

despair, anger, love, and yes, pathos—which, as I have learned, is the beating heart of all stories.

### THE COMING-OF-AGE STORY: A THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING

As it is commonly understood, coming of age is defined as the specific instance in a child's life when he transitions from childhood to adulthood. When a child "grows up" or "comes of age," he is thought of as crossing a threshold; on the one hand, the child is still considered a child, while on the other, he is already considered an adult. When this threshold is crossed, the child undergoes a sudden, irrevocable change. This change is the stuff of the coming-of-age story.

Coming of age is an enduring theme in children's literature, young adult fiction (YA), and fiction written for adult readers. The coming-of-age theme is particularly prominent in YA because of the similarity in the ages of the YA character and the YA reader.<sup>3</sup> Despite the extensive body of scholarship in this field, there are still a lot of misconceptions about what can and cannot be considered YA.<sup>4</sup> Karen Coats notes that one major issue hampering a serious study of YA is the absence of clear lines demarcating the space it occupies.<sup>5</sup> By and large, critics have not arrived at a firm consensus as to where children's literature ends and YA begins. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the line that marks the end of YA and the beginning of adult fiction is equally as blurred.

A lot of factors contribute to a fictional work being considered (or not considered) YA. Some of these factors are textual—linguistic register, vocabulary, the age of the main character, the complexity of the theme—while others are extraneous to the text, such as the writer's intended readership versus the readership that his work actually enjoys. Furthermore, it must be underscored that fiction typically branded as YA is precisely that—*branded*, meaning publishers brand a book as YA through

- 3 While YA's prescribed reading age varies from publisher to publisher, the general consensus is that the YA reader is in between the ages twelve and eighteen. A typical element of YA literature is that the protagonist is also roughly around this age range and that the story unfolds through his or her point of view. One of the reasons behind the publishing success of YA is the immediate relatability YA literature establishes with its readership. See Fiona Dixon, "What Is Young Adult Fiction?" Professional Writing Academy, October 20, 2023, <https://www.profwritingacademy.com/what-is-young-adult-fiction>.
- 4 Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill, "The Young Adult Canon: A Literary Solar System" in *Critical Explorations of Young Adult Literature: Identifying and Critiquing the Canon*, ed. Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill (Routledge, 2022), 2.
- 5 Karen Coats, "Young Adult Literature: Growing Up, In Theory" in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby A. Wolf et al. (Routledge, 2011), 322.

marketing campaigns, book art, and easy labels that tell consumers the exact age range of the book's intended readership. Part of the difficulty of pinning down YA as a literary form is that it is not just the sole product of the writer but also a product of the publishing industry.

In the Philippines, YA is a generally new space. As recently as the 1990s, there was no distinction between YA and children's literature. It is only in recent years that local publishers such as Adarna House have started categorizing books as specifically YA. Writing in 1994, Ma. Elena Paterno said that children's literature "is the only genre defined by its audience."<sup>6</sup> National Artist for Literature Virgilio S. Almario followed this up by saying that for a writer to effectively write for children, he must be aware of his readers' psychology, interests, needs, capabilities, and limitations.<sup>7</sup> These considerations have real effects on the formal elements of the written work, such as the story's characters, its tone, the pacing of the plot, and the complexity of the theme. It can therefore be said that children's literature becomes children's literature primarily because the author decides to write for a child reader. Given YA's relative newness to the Philippines, as well as the ongoing debates on how to properly define YA, I will argue that Paterno's pronouncement about children's literature in the 1990s holds true for the YA of today. Insofar as the Philippines is concerned, a work of fiction can be largely be considered YA if from the beginning of its writing the author intended for it to be such.

Victor Malo-Juvera and Crag Hill, in their attempt to put together the canon of YA literature, identify several characteristics of works that have been widely accepted as YA. I would like to highlight one of these characteristics, since it also appears in my own stories. According to Malo-Juvera and Hill, a hallmark of YA literature is that it "problematizes the dominant norms of the world within which the characters navigate."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Coats says that one quality of YA literature is that it calls into question the story's moral universe, which does not usually happen in children's literature, where a "closed" moral universe ensures that the good is rewarded and evil is punished.<sup>9</sup> While this qualifier may effectively

6 Ma. Elena Paterno, "A History of Children's Literature in the Philippines," in *Bumasa at Lumaya: A Sourcebook on Children's Literature in the Philippines*, ed. Virgilio S. Almario et al. (Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1994), 3.

7 Virgilio S. Almario, "Writing in Wonderland," in *Bumasa at Lumaya: A Sourcebook on Children's Literature in the Philippines*, ed. Virgilio Almario et al. (Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1994), 26.

8 Malo-Juvera and Hill, 3.

9 Coats, 322.

separate YA from children's literature, it does not establish the boundary between YA and adult literature. In fact, this makes the boundary more problematic. How then do we categorize classics such as *Les Miserable*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and even *Noli Me Tangere*, which all interrogate the dominant social and moral norms of their respective worlds?

Mike Cadden, in his analysis of the formal elements of the children's novel and the YA novel, finds that YA is more closely allied with fiction written for adults than with children's literature. This is because of the YA novel's ability to more fully embrace all the novelistic modes identified by Northrop Frye—irony, comedy, romance, and tragedy, which if anything, are the modes of the adult novel.<sup>10</sup> Cadden further argues that a key factor differentiating the YA novel from the adult novel may not be the mode of the novel per se but the degree in which irony, comedy, romance, and tragedy manifest themselves in YA. Hence, Cadden makes the compelling argument that the YA novel could be a “subset” of the adult novel rather than an entity in itself.<sup>11</sup> Adding to this, I would like to argue that the qualifier identified by Coats—YA's ability to question the workings of the moral universe—is not so much a descriptor of YA literature but of all good literature.

For the critical component of this thesis, I offer few observations from my reading of a select sample of coming-of-age stories both from the West and our own literature in English. The approach to these texts is not purely literary but also cultural. Among the objectives of this discussion is to particularize coming of age as a Philippine experience through an analysis of the social and cultural norms that surround the production of these stories.

The stories collected in the creative component of this thesis feature young characters who interrogate, in one way or another, the various systems that hold sway over their worlds. While the moral universe in

<sup>10</sup> Using Frye as his framework, Cadden looks at the novelistic—i.e., formal—qualities of children's and YA novels. Cadden claims that while it is possible for one to find children's novels in all four modes—irony, comedy, romance, and tragedy—publishers only consistently publish children's novels in the modes of comedy and romance. On the other hand, the YA novel has a healthy sampling of all these modes, especially tragedy and irony. The reader will admit that tragedy and irony are complex novelistic modes, as well as complex themes, that could present an obstacle for a younger readership. YA is very much comfortable with these modes, which is part of the reason why Cadden sees YA literature as skewing to the domain of adult literature more than literature for children. See Mike Cadden, “Genre as Nexus: The Novel for Children and Young Adults,” in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, ed. Shelby A. Wolf et al. (Routledge, 2011), 307.

<sup>11</sup> Cadden, 308.

these stories frequently comes into question, I do not consider these stories YA. The simple reason for this is I did not have a YA readership in mind when I was writing these stories. Hence, the kind of language used in these stories, the construction of the narrative, the violence contained in some scenes, as well as the story's unsaid elements make them more suitable for an adult readership. Instead of labeling these stories YA, I would rather that they be understood, quite simply, as coming-of-age stories.

Coming of age is marked by a host of numerous changes—physical, psychological, and emotional, to name a few. To limit this discussion, I would like to focus on what I feel is the most compelling change that a child encounters in the process of growing up. I argue that a child comes of age once he develops the ability to recognize, even in its most rudimentary form, the difference between good and evil. More often than not, this recognition is occasioned by the entry of evil into the child's world. When confronted with evil for the first time, the child is also able to recognize, by opposition, that which is good. This ability to comprehend good and evil is what allows a child to interrogate the social systems that form part of his or her world's moral universe.

Since good and evil are among some of mankind's most primordial concepts, it is fitting to preface the discussion on coming of age with myth. In the Book of Genesis—a text the majority of Filipino children grow up with—it is said that prior to their encounter with the serpent, Adam and Eve enjoy immortal life in the Garden of Eden. They commune with all of creation and are therefore in communion with the Creator Himself.

Mircea Eliade explains that Paradise in the Christian tradition is understood as an actual world, where “heaven is depicted as *in illo tempore*, very close to the Earth.”<sup>12</sup> God's presence permeates through the entirety of the Garden of Eden, making it appear as though the Creator and Paradise are one and the same thing. Similarly, Joseph Campbell describes Paradise as a “Garden of Timeless Unity”<sup>13</sup> where God, man, and all of creation exist as a single, immutable whole.

12 Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 59.

13 In the term “Garden of Timeless Unity,” Campbell uses the word “Timeless” to mean “without time.” In his explanation, the Biblical Garden of Eden is a place suspended in an eternal present, free from the powers of time. It is also a place where all of Creation is inextricably joined with the Creator in a singular and total Unity, which is eventually upended by the Fall of Man. This Unity ceases, and Man now lives in a world of multiple dualities. See Campbell and Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (Anchor Books, 1988), 56.

The Book of Genesis tells us that the Fall of Man is brought about by a transgression on the part of Adam and Eve. As the familiar story goes, Adam and Eve eat of the Forbidden Fruit. After doing so, both are immediately expelled from the Garden of Eden, causing a great distance to yawn between man and God. Formerly *in illo tempore*, Paradise becomes depicted as remote and inaccessible.

One will recall that the fruit eaten by Adam and Eve comes from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Campbell qualifies that the knowledge Adam and Eve receive after eating the Forbidden Fruit is not evil *per se*, nor is it evil as is commonly understood today. Rather, the eating of the Forbidden Fruit gives Adam and Eve an awareness of duality in the world.<sup>14</sup> This duality fragments the unity of the Edenic Paradise, allowing Adam and Eve to perceive the world in terms of opposites—God and man, male and female, good and evil. Hence, it can be said that Paradise is lost to man at the price of knowledge, and part of this knowledge is the knowledge of good and evil.

At this point, it would be helpful to draw parallels between the Biblical Fall, on the one hand, and the lived experience of childhood and growing up on the other. When a child enters the world, he perceives it as a single whole, populated only by himself and his basic desires. According to Sigmund Freud, a child is largely composed of the id—that part of our psyche that is primitive, sexual, and aggressive.<sup>15</sup> Freud further claims that children, by virtue of their being ruled by the id, are primarily pleasure seekers who seek gratification where they can immediately find it.<sup>16</sup> For a child, this means seeking pleasure in various body parts—the mouth, the anus, and the genitals—which become sites of sexual pleasure throughout the stages of a child's development.<sup>17</sup>

When the child begins to comprehend the existence of his parents, he becomes aware of entities separate from and outside himself. Like

14 Campbell and Moyers, 55.

15 Freud's most important contribution to psychology is his theory of personality, which divides the human psyche into three parts: namely, the id, the ego, and the superego. A brief summary of this theory can be found in the website Simply Psychology. See Saul Macleod, "Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego: Definition and Examples," Simply Psychology, accessed March 8, 2023, <https://simplypsychology.org/psyche.html>.

16 Charlotte Nickerson, "Freud's Theory of Id in Psychology," Simple Psychology, accessed February 15, 2023, <https://simplypsychology.org/what-is-the-id.html>.

17 Freud identifies five stages in the psychosexual development of child: the Oral, Anal, Phallic, Latent, and Genital. In each stage, a child identifies a particular part of his or her body as the locus of sexual pleasure. A summary of this theory can be found in the website Simply Psychology. See Saul Macleod, "Freud's Psychosexual Theory and 5 Stages of Human Development," Simply Psychology, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://simplypsychology.org/psychosexual.html>.



Adam and Eve, the child receives the understanding that the world is not a singular unity composed only of himself but a set of dualities, the most evident of which is that of the self and the other—the other being the child’s parents.

Parents play an important role in curbing the child’s primal desires. A child’s instinctive reaction to his parents preventing him from pursuing his wants is to lash out in anger and aggression. As the child matures, he learns to either repress the id’s basic urges or sublimate them into more acceptable forms. Later on in life, society steps in to take on a role akin to the child’s parents. Social, cultural, and economic norms are employed by society to keep the child’s behavior in check. In the eyes of the child, the numerous prohibitions imposed by both his parents and society can be seen as evil in that these prevent him from pursuing that which satiates him and makes him happy.

The Western canon is replete with works depicting children prevented by either their parents or society from pursuing the desires of their hearts. James Joyce’s “Araby” is a classic example of a child protagonist not being able to follow his bliss. In this story, a poor boy goes to a fair to meet a girl he fancies. In the fair, the young narrator overhears a conversation between the girl and her friends. In this clandestine conversation, he is mocked and derided because of his socioeconomic lot in life. When the young girl approaches the narrator and asks if he would like to purchase anything from the fair, the narrator declines and walks away. The narrator does for two reasons. First, because he realizes that he does not have enough money to buy anything from the fair, and second, because of the quiet mockery he has received from no less than the object of his affections. In the span of a hushed conversation, Joyce’s narrator is made clearly aware of the fact that he is not welcome at the fair. In “Araby,” socioeconomic norms prevent the narrator from pursuing his simple joys. With no way to combat the norms that have come in between him and his desires, the narrator is left with no other option but to gaze out into the darkness, his eyes “[burning] with anguish and anger.”<sup>18</sup>

In Joyce’s story, the narrator is denied access to wealthier worlds. As the story comes to an end, the narrator learns the harsh reality that the boundaries between social classes are not easily traversed. More often than not, such boundaries are totally impermeable. Here, the narrator learns an important lesson on the nature of evil and how evil acts through

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18 James Joyce, “Araby,” in *Dubliners* (Dover Publications, Inc. 1991), 19.





social systems, orchestrating them in ways that prevent a person from pursuing his wants and desires.

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* is another example of a coming-of-age story. Unlike the narrator in "Araby," the children in Golding's novel do not merely encounter evil in their world but become sources of evil themselves.

*Lord of the Flies* can be read as a critique of the dominant colonial narrative of Golding's time. As this narrative goes, the West is regarded as the bearer of the light of civilization and is therefore duty-bound to bring this light to the "dark" continents of the world. This means waging war in order to tame the "savage" inhabitants of far-flung lands, thus laying the groundwork for a proper civilization to be established. This civilization-savagery dichotomy aligns with a colonialist view of the world, which narrowly consists of Europe and The Other. This colonial narrative presupposes that prior to the arrival of European explorers, the lands of America, Asia, and Africa were populated by primitive savages incapable of civilization. Golding turns this narrative on its head by planting the seed of savagery in the hearts of well-bred British schoolboys, who, when left to their own devices, are quick to turn savage themselves. I argue that this savagery is a product of an insidious kind of evil that has been lurking in the world of the novel even before the reader picks it up and turns the first page.

At the beginning of the novel, Ralph attempts to lay down a set of rules deemed necessary for the governance of their castaway society. Soon enough, this society splits along tribal lines, with Jack leading a faction of boys loyal to him. The novel takes a turn for the horrific when the boys' primitive instincts emerge. In Freudian terms, the total absence of adult authority on the island constitutes the perfect environment for the id to take over.

Jack and his followers completely give themselves up to their base desires, causing savagery to ensue. This savagery is seen in the boys' preference for tribal anarchy as opposed to any form of rules-based governance. It is also seen in the carnal, almost sexual desire for meat and blood, displayed when Jack and his crew slaughter a pig and devour it in a seemingly orgiastic feast. Small acts of aggression turn into coordinated mob violence, which results in the death of two of the boys. This kind of behavior shocks us only because we, as adult readers, recognize the savagery displayed by the children as something that we have managed to repress through our own process of growing up.

While the Western colonial narrative attributes savagery to societies outside the West, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* ultimately implicates the West as the worst savage of all. At the end of the novel, Ralph runs to the edge of the island in an attempt to escape the bloodlust that has taken hold of all the other boys. He stumbles on the shore and looks up to find a man who is dressed in a navy uniform. Rescue has finally arrived, but the reader is quick to realize that there will be no true salvation for the boys. In the very last sentence of the novel, the uniformed man fixes his eyes on "the trim cruiser in the distance."<sup>19</sup> This detail is the true evil in *Lord of the Flies*. It signals the reader to the existence of a larger war that has been happening off the page. David Lodge, in his reading of *Lord of the Flies*, says that the officer's gaze at the navy cruiser implies "complicity in an institutionalized form of violence—modern warfare—that is equivalent to, as well as different from, the primitive violence of the castaway boys."<sup>20</sup>

War is the great evil present in *Lord of the Flies*. Despite it being revealed only at the end of the novel, I argue that it is present all throughout. Golding's cast of British schoolboys are heirs to a long legacy of warfare, fueled by the West's dreams of empire and colonial expansion. As readers, we understand that the castaway boys are unwitting victims of a bloody history that has been crafted by their forefathers one brutal war after another. As the boys play the game of war on the isolated island, the reader understands that Ralph, Jack, and the rest of the crew may soon take up their places in a real war, this time as grown men. It is clear that those who survive the bloodshed on the island survive not as children but as adults. When Ralph bursts out into tears at the end of the novel, Golding cannot be more correct when he says that Ralph "wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart."<sup>21</sup> It would be good to qualify that the heart being referred to here is an adult heart as well as a Western one.

In these works by Joyce and Golding, the evil that the child encounters is a sociological one, couched in complex systems of economics, power, and culture. These works also show the reader the possible effects of evil once it has entered the world of the child. In "Araby," the child protagonist stoically bears the brunt of evil and is left with no other option but to weep and rage in silence. In *Lord of the Flies*, the stranded

19 William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (Penguin Books, 2016), 202.

20 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (Penguin Books, 1992), 226.

21 Golding, 202.



boys are seen as historic heirs to war, who merely act on their latent desires for bloodshed and violence, thus perpetuating a cycle of evil that they have always been part of.

In “Araby” and *Lord of the Flies*, the kind of evil the child protagonist comes face to face with is one that is far larger than the child himself. One can say that these two stories offer little to no hope of salvation for the child. The only means by which the child character can survive is to push back against this evil with all the force of his will. The reader sees this pushing back in the quiet but seething anger in the eyes of Joyce’s narrator—a detail that is telling of the kind of person the narrator might possibly grow up to become—and Ralph’s more dramatic survival as he runs out to the beach at the end of *Lord of the Flies*. What is troubling about this is that survival for these children means imbibing, at least partially, the very evil that confronts them. As mentioned above, it is clear from these two texts that the children who survive do so as adults and not as children.

These two works of fiction admittedly depict a rather grim version of the coming-of-age experience. In my own writing, I have found myself gravitating to similar texts, particularly because of their powerful depiction of the end of innocence and the beginning of knowledge. Other such texts are Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, William Faulker’s “Barn Burning,” Graham Greene’s “The Basement Room,” and Stephen King’s “The Body.” Despite my personal preference for darker coming-of-age stories, I argue that coming of age, both in literature and in our lives, is not complete without some form of hope, no matter how fleeting that hope is.

A common comment I received during workshops is that my stories tend to be a bit too grim. Given that the stories are built around evil entering the world of a child, I feel that the grimness is warranted. However, it has been suggested that some of the stories could use some levity here and there, if only to counterpoint the bleak atmosphere. I have given this some thought and come to the realization that even the darkest of stories need a moment for the child character, or at least the reader, to see some kind of goodness in the world of the story. After all, the child character in coming-of-age stories, similar to the child character in YA, is one who questions the morality of his or her universe. In this questioning, the child discovers evil but also that which is good. This goodness can be understood as hope.

It was in a college philosophy class that I first encountered the writing of Gabriel Marcel, a French philosopher whose works deal with the phenomenon of hope. Marcel likens hope to the SOS sent out by the crew of a sinking ship.<sup>22</sup> After having exhausted all means of keeping their vessel afloat, the crew sends out an SOS at the face of almost certain death. They have no option but to pin everything they have—the entirety of their physical and psychic existence—onto that SOS. They do so despite fully knowing that there is no assurance that anybody would hear their call for help. The totality of the crew’s conviction in that SOS is hope. Hope is bravery. Hope looks death straight in the face and, with clear-eyed audacity, dares to propose an alternative. In terms of the coming-of-age story, the inevitable end of childhood is analogous to the sinking of Marcel’s ship. But Marcel says that this is still an incomplete understanding of hope. To think of hope as a stubborn nonacceptance of things to come is merely scratching the surface of what hope truly is.

Marcel makes the crucial distinction between “I hope” and “I hope that.” When a terminally ill patient “hopes that,” this means he is hoping that he will be cured of his illness and carry on with life. This kind of hope functions as a refusal to succumb to death. It is an important and perfectly valid refusal, but as per Marcel, it is only the first level of hope. Absolute hope—the “I hope”—is hope that is free from conditions and objectives. When untethered, hope becomes a gracious state of being, where one is able to peacefully accept what is to come, even death. At this point, hope becomes transcendental.<sup>23</sup> It transcends anger and refusal, gifting the dying with the quiet wisdom that we are more than just our bodies and that there is a part of us that will never truly die. It is only through the eyes of hope that we are able to see the entropy of all things around us, including ourselves, with both courage and grace.

Hope is the work of writers. Although I am fond of coming-of-age stories with a dark tenor to them, I must say that the human journey in these stories will not be complete without hope. Perhaps the task of fiction is not simply to lay bare the emotional truths of the lived experience but also to speak of the possibilities arising from these truths. This now brings me to the rationale behind writing stories of childhood and coming of age. I feel that it is important to memorialize

22 Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1964), 145.

23 Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysics of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Henry Regenery Company, 1951), 29–67.

the coming-of-age experience because it is the first of our many encounters with the world's evil, as well as the first of our many encounters with the good.

### **READING AND WRITING THE PHILIPPINE COMING-OF-AGE STORY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF SELECT WORKS FROM PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH**

As one might expect, coming of age in the West is different from coming of age in the Philippines. At this point, it would be good to look at our own body of anglophone literature, which also has numerous examples of the coming-of-age story. While these stories share resonances with their Western counterparts, the Filipino writer mediates the coming-of-age experience with cultural and historic nuances, which are true for the Philippine reality from which these stories emerge. Thus, certain arguments can be made for what can possibly be considered the Philippine coming-of-age story.

In the two-volume anthology *The Children's Hour*, Gemino H. Abad and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo gather several short stories in English written by Filipino writers. These stories feature the themes of childhood and coming of age. The first volume, edited by Abad, brings together works from the older generation of Filipino writers, such as NVM Gonzalez and Gilda Cordero-Fernando. The second volume, edited by Pantoja-Hidalgo, features the works of younger writers, such as Vicente Garcia Groyon and FH Batacan, among others.

While *The Children's Hour* gathers a fine selection of stories about childhood and coming of age, it cannot be considered an exhaustive archive of Philippine coming-of-age literature. In fact, the sparse introductions by both Abad and Pantoja-Hidalgo provide little to no insight into the editorial process employed in the selection of the stories. Absent from both introductions is a clear definition of "stories on childhood," in the case of Abad,<sup>24</sup> and an "initiation story," in the case of Pantoja-Hidalgo.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the editors used two different terms as qualifiers for the stories that appear in this anthology underscores the fact that the theoretical thread that binds the selected stories is loose at best. This leads me to suppose that *The Children's Hour* may have never intended to be anything other

24 Gemino H. Abad, introduction to *The Children's Hour Stories on Childhood*, ed. Gemino H. Abad, vol. 1 (University of the Philippines Press, 2007), vii.

25 Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, introduction to *The Children's Hour Stories on Childhood*, ed. Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, vol. 2 (University of the Philippines Press, 2007), x.