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Young Adult Trauma: Representation, Intersectionality, and Friendship in Leigh
Bardugo's *Six of Crows*

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By

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Abstract

The trauma represented in YA Literature is relevant to young adult readers. The texts *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* (dir. George Tillman, Jr.) represent fantasy YA, dystopian YA, and contemporary YA, and give different contexts for the multitudinous nature of trauma. Outlining the history of trauma in the world and in literature before delving into its representations into these texts will provide context for the intricate ways they are used. The examples from these texts will provide proof of the popularity of trauma as a method of reaching viewers, who may have experienced similar traumas or post-traumatic symptoms. This is all to draw conclusions about the way and the reasons that young adult readers are impacted by reading about trauma in texts. Between race, gender, and sexuality, marginalized groups are often left out. Without these fictional representations, children who do not see themselves represented can feel like their experiences are not valid. The intersection of gender, race, and class is important to each of these texts, especially *Six of Crows* and *The Hate U Give*. Bardugo crafts her world utilizing these contexts to create a diverse cast of characters, all of whom come with their own form of trauma.

Trauma is utilized as a main theme in many texts of varying genre and demographics, but its largest impact lies in young adult (YA) literature. In Leigh Bardugo's YA fantasy novel *Six of Crows*, all of the main characters are connected through their trauma in a universe where trauma is almost inevitable. This text exemplifies how important trauma can be in the development of a child, for better or worse. It also deals with many forms of trauma in a non-exclusionary manner, where other texts, especially fantasy, avoid topics such as disability and sexuality. Persistent trauma is often the focal point when trauma is utilized as a theme or characterization in YA texts. Angie Thomas' contemporary text *The Hate U Give* is a prime example of this, where the protagonist is followed post-trauma, and everything is directly correlated to the specific event. *The Hate U Give* also strays from the fantasy of *Six of Crows*, and deals with trauma in a modern, realistic world. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* draws upon the realism and the fantastical, a dystopian novel that repeatedly refers to the death of the protagonist's father as a reminiscence of the way she came to be. These two texts serve as support for the analysis of *Six of Crows* and the importance of trauma in YA literature. The historical lenses provided by trauma studies professionals assist in breaking down what exactly is important about these YA texts' individual representations of trauma.

Origination of Trauma Studies

Representation in entertainment is important to the consumers. Between race, gender, and sexuality, marginalized groups are often left out. The young adult literature genre is currently a large proponent of the publishing industry placing a heavy importance on representation, and for a good reason. Without these fictional representations, children who do not see themselves represented can feel like their experiences are not valid. Trauma as a topic is expounded upon in

YA, as it can assist children with dealing with their own trauma, as well as depict protagonists who overcome their trauma, similar or otherwise. Christa Schönfelder outlines the timeline of trauma, from its inception into its use in literature, while Michelle Balaev's "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" delineates the existence of trauma as a literary device.

Writing convincing trauma is difficult in itself, as "within the contested field of psychiatry, trauma is...a particularly controversial subject," (Schönfelder 28). Trauma as a theory and medical condition is, in relation to literature, a fairly new idea. While theorists like Freud, Pierre Janet, and Charcot explored childhood trauma, it was World War I that "with its trench warfare, where the horrors of war reached a previously unimaginable intensity," (Schönfelder 43) circulated the idea globally. "The sufferings of a significant number of soldiers were diagnosed as "shell shock," a condition that was first thought to be a physical affliction caused by exploding shells but that gradually came to be reinterpreted as a psychological affliction (Brown, "Posttraumatic" 505). The intensive study of trauma was again dropped until post-World War II, when it was finally taken seriously. Trauma was primarily conceptualized on the basis of the Holocaust, with theorists arguing for it as a complete explanation for the "inherently traumatic nature of culture, history, postmodernity..." (Schönfelder 45). Trauma went from an enigma to the makeup of civilizations and an explanation for the way that people interacted with society. The connection of trauma to war plays in many YA Literature texts, but when it comes to popular, commercialized series, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* is the most relevant.

The text is based in a post-war world, setting the baseline for cultural trauma throughout the text. In fact, the entire plot structure of the *Hunger Games* is a reminder (a tribute) to the fallen District and of what could happen to any other District that rebels against the Capitol. The

reason that disparate, dystopian worlds with traumatized characters like this one (more examples include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Fahrenheit 451*) are believable is because of their own past. Part of the reason the audience believes in Katniss, even though she is an unreliable narrator, is because Collins places her in context. Without knowing that she lives in a post-war dictatorship, lost her father, and hunts to stay alive, the succeeding events would be ineffective.

Schönfelder's break-down analyzes the way that mental health and trauma are compared as portrayed in novels of the romance period. She argues that "romantic trauma novels...raise questions about the interrelations between psychology, mental illness, and morality," (68). The Enlightenment Era notions of mental illness were another roadblock on the path towards studying trauma as an isolated affliction, and "...the line between a potentially beneficial attempt to assign more responsibility to the patient in an effort to cure illness and the problematic act of morally judging and even blaming an individual for a mental disorder is difficult to draw," (Schönfelder 67). In the post-modern framework, trauma in novels continue to utilize the creation of "spaces of moral and ethical complexity, instability, and uncertainty," that are so hallmarked. This is paramount in Katniss' decision to volunteer as tribute for her sister, her decision to partner with Rue in the Games, and many more pivotal moments in her narrative. Her trauma is an explanation for these forks in the road, and continue to create more moral dilemmas in the future texts. In Collins' third installment of *The Hunger Games*, *Mockingjay*, Peeta is held captive and tortured for information by President Snow. He is eventually returned to Katniss, but has severe scars from this experience. In the epilogue, Collins references the lingering effects of his PTSD, and it is not so quickly dismissed. Through *Mockingjay*, Peeta is essentially a different person because of his trauma.

Balaev posits that “the trauma novel demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments,” (149-50). For Katniss, this is best depicted in her decision to kill would-be President Coin following the death of her younger sister, Primrose. Collins adequately sets up the parallel between Rue and Primrose, going so far as to have Katniss state that Rue reminds her of Prim. Watching her younger sister die as she looks on helplessly is a return to the arena for Katniss, as she witnesses a traumatic event replay. This leads to yet another moral crossroads, where Katniss knows President Coin directed an attack on civilians, and acts according to her trauma. In *Six of Crows*, Bardugo allows Kaz to recall his trauma of touching his brother’s dead body throughout, but emphasizes it when he is actually forced to touch another person skin-to-skin. It is when he is placed in that situation, a specific environment, that he is debilitated by his trauma. Balaev’s assertion that the return to environment is an inherent part of the trauma novel is supported by Collins’ and Bardugo’s novels.

It is a little over halfway through the text that Bardugo gives the audience a glance at what Kaz is really going through when he is in close proximity with many people. The crew is sneaking into the Ice Court on Fjerda, when he is stripped of the distance from people he requires, and acknowledges that he is appearing weak.

They’d gone through two checkpoints. That meant they’d been counted. Someone had opened the door—not once but twice—maybe even laid hands on him, and he hadn’t woken. He could have been robbed, killed. He’d imagined his death a thousand ways, but never sleeping through it.

He forced himself to breathe deeply, despite the smell of bodies. He'd kept his gloves on, something that the guards might have easily taken note of, and a frustrating concession to his weakness, but if he hadn't, he felt fairly sure he'd have gone completely mad.

(Bardugo 277).

This scene functions in two ways for Kaz: he is vulnerable (“frustrating concession to his weakness”), and he hates it. The trauma of his brother’s death has permeated him so deeply that he can lose consciousness when touched. This is reflective of Balaev’s point about trauma challenging social and emotional connections later in life. Kaz’s PTSD manifests in these moments of blacking or zoning out, in which Bardugo gives the audience exposition about his trauma. The details about his issues with breathing and being able to smell the bodies around him are both obviously referential to his brother’s death. He fears the thought that he could have been robbed or killed, both of which happened to Jordie. His inability to depart with his gloves caps the inner monologue (“kept his gloves on, something the guards might have easily taken note of,”) finalizing that he is still haunted by his brother’s death to the point of risking capture.

Kaz has dialogue with Inej in this section, asking that she continue speaking so he can track her voice to ground him in reality again. Kaz “hated that Inej had seen him this way, that anyone had, but on the heels of that came another thought: *Better it should be her*. In his bones, he knew that she would never speak of it to anyone, that she would never use this knowledge against him,” (277-78). Their relationship has changed so much from the beginning of the text, where Inej functioned as a tool that he trusted. Kaz is now able to trust her as a person. Putting this tangent right next to Kaz’s reflections on his own trauma highlight that Inej is helping him be able to break down the barriers he has between himself and others. This display of reliance on Inej is comparative to Peeta’s reliance on Katniss in the epilogue of the third Hunger Games

installment. After being tortured and brainwashed, and even after they have children together, he is still uncertain about Katniss' true intentions towards him. The repercussions of trauma are ever-present for these characters, but the representation in these YA texts and these heroes and heroines being seen at moments of weakness and victory are important for adolescent readers who are potentially struggling with their own trauma. Kaz works through his inability to trust others all throughout the text, and his relationship with Inej reflects this. It is a positive step in his emotional growth that is combatting his trauma.

Something to note about both of these relationships is the decision to have the female characters, one heroine, one not, take on the PTSD of their male counterparts. Neither Kaz nor Peeta take advantage of Inej or Katniss in terms of “emotional dumping”, the practice of using friends or companions to vent all emotional burdens onto without reciprocity. However, the female characters are clearly in the position to comfort or fix the males. This bias seems to come out of a lot of YA fiction, and is not a singularity. Inej and Katniss have plenty of PTSD to deal with themselves as well, but it seems that, somehow, Kaz and Peeta have it much, much worse. In further critique of the gendered aspect of this phenomenon, Kaz and Katniss are much closer to each other in terms of personality than Kaz and Peeta are. Kaz and Katniss are both reluctant, angry, sometimes anti-heroes, making decisions solely because of their siblings (Kaz's brother, post-humous). Katniss has seen just as much death as Kaz, if not more, and lived through the death of her father. This lens makes it clear that the authors do have bias about which of these two genders (wholly forgetting the non-binary) are able to handle their traumas.

Characterized Trauma in *Six of Crows*

Kaz Brekker's Trauma and Physical Disability

The protagonist of *Six of Crows*, Kaz Brekker, has the most obvious depiction of trauma in the text. As a child, he and his brother moved to live on the streets of Ketterdam, one of Bardugo's fictional cities. When Kaz and Jordie first arrived in Ketterdam, they are doing okay. Jordie finds some work, but is then frustrated when "they say they have no jobs, but they mean they have no jobs for a boy like [Jordie], (207). Jordie and Kaz meet a boy named Filip, who was a runner for someone named Mister Hertzoon. After Jordie does this for a bit, Mister Hertzoon plays on Jordie's ego and greed and offers him a, investment deal. When Jordie takes the deal, Hertzoon disappears, and the Rietveld's (Jordie and Kaz) lose all their money. This leads to their impoverished state, and they catch the plague of firepox that is running through Ketterdam. Someone finds them, the two are tossed into the bay, presumed dead, and Kaz is with his brother's corpse. "He woke surrounded by corpses...Jordie's body was beside him, barely recognizable, white and swollen with rot, floating on the surface like some kind of gruesome deep sea fish," (275). Kaz is even forced to use his own brother's body as a life raft:

When night came, and the tide changed direction, Kaz forced himself to lay hands on Jordie's body. He was too frail to swim on his own, but with Jordie's help, he could float. He held tight to his brother and kicked toward the lights of Ketterdam.

Together, they drifted, Jordie's distended body acting as a raft. Kaz kept kicking, trying not to think of his brother, the taut, bloated feel of Jordie's flesh beneath his hands; he tried not to think of anything but the rhythm of his legs moving through the sea. He'd heard there were sharks in these waters, but he knew they wouldn't touch him. He was a monster now, too, (276).

This traumatic event follows Kaz throughout his life, and results in his inability to touch another person's skin. Bardugo uses extreme imagery in order to convey the way that Kaz is being

affected permanently as he tries desperately to swim back to shore. On page 132 of the text, the audience sees this in action. “The sensation of skin on skin set off a riot of revulsion in Kaz’s head...” He wears gloves around all but one character (Inej), and does not touch anyone with his bare hands until the second novel of the duology, *Crooked Kingdom*. Kaz’s haphephobia has seemed to affect all of his relationships.

Another lingering effect of his brother’s death is his need for control and money. He describes himself and Jordie as “two stupid pigeons waiting to be plucked,” (71) when first interacting with Pekka Rollins in the text, the con man who they lost all means to when first moving to Ketterdam. The equivalence to “pigeons” implies that they were no better than clueless animals when they arrived. He takes the blame for the situation surrounding Jordie’s death, and consequentially refuses to leave himself susceptible to being double crossed or conned. This aspect of his trauma reveals itself in Kaz’s first appearance in *SOC*. In Chapter 2, Kaz reveals that a member of his crew (Big Bolliger) has betrayed them. He cannot accept this, and beats Big Bolliger (with walking cane and gloved hands) and gives him the choice of dying there or disappearing from Ketterdam by the next day (33). His first main action as the protagonist is shutting down the betrayal that mimicked how he and Jordie were played by Pekka Rollins.

Pekka Rollins is a lingering antagonist for Kaz throughout the text, and it Kaz later discloses that “Pekka Rollins killed [his] brother,” (204) to Inej. Although it is later revealed, we are meant to understand that Pekka Rollins was Mister Hertzoon. When Van Eck Sr. gives Kaz the task of retrieving Bo Yul Bayur, Kaz does not know that Pekka Rollins is also going to be there. When he finds out, he is momentarily distracted, but then seems to refocus on the task at hand. It is only in passing that anyone mentions this. Then, when the crew is in the Ice Court, he

puts the Crows in danger when he releases Pekka from the jail at the Ice Court in order to be able to beat him on a level playing field at the end of Chapter 26. Kaz had Rollins in the back of his mind then entire time the heist was going on, highlighting his unhealthy obsession for revenge.

As a teenager, Kaz is already underestimated by the other gangs in Ketterdam. His limp, caused by a heist targeting Hertzoon early in his career (401), is a physical representation of his childhood trauma that would have meant death in Ketterdam if Kaz had not worked around it to become a feared gang leader. The cane, in fact, represents Kaz's strength. In his first display of violence (Big Bolliger's dismissal) Kaz uses his cane to beat him. Much like Kaz, the cane is adorned by the Crows. The head of his cane is a heavy, silver, crow's head. Kaz's crows (his crew) are as impactful as the cane cracking down on his enemies heads.

On a mental level, his hands are scarred from the handling of his brother's body. He wears gloves at all times, and this is mostly to do with not touching skin-to-skin. "His gloves were his one concession to weakness. Since that night among the bodies...he had not been able to bear the feeling of skin against skin" (401). The gloves also serve to perpetuate rumors about what his hands might actually look like. People in Ketterdam fear Kaz to the point of imagining him as a monster because of what he has done, but also because of the persona he wears. He uses his physicalized trauma to his advantage in this way.

As far as accessories go, Kaz has had no trouble acquiring who he wants for what he wants. Inej Ghafa (The Wraith), Jesper Fahey, Nina Zenik, Matthias Helvar, and Wylan Van Eck are all enlisted to help Kaz with breaking into the Ice Court to kidnap Bo Yul Bayur, the creator of Jurda Parem. Kaz has difficulty not becoming too close to the Crows, as his PTSD extends to the idea of having a family that will not abandon him.

Inej is Kaz's closest confidant, and one of the few Crows that is an active member of the Dregs (the other being Jesper). In the first few chapters of *Six of Crows*, Inej is seen spying on Kaz and Per Haskell, the figurehead of the Dregs. She then follows Kaz to his quarters, and he relays the information to her. This is the first person that Kaz is seen trusting, and one of the only people that Kaz can trust. He also reveals his hands in Inej's presences, and only does so again later in the novel when Inej needs his gloves to scale the walls in the Ice Court. Their conversation goes back and forth playfully, but it is clear that Inej is still held at a distance, professionally. Jesper is the second Crow who is a member of the Dregs, and has a terrible habit of gambling. This character kind of mimics the recklessness that Kaz and Jordie participated in when they first arrived in Kerch. Although they did not have gambling addictions as children, they certainly had issues with money. Although Kaz cannot tolerate this sort of recklessness in himself, he seems to want to care for Jesper, often becoming the older brother that Jordie could not be for him. Nina works at the Menagerie, where Inej escaped Tante Heleen, except she is a Heartrender Grisha, and does not work in sexual prostitution. She also has worked with Kaz before on jobs, but is not a full-fledged member of the Dregs. He needs her mostly to break out Matthias Helvar, as she has the ability to slow peoples' hearts down to the point of unconsciousness (or death, but Nina prefers not to). Kaz is almost polar opposite to Nina, someone who is empathetic and sensitive to the darker things the Crows engage in. Her national and cultural pride and attachment is another divider, and comes into play later.

Bardugo uses cultural and national norms with Matthias as well. He was a Drüskelle, a Fjerdan soldier that is meant to find and kill all Grisha, who are (to Fjerdans) an abomination of nature. Matthias and Nina's relationship is important to the dynamic of the forming crew. Nina feels responsible for Matthias ending up in Hellgate, because she betrayed him after they landed

in Kerch. She has been asking Kaz to set him free, and he finally agrees to if she will be in on the Ice Court Heist. Matthias is also their inside man, as he has the most knowledge of the operations of the Ice Court, which is in Fjerda.

Wylan Van Eck is proof of Kaz's expertise in his business. He is dealing with Jan Van Eck, Wylan's father, and assumes that Wylan will be good bait in the future if Van Eck betrays the Crows. He is unfortunately wrong, and underestimates just how much Jan hates his son. It is later revealed that Wylan is dyslexic, and was abandoned by his father, under threat of murder. Jan Van Eck does not flinch when Kaz threatens to kill him, and this vilifies Jan even more in Kaz's eyes, who is also disabled and was abandoned by his brother, even without his own volition.

The members of the Crows have their own disabilities and traumas, and this seems to be the reason that Kaz is drawn to them. In each of them, (even Matthias, who has his own difficulty letting go of his prejudice) he sees himself, and becomes somewhat of a savior figure for them by the end of *Crooked Kingdom*, Bardugo's second and final installment of the series. Kaz has Inej as his direct opposite, a faithful girl who has not let her experiences jade her, but still finds mirrors of himself in the rest of his crew.

Kaz and Inej have surprisingly similar back stories for the two main characters of the text. Both grew up in a loving home, and both were stripped of this by people who would take advantage of their innocence. This is the way in which Inej acts as Kaz's greatest foil throughout the text. Inej, although her trauma could be considered much greater by spanning cultural and historical boundaries, has turned her trauma into a mode of heroism. Kaz makes no qualms about his disbelief in the goodness of humanity, while Inej holds onto her faith in the Saints and in other people to be better than they have to be. Inej even will "pray [Kaz gets] all that [he] ask[s]"

for,” after he expresses his desire “to die buried under the weight of [his] own gold,” (205). Inej is a mix of sarcastic and resigned to Kaz’s ways in this moment, and he continues to mock her and requests that she leaves him out of it. Kaz’s ridicule of her faith turns back against him, and reveals that he does not believe that he deserves prayers. This is another way in which Bardugo actively characterizes her characters in relation to one another. Their motivations belong to themselves, and are always clear.

Inej using her faith as an escape from her sins and trauma is something that Kaz is unable to do for himself. Although her intentions are good, Inej *does* stand idly by in the face of overt physical violence throughout the course of the texts. When Big Bolliger is shot in the first few chapters, “She could [have gone to] him...” but “she spoke a quick prayer in the language of her Saints and began the steep climb down the outer wall,” (34). Inej often prays after doing something she knows she should not, and hopes that it will eventually save her. There are a plethora of discussions and quips surrounding Inej’s faith, but she goes against the basest of moral truths, which is killing is wrong. At this point in her life, Inej uses her faith as a coping mechanism for deflecting all the pain and suffering she is complicit in.

Both of their main traumatic experiences are also attached to a forceful removal from their respective families. Inej’s greatest desire, fully and finally realized at the end of *Crooked Kingdom*, is to stop the slavers and free all the other Suli girls taken from their homes. Kaz is, unfortunately, stuck in achieving revenge for his brother and for his own loss of innocence. This is not to say that Kaz is the antagonist, but he is definitely an anti-hero. Inej is able to understand her trauma on a grander scale, and remove the personal aspect from the equation. She ends up on a mission to save others from the same fate as herself. Kaz’s interest lies in revenge for everything that has befallen his family. First, his “father died, crushed beneath a plow...Jordie

had sold the farm (205-6), then “Jordie woke with a fever,” (274) and Kaz was left alone. Kaz can only see that he needs to exact revenge on Pekka Rollins. This cause would end up helping many people, other people like he and Jordie who were taken advantage of, but is also highly personal and vindictive.

This opposition represents the different ways in which trauma can manifest, and highlights the macro vs. micro scale of trauma. Trauma can be delineated between the group and the individual—Kaz is a white man, a demographic that is still privileged in Bardugo’s novel, and his trauma is obstinately personal. Inej is instead fighting back against an institutional, racial persecution. She feels the collective cultural impact of her trauma. This also explains why Inej has more outright loyalty to the crew throughout the text, while Kaz has difficulty trusting even her. Inej believes that she can incite change in the world, while Kaz is only focused on righting the wrongs that have been done to him. His selfishness and her saintliness are reflective of the origination and content of their traumatic pasts.

Intersectionality of Trauma

Stef Craps and Gert Buelens “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels” points to the fact that “trauma studies...came to prominence in the early-to-mid-1990s,” even though “poststructuralist criticism” had been discussed since the late 1970s (1). This paints trauma as a relatively new theory, especially as it is considered in relation to history, politics, and ethics. Susannah Radstone’s “Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics” looks at the way that trauma discourse happens, and “some reflection on and reflexivity concerning its implications and contexts, as well as some consideration of the paths not taken by trauma theory,” (Radstone 10). Craps and Buelens address that trauma studies often engage solely with “traumatic experiences of white Westerners,” (2), funnily enough, the ethnic group of which is least traumatized

globally. In reality, the role of white Westerners in trauma is actually as the oppressors, and has little to do with their experience as trauma victims.

The focus on this demographic is expected, as white Westerners make up the majority of those with access to academics. In the United States, as mentioned, the documentation began out of a desire to understand the after-effects of war on American soldiers. "...feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown has argued that traumatic experiences of people of color, women, gays and lesbians, " (problematic in its own rights) "lower-class people, and people with disabilities often fly under the trauma-theoretical radar because of the fact that current definitions of trauma have been constructed from the experiences of dominant groups in Western society," (Craps and Buelens 3). This is the convention with most new areas of study, but is almost hypocritical in its inception, as these "dominant groups" are often the biggest instigators of colonial and cultural traumatic events.

Radstone proves this point in asking why "there has been so little attention, within trauma theory, to the recent sufferings of those in Rwanda, in comparison to the attention that has been focused on events in the US on 9/11?" (24). In trauma theory, it is more that these events are referenced in comparison to the topic at hand instead of being confronted directly as a source of study. Like most other academic fields, this is delineated by the interest of the field and the money behind the desired research.

Sabine Sielke's "Why '9/11 is [not] Unique,' or: Troping Trauma" introduces the phrase "trauma envy" (387), directing the conversation towards the way that studies can sometimes glorify or compartmentalize traumatic events, specifically the Holocaust. There is a phenomenon in which the Holocaust exists as an umbrella term for other traumatic events. This is problematic in its approach, as it can erase the other complexities behind traumatic events. The Holocaust

was racially and culturally traumatic, but had many other facets because of the multitudes of experiences for individuals. So much so that the trauma has persisted into the 21st century, and has even incited modern-day Nazi sympathy in some areas of the world, especially in the United States. This recalls traumatic history that can be both universal and personal. While there are all these aspects to the Holocaust, its aftermath cannot be merely copy and pasted onto other genocides like the Paris 1961 massacre of Algerians living in France towards the end of the Algerian war. This is the difficulty in studying trauma. Even though it is a science, it is difficult to quantify the manifestations of trauma, and is incomplete in any attempt to assign exact outcomes.

Western racial intersectionality in trauma studies is apparent in Bardugo's built world, but is a priority in Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give*. This text and film crucially acknowledge both the trauma that Starr Carter (black female protagonist) goes through as a student in a predominantly white and wealthy school who witnesses Khalil (her childhood friend) murdered by a police officer. She herself deals with the trauma of this particular situation, but is also forced to face the cultural trauma as a black girl in the United States. The event begins to change the way that Starr interacts with her privileged friends at her school and the community who support the call for action against the police officer.

Starr is a character that allows people to "see themselves" from many different angles. She is traversing the planes of discrimination, racism, and microaggressions first from the outside and then from inside her own life. The event allows her to see her friends for what they truly are; Hailey tells Starr that she is different, not like Khalil. Once she realizes that they will never understand, the racial divide that permeates the country seep into her relationship, and confront the audience about their relationship with racial discourse. This transformation of Starr

post-trauma is an important representation of personal and cultural trauma for young readers who may not understand at first the complexities of police brutality and racially-charged crimes.

This is another example of a Western perspective of trauma, and ignores some broader colonialist implications, but is a departure from the exploration of white trauma for YA readers. Colonialist trauma can be found in Sherman Alexie's YA novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, but colonialist traumatic representations are difficult to find in YA literature. Post-colonial trauma in itself is a deeply explored genre, but does not garner as much critical acclaim in YA literature as white Western trauma novels do.

Bardugo takes on cultural trauma from a wider point of view, assigning race, ethnicity, and national adjacency to each of her characters. Inej Ghafa, Jesper Fahey, Nina Zenik, and Wylan Van Eck. Inej Ghafa, and the other of Kaz's crows, have trauma that has more to do with their races and ethnicities than unfortunate circumstances. Inej is Suli, a nomadic people who come from Ravka, and is portrayed as highly religious. She is often praying to her saints even and especially when she has to kill. She is kidnapped from her home in Ravka one day to be sold into prostitution under Tante Heleen.

Inej represents the plight of human trafficking in the world today. She is a person traumatized by her existence as another's property, and is then expected to be able to move on and spy, kill, and thief for the remainder of her life. Although Kaz has removed her from her harmful environment, he did not see the potential toll that her life as a member of the Dregs would have on Inej. She has an incredibly enduring faith that is tested as she goes along with a life of crime. She knows that Kaz is in it for the money and the revenge, not for the positive effects re-capturing Bo Yul Bayur would have on the world. And yet, she is indebted to him and

Per Haskell. She wants desperately to buy out of this contract, too, but it is better than Tante Heleen's menagerie.

Jesper Fahey is potentially the most relatable traumatized character in the text for YA readers in the United States, and brings a bit of realism into the Grishaverse, the name for Bardugo's connected anthology. He is a black man, who has hidden his status as a Grisha in order to not be persecuted by his community. On top of this, he is gay. These layers of his marginalization in the Grishaverse, and what would be in the real world, create a character who feels real and represents communities often underrepresented in YA fantasy. In flashbacks throughout the text, it is revealed that his mother was also a Grisha, and his father continued to hide Jesper's true identity. Although his father is an understanding character, introduced in *Crooked Kingdom*, he is a symbol for the upholding of the patriarchy by parents. Jesper leaves Novyi Zem in order to go to school in Kerch, the island that Ketterdam is on. He ends up dropping out, begins gambling heavily, and ends up as a sharpshooter for the Dregs. Jesper's turn to gambling indicates how reliant he was on his stability at home. He was sheltered from being his real self, and Ketterdam gave him the ability to break out of that shell. His father had taught him how to shoot back home, and Jesper holds on to his guns in his new world—these guns symbolize his connection to family. Jesper deals with being able to be himself in the new environment while still respecting the values that his father had instilled in him.

Nina Zenik, like Inej, was held by Tante Heleen at the Menagerie before Kaz bought out her indentured status. She was captured by the Drüskelle and escaped with Matthias, one of her captors, only to sell him out as a slaver when they arrive in Ketterdam. During her captivity under the Drüskelle, Nina was caged, ridiculed and mocked. As a Grisha, she was a part of people who were in active persecution. When she finally did escape captivity, she was relegated

to another form of imprisonment, earning her keep by performing her abilities for the men who desired the effects of her powers. When Wylan is first introduced to the other cast of characters, he is not introduced as Wylan Van Eck. It is later revealed, after Jesper accuses him of not being good enough at demo (demolition), that he is the son of Van Eck Sr., who is funding their heist. At first glance, it seems that Wylan will just be used as a bargaining chip, but Bardugo goes much further with his character. Wylan has been essentially disowned, and it is later revealed that it is because of his dyslexia. There are snippets towards the end of the novel and into *Crooked Kingdom* about Wylan's "specialists, tonics, beatings, [and] hypnotism," (447) all used in order to try and rid him of his dyslexia. Kaz, instead of treating Wylan differently, uses his strengths in the Crows, and even becomes a sort of mentor to him. At the end of *Crooked Kingdom*, Wylan is reunited with his mother and holds his father's estate with Jesper. Bardugo heralds the found family trope, especially with Wylan and Kaz. Wylan has Kaz as the father figure that he never had, and Kaz is able to be a big brother, something he lost. The two unconsciously work through their traumas with the help of one another.

Bardugo's efforts at being inclusive in her cast cannot go unnoted. Each of the main cast of characters have aspects of themselves that are marginalized, and are still the heroes of the full text. At the end of *Crooked Kingdom*, it is even Matthias who is killed, and not one of the female characters or characters of color. As the trauma studies community has come to understand trauma more broadly, the conversation on cultural and national trauma has expanded to include and prioritize new subjects; Bardugo's text is a prime example of this in action. This piece of information, on top of all their individual traumas, makes an additional point about how Bardugo acknowledges the importance in representation from race to disability to diverse upbringing in young adult literature.

Friendship in Young Adult Literature as Formed Through Trauma

An important part of Bardugo's characters' development is their friendship with each other, another important theme across the YA genre. The main friendship represented in the text is sort of methodically explained through all of their separate (sometimes but rarely overlapping) confrontations with trauma. The lack of a stable family environment is essential for this, which is a common problem with the protagonist and supporting cast. Ivy Schweitzer's *Perfecting Friendship* addresses this "emergence of 'families of choice' in which friendship is the salient form of social affiliation, providing an alternative to hierarchical and potentially oppressive 'communities of fate' (Pahl 3, 5)". Although this trope is typically identified in LGBTQIA texts, where adolescents are not accepted by their families, it is also useful in explaining the relationship between Bardugo's characters. The journal "LGBT Youth and Family Acceptance" explains the ways that found families are formed, and the occurrences that lead to them. The trauma of losing ones' family (or at least home) is the way that the found family works in this text.

The expectations of a family are inverted in so many ways in this text, in that there is not a remaining example of a "nuclear family" (mother, father two children) for any character. Kaz left his parents and lost his older brother, forever affected by the event of his brother's death. He is a part of the Dregs (the gang that he is second-in-command to), but he is still separate from the members—"Inej knew the moment Kaz entered the Slat...Per Haskell's favored lieutenant was home," (Bardugo 59). Inej refers to the Slat as his home, but it is clear from this description that Kaz has a different precedence than most of the members of the club. This is essentially Kaz's version of a home, somewhere where he is also considered a lieutenant. He is unable to fully rest, constantly on guard in his own home. When Kaz and the others rescue Matthias from Hellgate,

he says “Hellgate would have been paradise to me as a child,” (Bardugo 133), even though Hellgate is a brutal prison.

Bardugo continues to give ample evidence of Kaz’s displacement from an actual home in the way he interacts with Jesper. The beginning of the text also displays Kaz’s hesitance towards Jesper, someone who shares Kaz’s home in the Slat, even though he does end up trusting him. After he brutalizes Big Bolliger, Kaz thinks he “could have told Jesper that he knew he wasn’t dirty, reminded him that he’d trusted him enough to make him his only real second in a fight...” (Bardugo 36) even though he does not. At this point in the text Kaz is still holding the Crows at a distance, unable to fully allow himself to find a family again. The interactions between Jesper and Kaz are reminiscent of the way Kaz interacts with Jordie in flashbacks—when they find out that Hertzoon has swindled them, that he left, Jordie keeps that information to himself. He puts on a face for Kaz to make the best of their situation, which is what Kaz constantly does for Jesper. He takes the brunt of things, like the knowledge of Big Bolliger’s betrayal, in way of protection. It is even worth noting that both Jesper and Jordie’s names start with a j. This is one piece of evidence of Bardugo deliberately placing these characters as a new family for Kaz to create.

The lack of home for the main characters is consistent. Inej was taken from her home, as was Nina, and both were forced to become objects to be admired at the “House of Exotics...forced to don fake Suli silks,” (Bardugo 73). Jesper is on the LGBTQIA spectrum, and is also secretly a Grisha, something thought to be a curse in his culture. Wylan’s dyslexia makes him unable to live up to his father’s expectations. When Kaz threatens Wylan to his father, he tells Kaz “...my son...cannot do what a child of seven years can...What my son cannot do, is read...I finally had to accept that Ghezen saw fit to curse me with a moron for a child...He is a

disgrace to my house,” (Bardugo 447). Matthias is unable to kill Nina, and breaks his coded life in the Fjerdan army to save her. Essentially, Bardugo’s cast of characters are without family, and end up coming together to have some semblance of normality in their lives.

Something that Bardugo and Collins both fall into is abandoning core friendships for romantic intentions. While as a whole the six main characters of Bardugo’s text are friends as a group, they also end up pairing off with each other by the end of the duology. Kaz and Inej are in an eternal struggle to open up to each other, Matthias and Nina are already romantically involved, and Jesper and Wylan are a more innocent version of enemies-to-lovers. This reinforces to some extent John Milton’s argument in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, that “[This] pure and more inbred desire of joining to is selfe in conjugall fellowship a fit conversing soul (which desire is properly called love)...” (Milton 128). The thought that homosocial friendships are more bountiful than heterosocial is quite misogynist, implying that women cannot keep up intellectually with men. Yes, Inej and Kaz are closest, but this only turns into a romantic relationship. Bardugo does include a gay pairing in her main cast of characters (Jesper and Wylan), but this does not excuse the sort of social back-peddling she portrays in the friendship across the whole group.

She reinforces the homosocial model of friendship between Nina and Inej, who become very close over the course of the first novel. Milton does not argue for female friendship, but the binary nature of the argument is the same. Schweitzer proposes that “women’s friendships in the early period [were] sui generis, categorically different from male friendship with its long history in Western philosophical thought,” (7). This point of view takes into account the social and political history of women having or not having their own autonomy, specifically where friendship and socialization is concerned. Bardugo deals with the idea of autonomy quite heavily

throughout the text, and especially with Nina and Inej. While their relationship can boil down to a homosocial model that many authors fall into, there are also deep, shared experiences regarding their freedom and the freedom of their own people that bring them together.

Schweitzer also addresses the counteracting point of view to this, that “the idealization of separate spheres and feminist sisterhoods,” was appropriating minority interests (7) by separating themselves from white male friendship. Inej and Nina are not the *Six of Crows* equivalent to a white woman, but are persecuted for their religion and race. They are also both overtly sexualized by Tante Heleen, and regain their ownership of sexuality after being released from the indentured status. Schweitzer cites Julie Ellison’s *Cato’s Tear and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* in discussing “the almost exclusive focus on female sentimentality” as a counter to “the masculine and transatlantic character of the early American culture of affiliation,” (7). Inej and Nina are not necessarily sentimental characters, and do not rely on any sort of gendered softness to exist in the plot of the text. Bardugo allows their friendship to grow out of mutual respect and understanding as a result of their own pasts. Inej and Nina help each other dig out of their trauma in a different way than the other characters could attempt—this is what makes their gendered friendship genuine.

Collins’ attempt at friendship is most easily seen in the relationship between Katniss and Gale, who have grown out of their environmental trauma together. Alison Bewley looks at Katniss as an orphan in “Literary Traditions on Fire: Mimetic Desire and Role of the Orphaned Heroine in Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* Trilogy”. The first important notation on this definition is that Katniss is not *technically* an orphan, but lost her mother almost as much as her father when he died in a mining incident (Bewley 374). The similarities between Katniss and Kaz are palpable here—her father and his brother both die due to their environments. They are

both consequently forced to grow up rather quickly in order to survive. Although Katniss has all the aspects of a typical YA male hero (independence, strength, cunning, desirable), she still falls into the love triangle between Gale and Peeta, as a typical female heroine. Her friendship with Gale is abandoned as he begins to compete with Peeta for her love.

The staging of friendship in *The Hunger Games* is much different than *Six of Crows* because of its inherent nature of Katniss' friendships developing on broadcast television—in other words, it is genuinely staged. Bewley points out that “Peeta’s mediation of the Capitol’s desire for Katniss represents the first time she is placed in the object position in a triangle of mimetic desire, but it certainly is not the last. More prominent in popular culture is the love triangle that Katniss finds herself in with Peeta and Gale, who was once simply her best friend and hunting partner,” (379). As opposed to a natural development from friendship to romance, Katniss’ status on stage sort of ignites the romantic desire that Gale falls into. Collins makes a stunning point about desire and objectivity.

This is completed when Gale and Katniss are on opposite sides of an argument to trap and kill District 2 workers in the third installment. They both separately realize that they do not understand each other. Gale was under the spell of the Games in falling in love with Katniss, and he sees her as she was to him before the Games at this point. Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men* “builds on Girard’s triangular desire to argue that gender asymmetry dominates triangles of heterosexual romance. Sedgwick points out that ‘bonds of ‘rivalry’ between males ‘over a woman’ subordinate the woman in this triangle in such a way that the true tension lies between the two men,” (Bewley 380). The competition from the arena bleeds into Gale’s life, and incites his desire for Katniss because of Peeta.

Katniss' other friendships are formed around the arena, the only place where real friendships can exist. She befriends her stylist, Cinna, who plays the game from the outside. She befriends her trainer, Haymitch, who is able to assist Katniss throughout the games and far afterwards. She even befriends Effie, an announcer who works for the Capitol. Although Effie is far embedded into the culture of the Hunger Games, she develops love for Peeta and Katniss and strips away the shield that she enters the text with. Most importantly, Katniss befriends Rue during the games. Her death is one of the greatest signifiers that friendships cannot survive inside the arena. This is perhaps part of the reason Katniss is so hesitant to befriend other tributes in the Quarter Quell—she does not believe that these friendships can be real.

Inej and Nina and Katniss and Gale abandon Aristotle's classic model of the friend as "another self". Although Inej and Nina have many similar life experiences, they come from completely different backgrounds and have nearly opposite personalities. Katniss and Gale follow the thread that Schweitzer identifies in Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, that "instead of epic nostalgia, Sedgwick produces a more nuanced, though still thoroughly sentimentalized, account of the challenges of interracial and cross-gender friendship that differs from Cooper's [*Mohicans*] representation by its failure," (25). The arena creates an entirely new Katniss that Gale does not understand, and he falls into the issues brought up by Schweitzer surrounding Sedgwick's characters. He is no longer able to relate to Katniss, and so objectifies her as something new.

The cast of *Six of Crows* function as a cohort under the principles of friendship utilized by Pythagoras. Schweitzer defines his system as practicing "themselves a radical mutuality, unselfishness, and loyalty that extended even to society member unknown to them but avoided relations with outsiders whom they considered immoral," (32). The exclusivity of the crows is

what aligns them with this ideal, but it is their moral compass that guides them on the same path. Each of the members have a moral purpose for their criminal actions, even if they are highly personal. In a 21st century context, this is reflected in the found family that has become popularized as a way for people to align themselves with people of like-mind. Schweitzer looks at “M.I.L.K Collection: Moment of Intimacy, Laughter and Kinship”, which “stages a similar mirroring in relation to the new millennium’s defining mode of intimacy, the ‘family of choice’”. Although it depicts a wide range of people from many cultures, the collection ultimately confirms friendship’s basis in endogamous homogeneity,” (207, 208). This is representative of the friendships that Bardugo uses, at least in age, and is relevant across the YA genre.

The traumatic events in these character’s constructions are the binding agent for their friendships, and is key to their healing over the courses of the texts. Katniss and Gale begin their bond over her father’s death, and the traumatic circumstances of their shared childhood. The characters of *Six of Crows* all have issues with a lack of autonomy—their inability to control situations. This is evident in the debt that Inej and Nina feel towards Kaz, the person who freed them from literal indentured status, a definitive lack of autonomy. The endogamous homogeneity and the family of choice combine with their childhood traumas to quickly build symbiotic friendships.

Though the impetus for trauma studies came from post-war returnees, childhood trauma has been found to be quite enduring throughout adulthood. An understanding of trauma studies helps explain the place of trauma specifically in young adult literature, where young readers have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in powerful characters. Though Bardugo’s characters are by no means positive role models, they provide a mode of expression for those readers who may feel limited by any past trauma that still affects them daily. Trauma is inextricably

connected with diversity, and Bardugo focuses on this with a gravity that equals the heaviness of the plot. As the understanding of trauma as cultural, national, racial, and ethnic roots more firmly into the scholarship on trauma, it is important for the literature surrounding trauma to grow in these directions as well. *Six of Crows* trends towards the positive representation of trauma and disability in YA literature, but has room for growth in regards to conversations addressing sexuality and gender. One work of fiction does not have the capacity to address all of the forms that trauma takes, which is why the continued exploration of childhood and adolescent trauma is important in continuing to move the field forward.

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