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Reading About Solidarity and Collective Action: Social Minds in Radical Fantasy Fiction

Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak[1]

Abstract

This article employs the theory of social minds proposed by Alan Palmer (*Social Minds in the Novel*, 2010) to argue for the emergence of a group-based thinking, feeling, and acting focused on reforming the status quo, using David Whitley's Agora trilogy (2009–2013) as an example of Radical Fantasy. This particular sub-genre of fantasy is seen as radical in the way it envisions an intergenerational struggle by the oppressed against political, racial and economic injustice, resulting in a new social order (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016). The notion of transformation, it is argued, is a characteristic quality of mental functioning in Radical Fantasy story-worlds. Beyond examining Whitley's trilogy in these terms, the article also argues for a broader interest in intergenerational collective action in the field of children's literature as a way of acknowledging texts that extend the aetonormative paradigm of children's books (Nikolajeva, 2010).

Keywords Radical fantasy · Social minds · Intergenerational solidarity · Narratives of community

Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak is Associate Professor of Literature and Director of the Center for Young People's Literature and Culture at the Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław, Poland. She is the author of *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy Fiction and Its Young Readers* (2016). Her research focuses on speculative fiction, utopianism, and child-led approaches. She has taught courses in children's and YA literature and culture. She is a Fulbright, Kosciuszko, and Marie Sklodowska-Curie fellow.

✉ Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak
justyna.deszcz-tryhubczak@uwr.edu.pl

1 Center for Young People's Literature and Culture, Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław, Ul. Kuźnicza 22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland

A Radical Subgenre of Fantasy

In "Symposium: Marxism and Fantasy," Fredric Jameson has a piece entitled "Radical Fantasy", where he proposes the category of radical or materialist fantasy; that is, a subgenre of fantasy capable of representing "the concrete social worlds of alienation and class struggle" (2002, p. 280). In "Periodizing the Postmodern: China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* and the Dynamics of Radical Fantasy," William J. Burling (2009, p. 326) sees Radical Fantasy as a broader trend, situating it on "a continuum of historical developments in fantasy" as responding to late postmodernism, global citizenship, alter-globalism, and media saturation.[1] Radical Fantasy texts depict political mobilization and transformation achieved through the collective efforts by ethically and biologically diversified groups of the oppressed who struggle against concrete economic and political exploitation (Burling, 2009, p. 332). Importantly, individual choices do matter in collective efforts against oppression (p. 339), but it is within the context of joint emancipatory action that the individual's ethical quandaries and creative agency become effective.[2]

As I show in *Yes to Solidarity, No to Oppression: Radical Fantasy for Young Readers* (2016), Radical Fantasy has also developed as a subgenre of fantasy literature for young readers. Examples of Radical Fantasy include Kristin Cashore's *Graceling* (2008) and *Bitterblue* (2012); Frances Hardinge's *Twilight Robbery* (2001),[3] *Fly by Night* (2005), *Gullstruck Island* (2009),[4] and *A Face like Glass* (2012); Rachel Hartman's *Seraphina* (2012) and *Shadow Scale* (2015); Ursula Le Guin's *Powers* (2007); China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* (2007); Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008); Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000); Jonathan Stroud's Bartimaeus sequence (2003–2010); and David Whitley's Agora trilogy (2009–2013). Radical Fantasy highlights child and adolescent characters' participation in abolishing existing power structures and building new networks of social relationships in communities marked by alienation and distrust. The young characters remake oppressive structures not by private rebellion but by inspiring and leading collective social action across divisions of class, race and age. While the feasibility of social cohesion may constitute a substantial cognitive challenge for young readers who are neo-liberal subjects (Burman, 2005), born and growing up in times when being competitive in the job market is the major goal of upbringing and education (Moss, 2014; Valentine, 2016), its radical quality results from the visions of the combined efforts of younger and older generations to struggle against political, racial and economic injustice (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016). Our culture rests on the narrative of separation between children and adults that negates the possibility of

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[1] According to Burling (2009, p. 330), other subgenres of fantasy that have emerged in response to late postmodernism are "new horror," "Weird Fantasy," "New Wave Fabulism," "slipstream," "interstitial fiction," "new weird," and "interfiction." I capitalize the term, Radical Fantasy, following Burling's usage.

[2] For a detailed critical account of Jameson's views on Radical Fantasy, as well as of Burling's further discussion of the genre, see my "Utopianism in Radical Fantasy for Children and Young Adults" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2012).

[3] Published as *Fly Trap* in the USA.

[4] Published as *The Lost Conspiracy* in the USA.

egalitarian and partner child–adult relations (Alderson, 2016, p. 154): children—always on the way to their adulthood—are therefore human futures, "at once bridging the gap between the present and the future and being the material from which the future will be made" (Lee, 2013, p. 1). By acknowledging children's impact on society and highlighting the very possibility of achieving intergenerational solidarity, Radical Fantasy texts challenge the notion of childhood as a human resource to be exploited in the future; instead, they (1) emphasize the centrality of the younger generation's views and needs for the growth of better societies; (2) invite both adult and child readers to reflect on practices leading to solidarity across generations. Hence, Radical Fantasy may potentially aid young readers in seeing their lives as part of the larger dynamics of social and economic relations.[5]

Arguably, the potential of Radical Fantasy to influence readers in the ways mentioned above stems from its representations of the emergence of a group-based thinking, feeling, and acting aimed at reforming the oppressive status quo, which I see as a characteristic quality of mental functioning in Radical Fantasy storyworlds. To provide a model of an interpretative approach revealing this quality of Radical Fantasy, I rely on Alan Palmer's *Social Minds in the Novel* (2010), which proposes that collaborative cognitive activity underpins novelistic narratives. I shall look at the Agora trilogy (2009–2013) by David Whitley in order to show that narrative representations of social cognition in such texts center on the formation and workings of social minds, which in turn result in the transformation of the oppressive status quo. In such works, the young and adult characters often follow one another's thinking, come to the same conclusions, learn from one another and share needs, dreams and goals that lead to joint attempts at creating a better society.

The interest in social minds has so far been absent from cognitive approaches to children's texts, which usually focus on one of the following: scripts and schemas (Stephens, 2011; Seelinger Trites, 2014; Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Marecki, 2015; Oziewicz, 2015; Palkovich, 2015; Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016); on Theory of Mind (ToM) and empathy (Nikolajeva, 2014; Seelinger Trites, 2014); on emotions (Nikolajeva 2014); on embodied metaphors (Seelinger Trites, 2014; Purcell, 2018), or on Text World Theory and cognitive grammar (Giovanelli, 2016). My analysis also points to some wider implications of the study of social minds in children's literature; for, while differences and conflicts between younger and older generations have been abundantly acknowledged in children's literature criticism, a broader focus on intergenerational collective thought in texts for young audiences has not been considered, albeit it uncovers a diversity of child–adult relationships. As a complement to studies focused on aetonormative patterns of power struggle between younger and older generations, such an inquiry testifies to the vital significance

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[5] While Burling sees late capitalism and the growing popularity of posthumanist discourses as crucial contexts for the emergence of Radical Fantasy, I propose cultural-cognitive capitalism, "cosmodernism," popular cosmopolitanism and youth social movements (e.g. Occupy Wall Street) as equally important elements of late postmodernism affecting current cultural production, including texts for young readers (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, pp. 64–65).

of children's culture in the development of generational intelligence and empathy towards age-others.[6]

Social Minds in Fiction

Western literature is usually seen as "overwhelmingly about the self," which in turn has led to a relatively limited attention being paid to narratives in which the self is depicted as participating in the interdependent network of individuals, rather than as an individualistic unit (Zagarell, 1988, p. 499). Nevertheless, as Sandra A. Zagarell stresses, "[w]estern culture has long advanced powerful literary as well as theoretical alternatives to its own preoccupation with the self," which she refers to as "the narrative of community." This category includes texts that focus in detail on the everyday life of a community and, in this way, respond "to the social, economic, cultural, and demographic changes caused by industrialism, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism" (Zagarell, 1988, p. 499). The centrality of the community is also reflected in the emphasis on interdependences among community members and in the perspective of the participant/observer narrators, facilitating readers' understanding of communal life (p. 515). Zagarell traces the development of such texts from the nineteenth century until the second half of the twentieth century, locating them in the domain of women's writing and showing that they rest on the strong presence of female characters determining the functioning of a given group.[7] I propose that Radical Fantasy texts for young readers are more recent narratives of community that emphasize the crucial role of children in maintaining and shaping communal life.

Alan Palmer's *Social Minds in the Novel*, one of the first studies to make a powerful claim for the centrality of the social nature of cognition in fiction, is especially useful in discovering and analyzing narratives of community (cf. Alders and von Contzen 2015; Kukkonen, 2016, 2017).[8] Palmer argues that "fictional minds, like real minds, form part of extended cognitive networks" (2010, p. 26) whose workings—"the formation, development, maintenance, modification, and breakdown" (p. 41)—constitute a large part of the subject matter of stories. This is so because "as storyworlds are of profoundly social nature, […] novels necessarily contain a good deal of collective thinking" as opposed to intramental thought (p. 41). Therefore, Palmer concludes, we fail to recognize the full importance of the thought that occurs in novels if we rely only on an internalist perspective, which emphasizes "inner, introspective, private, solitary, individual, psychological, and detached" mentation (p. 42). For Palmer, attention should be paid to both approaches, "because a

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[6] See Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques (forthcoming, 2019).

[7] Zagarell's argument is close in spirit to Angela Hubler's plea for more theoretical attention to be paid to YA literature that focuses on characters who "engage in the collective process of social change" (2011, p. 71), especially in feminist contexts.

[8] Palmer's earlier attempts at developing this approach can be found, for example, in his *Fictional Minds* (2004).

major preoccupation of novels is precisely this balance between public and private thought, intermental and intramental functioning, and social and individual minds" (p. 42).[9] Although his readings are illustrated mostly by nineteenth-century novels, the focus on social minds can certainly be explored more widely across genres and periods, including, as I argue, in texts for young audiences.

In his discussion of how fictional social minds form, develop and, finally, disintegrate, Palmer highlights the varied intensity of intermental activity. At the lowest level, characters need to engage in mind reading to understand each other in everyday contexts. Characters who know each other well form intermental pairs and small groups, which makes solving problems easier. Individuals and small groups may also participate in larger groups that, depending on particular circumstances, will also engage in joint thinking and action. Palmer (2010, pp. 46–49) outlines the following typology of intermental activity with regard to its scope although, as he points out, it inevitably fails to reflect "the complexity and range of the intermental units to be found in novels": intermental encounters (minimal, often random intermental activity); small intermental units (connectivity formed over time, often in marriages, close friendships and families, characterized by a substantial awareness of what others are thinking); medium-sized intermental units (characterized by a sense of joint thinking, as among work colleagues or networks of friendships); large-sized intermental units (larger groups producing "a collective opinion or consensus view on a particular topic"); and intermental minds (well-defined and long-lasting, large, medium and small intermental units that can be regarded as group minds). Finally, although all these social minds consist of experiential agents in their own right, "capable of collective experience in the first place whether agential or receptive" (Alders, 2015, p. 114), they should be seen as resulting from the combination of ideas coming from individual minds. As such, they are more than just the sum of diverse ideas, and yet they do not make decisions on their own: they only provide a background or a set of principles that shape decisions made by individual minds (Ryan, 2011, p. 657).

My analysis of the intermental activity in the Agora trilogy reveals that an exploration of collectivity may be crucial for understanding how readers interpret themes of solidarity in Radical Fantasy texts. While it may seem that social minds are "only productive of narrativity when they clash with the aspirations of individual minds" (Ryan, 2011, p. 658), I will argue that narratives may also be driven by clashes between social minds and conflicts arising when a new social mind emerges from a character's confrontation with another social mind. Witnessing such complex forms of intermental activity, readers of Radical Fantasy are cued to use their own cognitive abilities to follow the progression from a dynamic of conflict and fragmentation

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[9] Palmer builds his approach relying on the notions of intermental and intramental functioning used by Lev Vygotsky (1981, p. 163) in his "genetic law of cultural development." It assumes that intramental functioning (mental functioning, such as cognition or memory, within an individual) is preceded by mental processes shared between people and is a result of their mastery and internalization of social processes (Wertsch and Tulviste, 1992, 549). Palmer (2004, p. 136) seeks to reverse one of the most important tenets of narrative theory, namely that the individual consciousness is primary and only later influenced by social factors.

to a more positive dynamic of group solidarity and joint identification, which manifests itself in cooperative behaviors aimed at achieving a better future. Finally, let me stress that my aim is to affirm interpretative possibilities rather than assert the actualities of readers' interactions with texts. As readers will note (below), I have emboldened expressions that signal characters' intermental activity.

Social Minds in Radical Fantasy Fiction

The Agora trilogy depicts a revolutionary transformation dependent on solidarity across class and age (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, pp. 58–59).[10] Agora is a city founded by the Libran Society, a group of rich people who wished to create a world that would not be "torn between extremes" (Whitley, 2009, p. 307). To make their vision feasible, they secretly designed two completely different communities, whose inhabitants did not realize that they were participating in a utopian experiment. In the rural utopia of Giseth, the ideal of balance and equality prevails over individual choices even when the community arbitrarily decides about the personal life of its members. As an alternative to the Gisethi way of life, the social order of Agora was meant by the Librans to become a place "where balance, barter, and give-and-take were woven into its very heart and soul. Where value was judged by every individual, and one could force something out of nothing" (p. 307). Yet the ideally non-violent and non-coercive exchanges degenerate into an oppression that sustains social inequality: the all-pervasive marketization that develops in Agora has a dehumanizing effect as anything, including people's lives, thoughts and emotions, can be sold in the market. Parents trade their children and the latter become traders themselves when they turn twelve. The city is run by an aristocracy, while the lower classes live in slums and die of plague.[11]

The cues for readers to pay attention to diverse forms of human thought presented in the series are obviously interspersed throughout the texts. For the sake of clarity, before I go on to identify and discuss more complex examples of social minds, I will focus first on the general intermental activity in the storyworld of Agora as a background for the emergence of the characters' joint thinking.

The Libran Society is an example of a high-functioning, well-defined and formally coordinated intermental unit, or a group mind, characterized by a very strong, long-term disposition; that is, there is a link between the immediate mental events

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[10] The Agora trilogy consists of *The Midnight Charter* (Whitley, 2009)*, Children of the Lost* (Whitley, 2010) and *The Canticle of Whispers* (Whitley, 2013). For the sake of brevity, and because the proposed analysis is conducted in order to signal interpretive possibilities, I do not include examples of social minds from *Children of the Lost*, although they can certainly be found there in abundance.

[11] The name of the city derives from the agora, the central place in ancient Greek city-states. However, the very way Agora functions is close to Agorism, a left-wing, libertarian, politico-economic philosophy advanced by Samuel Edward Konkin III. He argues for "[t]he society of the open marketplace as near to untainted by theft, assault, and fraud as can be humanly attained is as close to a free society as can be achieved" (Konkin III, 2008, p. 73). I have found no evidence that Whitley was aware of Konkin III's ideas when writing his trilogy (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, p. 95).

of the inhabitants' consciousness and "aspects that endure over time – beliefs and attitudes, their personality" (Palmer, 2010, p. 29). In the case of the Libran Society, the latter are their utopian ambitions and the former—the development of specific decisions and solutions to be put into practice. The activity of this group mind is reflected in words of the Oracle, a dispassionate historian, who notes that "the first Libran Society was a group in the world outside our lands. **A gathering of thinkers and philosophers who saw balance** in all things as the key to a perfect world […]. **They believed** that under their guidance, the world could find a perfect way of life […]. **The true Libran Society knew** that balance was everything […]" (Whitley, 2013, p. 165, my emphasis).[12] The trilogy centers on the exploration of the pressures that this group mind exerts on the individual minds and intermental units, and especially on those characters that do not want to conform to this society's vision.

Numerous passages in the trilogy also express Agoran views about the precarious nature of life in the city. In the following excerpt, Mark, one of two child protagonists, reflects on what it means to live in Agora:

> **the most wretched of the debtors were said** to be taken before the Director of Receipts, the ruler of Agora himself […]. **It was said** that the Director held a great ledger with the name of every Agoran written in it. **It was said** that […] if he erased the name, struck it out with a stroke of his pen, **it would be** as if that person had never existed—**their life forgotten**, **their passing brushed away**. (Whitley, 2009, p. 30, my emphasis)

The intermental thought is indicated by means of the passive voice and presupposition, the combination of which produces the sense of the all-pervasiveness of the Agoran mindset and of the community's shared social identity. The use of the passive voice to describe what happens to someone removed from the ledger reflects the power of this social mind. It is this omnipresent mindset that exerts pressures on the characters' search for alternatives to the status quo. In fact, the story would not make sense without the presence of this social mind. As the series progresses, the city reveals other social minds that either converge with or clash against the Agoran social mind. Moreover, on the one hand, the passage shows how the storyworld of the novel is experienced by an individual (in this case, a lonely child); on the other hand, it contains both the embedded perspective of the general public, which Mark seems to accept, and that of the Director, for whom people are only items in a ledger. In other words, the center of the Agoran mind is located in the institution of the Directory, which imposes regulations and constraints on individuals. Simultaneously, this social mind includes the inhabitants of the city, who are all subjected to the official system. As Palmer explains (2004, p. 141), "[t]he fictional text is primarily seen not as the representation of an objective storyworld, but as the interconnection of all of the subjective embedded narratives of all the characters who inhabit that fictional world." It is up to the reader to put all the narratives together when trying to understand both Agora itself and the situated identities of its citizens.

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12 I have used bold for emphasis—to mark examples of characters' intermental activity—rather than italics, the latter being easy to mistake for an author's own emphasis.

The collective action and solidarity depicted in the trilogy develop gradually against a background of limited intermental activity among the characters. Mark and Lily, the two young protagonists who are also close friends, become aware of their roles as the Protagonist and the Antagonist, who are to test the Agoran system. In the following passage, the internal focalization reveals Lily and Mark as having the minimal level of understanding that makes everyday communication possible. Lily is also a "mind-reading 'empath'" (Keen, n.p.) who not only identifies with Mark because she is of the same social status, but also because she understands his emotional reactions and behavior:

> Mark cast down his eyes; **she [Lily] could see him** lose his color again. **She knew how he must be feeling**. **She had been the same** when **the orphanage had sold her** to the bookbinders when she was half Mark's age. **Suddenly** no choice but to work because **they had the right to stop feeding you**. (Whitley, 2009, 13, my emphasis)

Lily's insight into Mark's predicament, however deep it may seem to the reader, is an element of the storyworld. As Marisa Bortolussi (2011, p. 285) explains, "[c]haracters do not have theories of mind of other characters; they only think or know what the narrators tell us, or insinuate, that they think or know." Hence the analysis of social minds should also entail paying close attention to the role of narrators and the way that readers process these mediators. Elise Nykänen (2017) usefully elaborates on the question of the unnaturalness of fictional minds: they "simultaneously *are* and *are not* similar to human minds […]. The fictional mind is an aesthetic illusion that is constructed, yet recognizable, and as such, is prone to be empathized with or shunned by the reader." Therefore, as she continues, even though both readers' and characters' attempts at reading fictional minds are far from real-life processes, the characters' mind-reading is a source of "meta-representations" of readers' attempts to read the characters' minds as if they were real" (p. 22). Even if readers do realize that the characters they are reading about are fictions created by someone else's imagination, they are trained in how to approach such dramatis personae as if they did not have this awareness. This training also applies to social minds. By following Mark's and Lily's cognitive functioning and by witnessing how Lily tries to understand Mark, readers may also get to know some details about the Agora storyworld as the Agoran society, represented by the orphanage and the bookbinders, is in fact another intermental mind active in this passage. Lily's and Mark's feelings make sense only as a reaction to the cognitive functioning of the city, which itself is a complex cognitive network to which the two characters belong whether they want to or not. In other words, the intermental mind of Agora makes it possible for Mark and Lily to find common ground since it serves as a source of familiar scripts for the characters. Yet, this intermental mind also interferes with their fellow-feelings because its prescribed scripts impose some limitations on the meaning-making in which the children engage: they see no choice but to accept their fate, at least for the time being.

However, another passage reveals how an awareness of the correspondence between their experiences makes Lily and Mark bond and form a small intermental unit ready to plan and initiate joint action. Their mutual understanding

is reflected in the use of the "we-mode," signaling "[j]ointly intentional joint action" (Tuomela, 2006, p. 36):

> "Lily [….]" he said. "**what do we do**?" When **he looked up at her**, **he suddenly seemed** so lost. **Lily took his hands into her own**. "**We survive**, Mark. […] **We try** to love, try to find somewhere **we can** call home." […] "**We do** what we can for ourselves." **She squeezed his hands**. "And for each other." (Whitley, 2009, pp. 23–24, my emphasis).

Interestingly, the passage also contains examples of nonverbal somatic communication as a means through which minds become available to each other: the looks and touch exchanged between Lily and Mark convey their mutual trust and reassurance. This passage also shows that thought may be public and available as it can manifest in physical terms (Palmer, 2004, p. 173), for "the mind extends beyond the skin" (p. 204).

Despite the strong bond between Mark and Lily, as well as their growing awareness of their commitment to the revision of the status quo, their purposes and actions do not coincide for a substantial part of the series. As a result, they create intermental units with other characters before they reunite, and Mark joins the new social mind co-created by Lily and her other friends. Before that happens, Lily becomes a reformer of Agora as she turns out to be capable of catalyzing collective efforts to relieve the suffering of debtors by counterbalancing the city's economy of price with an economy of gift giving, cooperation, and trust. Together with Dr. Theo, a young upper-class doctor, Lily opens an almshouse where they treat and host the sick poor for free. The following passage depicts Lily and Theo, who have evidently become an intermental unit, as expressed in the nonverbal communication between them. The bond between Lily and Theo is an especially powerful example of intergenerational collaboration transgressing the social norms of Agora, and especially the aforementioned estrangement between parents and their offspring induced by Agoran economy. Although the doctor is Lily's master, he never agrees to such an arrangement and always treats the girl as his equal. Hence Lily openly expresses her belief that, if the Agorans see a working alternative to what they know from their everyday experience, they will embrace it.

> To her [Lily's] **surprise**, **she felt the touch of his [Theo's] hands on her own**, flat on the altar, and **looked up into his eyes, which were full of concern**. […]
>
> "If there was just **one person who could show everyone there is another way**, Theo," she said more steadily. "If **someone stood up** in the middle of the city, with **everyone watching**, and did something that brought them nothing in return, and happiness to others […] it might start something that couldn't be stopped. **It might make people see and think** […] **and change** […] **and stop** letting **Agora be the sort of city where six-year-olds can be taken away in the middle of the night**, all alone…"

Lily trailed off. **Dr. Theophilus was looking at her oddly**. For a moment, **she thought she could see hope in his eyes**. But when he spoke, **his voice was sad**.

"I believe, once, **I used to think like you**. When I was younger […] I forget sometimes how young you are. But **believe me**, Lily, this is all **we can do**. If **we make** things better in a little way, and for as long as possible […]." (Whitley, 2009, p. 100, my emphasis)

Yet, the passage also reveals difficulties inherent in forming a large intermental unit—in this case, a society based on altruism and solidarity. The conversation between the two characters is presented from Lily's perspective, which enhances the sense of the tension between their friendship and Theo's disbelief in the possibility of change.

The obstacle, signaled in this passage as inhibiting the formation of a larger unit, is anti-utopianism, that is, the conviction that no radical sociopolitical alternative to the status quo is possible and hence it is delusional to search for one. Theo tries to persuade Lily that this is the case by switching from reminiscing about his own experience of hopefulness to the we-mode when talking about his misgivings about the potential for any systemic change. Again, the characters communicate through a body language that emphasizes the intensity of their bond. As Theo and Lily work together, the doctor slowly becomes committed to her ideas even if for a long time he insists on seeing his work in more humble terms.

As the series progresses, it depicts confrontations between the social mind created by Lily and her friends and the Agoran mind. In the passage below, the third-person omniscient report shows how Laud, one of Lily's friends, questions the main assumptions of the Agoran mind. He is encouraging the Signor, an aristocrat, to think independently of the official version of Agoran history, accepted by the citizens. The body language and indications of voice modulation contribute to the intensity of this confrontation:

A flash of anger crossed the Signor's face.

"**You think I would lie to you?** […] This tale is a fantasy. **Everyone knows** that there are no lands outside the city."

"**Everyone is obviously mistaken**," Laud replied, **sharply**. "*Everyone* **should be prepared to accept** that there are stranger things going on in this city than *everyone* **thinks**." (Whitley, 2013, p. 115, my emphasis)

In another passage, readers witness the mixed reactions of the "crowd" (representing the Agoran mind) in response to Lily's attempt to put across her utopian message.

There was a loud rumble from the crowd. People were rising to their feet confused and disgusted. Lily could see some beginning to storm out, while others sat in surprise or shock [….] Mark still sat, waiting. **He could tell** that she hadn't finished. Theo told her that sometimes she got **a look in her eye that no one could turn away from**, and she used this in the

court now. **People stopped, silenced, giving her their attention**. (Whitley, 2009, p. 256, my emphasis)

Lily consciously tries to reshape the social mind created by those present at the court by enhancing her argument with her body language. This is an interesting example of what Palmer refers to as dramaturgical action:

A person evokes in their public audience a certain image or impression of themselves by purposefully disclosing their subjectivity […]. Thus, the presentation of the self does not signify spontaneous, expressive behavior, it stylizes the expression of their experience with a view to the audience. A character's management of other characters' impressions of them is an important element in the way in which his or her mind works in action. (2004, p. 166)

Palmer stresses that "impression management" signals the encounter of the characters' embedded narratives—in this case, "those of the manager and those of the managed" (p. 166). The passage also depicts minds in action (Palmer, 2004, p. 183); that is, a situation where there is little difference between intermental action and intermental thinking as the crowd's thoughts are expressed through its behavior, which in turn is interpreted by Lily, whose thoughts are also reflected in her behavior. Finally, the above passage also contains an example of intermental units at work, which is revealed by shifting focalization: while Lily reads the reactions of the crowd and hopes hers will be read by the others, Mark also recognizes Lily's attempt at management of the crowd, thematizing the mind-reading process for the reader.

The depictions of the difficulties Lily faces in her project of reforming the Agoran mind are counterbalanced by the emergence of collaborative action in the Agora trilogy, reflected in the formation of a medium-sized intermental unit among Lucy, Mark, Theo, Laud and Benedicta. It is a balanced and symmetrical meeting of individual minds engaged in collective action and joint decision-making in response to the concrete form of social injustice (the Agoran trade in human goods). In other words, the characters share the collective commitment that makes them willing to think, feel and act in ways that address their shared concerns. As Benedicta explains to Mark, using the we-mode:

"Lily started up the Temple Almshouse, but **we've spread its message**. **Without all of us**, it would never have become as important as it is. **We kept it alive** […]. **It's our city, our world** […]. When Laud finds her, and he *will* find her, **shouldn't we be able to show her** that **we've made a difference**, **our** way?" (Whitley, 2013, p. 193, my emphasis)

The use of the we-mode in this case emphasizes that Benedicta believes that she and her friends are participating in a joint enterprise.

With time, part of the Agoran mind (the debtors) willingly joins the Temple mind, thereby originating a broader cross-class and cross-age social movement demanding justice. Theo continues Lily's work by trying to convince the debtors that nonviolent revolution and solidarity are the most effective weapons

against the oppressive system: "**For as long as anyone can remember, every-one** in Agora has been alone—battling against friends and strangers alike to pull themselves to the top of the heap. But now […] **we are united** […]. **People are helping each other, banding together**" (p. 238, my emphasis). To emphasize the need for unity, he appeals to the citizens' sense of originating a new social mind and a shared group dynamic in which they are participating, manifested not only in thoughts, but also in specific behaviors counteracting alienation and mutual hostility. The gradual intensification of the intermental activity depicted in the trilogy culminates in the transformation of the Agoran mind, catalyzed by the almshouse movement and its principles of solidarity and mutual responsibility. Lily realizes that the change is not a result of her own vision, or her intramental cognitive activity, but rather of the intermental thinking she has engaged in with her friends. She also sees the new social mind as a collectivity that does not suppress individuality or efface her agential self as the founder of the almshouse movement. Readers may follow Lily's reasoning in the following passage: "Yes, **this shattered Agora** was very far from the charitable paradise she had once dreamed of creating […]. But still, **her almshouse was the center of the downriver city**, **the place that gave everyone hope**. **People were volunteering** to help, **banding together** against the oppressive forces of the Directory" (p. 285, my emphasis). The enthusiastic involvement of the citizens in the almshouse movement is the germ for broader reforms the citizens will most likely embrace. The following passage, reporting Lily's thoughts about the change, signals that the intermental mind of the Libran Society, which has determined the Agoran mind, loses validity and it is likely that it will gradually disintegrate as the Agorans try to transform the city relying on their own hopes for a better world:

> **No one told us we were supposed to be an experiment; no one said that we were supposed to think a certain way**. And now, we don't. **We've changed**; we're human. **We have lives of our own** that don't depend upon **prophecies or ancient plans**. **We're our own people**, and **we always will be**. (p. 365, my emphasis)

Aided by her friends, Lily shows the Agorans that while the Librans hoped for perfection, there is no blueprint for progressing to a better society. A new future is a result of choices depending on particular predicaments with which individuals and societies have to deal and depends on the collective intentionality of social minds.

Nevertheless, Whitley's trilogy not only registers a successful formation of social minds driven by the collective goal of redressing injustice, but also points to the inherent instability of large social minds and the necessity of unswerving efforts to maintain it. In the following passage, the reader is again invited to assume Lily's viewpoint and share her understanding of the formation of the new social mind: "she saw **receivers mixing with civilians, elite next to debtors, all cheering together** […]. Tomorrow, Lily was sure that **most of them would be back to normal, ready to draw their fellow revelers into the dirt to get the best deal**. But for today, the revolution was over; peace was restored" (p. 375, my emphasis). The reformers realize that new conflicts are likely to arise but believe that they can now be solved as

long as all Agorans remain committed to their common goals; or, in other words, as long as the new social mind and collective agent survive.

The above analysis of intermental activity in the Agora trilogy reveals how fictional worlds marked by alienation and class struggle can be transformed into more hospitable milieus through collective thought and agency. This collectivity depends to a large extent on efforts shared by the child and adult characters. Lily, Mark, Benedicta, Laud and Theo are justice-oriented citizens who attempt to improve their society by questioning and reforming dominant patterns of oppression and injustice. Their willingness to read the minds of other characters in order to form intermental relationships results in joint decision-making and collective action that form a social movement. Granted, the above discussion has centered on only one example of Radical Fantasy fiction. However, following Corrine Bancroft and Peter J. Rabinowitz's proposition (2011, p. 337) that Palmer's study should invite a reflection on whether characters from different books can belong to the same social minds extending across texts, I suggest that there exists an intermental group of characters emerging from diverse Radical Fantasy novels. Some of the characters in these texts, both child and adult, become change-makers engaged in diverse forms of collaboration destabilizing oppressive social orders and shaping the future of their communities (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, p. 30). As Bancroft and Rabinowitz (2011, p. 337) note, "many writers […] not only emphasize social minds *within the novel,* but also invite readers to join those minds."[13] Over the years of my own interpretive engagements with these texts and their characters, I have been participating in an intermental group extending beyond the printed page. Moreover, in retrospect, such social minds also emerged in the joint exploration of Radical Fantasy with the young readers participating in the reader-response project I conducted in 2014; our conversations included moments when we tried to read the minds of characters from several books as if they all not only belonged to one fictional universe, but were also real people. The workings of crossover social minds certainly constitute a fascinating avenue for further exploration in empirical reader-response research.

Conclusion

Literary visions of intermental activity developing into a collective initiative to solve social problems could foster readers' moral imagination and empathy (Koopman and Hakemulder, 2015). They could also enhance readers' ability to take prosocial action in the real world (Alsup, 2015). In the case of Radical Fantasy, representations of joint actions and cooperation might potentially engage young readers in a critical appreciation of the communities in which they live and of their own status as active members of these communities. Moreover, readings centered on cross-age partnerships could expand the conception of children's literature, usually seen as

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[13] Examples of extended social minds can be found in crossover fan fiction combining plots from diverse sources, such as Harry Potter and Twilight, or in the Kingdom of Hearts crossover action role-playing games incorporating, among others, diverse Disney characters.

an adult cultural production for children that focuses predominantly on conflicts and power struggles between younger and older generations. However, children's texts may promote intergenerational bonds as they present a continuum of child–adult relations, including connections between age-others who share common values, interests, mutual care and responsibility. Children's literature could thus serve as a cultural practice addressing the need for the intensification of effective intergenerational affiliations, which are increasingly urgent in the face of the global aging of populations, changes in family structure, transnational family separation, the emergence of a new precariat class, and political trends pitting younger and older generations against each other.[14]

Nevertheless, whether the Agora trilogy and other Radical fantasy novels can indeed activate readers' cognitive abilities in such ways remains a matter of speculation. An objection could be made that young readers may not be capable of tracing the workings of fictional social minds as they do not have sufficient social and literacy competences. While this certainly might be the case, Bancroft and Rabinowitz (2011) report the following classroom experience with Bancroft's sixth-graders (aged 11–12). When discussing *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971) by Robert C. O'Brien, the students, "untrained in many standard interpretive techniques," made "the jump from ToM to Social Mind Theory" as they pointed out that the characters' attitude to Mrs. Frisby changes radically when they learn she is Jonathan Frisby's widow and the only character unaware of her husband's connection to the rats. As the students explained, Mrs. Frisby was excluded from the collective knowledge among the farm animals. For Bancroft and Rabinowitz, "this exclusion is a bigger, more revealing, and more sophisticated clue" than the more straightforward connections that the children could have noticed. Moreover, the young readers in that particular classroom were so interested in the social mind that they thought the animals' conflict with the cat the central one in the narrative; for the cat is the enemy of all the small animals, who often repeat the saying, "We all help one another against the cat." The students' "commitment to the social mind" was therefore so intensive that it prevented them from noticing other elements of the narrative (2011, p. 334).

The potential of Radical Fantasy texts to elicit young readers' commitment to social minds could be tested in empirical cognitive criticism that examined young readers' critical socio-political consciousness as reflected, perhaps, in how readers uncover, react to, and report intermental activity. To concur with David S. Miall (2006, p. 35), without the study of real readers, cognitivism might remain only one more interpretative tool. I would add that this will be so unless cognitive criticism is rooted in local contexts and applied for particular purposes. Therefore, I would like to propose that such research take place in the classroom, in school projects aimed at promoting connectedness of education to the world through active citizenship. A literature class structured around a collaborative interpretation of fictional collectivities and intermentalism could first lead to a discussion about students' awareness of the functioning of a democratic society and of their own rights and responsibilities

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[14] For a broader discussion of these issues, see Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Jaques (forthcoming, 2019).

to be followed inside and outside the school. This discussion could also focus more specifically on the status of children's and young people's civic agency in the real world, especially in relation to intergenerational solidarity and communal futures. It could then be followed by a reflection on how adults (teachers, parents, members of the local community or neighborhood) perceive students' agency and whether they see them as partners in collective efforts to improve society in immediate contexts and with a view to a more distant future. Finally, it might motivate students and teachers to undertake concrete actions changing the reality around them and shaping their preferred futures. The success of such endeavors would depend on teachers' willingness to reduce the inevitable asymmetries of power in the classroom through encouraging shared learning of older and younger people practicing democracy in connection with their own lives and the lives of their communities. Yet even more fundamentally, it would depend on building a partnership between a given school and a local community, resulting in a cooperation in which everyone's contribution is valued and respected.

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