleased by these responsibilities because Emory has done what Ama could never have done for herself: rescue her from the dragon. Arnold carefully and intentionally selects vocabulary throughout the book that speaks to the economic value of women in this society. Using a metaphor of women as agriculture, the Queen Mother counsels Ama: “[t]his is how it has always been. We come; we are tilled and planted; we grow our crop; we wither; we die” (290), reinforcing the belief that women’s roles as wives and mothers is natural and biological. This framing constitutes a familiar feminist script: one in which binary gender roles confine women within domestic spheres and, thus, need to be empowered to become feminist

2 (Arnold 291)

subjects. This begs the question, what is liberation for Ama in a society like Harding? And furthermore, how does Ama's liberation impact other women?

The women in Arnold's novel do not suffer equally. While Ama is considered the property of Emory, she also has an army of domestic help cleaning, feeding, and dressing her: "of course the servants would be neither resting nor playing, but rather working, as was their duty"(17). Tillie, her maid, not only waits on her all day but replaces the warm stones in her bed and adds wood to the fire in her chambers throughout the night to keep Ama warm. Ama is aware of what is expected of the girls who work for her and often expresses internal thoughts of shame for asking other women to serve her. However, she begins to rely on Tillie for personal requests, such as babysitting her pet lynx, Sorrow, while she attends dinner. Ama is, at times, both powerless and powerful. The dynamics between Ama and the women of Harding reveal a central tension between theories of empowerment and liberation. Popular feminism convinces women that their empowerment is a path to a feminist identity; women are equal in power and wealth to men. Ama's relationship to the Queen Mother mirrors this dynamic as the Queen Mother attempts to convince her that her future role as queen is one she should both desire and for which she should be grateful. Ama desires liberation but many characters she encounters teach her that empowerment within Harding is what she should desire. Banet Weiser reminds us that empowerment within a patriarchal, white supremacist society is not the same as a liberatory feminist project (185). An empowered subject is a better economic subject, and in this world, Ama's value comes from her ability to produce children that continue Emory's legacy as ruler.

Arnold repeatedly uses language to convey how trapped Ama feels: "*Constrict. Constrain. Conscript. Construct. Consume.* Words beat in Ama's head as her heartbeat against the boning and binding of the gown in which she stood, trapped – the dress that was to be her wedding gown" (267). While the King is cruel and abusive (at one point in the novel he leads her around the grounds on a leash), she initially finds comfort in his company. Because she has no memory, she has known him longer than anyone else. After Emory's coronation, there is a large feast with the entire court in which Ama must confront the responsibilities of her new position. During the meal, she becomes consumed with the beauty of the music and stops eating. Emory demands she eat her meat and points out that the court is waiting for her to continue, "all up and down the table, forks and knives were suspended midair, or laid aside, as the court watched her face and waited for her to enjoy her meal" (133). Ama is not hungry but continues eating, realizing that "there was some shelter in doing as she was expected to do" and that as she continued to eat, "she seemed to fade into the texture of the room" (133). Although uncomfortable in her position, she is aware that maintaining the status quo and doing as she is told tempers conflict and resistance between her and Emory. And while Emory's expectations dictate her behavior, relative to the other court members who cannot continue their meals until she eats her own, she has a great deal of power.

The Queen Mother is another example of empowerment within systems of domination. Until Ama becomes the Queen, the Queen Mother is the most powerful woman in Harding. The Queen Mother has a lot to gain within the hierarchical society of Harding. She has less power than Emory, but her position is in stark contrast to all the people who serve her. Toward the end of the novel, as she is nearing the end of her reign as queen, she says to Ama: “[p]erhaps I could have been a good ruler. A just ruler, even. I will never have the chance, of course – this is a world for men. My husband ruled the lands, and now my son shall, as it should be. So we will not know what I could perhaps have done with real power” (291). The Queen Mother acknowledges the injustice of their roles in Harding, revealing her frustrations within her limited empowerment. Although the Queen Mother is aware of everything that was not available to her as a woman who cannot “rule the lands”, she still desires that power within this society. She is unable to imagine a different kind of society, a liberated society, where power would be distributed among the citizens of Harding. Ama is finding ways to use the power available to her, but ultimately she is positioned to maintain the same systems that oppress her. In the beginning, Emory recalls conversations with his mother as a young boy: “[n]ow, Emory,’ she was wont to say, patting the cushions beside her, ‘tell me what you’ve conquered today.’” (8). Through characters like the Queen Mother, we see women who have a lot to lose by bucking the system: her status as queen and the world of Harding as it is currently operating. Characters like the Queen Mother illustrate how women are as implicated in maintaining patriarchal norms as men.

In the end, Ama does leave the kingdom, choosing to be liberated from Harding and Emory’s control rather than seeking power within it. Arnold seems to be rejecting empowerment themes that celebrate women who succeed within a patriarchal system. But, what of all the other women left in Harding? Our students’ responses were reflective of both popular feminism and popular misogyny. On the one hand, the students thought Ama deserved to be free without the responsibility of saving the rest of the kingdom. One student remarked:

I kind of felt trapped along with her, and so I selfishly did not care what happened to the kingdom. I was like, “Thank God. We’re out of there. We are a dragon now.” I was like, “I don’t give a damn about what happens to anything else, like, I don’t feel, like, quite as trapped in her brain, body as I did throughout the story.”

This student thought she was a feminist because she was strong enough to defeat her oppressor. On the other hand, some were not willing to call her a feminist because she does not stay to rescue others: “[i]f she flies away then the Queen Mother can live, but then, what does that mean for the kingdom, that I was really interested, like, I want to know what’s going to happen next?”

Whether or not Ama's decision to leave becomes the catalyst for systemic change in Harding is impossible to know. Still, readers have an opportunity to question whether her actions were working toward (or against) the collective liberation of Harding. Ama kills her oppressor (literally eats Emory's heart after ripping it from his chest) and flees the kingdom, returning to her physical state as a dragon. From the window of her bedroom, the Queen Mother watches Ama as dragon fly away from the kingdom. However, in liberating herself, she does nothing to change the conditions of the other women in Harding. Similarly, representations of sexual assault in YAL often feature a conclusion where the survivor exacts revenge on her perpetrator, only becoming a feminist subject when they enact the same violence used against them (Ragsdale-Richards). For Ama to achieve liberation, she needed to enact corporal violence onto her oppressor. The "furiously feminist" ending of this novel offers readers a singular script: a feminist subject looks out for herself at all costs. Ama's empowerment would either come from becoming Queen or escaping, neither of which can collectively liberate the women of Harding. While we, as well our many of our students, felt satisfaction from the ending, we want also want to be clear that we do not think Ama, as a victim of rape, has any obligation to undo the system that made her rape possible. As we have argued in another paper about Louise O'Neill's 2015 *Asking For It*, literature (or student responses to literature) that places the burden of systemic problems on harmed individuals leaves no room for healing and processing trauma (Thein et al.). In the section that follows, we explore some of this harm by using lenses of domestication and ferality to analyze the relationship between characters and animals in Arnold's text.

"ONE SHOULD NOT MAKE A PET OUT OF A WILD BEAST"⁴: DOMESTICATION AND FERILITY

Themes of domestication, ferality, and wildness run throughout Arnold's novel as she explores relationships between animals and humans. The methods Arnold's characters use to tame their animals mirror how women, like Ama, are trained into their roles. Arnold uses relationships with animals to explore patriarchal values and rape culture. In the opening pages of *Damsel*, Emory is hunting for a dragon so he can rescue a damsel and claim the throne as King. He is taught from a young age that it is his destiny to conquer a dragon and rule the kingdom of Harding. Emory's mother repeatedly tells him that he has three weapons with which to kill a dragon: his sword, his mind, and his yard (Arnold's euphemism for penis). In a later scene, Ama refers to Emory's penis as a "fleshy tusk, white like ivory" (Arnold 57), underscoring the material value of his sexuality. Emory is taught that he is entitled to whatever he needs and desires, and that his penis, and thus his sexuality, are valuable weapons. He can then use these valuable weapons to domesticate that which is out

3 (Arnold 309)

of his control (feral) such the dragon, various women, the lynx, and other conquests throughout the novel.

Those around him regard Emory's sexuality as natural and carnal. The power he exerts over others has been encouraged and fostered by those who continue to pay deference to him. By categorizing his 'yard' as a weapon, Arnold suggests Emory's sexuality is a tool that gives him power, particularly through violent sexual assault. Emory celebrates and takes pride in his promiscuity. In one early scene, he has sex with the hedge warder's niece and "relieved her of her virginity" (32). Fabiana is another servant with whom Emory is particularly enamored. It is important to notice that Fabiana and other women of Harding do not require the same process of domestication that Ama undergoes; by nature of their class status, they are already considered domesticated. After Emory drunkenly climbs into Ama's bed one evening and, without her consent, penetrates her with his fingers, Ama decides to visit Fabiana in an attempt to understand whether others feel desire and pleasure with Emory. Fabiana, frustrated by Ama's questions, reiterates that her desire does not matter. Ama suggests to Fabiana that she continue to "take visits from the king" once Ama and Emory are married. Fabiana finds this suggestion absurd: "[w]hat matters, only, is my king's pleasure. You and I, whichever other girls take his fancy, we are all servants to that" (166). Emory's sexuality is regarded as uncontrollable and never as 'feral' or in need of the kind of training and domestication he subjects Ama to. His ferality is accepted by those in Harding because they view him and his sexuality as necessary to the continuation of Harding's ruling class. Emory's sexual violence is a tool to maintain his power and status.

In a particularly disturbing scene, Emory is upset that Ama has left the castle to walk outside without his permission, and, as a consequence, ties Sorrow's leash around Ama's neck and walks her back to the castle. At one point, he walks her through the kitchen: "no one mentioned Ama's current situation, of course, and more than that, no one even acknowledged her presence" (150). Alternatively, Sorrow's presence in the castle and Ama's strong connection to her compounds the power struggle between Ama and Emory. Sorrow becomes Ama's companion after Emory brutally kills the kitten's mother on their journey back from the dragon's lair. In an early scene, Ama walks into the brush to use the bathroom and crosses paths with a protective mother lynx and her young kitten. Crouching low to the ground and "keeping her gaze respectfully lowered", Ama "placed her hands on the ground in supplication" (69) to the mother cat to minimize herself as a threat. The mother lynx retreats and the kitten returns to play with Ama. Arnold suggests a degree of respect between Ama and the lynx or even an understanding that they are both 'wild' (and not actually threats to one another) right before Emory slashes the mother cat's throat, believing himself to be rescuing Ama, yet again. Ama is devastated by Emory's act of cruelty, and recognizing he is about to kill the kitten, demands to keep the kitten as a pet. At this moment, Ama has to make "herself seem small and turn her hands palms-up, in supplication rather than demand," repeating "please" to Emory, knowing he will not relent

unless she is deferential to his desires (73). Emory relents but only temporarily and becomes increasingly more demanding that Ama get rid of Sorrow, especially after Ama has Sorrow attack Emory when he assaults her. In this scene, Arnold writes about Sorrow and Ama as if they are physical and emotional extensions of one another, Ama giving Sorrow “silent permission to do what Ama could not” (108). Arnold’s word choice and development of the dynamics between Sorrow, Ama, and Emory requires the reader to contemplate the extent to which feral and wildness are synonymous with danger and aggression.

Later in the narrative, Ama enlists the help of Pawlin, Emory’s closest friend, to train Sorrow, after Emory’s continued threats. Pawlin’s role as a falconer is to train birds of prey, and he teaches Ama how to train her lynx as he trains his birds. Arnold uses domestication and ferality as a metaphor for rape culture and consent through these training scenes. At one point in the novel, Ama goes to work with Pawlin and finds him sewing the eyelids of one of his birds shut. He informs her that what he is doing is “seeling”:

It is done with newly caught birds to minimize their stress. You see, I know that the bird is in no danger, but the *bird* cannot know that, and so remains in a constant state of alarm until it is tamed, looking everywhere for threats. So, by eliminating the bird’s sight in this way – temporarily, of course – I am sparing it from the necessary stress [...]. It’s kinder this way, to shield lesser animals from that which they cannot control, don’t you think. (190).

Pawlin goes on to describe the next step in the training process, “manning”:

To help her accept that the hand that shall provide her food will be the hand of the master. To help her learn that, though she began from a place of fear, she can move into a pace of acceptance and, eventually, even a place of love. (191)

Ama, having no memory of where she has come from and no frame of reference for the duties of a queen, must also go through this training process. First, she must be trained not to fear those around her – even if the way Emory treats her is abusive or oppressive. Then, once her instinct to protect herself has been removed, she must accept her new life and find contentment within captivity.

Ironically, Ama engages in this same process with Sorrow. After Emory threatens to get rid of the lynx once they are married, Ama must train her to be a docile house cat to keep her. Through her work with Pawlin, Ama begins training Sorrow with rewards to keep her nearby: “Sorrow was a smart student, and though it was certain that she would have preferred freedom to being chained, regular rewards of smoked fish and scratches behind her ears seemed to convince her to be complacent enough” (123). Later, Ama expresses guilt about training the cat in a way that strips Sorrow of her power and instincts. Pawlin reminds

Ama, “[b]etter that she fears you now than King Emory later” (271). Ama understands that she must assert her authority over the lynx in order to keep Emory from harming Sorrow. Ama’s sense of responsibility for the lynx gets implicated in her ability to preserve Sorrow’s feral, or wild, instincts: “[i]t made Ama feel ill, that she was training her Sorrow *not* to protect her. *Not* to come to her aid” (225). Later in the text, Ama releases Sorrow into the wild but remains worried about whether or not the kitten can survive after being domesticated.

A feminist framework informed by feral theory presents opportunities for deeper engagements with the topics and themes Arnold is exploring in the text. For example, many students in the book club felt the treatment of rape in the book was “surface level”, but one student wondered what function rape played in the narrative:

Could it be possible that like she could only like, change back because she hadn't had sex with him? Like he turned her into a human by, like raping her? So, when that came full circle like she would be trapped that way?

Referring to the book’s opening scene when Emory conquers the dragon, this student raised a controversial question about rape as a tool to domesticate and contain Ama. Combining feral feminisms with popular feminism can support students in critiquing how many novels marketed (or perceived) as feminist, such as *Damsel*, frequently rely on sexual assault between cis men and cis women to forward their feminist messaging. For some of our students, Ama only became a feminist subject when she freed herself from Emory’s control by enacting the same level of violence on him. If the relationship between domestication and ferality is constructed and practiced by those in positions of power – namely humans – then it must also be deconstructed and abolished through resistance and critique. However, Arnold’s story suggests that Ama can only become liberated by engaging in the kind of wild and feral behavior that Emory deemed dangerous in animals like the lynx. In the next section, we grapple with what it means to become feral or wild when, in Ama’s instance, she was already and always a dragon.

“FROM THIS BECOMING, THERE SHALL BE NO UNBECOMING.”⁵: KNOWLEDGE AND MEMORY

Throughout the novel, Arnold uses the language of becoming, knowledge, and memory to describe the numerous ways Ama comes to know herself and her place in Harding. Material feminist theories of becoming require a reader to understand identity as neither stable nor linear. Instead, theories of becoming ask readers to consider identity as constituted by a

4 (Arnold 289)

combination of discursive and material realities that shift over time. Our students' fixed definitions of feminism may have limited their ability to see Ama as more than having achieved or not achieved a feminist subjectivity.

The novel's opening chapters are told from Emory's perspective (the text shifts to Ama's perspective shortly after). As Emory fearfully looks for the dragon, he reminds himself of conquests up to this point: animals he hunted, adults he manipulated, and girls he seduced. Emory eschews thinking about anything other than the physical task at hand, "anything he needed his body to do, it did, and well [...] his body knew better than his head" (8), and later remarks that wandering thoughts, especially thoughts of women he had sex with, were unsafe in moments he needs the strength of his body: "[a] brain will lie to the body, even when the body is the brain's only hope" (10). Emory's sharp distinctions between the brain and the body reflect a false dichotomy that perpetuates gendered and misogynistic scripts that men are superior to women because of their bodily strength, while simultaneously objectifying women's bodies as valuable property and devaluing the importance of their intellectual knowledge. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Grosz and Susan Bordo, Trites argues that this false dichotomy ignores the body as "a site of knowledge [...] an active aspect of agency that is separately interconnected with brain functioning, since all brains, after all, are housed in bodies" (*Twenty-First-Century Feminisms* 86). Through analysis of Ama's character, we see the ways her agency is continuously (re)produced through the relationships between her body, her mind, and her material world.

Soon after Emory realizes what tool he needs to conquer the dragon, the novel transitions to Part Two, where Ama is naked and carried out of the dragon's lair atop Emory's horse. A key scene has been cut from the story: Emory's defeat of the dragon. The novel switches to Ama's perspective, and she has no memory of what has happened or anything about her life before being rescued. Everything she learns about her new life and role seems inevitable: "that is the way it has always been" (Arnold 292). Despite being told she was rescued and is now safe, Ama longs for her memories and is unsettled by her current circumstances, feeling in her body that something is amiss but thinking, "ignorance, perhaps, would be the safer path" (41).

In another example of what our students perceived as a heavy-handed commentary on patriarchal values, Ama quite literally does not become Ama until Emory names her, declaring, "a woman's name should begin with an open sound, don't you think?" Ama does not reply, thinking "it seemed a rather rude time to protest, given that this day he had already saved her life, clothed her, and fed her supper" (47). We understand our students' frustrations with the obviousness of this moment and students were quick to draw connections to Margaret Atwood's method for naming her characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). However, the ensuing conversation between Emory and Ama is rich with dialogue to discuss the relationship between language and materiality, and its implications in Ama's becoming.

After being named by Emory, Ama asks him to describe her physical appearance. She becomes increasingly frustrated with his poetic metaphors (comparing her to flowers on spring days), descriptions of details she can ascertain herself (her long, wavy red hair and pale skin), and a gaze that makes her feel “as if he was appraising livestock” (Arnold 48). She makes the request again but this time clarifies, “tell me about my face. *That* I haven’t seen [...] describe me as I am, without flourish or embellishment” (48-49). After a few unsatisfactory attempts at finding language that would help Ama understand who she is, Emory pulls out the broken blade of his sword to show Ama her reflection: “[t]he blade was too thin to show her countenance all at once, but here was her eye – amber, as Emory had said, flecked with gold” (49). This moment is Arnold’s first definitive clue that Ama is, in fact, the dragon. Earlier in the novel, the dragon is described as opening “one amber eye” (15). In this instance, Ama is both the dragon, somewhere inside of her, and the girl that Emory creates and constructs through his description of her physical appearance. Ama’s experience being and becoming a damsel, a queen, a wife, a mother, a woman, and a dragon is informed by the discursive and material forces in her new environment.

Having no memory of what has come before she was ‘rescued’ by Emory, Ama must rely on the discursive work of those around her to determine what it means to be a woman and a queen in Harding. Emory reminds her that he has saved her throughout the book and makes her believe that she was in great danger of being held captive by a dragon. We learn later that this was not the case (that Ama was the dragon), but her journey to becoming the dragon again involved her actively searching for answers beyond what was fed to her by Emory. Given that she has no memory, Ama must rely on the language used to describe her as well as the way the people in Harding treat her. Throughout the novel, we are reminded that Ama is to ‘become’ a queen and ‘become’ a wife and mother of her future son. She learns discursively from those around her about what is expected of her in this role and body, but has a latent and conscious feeling that she used to be someone else. As Ama struggles to remember her past, she wonders: “perhaps the key to being content, even without a past, is to keep your eyes firmly on the present moment, and looking no further than what was most probably around just the very next bend – tonight, a fire – and not anticipating beyond that, or allowing oneself to cast backward, into the great black void of before” (68). To become a queen, Ama must ignore everything other than what she is told, including the ways her body is communicating with her. For example, in the early moments of being rescued by Emory, Ama is without clothing. She is keenly aware of, and embarrassed by, her nakedness, and when Emory removes his belt to offer a solution for getting his spare pants to fit her body, “a shock of fear jolted through the place between her legs” (45). What sense are readers making of feelings of fear that manifest in Ama’s vagina? Arnold’s choices, both in language and narrative structure, invite the reader to become an investigator of the truth. The reader is implicated in Ama’s journey to recover her memory.

Throughout the novel, Ama is drawn to heat and fire. As winter falls around her, her bedroom becomes intolerably cold: so much so that Tillie must heap blankets on her and keep her bed filled with warm stones all night. When she is taken to the glass blower's chamber, she finds the one place she can be comfortable in the castle: next to the fire. As she spends more time next to the fire, she begins to have visceral memories of her life before, and when she begins to engage in glass blowing herself, she creates a large glass dragon. Mirroring Emory's early descriptions of the dragon's lair as ornately jeweled and warm in color and temperature, Ama's glass blowing becomes the way she can retrieve her memories of being a dragon, wounded and raped by Emory. In a rage, Emory shatters the glass sculpture and refuses to answer Ama's questions about his conquest. Using a shard of glass from the broken sculpture, Ama slices open Emory's chest, removes his heart, and "bit into it like a ripe plumb" (309). The book's final paragraph is a description of the Queen Mother, seated among her cats and looking out the window as the outline of a dragon flies across the night sky. The reader is left to assume that Ama has become the dragon once again.

Because Ama is seemingly a blank slate for much of the novel, with no memories, no family, and no understanding of the rules governing the behavior of men and women in Harding, Arnold's novel offers readers an example of how one's becoming is a complex process of negotiating agency. Ama's subjectivity as a woman, a dragon, and a feminist, is neither stable nor fixed. However, our students' responses to Ama's agency and narrative arc were mixed, one student remarking: "Ama was weird. I didn't really like her as a person." We see this response as a form of popular misogyny couched in a critique of Arnold's literary skills. Students were constrained in their ability to see Ama's complexity and instead pointed to her likeability to determine whether or not Ama was a protagonist worthy of their consideration. Earlier in this article, we mentioned one group of students evaluated Ama's feminist identity by discussing the extent to which she was "strong" and possessed agency. They quickly determined she was strong – "we thought she was strong because she pushed back against a lot of the different ideas and situations she was in" – and that "sometimes" she was possessing agency. We did not pick up on this moment in the book club or delve into it, but it illustrates moments in discussions ripe for unpacking Ama's becoming. We argue material feminist frameworks such as becoming would afford students the ability to see Ama as more than the narrow scripts available to her in Harding, and her narrative as more than either a fairy tale or an anti fairy tale.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Arnold's novel *Damsel* necessitates re-readings. Similar to the way readers are disoriented when reading texts like *The Wife's Story* by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Damsel* is enjoyed differently during initial and subsequent readings. The pleasure in this kind of novel comes from re-

reading for all the clues we missed during the first reading. We believe Arnold expects her readers to be both savvy enough to get where she is going but also to fall into her traps. We believe Arnold wants readers to be disoriented and to make problematic assumptions, forcing us to repeatedly ask: ‘how do we know what we know?’

As educators of future school librarians and teachers, our central motivation when reading YAL is to consider what books can do for our readers – what opportunities there are for conversations about contemporary topics and concerns. So when prized young adult literature is marketed by publishers and critics as ‘feminist’, we wonder what kind of feminism is portrayed in those texts and what types of conversations about feminism those texts can inspire. Our aim in this article is neither to critique nor celebrate Arnold’s text; rather, we see it as an example of a text ripe for analysis and discussion because it invites readers to engage deeply with feminist ideologies.

In an interview, Arnold reflects on her role as author: “[t]he author is the tea leaf in the boiling water of her work; she cannot help but infuse it with her selfhood [...] it’s the job of the critic to evaluate what the work means, and how successful it may be” (Bittner and Arnold 61). We agree with Arnold that her storytelling, and thus her feminist identity, will always be limited by her selfhood and position, particularly as a white woman. We, the authors, do not position ourselves as literary critics whose goal is to evaluate the success of her novel. We, too, like our students, are limited by our identity positions as white women when engaging with Arnold’s text. However, as teachers, we see critical feminist theory as a powerful tool to uncover and name the particular ways white and popular feminism are embedded within the story, our imaginations, and our world. Critical feminist theories such as popular feminism, feral feminism, and material feminism allow readers to name and critique the familiar feminist scripts surfacing in their reading of *Damsel*. Is fleeing the kingdom feminist? Who gets to be a feminist (in this book and other YAL)? Who isn’t being served by Ama’s (and Arnold’s) version of a feminist? Who decides?

We align with scholars who recognize that all stories are political and partial (Kumashiro). We do not believe any one book can directly or completely teach complex issues related to race, gender, and class. However, we contend that feminist theory, coupled with YAL marketed as feminist, offers opportunities for nuanced analysis that students can then apply to their readings of the world: the media they consume outside of coursework, conversations with friends, dinner table talk with family, and tensions in and around workplace politics. Likewise, a more careful exploration of contemporary feminist thought offers educators opportunities to engage students in theoretical readings of popular, contemporary, and prized young adult novels in ways that frame the complex nature of feminism, and trouble what it means to be feminist, for our students.

REFERENCES

- ALA. "The Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature". ALA, <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz>.
- Arnold, Elana. *Damsel*. Balzer + Bray, 2018.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Beck, Koa. *White Feminism: From the Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind*. Atria Books, 2021.
- Bittner, Rob, and Elana K. Arnold. "Fairy Tales, Feminism, and Fighting the Patriarchy: An Interview with Elana K. Arnold." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2019, pp. 59-65.
- Halberstam, Jack. *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*. Duke University Press, 2020.
- Hamad, Ruby. *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*. Catapult, 2020.
- Kendall, Mikki. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot*. Viking, 2020.
- Kumashiro, Kevin. "Posts' Perspectives on Anti-oppressive Education in Social Studies, English, Mathematics, and Science Classrooms." *Educational Researcher*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2001, pp. 3-12.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Wife's Story". 1982. *The Unreal and the Real: The Selected Short Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin*, Small Beer Press, 2012.
- Montford, Kelly, and Chloe Taylor. "Guest Editorial: Feral Theory." *Feral Feminisms*, vol. 6, 2016, pp. 5-17.
- O'Neill, Louise. *Asking For It*. Quercus, 2016.
- Priske, Katie. "Tensions in Feminist Nonfiction for Young Adults: A Content Analysis of Text and Peritext." *The ALAN Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2021, pp. 78-88.
- Ragsdale-Richards, Marybeth. "Caught Between Voices, Caught Between Pages: Considering Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* as a Pseudo-Feminist Text." *Feral Feminism*, vol. 8, pp. 102-114.
- Rubinstein-Avila, Eliane. "Examining Representations of Young Adult Female Protagonists through Critical Race Feminism." *Changing English*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007, pp. 363-374.
- Short, Kathy. "Critical Content Analysis as a Research Methodology." *Critical Content Analysis of Children's and Young Adult Literature: Reframing Perspective*, edited by Johnson, Holly, Janelle Mathis, and Kathy G. Short, Routledge, 2016.
- Thein, Amanda, Kate Lechtenberg, Jenna Spiering, and Nicole Ann Amato. "When the Fire Burns Out: Ambivalence, despondence, and despair as responses to sexual trauma in *Asking for It*." *Girls on fire: Creating consciousness, informing action*, edited by Sean P. Connors and Sarah Hengtes, McFarland, 2020, pp. 105-120.
- Thomas, Ebony Elizabeth. *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games*. New York University Press, 2019.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. "Teaching Feminisms: Triumphs and Failures in The Hunger Games Trilogy." *Teaching Girls on Fire: Essays on Dystopian Young Adult Literature in the Classroom*, edited by Sarah Hengtes and Sean P. Connors, McFarland, 2020.
- . *Twenty-First-Century Feminisms in Children's and Adolescent Literature*. The University Press of Mississippi, 2018.
- . *Waking Sleeping Beauty Feminist Voices in Children's Books*. University of Iowa Press, 1997.
- Wadiwel, Dinesh, and Chloe Taylor. "A Conversation on the Feral." *Feral Feminisms*, vol. 6, pp. 82-94.