GIRL ON FIRE, GIRL ON DISPLAY: FEMININITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE IN SUZANNE COLLINS'S *THE HUNGER GAMES*

by

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This thesis explores young adult dystopia through the first installment of Suzanne Collins's acclaimed series *The Hunger Games* (2008). A standout in its genre, *The Hunger Games* imagines a post-civil war future in which the wealthy, governing Capitol requires each of twelve outlying districts to send two children to participate in the Hunger Games, a tournament-style fight to the death. Coming from the poorest district, sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen travels to the Capitol—alongside Peeta, the boy tribute from her district—and is immediately thrust into the limelight, forced to grapple with the commodity driven social order and desirability politics. Collins paints a picture of the gendered expectations society places on young girls and portrays Katniss adeptly navigating the gaze of the camera within the arena. By examining Katniss's physical appearance, how she performs gender for the omnipresent audience, the contrast of Katniss's actions with what Peeta can get away with, and Katniss's relationship to the youngest tribute, Rue, this thesis argues for the literary value of young adult dystopia and its ability to illuminate oppressive societal norms. Ultimately, through her nuanced navigation of traditional gender and power structures, Katniss cultivates her own empowerment and serves as a role model for the young adult audience.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Sometime in the winter of 2014, I sat on my family's soft brown couch after school and opened *The Hunger Games* for the first time. I was eleven, which I remember precisely because the thought passed through my head that I was too young to qualify for the Games. For some reason, this reassured me. When the weekend rolled around a couple of days later, I was in deep. My parents had to come extract me from my room for dinner, finding me sitting rigidly upright against the headboard of my bed. It wasn't a relaxing read. This was my first real introduction to a book with stakes. I say I didn't develop anxiety until high school, but I walked into fifth grade on Monday unfocused and with a pit in my stomach, desperate to get my hands on the next book, so I suppose that's debatable. I was utterly engrossed until I finished, at which point I looked for more.

Next came *Divergent* which probably introduced me to grief (if you know, you know). *The Giver*. *Delirium*. *Matched*. *The Testing*. *Legend.* It's funny that I initially didn't know what to write my thesis on, given that this one genre dominated such a formative period of my life, literally and metaphorically. I *thought* about these books—the characters, plots, and endings, good or bad—probably far too often. In fact, *obsessed over* would be much more accurate. I knew logically they were all fictional, nothing to worry about, but I couldn't reconcile my preoccupation with the dystopian words and characters who, at the time, seemed so grown up at sixteen.

Sophomore year of high school, my English class read *Fahrenheit 451*, and I said to my friends that, down the line, *The Hunger Games* would be the dystopian cautionary tale teenagers are forced to read and begrudgingly present group projects on. Now, having engaged in as much contemporary material as possible throughout my undergraduate degree, I am even more

convinced of the inherent value in young adult dystopian literature. It's a genre frequently brushed off as unserious or, as Sean P. Connors puts it, "lowercase 'l' literature," but to me, little else has been as influential (Connors, "Introduction" 6).

Young adult (YA) literature is a genre geared toward readers ages 12-18 which originally emerged in the 1960s with books like *The Outsiders* (1967) and *The Contender* (1967). It has only grown since then, pop culture becoming obsessed with catering to the teenager who occupies the space between young childhood and working adulthood. Next came its sister genre, the YA dystopia. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) is widely credited with merging young adult with dystopia, as Lowry's 12-year-old protagonist grapples with his supposed-utopian society stripping all choice from its inhabitants in an attempt to stop war, poverty, and crime. A waterfall effect commenced in the early 2000s with books like *Uglies* (2005), *The Hunger Games* (2008), and *The Maze Runner* (2009) following in quick succession, each with its own take on an adolescent protagonist taking on various oppressions and rebelling against societal norms. These series and countless more utilize the established YA protagonist model now set in a dystopian world—a country in ruins, a utopian cityscape in disguise, a post-apocalyptic world. Their fights against hidden-in-plain-sight governmental enemies have empowered readers for years now, yet YA is often brushed off by academics, stating it has no real place in the literary canon.

Some young adult novels may be easy to read at a surface level interpretation, but that does not mean they are not rich, underexamined sites of study. Antero Garcia, author of *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature* and Stanford University professor also makes this argument in the essay "Pedagogy of the Demonically Possessed" in which he writes on critical pedagogy and popular literature. In this essay, Garcia advocates for young adult literature in the classroom through the lens of critical pedagogy—that is, examining the power structures,

oppressive regimes, and patterns of inequality present in these novels—as he writes, "Careful and deliberate facilitation of YA discussions in classrooms can help foment a critical consciousness" (Garcia, "Pedagogy" 95). In addition, Garcia acknowledges the impressionability of developing youth and how valuable young adult texts can be due to their accessibility. When combining, these two aspects—teaching accessible texts through a critical lens—young adult literature becomes invaluable.

Connors echoes this sentiment in his own experience teaching classes on young adult literature at the University of Arkansas. In his introduction to *The Politics of Panem*—a compilation of critical essays on *The Hunger Games*—he describes how students had been evidently taught the difference between high and low brow literature, YA falling firmly in the latter. However, when Connors began experimenting with teaching young adult novels coupled with literary theory, the high quality of class discussions and complex themes they explored proved that, when approached with a critical lens, YA is very much capable of contributing to capital "L" Literature. How students approach a book, even an "easy" one, will ultimately dictate what they take out of it, and a well-written YA novel has just as much potential to be examined for depth, important themes, and literary seriousness as one deemed "literary fiction." Not to mention, their more easily digestible prose, often relatable main characters, and emotions accessible to a younger audience make YA prime for, but not limited to, teens and pre-teens.

The dystopian addition to YA offers further opportunity to follow this premise. But, if realistic young adult fiction is discriminated against, her dystopian sister faces it ten-fold, which Connors also addresses in the *Politics of Panem* introduction. Connors foregrounds the criticism YA dystopias have faced since becoming immensely popular in the 21st century, with prominent critic Ruth Graham calling YA trashy, indefensible as real literature, and embarrassing for adults

to read. To counter, Connors cites fantasy author Juliet McKenna who writes that while speculative fiction (a genre that includes science fiction, dystopia, fantasy, and more) may not directly imitate real life, it can use its "magic mirror to reflect the world around us" (Connors, "Introduction" 4). Similarly, fellow Arkansas faculty member Keith Booker contends, "If the main value of literature in general is its ability to make us see the world in new ways, to make us capable of entertaining new and different perspectives on reality, then dystopian fiction is not a marginal genre" (Connors, "I Try to Remember" 138). And, few would encapsulate this idea as well as acclaimed science fiction author Ursula Le Guin:

> For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons, because they are afraid of freedom. (Le Guin 40)

Of course, *The Hunger Games* does not have dragons or magic or many other traditional "fantasy" elements, but it does create an alternate world, landing it in the larger category of speculative fiction, and this is enough for many to dismiss it, claiming its lack of "realism." But, as Le Guin eloquently contends, its precisely this separateness that can illuminate truths in the "real world." Essentially, dystopia's value lies in its reflection on real world problems and allowance for readers to engage in new perspectives within the separate confines of an alternate reality. Like the young adult genre, it is an opportunity to reach under the surface to reveal complex characters, conflicts, and themes.

In the YA dystopian genre, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* has become somewhat of a standout. Though it was hardly the first, it seems to have become the standard to be met, books like *Divergent*, for example, striving for its same star power but falling short. This may be in part due to the astounding success of its movie adaptations, but (despite my personal adoration for them) I am not interested in nor have the tools to analyze the films. Rather, in the following sections I will delve into the first book in the series, demonstrating the desirability politics and gender performance at play that illuminates the ways in which adolescent girls must navigate societal demands of them.

In *The Hunger Games*, Collins presents us with a future, post-civil war United States called Panem which consists of 12 districts of varying wealth and status that serve the ostentatious Capitol. Every year one boy and one girl between ages 12 and 18 from each district are "reaped" to participate in the Hunger Games—a reality television-style fight to the death aimed at reminding the districts of the Capitol's power. In District 12, the poorest of them all, sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen spontaneously volunteers for the Games when her twelve-year-old sister's name is called at the reaping. She goes to the Capitol alongside fellow tribute Peeta and mentor-slash-former-victor Haymitch. Once at the Capitol, all the tributes are interviewed and paraded around, creating excitement and spectacle for the audience before heading into the actual arena.

Katniss goes solo for some time before teaming up with Rue, the twelve-year-old Black girl who reminds Katniss of her sister, Prim. After Rue dies tragically, Katniss moves to find Peeta, taking up the charade of a star-crossed lover and playing up their romance for the audience who can sponsor them by paying for gifts to be sent into the arena. When Katniss and Peeta are the only two left in the arena, Katniss comes up with the plan for them both to commit

suicide by consuming poisonous berries, a stunt that the Gamemakers hastily stop, allowing both to escape as victors. Throughout the remaining two books in the trilogy, Katniss faces backlash for such a display which is deemed an apparent rebellion against the Capitol. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss is thrust back into the Games for the Quarter Quell—a special version in which all tributes are reaped from the existing pool of victors—before being rescued by rebels. By *Mockingjay*, the rebels, led by President Coin of a surprise-District 13, are fully at war with the Capitol, with a traumatized, PTSD-ridden Katniss as the figurehead.

YA critics would call this type of plot uncritical, lacking literary complexity, and, above all, low-brow. In her essay "Against YA," Ruth Graham makes the claim, "YA books present the teenage perspective in a fundamentally uncritical way." I am sure it goes without saying that I am writing this thesis because I disagree. Not only does Katniss's first-person point of view drive the novel's focus on gendered societal standards and illuminate the expectations placed on adolescent girls, but the very world Collins creates in this series is incredibly complex. To foreground its literary merit, Rebecca Seelinger Trites points out several examples of intertextuality—that is, Collins placing her series among its ancestral texts. Trites cites the many similarities to George Orwell's *1984* such as nuclear weapons, impersonalized place names, and a government that manipulates people to hate those whom they had previously loved as one such example and the allusion to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* in the series' third installment *Mockingjay* during which Katniss serves in squad 451 as another. Moreover, Collins borrows names from ancient Rome, Shakespeare, and Greek mythology—Coriolanus (President Snow), Caesar, Seneca, Cinna, Brutus, Castor, Pollux—further integrating *The Hunger Games* into a legacy of "ideologemes about power and who wields it" (Trites 22). Through these connections to significant works with connotations of power struggles and suppression of information,

Collins's work establishes credibility as a dystopia with something important to say, even with its classification of young adult.

Aside from the obvious political power structures present in *The Hunger Games*, Collins has also crafted a complex social order that Katniss is caught in the middle of throughout her time going to the Capitol, in the Games, and in her life afterward. The primary topic of my thesis will consist of examining the social power structures that are deceivingly gendered and the ways Katniss continually contorts herself to fit into them. As a teenage girl, she is constantly subject to contradictory gendered expectations and must don various gender codes to survive. Admittedly, Panem operates on a relatively strict gender binary, highlighted by the Games requiring a pair of tributes from each district consisting of one boy and one girl. When these tributes are primed to be seen in the public eye, instantaneously promoted to celebrity status, they become a key example of this society's ideology. Katniss, for example, as the female in her pairing, has her physical appearance altered drastically to play up her femininity. Capitol society demands Katniss look a certain way even as it creates a distance between her external body and inner identity, showing perhaps the most easily identifiable example of the social (and gendered) power structure Katniss has entered into. Collins has crafted the novel entirely from Katniss's first-person point of view, so the reader gets to see her thought-process and the ways in which her actions often do not match how she feels inside.

Of course, arguably, the higher-stakes example is how Katniss must act. While her physical appearance thus far has served to amplify her femininity, Katniss often subverts the affiliated social roles while she is in the Games. Though the Games may initially appear gender equal, as boy and girl tributes come in equal numbers and are put on a level playing field, it becomes evident quickly that this is not at all the case. Katniss is perpetually aware of the camera

watching her every move and how she appears to an audience, not to mention sponsors who have a direct correlation to her survival. As such, Katniss embraces some typically masculine behaviors, some feminine, and oftentimes a strategic mix of the two in order to show the audience the version of her they want to see. She proves not only her mastery at predicting Capitol desires but the inefficiency of Panem's strict gender binary. Katniss's manipulation of the gender binary to find success in the Games highlights its limitations both within and outside of the text. As a young girl, Katniss has to navigate often contradictory expectations of her, much like teenagers outside of this fictional world.

When contrasted with Peeta, Katniss's hypervigilance and demanding expectations become even more obvious. Her fellow District 12 tribute need not alter his actions to fit specific gender codes at all and in fact continuously adopts feminine ones without any repercussions. Meanwhile, Katniss's intricate gender performance—including leaning into her love affair with Peeta—keeps them both alive through sponsor gifts. The relationship between Peeta and Katniss only further highlights Katniss's need to perform and Peeta's freedom to be himself.

Finally, the character of Rue offers opportunity for multifaceted analysis on race and gender and how Collins crafts innocence. As the youngest a tribute can be is twelve-years-old, the text classifies Rue as the ultimate innocent child even when her fellow competitors are also children. Collins accomplishes this through comparisons to Katniss's sister Prim who is also twelve, but while Rue is described as having dark brown skin and eyes, Prim boasts the wealthier merchant class's blonde hair and blue eyes. My thesis's final section will elaborate on how Collins contends with the element of race and ensures the reader has a different viewing experience than the in-book audience.

My research began as a mechanism to prove the claim I made when I was fifteen: *The Hunger Games* should be taught in schools one day. Using textual close reading and incorporating various theories, this thesis will examine the ways in which Katniss must perform gender to stay alive in a commodity-driven social order. As dystopias act as mirror to reality, allowing readers to see more clearly inequalities in their own lives, Katniss is truly a stand-in for any teenage girl, encouraged to adopt the gender codes society demands from them. Standing at the critical precipice between childhood and adulthood, Katniss represents the illusion of choice so many teenagers face and the juxtaposing demands upon girls to be both youthful and mature. In the present-day political landscape, recognizing these implicit expectations of adolescents and girls in particular is as crucial as ever.

Chapter One: Katniss's Physical Appearance

Beauty is Pain: The Initial Transformation

To be clear, altering a girl's physical appearance once she enters the limelight is not unique to Katniss nor *The Hunger Games* in the slightest. The Hollywood starlet trope, dating back to the early 20th century, features a young woman who, searching for fame, moves to Hollywood and ultimately achieves the rags-to-riches story as she reaches stardom (Sternheimer). This story is not only popular but enduring, demonstrated by the three remakes of *A Star is Born* since the original in 1937 as well as countless other examples across time and mediums. A hallmark of this trope is the makeover: the young protagonist getting a new makeup look, new clothes, and lessons on how to act in her new setting. She effectively becomes a new person—or at least a new version of herself—that is more aligned with the demands of Hollywood rather than her ordinary hometown. Before she truly enters the industry, she must physically change; as such, for girls, beauty precedes everything. This is precisely what occurs for Katniss, the exception being that Katniss did not ask for any of it. "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," as feminist philosopher Judith Butler cites in *Gender Trouble* from Simone de Beauvoir (12). Though, Katniss doesn't become one at her own volition; rather, she is *made*. As she is thrust into the ultra-consumerist, superficial world of the Capitol, Katniss immediately undergoes an intense physical transformation. At the hands of her prep team, Flavius, Octavia, and Venia, Katniss enters the Remake Center for the first step in her evolution to become someone worthy of being paraded around the Capitol. For more than three hours, her team scrubs her body, fixes her nails, and, notably, Venia waxes every bit of hair from Katniss's body. This wouldn't be terribly note-worthy except for Collins's use of violent diction during this scene, which illuminates the brutality of this kind of physical violation.

The scene in the Remake Center begins with the harsh onomatopoeia *"R-i-i-i-p!"* instantly setting the tone as one of violence (61). The dashes interrupting the word prolong the reading experience, thereby connoting that Katniss's pain is similarly drawn out. It is not a word typically associated with beauty and is often used when describing destruction, introducing the idea that Katniss's physical transformation is a kind of brutal deconstructing. The violence continues through Katniss's first-person exposition, both in diction and in the very act she is describing, "I grit my teeth as Venia...yanks a strip of fabric from my leg tearing out the hair beneath it" (61). Collins's imagery in just this one sentence—Katniss gritting her teeth—and diction that further implies this intense pain such as "yanks" and "tearing out," perpetuates the notion of violence against Katniss thinly veiled as a makeover. Once again, several lines later, Venia prompts Katniss, "'Good news, though. This is the last one. Ready?' I get a grip on the edges of the table I'm seated on and nod. The final swathe of my leg hair is uprooted in a painful jerk." (61). The violent diction continues with the imagery of Katniss gripping the edge of the table in attempt to hold herself down as her hair is "uprooted in a painful jerk." The waxing alone is portrayed as violence against Katniss and is emphasized as painful in a way that is not necessary for the plot of the book but rather serves to show the extremity of the makeover process, the violation of her physical body.

But naturally, waxing was not the first thing Katniss endured in the Remake center. Katniss recounts:

> This [time in the Remake center] has included scrubbing down my body with a gritty loam that has removed not only dirt but at least three layers of skin, turning my nails into uniform shapes, and primarily, ridding my body of hair. My legs, arms, torso,

> underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the stuff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting. I don't like it. My skin feels sore and tingling and intensely vulnerable. (61-62)

Employing the same brutal diction and effective imagery, Collins furthers the idea that Katniss's physical transformation is extremely painful. The image of her team scrubbing off "at least three layers of skin" is clear and compelling; even though it is hyperbole, the reader can hypothetically see this scrub eating away at layer after layer of skin, turning it red and raw. Such an image is compounded by Katniss's descriptions of her skin as "sore and tingling and intensely vulnerable," as these emphasize that Katniss feels battered and wounded after her Remake rather than improved. The fact that the process to achieve Capitol standards of beauty requires the physical body to be made vulnerable reveals the true purpose of the Remake center. It is not to truly better the tribute or grace them with the luxury most don't have access to in their district, but to break them down, erase their former sense of self, and make them more susceptible to the Capitol ideology. It would be much more difficult to actively resist the institution of the Games after undergoing this process that leaves Katniss so exposed—not to mention entirely isolated from her family and community.

Still, arguably the most noteworthy phrase in this portion of text is the simile comparing Katniss to "a plucked bird, ready for roasting." Essentially, through the makeover process, Katniss has become something subhuman—an animal that humans often exert power over to the extent of eating them. While the Capitol is of course not going to eat Katniss literally, there is something to be said for the metaphor of making her palatable for Capitol society who does, indeed, consume the media made at her expense. In this initial physical transformation, Collins

pulls no punches in laying out that such a process is dehumanizing and aims to strip Katniss of her sense of self when she is left without even meager metaphorical feathers for protection. She is naked, vulnerable, and ready to be consumed by Capitol society who now finds her appealing. So, if there was ever a question, the presence of the Remake center and Katniss's violation at its hands is, of course, not for the betterment of the tribute at all, but rather a place to mold young, impressionable people to fit Capitol society's ideologies. The Capitol considers the makeover a process of turning barbarian District children into what they deem "real" people—desirable, idolized celebrities. Katniss's descriptions are hardly humanizing though, and in fact paint a clear picture in opposition, pointing to the palatable, no longer human thing she has been turned into. Free of any body hair, skin still stinging from the foreign wax, Katniss is finally ready to be roasted: ready to walk on their stages, enter the arena, and be devoured by the audience.

The Games themselves are supposed to be the "violence" of *The Hunger Games*, at least literally, but entrenched in the world that has created an institution such as the Games lies another type of assault, one that Katniss is only beginning to experience in her first makeover. On the surface, Katniss is required to look beautiful; being from such a poor district and not having access to the Capitol beauty regimen, she needs a makeover. However, what separates Katniss's experience from the traditional makeover trope one might be colloquially acquainted with is how the text maintains that it is not simply to beautify her but to deconstruct her sense of self, leaving her bare and ready to be molded accordingly. It's no coincidence that where Katniss undergoes her physical transformation is not called a studio or dressing room but the Remake Center. As a proper noun that indicates an official name—it's not just something Katniss calls it mockingly—the Remake Center is intentional and precise, directly stating its goal to erase what the tributes once were and remake them in the Capitol image. When the prep team is finally done

with their work, Flavius steps back, looking Katniss over, and says, "Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!" (62). It's this offhand comment that illustrates the goal to tear down and reconstruct. In a mere few words, Flavius establishes three things: that Katniss was not human before, that she is *almost* human now post makeover, and that the process of beautifying her through waxing, tweezing, and scrubbing is responsible for this change. They've managed to effectively erase all that they deem unfit. Obviously, Katniss is objectively as human now as she was before in District 12, but Flavius, as an extension of the Capitol, has a different definition: human equals beautiful, and in the Capitol you're not the former until you're the latter. This different definition of human requires a violation of Katniss's physical body, stripping painfully her former *unbeautiful* self that is intimately tied to her life in 12. The team has remade her, she is now deemed human by Capitol standards (or nearly so), but doing so has created a gap between Katniss's exterior and interior, her identity clashing with her bare and vulnerable physical state. As such, this is a further violation of Katniss, creating this distance simply for the sake of beauty.

In her first chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler establishes gender as a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). While Collins certainly shows the repeated stylization of Katniss's body in attempt to make her into the image of a girl desired by the Capitol, we can see that there is nothing natural about the end product. Showcasing one of the ways Katniss's first-person point of view is crucial to illuminating the complexities in Collins's work, the reader is perpetually aware of Katniss's discomfort and violation. We are not allowed the same ignorance as the Capitol audience—a

theme that will remain important—and as a result, it is excessively clear that Katniss's newly gendered form is rigidly constructed, not natural at all.

The Mannequin Effect: Katniss's Costuming and Interviews

Soon after Katniss's initial transformation, the first tribute interviews are on the horizon, and Katniss's physical appearance is as crucial as ever. As Katniss experiences preparing for her first interview with Caesar Flickerman, the text has the effect of fracturing her and pulling her farther away from her pre-Capitol identity, furthering the gap the Remake Center created. While she grapples with how to present herself in the interview, it is clear here that Katniss's physical appearance is arguably even more important than anything she says or doesn't say. Her beautification begins with Katniss thinking, "Maybe he [Cinna, her stylist] can make me look so wonderful, no one will care what comes out of my mouth," indicating that, like the initial tribute parade, the interview is another opportunity for the tributes to engage in spectacle, to sell themselves as a commodity to an audience that plays a significant part in who lives and dies in the Games through sponsorships (119). Thus, with her ultimate goal of survival, Katniss too must look the part of the Capitol doll, a distinctly uncanny image of a human whose faults have been precisely smoothed over. Katniss describes, "The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails" (119-120). The turning of her skin to satin represents a transition from the natural, skin, to artificial, fabric. By transforming her skin so, Katniss herself is being molded into something artificial, representing the Capitol's aim to deconstruct and reinvent her physical body into something the Capitol and its audience can consume.

Furthermore, Katniss narrates, "They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out," illustrating the same theme. The text spells it out by using the word

"erase," conveying that Katniss's various makeovers are not merely adding beauty but taking away something, too, and by doing this, the makeover necessitates the dissolution of her former identity. The small detail of "pale" makeup speaks to this as well, since Katniss is described as having olive skin which almost always refers to a darker color, at least a tan, relating how her makeover separates Katniss's physical appearance from her actual identity. This also, however subtly, sets up whiteness as the center of Capitol beauty standards. In addition, "draw" has a connotation of artistry, making Katniss's face the canvas—something for her team to take liberty with and fill in as they see fit. Once again, at the hands of the text and strategically chosen diction, Katniss becomes something artificial and without agency. The language in the text highlights Katniss's physical turn from her natural self to an artificial version of it: one that looks almost the same but more refined, polished, and perfect. When Katniss is transformed in this way, she is essentially a mannequin—a still, human-like but entirely faultless doll for her team, stylist, and anyone else to dress up how they want, and her relative powerlessness allows for it. In a completely new environment and having been told not to object, Katniss becomes perfectly malleable, and in this process the gap between her inner identity and external physicality grows.

In addition to erasing Katniss's identity through turning her into something artificial, the text also fragments her in this section, often describing only parts of her body or using preternatural diction. The scene in which the prep team does Katniss's makeup begins this effect when the text reads, "Huge dark eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink" (120). This sentence is not a complete independent clause but rather a fragment composed of several dependent ones. In this sense, syntactically the sentence mimics its lack of a subject performing action. This sentence is made up of three nouns and their associated descriptors, the last of which includes the relative pronoun "that" which cannot make a complete sentence on its

own. This is a form of passive voice that eliminates the subject, rendering it invisible. Therefore, instead of implicating Katniss as the subject and the owner of said eyes, lips, and lashes, the text omits her and instead focuses only on her features. The effect of this is that the text describes Katniss only as the culmination of these features which are all described separately. Katniss and her body parts become largely disconnected, and she is diminished to only the sum of parts rather than a whole human. Earlier in the novel Flavius revealed the Capitol's different definition of "human" which is strictly aesthetically pleasing. However, this sentence indicates the makeover may go further than this. Now, Katniss's stylization doesn't just create a new, beautiful version of her but deconstructs her physical body into its individual pieces in such a way that takes away her subjecthood. When Katniss isn't the subject in a sentence about her own body—indeed there is no subject at all—it becomes clear that the makeover, and the Capitol itself, is more invested in these features than whom they are attached to. In fact, they need not be attached to anything at all; the sentence doesn't need a subject and the beauty doesn't need a real human but merely a host, which the makeover turns Katniss into.

Once Katniss is fully costumed for her first interview, she looks in the mirror and absorbs her reflection; it is this point that further cements the makeover's separating Katniss from her humanness. Immediately after opening her eyes, Katniss uses excessively otherworldly diction to describe herself:

> The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror
> has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash
> and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my
> dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered in reflective precious gems,
> red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of

the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.

I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun. (120-121)

Through utilizing diction that leans into this alien, otherworldly feeling Katniss describes in the first sentence, Collins explores Katniss's inner feelings about her physical transformation now at its peak for her interview. At first glance, it appears as though Katniss calls herself a creature, though it's notable that she doesn't make this comparison explicitly. Rather, she says "the creature standing before me," indicating that the person in the mirror is not herself at all but another entity. This idea is compounded by the second sentence where we are faced with another incomplete sentence: "where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels." However, this time it is a dependent clause, so while it cannot stand on its own, there are subjects and verbs. Still, like the previous example, this sentence omits Katniss as a subject, instead having "skin" and "eyes" perform their respective actions rather than Katniss, the body they are attached to. As a result of her immense physical makeover, the text gives subjecthood to Katniss's newly beautified skin and eyes rather than Katniss herself. She is no longer an active agent regarding her own body, implying that her body is more important than she is, as she is not active in this sentence whereas her features are subjects.

Additionally, the second paragraph is comprised of three sentences; the first two are simple and mirror each other while the third is extended through simile, a comparative phrase acting as the predicate adjective. In this short passage, "I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun," the first two descriptors, "pretty" and "beautiful" are very traditional adjectives often attributed to humans. They are complimentary without being extravagant.

Meanwhile, the third sentence stands in sharp contrast, reversing the repetition of "I am not" to an affirmative "I am," when Katniss is not only described as radiant but is also compared to the epic celestial body of the sun. "Radiant" as the key descriptor—meaning glowing brightly or radiating beams of light—is a much different kind of adjective than the mundane, humanistic "pretty" or "beautiful." And she is literally likened to something otherworldly here: the sun. Set next to these ordinary adjectives, the final metaphor emphasizes Katniss's turn toward the supernatural, and, as a whole, these last three sentences underscore the impact of Katniss's makeover, its altering of her physical body to the point of inhumanity.

Specifically in this first pre-Games interview, Katniss experiences this styling at the hands of her Capitol prep team. In a process completely foreign to her, she is systematically deconstructed and strategically revitalized in a perfectly unblemished Capitol-appropriate image. It's this tension between what Katniss's identity has been for the previous sixteen years and her new one courtesy of the spectacle required of the tributes that the text highlights through the syntax and artificial, otherworldly diction described above. However, the question of why remains. Why is the Capitol makeover so crucial, and why does it go beyond simply making her beautiful, aiming to actually erase parts of her and paint them anew? While there is almost certainly not just one correct answer, Katniss's post-Games interview makes a compelling case that Katniss's physical appearance is just one way the Capitol attempts to preserve its carefully crafted control over the tributes and Panem at large.

A Sexy Baby: Oscillation Between Child and Adult

At the end of the first book, after the conclusion of the Games, Katniss faces her exit interview as a victor where she is unsurprisingly met with a similar makeover process. However, what sets the post-Games interview apart from its predecessor is that now, the Capitol has a

specific aim and a narrative to control. At the end of the Games, Katniss proposed the idea to Peeta that they both eat poisonous berries since the Gamemakers revoked the rule that both of them, being from the same district, could win. Within the Games themselves, the Capitol could not control Katniss's actions nor how she presented herself to the audience, but, pulled back into reality, the makeover is enlisted once again to attempt to control the teenager inadvertently sparking rebellion.

The novel establishes early that the tributes should fit in a niche. When Katniss is preparing for her first interview, she and Haymitch struggle coming up with a way that Katniss should present herself—vulnerable or funny or sexy or mysterious—and Katniss specifically notices which category the girl from District 1 fits into: "You can tell her mentor didn't have any trouble coming up with an angle for her...she's sexy all the way" (125). And, even in this passing thought, it is specifically the stylist choosing the "angle" for the girl from 1, establishing that costuming and styling is especially crucial to how a tribute presents. The Capitol encourages choosing an adjective to embody, urges tributes to sort themselves through arbitrary definitions—uncoincidentally one of the defining characteristics of many YA dystopias—as it makes control more easily attainable.

It is not surprising, then, that when the Capitol wants to control how the public perceives Katniss more than ever after the Games, the importance of her physical appearance is revived one final time (in book one, that is). With less than two chapters left, Collins reminds the audience of the importance of Katniss's physical appearance and what it can represent. Several days after the conclusion of the Games, Katniss's physical ailments are once again swept away, scars even from before the arena having "vanished without a trace" (351). Katniss notes, "My forehead feels like satin," referencing her first interview and the similarly artificial language

surrounding her physique, making clear the goal to erase any evidence of the Games and allowing for the audience to forget the trauma inflicted (351). Even before she gets on stage, Flavius confirms the makeover's success as he comments, enviously, "Oh they did a full body polish on you...Not a flaw left on your skin," (353). In an obvious disregard for her weeks of torture, Flavius exemplifies his status as a mere extension of the Capitol when he passes over Katniss's act of desperation in the Games and struggling mental wellbeing to focus purely on her physical aesthetics.

However, the pinnacle of this theme is epitomized when Cinna brings in Katniss's dress for her final interview. Immediately, she notices "the padding over my breasts, adding curves that hunger has stolen from my body" to which Cinna responds, unprompted, "I know... but the Gamemakers wanted to alter you surgically. Haymitch had a huge fight with them over it. This was the compromise" (354). Firstly, it becomes exceedingly clear that the Capitol Gamemakers have a stake in how Katniss physically appears, given their desire to, presumably, surgically enhance her breasts. Ignoring the wildly inappropriate nature of this as Katniss is only sixteen years old, it is also significant that Katniss had no knowledge of this—rather, it was Haymitch influencing the decision on her behalf. Such a power dynamic underscores how little agency Katniss really has, particularly when considering her physical appearance, and perpetuates the idea that, in the Capitol, Katniss becomes little more than a mannequin, a bare slate to be styled by whomever gains the power to do so. She just so happens to get lucky with Haymitch genuinely having her best interests in mind. In addition, we must ask why, at this stage, post-Games, the Gamemakers, and by extension the Capitol, want to surgically enhance Katniss. Part of the answer likely lies in the Capitol's valuing of artificial beauty and wanting Katniss to fit the part, therefore further distancing her from her unsightly, barbaric home in 12 that has defined her

identity and survival instincts. Still, the text suggests that there may be more at play here by hinting at the harsh dichotomy between child and adult—a division Katniss sits conveniently on the cusp of.

To further analyze Katniss's final interview, I will first turn to Professor Sut Jhally at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who directed the documentary *The Codes of Gender* (2009) in which he delves into advertising industry's strategic stylization of bodies. He begins by emphasizing that the current cultural system is entirely dependent upon the categories of male and female being clearly defined, but that this distinction is not natural or inherently biological. Rather, we perform the gender roles social convention expects from us. Consequently, the human body becomes a medium of communication through our culturally developed gender codes in a kind of shared, shorthand language. A subsection of this documentary that is especially prevalent here is the feminine infantilization. Jhally explains that female bodies are very often positioned in infantilized ways such as laying down in a similar manner to the fetal position or sticking their fingers in their mouths, albeit in a sexual manner. Female bodies are often the canvas for mixing adult sexuality with childhood associated with innocence. In Jhally's words, "women, even adult women, never leave girlhood behind," and the image of a young girl has become the stand in for womanhood (*The Codes of Gender*). *The Hunger Games* is a unique site for analysis of this subject, given that the tributes are all children; Katniss may not be a "little girl" but she is not an adult either. However, to control their narrative, the Capitol attempts to make the audience forget Katniss's youth.

In Katniss's final interview outfit, the Capitol attempts to style her to appear mature and sexual while Cinna effectively resists by making her look even younger than she is, a feat he achieves solely through costuming. Katniss describes, "The sleeveless dress is gathered at my

ribs, not my waist, largely eliminating any help the padding would have given my figure," the latter clause pointing to the intentionality on Cinna's part to push back against how the Gamemakers want to portray her (355). The hem falls just to the knees, and she wears distinctly flat sandals, leaving Katniss to think, "Without heels, you can see my true stature. I look, very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless" (355). It's not difficult to discern that Cinna wants to show Katniss's youth here, but it's important to note that different groups want Katniss, physically, to look differently, and, once again, the question becomes, why? The Capitol wants to make her breasts look bigger, and even Katniss admits she thought her outfit would be "more...sophisticated," a thinly veiled euphemism for less youthful and more mature. It's unclear exactly why the Capitol wants to surgically enhance Katniss, but given that they are trying to subdue unrest and control a narrative, it's not surprising that they do not want her looking like the innocent child they threw in the arena—that is, someone easy to sympathize with. Meanwhile, Cinna attempts to minimize Katniss to an unsuspecting young girl, an image much more difficult to hold accountable for inciting revolution. Katniss's physical appearance and costuming has always been a control mechanism, and even as Cinna uses them for the "good" cause, the sixteen-year-old becomes a medium for conflict as different sides attempt to control how she looks. Initially, Katniss is paraded (literally) around in her fiery all-black body suit, making her look fiercely competitive. It earns her the nickname "the girl who was on fire," turning her into the biggest spectacle out of the tributes, and certainly an intimidating one. But now, at quite the contrast, Katniss herself says she looks a mere fourteen. All of these competing ways to portray Katniss insinuate that a girl of sixteen—the cusp between childhood and adulthood—has the ability to present either way, and in the final interview costume, childhood innocence and adult maturity collapse entirely. Theoretically, this is a

strength for Katniss, to be able to present herself according to the circumstances as either naïve or strategic, except that she never has any actual agency over her appearance. Indeed, she can't even figure out exactly what Cinna has done in this final scene except that it is calculated in some way. Therefore, while Cinna is undoubtedly the good side to the Capitol's evil, this scene nevertheless highlights Katniss's perpetual lack of autonomy.

In this final section of Chapter One, having ample evidence for the ways in which extensions of the Capitol influence Katniss's physical appearance and how her makeover and various costuming illuminates nuances in Katniss's lack of agency, it was my goal to delve deeper into the Capitol's potential motives and why this matters at all. It's one thing for a young girl to be thrust into the spotlight and become the subject of a transformative physical makeover; this is common in lots of popular media. *The Hunger Games*, though, illustrates how destructive the process can be. With special attention to the aspects of gender and age, Collins highlights how the Capitol uses Katniss's physical appearance as a control mechanism, making her appear either mature or childlike at will. Katniss's body is posited as a battleground for ideologies, a weapon to wield in the power of perception as Collins proves that Haymitch's words are indeed true: "It's all how you're perceived" (135).

Chapter 2: Gender Performance

Man Up: Stifling Femininity in the Games

The Capitol itself, as a dystopian creation, is a unique mix of something set apart from reality and simultaneously mirroring it. In many ways, it defies traditional gender norms, as men and women are invited and encouraged to engage in flamboyant makeup, costume, and surgical enhancements. In addition, the male and female tributes in the Games are put on a single playing field, with both male and female winners emerging in the past 74 years. To the untrained eye, it may even appear as though they are equals in the Games. Of course, as this chapter will showcase, this is not true. Katniss must pay constant attention to the cameras in the arena and how the audience could be perceiving her at any given moment. She hides her emotions with the goal of appearing strong and gaining sponsors. In other words, Katniss works to portray traditionally masculine traits of power, agency, and stoicism, demonstrating the importance of brute strength to sponsors. For Katniss, though, this is not all that matters; it would never be as simple as that. In fact, the audience nevertheless desires to see the opposite, too—to see Katniss embody the submission, vulnerability, and innocence associated with the gender codes of femininity. Butler argues that "gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence," and in this chapter I will show how Katniss proves this to be simultaneously true and lacking (33). Certainly, Katniss performs gender, specifically femininity, in ways society wants to see. Though, according to Butler, this gender performance is mostly subconscious, prompted by societal expectations. We do not choose but rather are *compelled* to act in accordance with our perceived gender. However, Collins depicts Katniss choosing to alter her actions depending on what the situation calls for—Katniss utilizes both traditionally masculine traits and feminine ones, and even combines them, creating an alternative

way to navigate the gender binary in the Games. Therefore, while Butler's claim may fully encapsulate real-world experiences, perhaps there is something about the arena that allows for these once subconscious gender performances to become conscious, strategic choices. When such performances become active rather than passive, Katniss gains agency and power over her own perception.

Collins demonstrates over and over how Katniss's knowledge of the cameras dictates her behavior, as she is constantly aware of those watching her and what they want from her. Because of this, she knows to stifle any signs of weakness in order to uphold the justification for the Games and keep the audience blissfully unquestioning. For the Games to even exist, society has to hold two fundamentally contradictory ideas as truth: that girls are strong enough to compete with boys (and the consequent desire to see that strength) and that girls are inherently defenseless and submissive (and the corresponding desire to see those gender codes ratified). For all Katniss's cluelessness in how to act in her pre-Games interview, she understands this naturally and, as a result, manipulates the different narratives at play in the Games. Adopting different gender-codes at will, Katniss commodifies herself into an appealing prospect for the audience, keeping herself desirable...and alive. As such, the audience is able to come to terms with the ability for female tributes to project strength and fight evenly with their male counterparts. If a girl shows weakness or an inability to cope with the violence, the institution falls apart as the audience can no longer reckon with the choices of the Capitol; it can no longer make sense to them. Recognizing, either explicitly or subconsciously, the audience's hunger to uphold the Games they take pleasure in watching, Katniss strategically masks her emotions that would typically be classified as feminine. As Sut Jhally explains in *Codes of Gender*, female bodies are generally posited as defenseless and powerless—these are the connotations society associates

with women and femininity. Katniss subverts these expectations in two ways: hiding her emotions and consistently showing action to the camera.

The former begins the first night when Katniss climbs a tree and overhears the Career tributes with Peeta down below. She hears them scheming and thinks, “Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I’d better at least act on top of things. Not perplexed. Certainly not confused or frightened” (164). Here, Katniss exhibits her awareness of what the audience wants to see and uses diction specifically associated with performance—how she should “play” it and how she should “act.” These word choices reveal Katniss’s intentional performance, masking her weakness, confusion, or fear in favor of portraying the strength the audience craves. They don’t want to see any ineptitude, anything that would crack the fragile mechanics that justify the Games and allow them to continue. In addition, the connection between Katniss’s outward emotions and the audience’s desires becomes even clearer shortly thereafter when Katniss is struck with an artificial fireball. As she struggles with her injury, she narrates, “I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I can’t show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help” (179). Not only does Katniss explicitly state that she “can’t show weakness,” but the end fragment perfectly illustrates that statement’s relationship to the audience. “Not if I want help” is the clearest link yet to the audience’s desire to see strength in the tributes and their subsequent desire to reward them as sponsors. However, despite Katniss’s word choice, what she truly wants is not help but a reward for a proper performance. If the audience knew she needed *help*, this would only imply weakness, so Katniss is careful to cater to the spectator’s ego curated by their ability to bestow rewards. The relationship between tributes and sponsors will be more fully fleshed out later, but this quote is important here for its direct

depiction of Katniss's need to appear strong and stoic and her choosing to adopt what would typically be seen as masculine gender codes.

Furthermore, Katniss's awareness of the camera spurs her into action, emphasizing the agency she embodies throughout the Games to please the audience. Recalling *Codes of Gender* once more, the male body is typically positioned as powerful and able to act at any moment, thereby defining such traits as prominent masculine gender codes. Katniss personifies these strategically while simultaneously being aware of the camera. For example, right after Katniss overhears the Careers and Peeta from her spot in the tree, she shimmies down and drops to the ground, allowing the camera to find her once again as she describes, "I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!" (164). Katniss's exclamations here make her intent clear: to exert influence over the audience in their perception of her own narrative. While it's a small thing, a mere tilt of the head and slight mouth movement, this piece of action makes Katniss an active subject in the narrative the Games create. Rather than ignoring the cameras that are inevitably watching her, allowing herself to become a passive object for the audience to look at, Katniss looks *back* by giving the audience intentional action to decipher. Moreover, the word choice of "knowing smile" lends itself to Katniss's agency, too. She gives the impression that she knows something the audience doesn't, putting herself in a paradoxical position of power.

Still, it would be too simplistic to fit Katniss entirely into the masculine category now when there are feminine tropes at work, too. Katniss does showcase her agency to garner confidence from the audience, but she also plays into her own girlhood. For example, Jhally cites the "body cant" as a prominent feminine trope in advertising—that is, some part of the female body, often at the neck, waist, or knee, is twisted awkwardly, marking them as defenseless. When

Katniss cocks her head at the camera, body canting, she reminds the audience of her inherent femininity while simultaneously showing confidence and power to the camera. Her smile is another example, as she prompts the audience to recall the image of a personable girl they want to see from a female tribute. In this sense, though Katniss showcases her agency which would typically be seen as masculine, she balances it with her head cant and smile, drawing upon feminine gender codes as well. Panem's gender binary doesn't allow for a tribute to occupy both of these spaces simultaneously, yet Katniss does so repeatedly, and this largely contributes to her success.

Moreover, in this scene, one can see that the *Hunger Games* arena functions similarly to Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon—an idealized prison consisting of one tall guard tower in the middle and segmented cells in a circle around it, all illuminated from behind. In theory, inmates cannot physically see anyone surveilling them but know that it may be occurring perpetually. Because of this, there need not be anyone actually in the guard tower; inmates will act as if there is, regardless. Michel Foucault elaborates upon Bentham's Panopticon in his chapter "Panopticism" which turns the prison into a generalized mode of surveillance of which the major effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures automatic functioning of power" (6). The tributes in the arena are similarly under permanent visibility, and it is also unverifiable—another principle of the Panopticon Foucault lays out and defines: "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (6). By looking into the camera, assured of the possibility that someone could always be watching, invisible as they are to her, Katniss pushes back against the arena's panoptic power over the tributes. In addition, this act of intentionally trying to communicate with the audience again disrupts the Panopticon's scheme of

power. As Foucault describes of the inmate, “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (5). For an average tribute going about the Games unaware of the cameras, this is certainly true, but not for Katniss. She turns herself into a subject of communication despite the unverifiable surveillance, using the panoptic structure for her own gain.

Katniss’s ability to act for the camera is not confined to situations where she is alone, either; she also showcases this agency even around her fellow tributes, further bolstering a fearless image. On a separate occasion, Katniss has again taken refuge in a tree, and this time, the Careers find her, standing below eager to knock out their competition. This interaction begins with Katniss initiating conversation:

> Now I smile. “How’s everything with you?” I call down cheerfully. This takes them aback, but I know the crowd will love it.
>
> “Well enough,” says the boy from District 2. “Yourself?”
>
> “It’s been a bit warm for my taste,” I say. I can almost hear the laughter from the Capitol. “The air’s better up here. Why don’t you come up?” (181-182)

The mere fact that Katniss opens the dialogue asserts that she holds the power; she doesn’t cower or hide but faces the Careers head on. In response to her first question, Katniss relates that the Career crowd is taken aback—her forwardness is surprising as she is actively defying the gender norm of feminine passivity and powerlessness. Meanwhile, Katniss also knows that the Capitol will love her display of power, indicating that this is the very subversion of typical gender roles that the audience craves in the Games. Her ease of conversing only adds to the effect, as her

irreverent dialogue shows a level of agency and confidence that would definitely be unexpected for the defenseless, submissive subject she was initially Remade to be.

And Katniss's action doesn't stop here. She provokes Cato into trying to climb after her which she knows will fail due to his much larger size. At this, she also resumes her ascent, this time physically showing her ability to act and defend herself from the obvious threat. Not to mention, she is quite literally positioned above the Careers, asserting Katniss as superior, strong, and capable. Finally, when Cato inevitably fails, Glimmer uses the bow and arrow to shoot at Katniss, lodging an arrow in the tree trunk that Katniss then grabs and waves above Glimmer's head in a taunt, another showing of action rather than passivity. From her dialogue to taunting Glimmer with the arrow, Katniss puts on a performance for the audience: she simultaneously hides her weakness due to her burned leg and puts on an act of confidence, power, and agency that she knows the audience will love. In a scene during which Katniss could've easily shrunk back, hidden, and stayed silent, Katniss turns herself into an active subject for the audience's appreciation.

Still, Katniss's assertion of dominance over the Careers in this scene could also be read as a feminine performance of power. Her tactics of first evading Cato by climbing higher in the tree and then taunting Glimmer with the arrow are not overt acts of aggression or brute strength but rather subtle maneuverings that elevate Katniss to a position of relative power. Her friendliness, too, even if its ingenuine, props up Katniss's lean toward the feminine when she portrays the exact opposite of stoicism. This is to say, while Katniss's agency in the tree and speaking to the Careers could be argued as traditionally masculine, when combined with Katniss's other, more subtle actions, this scene illuminates the ways Katniss challenges Panem's simplistic gender binary. She finds a way to assert dominance without simply being stoic and foreboding,

redefining what a girl can be in the Games. This mixing of masculine and feminine traits creates a space between the dichotomy of masculine and feminine, expanding the very definitions of these categories in the novel.

Nevertheless, despite Katniss's performances of confidence, agency, and stoicism which echoes Jhally's coding of masculinity while incorporating more feminine nuance, the classic notion of femininity as sensual, caring, and passive remains an expectation for Collins's protagonist. As Jhally calls attention to, there are plenty of new-age female superheroes in pop culture that appear to defy traditional gender norms by portraying traits of power, confidence, and the ability to act. However, these traditional gender codes are ultimately never far from the surface; in fact, these powerful women are really only allowed to be powerful if they make up for it in some capacity—if she, in some way, conforms and shows a level of submissiveness, and ideally seductiveness, toward a male counterpart. Sometimes this effect can be ironic, and sometimes not, but isn't the fact that it happens at all a concession to the way these gender codes work in real life? Like a female superhero, Katniss saves herself and others throughout the Games, earning her a stellar heroic reputation, but she must inevitably yield this gender performance to feminine conformity.

Reviving Juliet: Becoming the Star-Crossed Lover

For all Katniss's work to appear strong, active, and in control, the tides turn completely when Peeta enters the equation. In the blink of an eye, she sheds her stoicism and takes on the caretaker role in her interactions with her alleged lover. In Sean P. Connors's essay, "'I Try to Remember Who I am and Who I Am Not': The Subjugation of Nature and Women in *The Hunger Games*," he introduces two ideologies present in modern feminist theory: Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia. Girl Power embodies the "'new girl': assertive, dynamic, and unbound from

the constraints of passive femininity" (Connors, "I Try to Remember" 137). In contrast, Reviving Ophelia attempts to draw focus to the dangers of social pressures that come with being this modern woman, instead preaching the vulnerability and fragility inherent to girls. In all their complexity, these two theories aren't mutually exclusive, but in simplistic terms, they do sit on opposite sides of a spectrum on how society views women. Up until now, this section has focused on Katniss's Girl Power: she enters the games with many traditionally masculine traits and interests such as her status as the provider for her family and her abilities to hunt and wield weapons, and she uses the Girl Power persona to her advantage. She shows that she is just as capable as the male tributes, besting the Careers as she climbs higher in the tree. She instills confidence in the audience by controlling any expression of fear and pain even while injured, instead putting on a show of self-assuredness, allowing them to uphold their justification of the institution of the Games. Ultimately, though, Katniss is not a man, and as a girl, she has a different set of standards that includes balancing both the Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia ideologies—the audience wouldn't want to see just one. So, once again, Katniss recognizes the different desires of the audience and shifts from embodying Girl Power, slipping into an innocent, submissive girl who fits the Reviving Ophelia narrative.

Katniss works as a lone wolf for the first half of the Games until the Gamemakers change the traditional rules, allowing for two winners if they are from the same district. Then, as soon as Katniss realizes it is possible to truly ally with Peeta (without having to kill him eventually) she knows what she has to do. While reasoning that it makes sense for any remaining pair to ally with one another, she makes the case that it's especially important for her to find Peeta: "Being one of the star-crossed lovers from District 12...it's an absolute requirement if I want any more help from sympathetic sponsors" (247). Echoing her previous justification for stifling her

emotions when she sustained her burn injury, Katniss states that if she wants any additional sponsors and gifts, she needs to ally with Peeta and reassume the star-crossed lover routine. The term Katniss uses here, "absolute requirement," emphasizes the extent to which her survival depends upon playing up her role in a heteronormative romance. When tributes' survival is often dictated by sponsors, Katniss cannot deny the audience's desire to see the gender-norm-affirming star-crossed lovers and must put on yet another act for the camera in order to survive. Similarly, Katniss stresses this again when she imagines Haymitch's words to her once she has met up with Peeta and is trying to care for his wounds. Imaginary Haymitch says, "You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's dying. Give me something I can work with!" (261). To give Haymitch something to work with is to play up the star-crossed lovers act. The audience wants her to be in love with Peeta and, presumably, exhibit a certain level of submission to him as the masculine figure to her feminine, reinforcing their heteronormative romance. It's precisely this relationship between the audience—or what Katniss anticipates they want—and Katniss's corresponding gender performance that drives her entire experience in the Games. In a commodity driven social order, Katniss is the commodity as the subject on screen, and she is only valuable if the audience buys into it. When the option of seeing the star-crossed lovers together again is on the table, Katniss knows her days of soloing the Games are over.

To give Haymitch something he can work with is also to give him something fitting nicely into a box the audience is familiar with—hence, the star-crossed lover trope. Coined in the prologue of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it is easily one of the most ubiquitous literary motifs as well as one that inevitably elicits intense emotion. It's not difficult to make the connection between the classic trope and Katniss and Peeta's situation, but what is curious is the extent to which it is emphasized. After imagining Haymitch's voice directing her, Katniss seems

almost to mock the intensity of it, narrating what the audience wants to see: “If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance” (261). The subjects of the middle two sentences—"star-crossed lovers” and “two hearts”—are similar in their melodrama. They are metaphorical, grandiose, and aligned with the ostentatiousness of the Capitol. So to follow these up with the single-word, relatively mundane noun “romance” breaks the pattern.

Knowing Katniss’s hesitations toward Peeta and the showmance illusion, it feels ingenuine and ironic, deadpan in a way completely at odds with the spirit of romance and making the entire sequence parodical. What’s more is how the progression of these sentences becomes increasingly depersonalized. The first sentence describes them as star-crossed lovers—a cliché but nevertheless depicting humans with feelings. The next, centering “two hearts,” moves further toward the metaphorical, now using synecdoche as the hearts become stand-ins for real people. While the metaphor signals two people in love, the vehicle is nevertheless anatomical and figurative, by definition dehumanizing. Finally, “romance,” has no direct connection to people at all. It is not a metaphor of love or an image of people but a genre, a set of tropes and designated roles for someone (anyone) to fill. In the progression of these statements, Katniss conveys how the audience doesn’t truly care about Katniss or Peeta but the *idea* of a dramatic, tragic romance—something they are familiar with and know how to care about.

Katniss must become the star-crossed lover to play to the audience and ultimately use sponsors to survive, and in order to give a pleasing performance, she must also buy into the Reviving Ophelia ideology, using traditional feminine gender codes to portray herself as innocent, vulnerable, and defenseless. When Peeta reenters the equation and the option of the star-crossed lovers reuniting emerges, Katniss knows instantly that this is all the audience wants.

While she was strong before, allowing for the audience's maintaining the justification for the Games, now the audience would surely rather see her adopt traditional femininity. Katniss's awareness shines through when she is talking to Peeta, saying, "'What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?'" before narrating, "He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try" (275). The entirety of *The Hunger Games* is in Katniss's first-person point of view and consequently anything that is not dialogue is filtered through her. Therefore, it becomes especially intriguing that in Katniss's thought process she first thinks of the audience's reaction to Peeta's death.

In her fragmented thoughts, Katniss reveals the grammatical connection between "that's not an option" and the second sentence, an incomplete one, "that the audience would hate me." By beginning both clauses with "that," each one harkens back to Katniss watching Peeta die, each one being a response to Peeta's theorized death. This recursive structure insinuates that not only is it not an option for her to watch Peeta die, but it is not an option for the audience to hate her. The audience's anticipated reaction to Peeta's death is the driving factor for Katniss, and her following thought about hating herself, too, is just that: an afterthought. This isn't to show Katniss's inner callousness or lack of empathy but to illuminate the extent of her gender performance and its importance for the audience. It's likely that Katniss's personal feelings are actually no less important than the audience to her, but she has been trained for weeks to consider her outward perception and what others want from her. Even if she would want to do it anyway, in this situation, she needs to be the caretaker for the audience, not herself.

Katniss's interactions with Peeta highlight the difference between the roles of provider and caretaker, the former a masculine role and the latter, feminine. Both roles do labor, but being a provider demands action and is connotated with violence, making it masculine-coded, while

being a caretaker requires more of the passivity and compassion associated with femininity. Katniss is familiar with being a provider, as she was the one to go into the woods and kill game for her family's food source. In contrast, the audience now implores Katniss to engage in this ultimate heteronormative femininity and become Peeta's caretaker, an image of kind, gentle domesticity. However, when Katniss asks Peeta, "What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?" it's in the context of her needing to venture to the Cornucopia to retrieve Peeta's medicine, a gift from the Gamemakers to save Peeta from infection if only she can get it. Collins presents a contradictory situation in which part of Katniss's caretaking duties require her to engage in the provider role, leaving the safety of their makeshift home in the cave for the center of a lethal arena. Thus far, we have seen how the audience expects a more docile Katniss when she is around Peeta, or at least that they respond favorably when she adopts those mannerisms. But suddenly she would be crucified if she didn't revert back to the autonomous Katniss from earlier in the Games to save her star-crossed lover. Such contradictory expectations of Katniss define her time in the Capitol and the arena across the trilogy.

Even in an impossible position, though, Katniss manages to mold herself to audience expectations, finding a way to shift back to the masculine provider role without entirely abandoning the femininity necessary to sustain the star-crossed lovers act. Butler argues, "The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (30). In other words, compulsory heterosexuality creates a gender binary that relies upon the masculine and feminine being defined off each other and through a desire for one another. We know that this gender binary exists in Collins's fictional world simply due to the make-up of the Games which require

one boy and one girl tribute, insinuating that those are the two options which sit opposite each other. Therefore, to appease their compulsory heterosexual society, Katniss must display her heterosexual attraction to Peeta, like when she deliberately alters her actions upon recalling her role as Juliet to Peeta's Romeo when she leaves for the Cornucopia:

> I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give Peeta a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night. (281)

Not only does Katniss explicitly connect her remembering the lovers' act with decision to passionately kiss Peeta, but she reflects on the audience's reaction to it and plays into it even further, feigning a teary goodbye. She recognizes that the provider role involves major physical action from her, and this might fly with the audience when she was on her own, but in her coupling with Peeta, Katniss being overly powerful would disrupt the gender dynamic between the boy and girl. Katniss's actions in this scene seem to preemptively assuage this for the audience, as if reassuring them that while she is going out to get the bag, she is nevertheless the sweet, loving star-crossed lover. In Katniss's negotiation with the unseen audience, she seems to understand Butler's idea of intelligible genders: "those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (23). Butler's terminology is convenient for describing the Capitol's desires. While they might appear to be accepting and encouraging of pushing the limits of gender conformity in the Capitol, the audience's need to see Katniss and Peeta together, affirming the narrative of heterosexual romance, shows that this doesn't extend to the arena. As such, Katniss needs to fit

into the intelligible gender of Peeta's heterosexual lover, and she succeeds (for now, that is). Notably, she shows the audience the ultimate emotional weakness here: crying, the very thing she has consistently tried to hide the entire time, even before the Games, back to when she was first getting on the train to the Capitol from 12. Why is weakness okay here but not when she is alone? Well, now it fulfills a purpose for the audience. Whereas previously it served only to cast Katniss as a weak girl, undeserving of any sponsor gifts, when Peeta is in the equation, the audience actually wants to see this as it elevates Peeta's masculine status and satisfies the male ego in a pleasing way rather than merely causing the audience discomfort in questioning the justice of girls in the Games...or the Games at all.

Happily Ever After: The Post-Games Interview

After considering the complexity of gender performance that Katniss adopts throughout the Games and analyzing what the audience expects from her, the post-Games interview offers an interesting continuation of these dynamics. Coming in the final pages of the first book in the trilogy, the final return to the Capitol and Caesar's stage seems to spell out exactly how things will be moving forward from the Games, with Katniss certainly encouraged to lean into classic femininity and emphasize her romance with Peeta. If she survived the Games at all, Katniss likely figured her grand performance for the audience would be over and she could reassume her life in District 12: taking care of her family, hunting, playing the provider and protector. Of course, as Haymitch asserts in *Catching Fire*, as victors, the Games are never truly over, and Katniss's act must remain pristine as ever to keep the audience—and now President Snow—happy indefinitely. The interview is the first bit of proof that Katniss's performance of femininity with regard to her relationship with Peeta will be maintained beyond the Games. As previously

detailed, this scene begins with Katniss's outfit—Cinna putting her in a pale yellow, girlish dress to emphasize her youth despite the Gamemakers' desire to surgically enhance her figure.

This interaction alone establishes that although the Games are over, Katniss will remain a battleground for ideologies; this is not a happily ever after exit interview but a continuation of the arena, and Katniss needs to perform. When the pair finally get settled on stage, they share a loveseat, and Katniss describes her closeness to Peeta, still selling the star-crossed lovers trope: "I sit so close to Peeta that I'm practically on his lap, but one look from Haymitch tells me it isn't enough. Kicking off my sandals, I tuck my feet to the side and lean my head against Peeta's shoulder" (361). More than merely showing her affection toward Peeta, Katniss's gestures here are loaded with the feminine gender codes Jhally cites in *Codes of Gender* like the body cant—the somewhat awkward sideways tilt that female bodies are often positioned in. This shows their defenselessness since, at this sort of broken-down posture, they are unable to effectively fight back against a hypothetical threat. Katniss leaning her head on Peeta's shoulder accomplishes just this. The image of her feet tucked up under herself conveys the same powerlessness, as well as submissiveness to Peeta as she leans her weight on him, showing that she is reliant upon him as a steady, masculine force. As Jhally states in the documentary, "The female body is used in a way that is at odds with the idea[s] of autonomy and independence," which is precisely what is displayed here. Katniss cannot even sit up on her own but needs to lean on Peeta's inherently masculine strength.

Moreover, as Caesar is asking Katniss questions, on more than one occasion she is unusually hesitant. When Caesar asks when Katniss realized she loved Peeta, she responds, "Oh, that's a hard one..." and when he she thinks it was the moment after the rule change when she called out his name, she says, "Maybe...because for the first time...there was a chance I could

keep him" (368). This is hardly the first time Collins utilizes ellipses, but it seems oddly out of place here; after all, Katniss was nervous in the other interviews and yet she doesn't come off quite so hesitant and meek. In fact, she doesn't trail off like this except for after a filler word like "um." So, once again, this interview is different than the others. Katniss's hesitancy, or perhaps stammering, further imbeds her in a performance of femininity, as the dialogue here shows her to be relatively passive and even shy—certainly the opposite of a commandeering, masculine force. Katniss has played the Games and survived them, but in doing so adopted this passive persona that she has to keep. Much like current day reality television, the audience feels connected to the people on screen. Paradoxically, for them it was real; for Katniss, while the stakes were real, she wasn't herself. It doesn't matter, though, because the Capitol lives and dies by public perception, and Snow will quite literally not allow Katniss to return to her former identity. As her gendered performance of femininity continues into *Catching Fire*, Katniss grapples with her on-camera persona and her inner-self. Like the Capitol pulled off with her physical appearance, the gender performance demanded of Katniss in the Games and afterward increasingly distances her from her original identity, conveying the larger-scale impacts of the Games on an adolescent girl.

Chapter Three: Gendered Survival Mechanisms

Embodied-Self Son or Constructed-Self Daughter?

In order to stay alive in the Games, Katniss undoubtedly alters her actions according to what she believes the audience wants to see from her even as she becomes increasingly distanced from her true self. In this sense, she molds a sort of new identity within the confines of oppressive societal norms, becoming what Meghann Meeusen would call a constructed self. In her essay "Hungering for Middle Ground: Binaries of Self in Young Adult Dystopia," Meeusen analyzes the roles of the constructed self and the embodied self in *The Hunger Games.* Meeusen identifies the constructed self as influenced by society while an embodied self is one's true nature. Dystopia, she asserts, frequently explores the tension between these two states in order to reveal how cultural, institutional, and societal constructs influence individuals and their respective agency. For Meeusen, Katniss represents the epitome of a constructed self, as her worldview is developed solely under a society that has taught her to "survive and rebel at any cost" (48, 2014). While YA dystopia often posits protagonists as having choice, agency, and individual power even under an oppressive government, Katniss does not follow this pattern. Meeusen cites Katniss's perpetual willingness to perform for and appease the Capitol and both Snow's and Coin's control of Katniss through threat of physical harm to those she loves as evidence of this.

Essentially, Katniss is consistently manipulated by various aspects of her environment and does not truly make choices of her own volition. Admittedly, it would seem this way in the post-Games interview when, at one look from Haymitch, Katniss alters her body language to appear more feminine on-stage, showing submissiveness to Peeta. This is what Haymitch tells her the audience wants and, in order avoid the wrath of President Snow, she abides. Of course,

the previous section argued that this is an intentional choice on Katniss's part, absolutely necessary for her survival. Meanwhile, Peeta is Katniss's foil. According to Meeusen, Peeta is an embodied individual, as he not only desires to rebel against oppressive societal forces but actually succeeds in doing so, unlike Katniss. Notably, in the previous passage, the reader doesn't see Peeta adjust at all based on external expectations.

This dynamic becomes even more intriguing when considering how often Peeta defies traditional gender norms. The aspect of Meeusen's argument that Peeta feels the influence of cultural expectations much less acutely than Katniss does certainly holds up. For example, in the Games, Peeta often takes the passive role that doesn't align with traditional masculinity. When Katniss finds him camouflaged along the riverbank, he has, essentially, no agency whatsoever. He cannot move due to his injury, leaving him to wait to die, for someone to find him, or for the Games to end. At her startling discovery—Peeta absolutely invisible underneath mud and weeds—Katniss thinks, "Forget chucking weights around. Peeta should have gone into his private session with the Gamemakers and painted himself into a tree" (252). She explicitly draws the comparison between the brute strength Peeta initially showed and the artful disguise that has saved his life in the Games, presenting a dichotomy of masculine and feminine traits.

Peeta's showcase to the Gamemakers was one of inherent masculinity, highlighting his physical strength and power. However, now Peeta adopts a much more feminine-coded approach, crafting camouflage that leaves him defenseless, lying down in a submissive pose, and waiting for others to act. Peeta's display of femininity may well have been his downfall if not for Katniss's gender performance—her proactively setting out to find Peeta. In this sense, Peeta is free to be the embodied self, oscillating between the masculine and feminine without backlash from the audience, but he escapes consequences (death) via Katniss's lack of freedom to do the

same. While Katniss does embody varying gender codes on the spectrum of masculine to feminine, she must do so extremely strategically, careful not to overstep what she deems to be the Capitol's line. She knows she can't "get away" with the things Peeta can and plans her actions according to what she thinks the audience wants. This ends up saving Peeta's life more than once. So while Peeta certainly exhibits the ability to be an embodied self, unaffected (or less so) by outside forces, it's a bit unfair to claim that Katniss simply fails to rebel against oppressive societal forces as Peeta does. Her drive to survive makes her a constructed self, and in order to keep both herself and Peeta alive, she has a different set of expectations from the audience that she must fulfill.

Peeta is consistently deferential to Katniss during the period when they are allied, providing another case of Peeta defying gender expectations. Some of his behavior can be attributed to his severe injury, but still, Peeta fails to even put on bravado. At the same time that Katniss finds him on the riverbank and marvels at his skilled camouflage, Katniss gives him directions and tells him she is going to roll him into the river to which he immediately agrees. He defers entirely to Katniss, so when Katniss says, "Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in [the river]," he responds, "No more rolling?" (254). Peeta allows Katniss to make the decision with no input from him at all, trusting her judgment and allowing her to make calls for the both of them. Next, Katniss tells him to swallow some pills that reduce a fever, and he "obediently takes the medicine" (255). The key word "obediently" here signals precisely the relationship between Katniss and Peeta at this moment.

In a complete abandonment of any masculine façade from his showcase to the Gamemakers, Peeta is exhibiting many feminine gender codes by deferring to Katniss and lying prone to attack. Notably, Peeta's turn toward the feminine does not necessarily implicate Katniss

as the masculine. In fact, she takes pains to minimize any masculinity she might convey in this interaction with Peeta by making her demands gentle. For instance, Peeta, exhausted from the efforts to get him into the river and clean his leg, asks Katniss, "Can I sleep now?" to which Katniss responds, "'Soon,' I promise. 'I need to look at your leg first.' Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off him" (255-256). Again, Peeta defers to Katniss, but more importantly, Katniss doesn't adopt an overly confident, powerful persona. Rather, she attempts to soothe him, the text highlighting how Katniss is moving "as gentle as [she] can," and "very slowly," and she only "inch[es]" his pants off. In this language, it is evident that Katniss is careful around Peeta and is embodying a feminine caretaker role due to her extreme caution and gentleness. In a situation where she could easily turn commanding due to Peeta's exhibited femininity, she resists. Even as she is repulsed by the injury and nursing doesn't come easily to her, she remains steadfast, capable yet tender. In a continuation of the analysis of Katniss's intentional behavior from Chapter Two, Katniss once again remains aware of how she may be perceived and creates a gap between her inner thoughts and outwardly projecting exterior. However, the main point remains: Peeta's continual defying of traditional gender norms in his submission to Katniss, defenseless positioning, and lack of reliance on his brute strength points to the ways in which Peeta does not have to pander to the audience as Katniss does. Peeta has the freedom in the Games to be his embodied self because the audience does not expect gender performance from him—at least, they will not punish him for going against the grain. The same cannot be said of Katniss.

Before Peeta and Katniss enter the Games, they rendezvous on the roof of the training center where Peeta reveals his greatest wish: to die as himself. His admission is met with confusion from Katniss. Peeta wants to be more than just a piece in the Games, and Katniss

responds, “But you’re not...None of us are. That’s how the Games work” (142). This pivotal interaction just before the Games indicates, firstly, Peeta’s goal of not molding to the Gamemakers’ intentions and, secondly, Katniss’s grasp of the reality at play. She sort of gets what Peeta is saying, in an idealistic sense, but dismisses it quickly because, as the conversation relays following, her real goal is simply to stay alive. She doesn’t disagree with Peeta’s wanting to remain true to himself, but rather says, “Only...no offense, but who cares, Peeta?” as she knows right away that this is simply not an option; it is completely at odds with her goal of survival (142). Peeta does not face this restriction. In fact, he is able to consistently defy gender norms and come out alive, even if this isn’t a primary goal or on his mind at all. To him, being his authentic self is worth dying for—and, because of Katniss, he does not actually have to die to be a successful embodied self.

Moreover, despite his unmasculine performance in the Games, Peeta never seems to face any real consequences for his actions. Never does the reader see the Capitol audience look down on him for the instances described. As Sean P. Connors (2014) writes, “Peeta can circumvent traditional gender norms without fear of retribution” and, “As a male, his [Peeta’s] society neither demands nor expects him to reinvent himself” (147). That is, Peeta doesn’t need to intentionally act in any specific way, at least per the audience’s desires. He is granted significantly more freedom in this way than Katniss is, as it should be evident by now that her route to survival is contingent upon performing the particular ways the Capitol wants to see. According to Meeusen, Peeta’s actions show his ability to be himself despite external pressures, but do these even exist for him? Likewise, Meeusen deems Katniss the epitome of a constructed self because of her failure to defy norms like Peeta does, but such an argument falls apart when there are two separate rule books for the Katnisses and Peetas of the Hunger Games.

Defiance or Blindness? Peeta in Contrast

By specifically comparing several instances when Peeta subverts typical gender norms with Katniss's actions, we can see how the two operate differently and how they are subject to different expectations. Chapter Two discussed Katniss's vigilance in the Games and how she strategically plays into codes of gender to cater to the audience she knows is behind the camera. In a world in which sponsors from the audience directly sway a tribute's survival, appeasing the audience is absolutely essential. At least, it is for Katniss. On the other hand, Peeta, who never faces repercussions for a lack of masculinity, clearly does not rely upon audience perception in the same way. Recalling Connors's quote, society doesn't demand that he change, whereas they certainly expect it of Katniss. In the cases of Katniss and Peeta being in essentially the exact same situations but reacting differently, these examples illuminate two things: that Peeta can get away with just "being himself" and that he likely isn't even aware of the potential harm to his image if he weren't male.

This dynamic is evident from the minute the District 12 tributes are reaped and sent on their way to the Capitol. After saying goodbye to their families, both Katniss and Peeta are loaded onto the train, the cameras swarming them, marking their de facto introduction to Capitol life. Unsurprisingly, Katniss showcases astute observation well before being thrust into the actual Games, as she thinks, "I've been right not to cry...I catch a glimpse of myself on the television screen on the wall that's airing my arrival live and feel gratified that I appear almost bored" (40). Notably, in saying "I've been right not to cry," Katniss recalls her thought process from the minute she was taken into custody: "I cannot afford to get upset and leave this room with puffy eyes and a red nose. Crying is not an option" (34). Even without stepping foot in the Capitol, Katniss has a clear view of how things work. She knows that to appear as a strong contender for

the Games, she needs to lean into stoicism while the cameras, an extension of a voyeuristic audience, are anxious for any bit of emotion from her they can get. In a rare moment of Katniss getting to be not only the subject of the broadcast but the audience as well, her ability to foresee what the audience wants of her on screen is confirmed. Katniss exhibits this awareness specifically by noting that she cannot be seen with puffy eyes and a red nose—physical evidence of her being upset. This description conveys how it is not the act of crying that is the issue but the physical signs of her distress that would make her look weak. Instead, Katniss wears an expression of indifference and is relieved that this is what the audience will see. Obviously, this is not how Katniss actually feels, so her gratification that her exterior doesn't match her interior is further evidence of both the importance of perception for Katniss and the demanding expectations the audience has already placed upon her.

This scene is key because Katniss's and Peeta's respective circumstances never get more similar, as they are doing the exact same thing with the exact same outside influences. Therefore, it's a prime site for a comparison between the girl and boy tribute from District 12. Looking at Peeta getting on the train after the reaping is somewhat jarring after considering Katniss's extremely controlled, poised demeanor. Katniss even makes the comparison between them herself, stating, "Peeta Mellark, on the other hand, has obviously been crying and interestingly enough does not seem to be trying to cover it up" (40). So, is Peeta making a statement by not holding himself back or is he simply oblivious to the effect it could have on his public image? Katniss does some of the analysis herself as she ponders if he is intentionally trying to appear "weak and frightened" to minimize his threat level, but determines that this wouldn't make much sense for Peeta who has grown up with enough to eat and a strong physique; in her own words, "It would take an awful lot of weeping to convince anyone to overlook him" (41). Given that his

weeping doesn't continue in this way, it's fair to say that Peeta isn't just playing the weakling angle as Katniss initially guesses. At this point, I would hazard that there's nothing intentional about Peeta's public display of weakness, but rather that he is fairly oblivious in his authenticity. And there is really no reason for him not to be since society doesn't demand a warped sense of identity or gender norms from him as it does Katniss. To bring it back to Meeusen's argument, yes, Peeta is an embodied self in the sense that he shows his "true self"—at least, from what the reader can gather via Katniss's point of view—throughout the process of the Games, but it's an easy argument to make when he doesn't face the same societal pressure as his female counterpart.

In another set of similar circumstances, Peeta and Katniss both face brutal wounds in the Games, Katniss's at the hands of the Gamemakers' engineered fireball which badly burned her calf and Peeta's via District 2 tribute Cato who slashed Peeta's thigh before leaving him for dead. As previously described, Katniss goes to great lengths to prevent herself from showing any weakness after her injury. Despite her repulsion upon seeing the state of her injury, she steels herself into showing the audience a calm persona, narrating, "Pity doesn't get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does" (179). However, it appears as though Peeta does not have this same theory. When Katniss finds Peeta at the riverbank, she immediately jumps into action trying to get Peeta into the water where she can wash his disguise off. It's in the process of moving him that Peeta does the very thing Katniss never allowed herself to—show emotion (A.K.A. weakness) at the injury. Katniss describes how "sharp cries of pain escape him" when she tries to drag him, and then, when she stops, "He's still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face" (253). All three of these things—visibly showing pain through sounds, facial expression, and crying—are what Katniss actively chose not

to show. Now, this isn't to demean Peeta, necessarily, but to indicate how he freely lets his pain show to the audience when Katniss so carefully hid hers from public view. It gets worse, too, when Katniss attempts to roll Peeta, only to stop due to "the horrible sound he's making" (254). This scene unveils the extent to which Peeta does not alter his actions in accordance with audience expectations and, apparently, doesn't have to. Again, Peeta never faces the consequences of such a performance of weakness. The District 12 team are sent food via sponsors, and Peeta ultimately gets the medicine needed to heal his leg. While, technically, Katniss receives the sponsor gifts, I would make the argument that those gifts, courtesy of the whims of Haymitch, were the result solely of Katniss's actions rather than anything Peeta did or did not do. In other words, Katniss executes a gender performance to ensure the survival of both herself and Peeta, contorting her actions based on societal expectations, while Peeta can just "be himself," making him technically embodied, but really just free from the oppressive constraints of being a girl.

The final nail in the coffin holding any argument for Peeta's awareness comes at the end of the book when the entire District 12 team is once again on the train, this time moving away from the Capitol toward home. With the Games over and the Gamemakers and Snow fuming about Katniss's inadvertent spark of rebellion, Haymitch has been coaching Katniss through her post-Games press. Touched on in Chapter One, Katniss needs to lean into femininity in an attempt to code herself as passive, naïve, and wholly innocent in any suspected rebellion. Cinna styles her to play up her girlishness and in her final interview Katniss shyly mumbles her way through, tucking her feet under herself and leaning on Peeta for support in a show of submission. To Peeta, this has seemed entirely normal, so when the train approaches 12's station and Haymitch tells Katniss and Peeta to "keep it up in the district until the cameras are gone," Peeta

is confused (371-372). He asks, “What’s he mean?” and then, “What? What are you talking about?” (372). Katniss confesses to Haymitch’s coaching her to “get it right,” saying that Peeta would do it without help, to which he responds, “I didn’t know there was anything to get right” and, confused, continues, “So what you’re saying is, these last few days and then I guess...back in the arena...that was just some strategy you two worked out” (372). The ellipses here hint at Peeta’s cluelessness as Collins allows us to see Peeta’s mind working to piece everything together as he initially thinks of just the last few days and then realizes it extends all the way back to the arena. It emphasizes his status as the embodied self, his ability to remain himself all the way through the Games, but evidently he never considered that Katniss may not be doing the same.

After weeks of being together, Peeta has finally figured out that Katniss has been playing a part while Peeta hadn’t known there was a “show” going on at all. He all but admits that he has never once considered performing for the audience when he states, “I didn’t know there was anything to get right,” *anything* being the star-crossed lovers act. Fortunately for Peeta, he hasn’t had to act at all in the grand scheme of the Games, but nonetheless he is now upset to find out that his survival was contingent upon Katniss’s performance of femininity. And, not only has Katniss been acting (being the constructed self) but she has made him a pawn in the performance. For all Peeta’s embodied-self-ness, adopting feminine gender codes at will, Katniss has forced him into the masculine, and at this revelation, he has to grapple with being leveraged in the scheme.

It’s not his fault that Katniss has had to mold herself in ways Peeta was entirely unaware of, but such a reaction does demonstrate his inherent blindness to the whole situation. Peeta has succeeded so far in remaining himself through the Games as he wanted, but Katniss has had no

choice but to change in intentional, specific ways. Meeusen calls Katniss reactionary, but when Katniss's constant vigilance is set opposite Peeta's lack, this seems an unfair label. In many cases, Katniss and Peeta are in extremely comparable, if not the same, circumstances, and they are held to different standards. When girls and boys evidently have different rule books for the Games, Katniss has exhibited far too much vigilance in choosing to control her appearance to relegate her as merely a product of her environment.

Chapter Four: Reckoning with Age, Race, and Rue

Since beginning my research on *The Hunger Games,* it has been my position that Collins does not blindly perpetuate the oppressive gender structures I have referenced in the previous sections but instead purposefully calls attention to these societal expectations in order to illuminate them for readers who can in turn resist them. In a final culmination of this argument, Chapter Four will look at Rue, the twelve-year-old from District 11. Right on the cusp of being eligible for the Games, Rue is as young as a tribute can be and the same age as Katniss's sister Prim. Rue's brutal death at the hands of the Career tributes offers perhaps the most clear-cut textual rebellion on behalf of Collins and serves as a mid-book reminder of all the tributes' youth, innocence, and powerlessness against the Capitol. Throughout the remainder of the series and in pop culture's discussion on Collins's work, Rue is an immensely tragic figure. The death of a child in itself is tragic, even more so the death of a girl, especially one as lively and nonviolent as Rue. As much as Rue insists on her being a real contender in the Games, she cannot shake her inherent girlhood and associated presumption of innocence. These gender codes, her extreme youth, and her likeness to Prim allow her to be innocent in a different way than the other young tributes and make her death tragic in a way only hers could be. This section will elaborate on Rue's role as the innocent and the ways in which Collins calls attention to it, ensuring that the reader cannot have the same detachedness as the in-book audience watching the Games.

The Child Among Children

The whole point of the Games is the sacrifice of children, but even under that criteria, there is an undeniably significant range of ages. The development between a twelve-year-old and an eighteen year-old is hardly comparable, especially when considering the brute strength

difference between Rue and, say, one of the Career boys. Katniss even notes that, generally, people don't like when a twelve-year-old is chosen, because "no one thinks this is fair" (21). So, even as all the tributes are children essentially sentenced to death, there's something widely recognized in the twelve-year-old as the epitome of youth and innocence, separate even from the other young tributes.

This effect is stressed in Rue's death scene, an arguably unnecessarily violent end for the Games' youngest tribute. Concerned when she returns from their scheme to blow up the Careers' stash of supplies that Rue isn't in their designated meeting place, Katniss sets off to find her. She follows Rue's whistle echoed by the mockingjays until she hears Rue's scream. At this point, Katniss narrates, "And that's when I hear the scream," then continues in the next paragraph, "It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Rue" (232). The description begins general, as Katniss calls it *the* scream rather than *her* scream, but is quickly identified as Rue's despite not using her name initially. Rather, Katniss calls it "a child's scream" first, seeming to attribute this solely to Rue even though her fellow competitors are children as well. The same occurs with "a young girl's scream;" aren't there several other young girls in the arena? Isn't Katniss herself a young girl? But these descriptors apparently apply to Rue only, as Katniss asserts that no one else is *capable* of making that sound.

The idea of Rue being physically capable of something not a single other tribute is capable of brings about a biological component of otherness; it's not only Katniss's or the audience's perspective that a twelve-year-old in the Games is different from the others but a physiological fact. This cements that Rue is, in fact, something separate from the other tributes. Simultaneously, the sequence of these terms—the scream, a child's scream, a young girl's scream, then Rue—is vital to the horror of what has occurred, as they are placed in ascending

order of innocence. As each term becomes increasingly specific, they elicit more sympathy for the subject; that is, a child's scream is more tragic than a scream from anyone, a young girl's scream even more so, before finally landing on Rue, established as the most innocent of all. In introducing the scene in this way, Collins accumulates these layers of innocence and escalates them in a way of increasing the horror over Rue's impending death.

Rue is the epitome of the *child* sacrificed to the Games, and Collins reminds the reader just in time. Rue has consistently asserted that the audience shouldn't count her out just because of her age, and she gets decently far into the Games (after Rue's death there are only six tributes left: Katniss, Peeta, Thresh, Foxface, Clove, and Cato). She aids Katniss many times, helping her escape from the Career pack, healing her trackerjacker stings, and working side-by-side in their plan to blow up the Careers' supplies. Because of these feats, readers, absorbed in the fast-paced excitement of the novel, can easily allow the characters' ages to slip from the forefront of their minds. However, the way Collins writes Rue's scream reminds the reader of Rue's youth, attributing the scream first to a child and a young girl before finally landing on Rue. And, besides reminding her audience, Collins's initially general diction here serves another purpose of relatability. Beginning unspecific allows the reader to fit a description into their own experience. "It's a child's scream," prompts one to recall on their own what one sounds like. If Collins had begun by stating that Rue was screaming, the audience does not get the opportunity to join what they know as a child's scream with Rue's, and there would be risk for disconnect. The reader may not sufficiently remember just how young Rue is, and the textual rebellion of not allowing for the reader to forget falls flat. The reader must not have the same experience as the in-book audience, and Collins ensures this by calling attention to Rue's ultimate youth in this pivotal moment.

In addition, Katniss's inadvertently referring to Rue as Prim further cements Rue as the epitome of the child and separates her from the Games and other tributes. In writing in the first-person present tense, Collins allows the reader into Katniss's mind, unfiltered in real time. It is only because of this that Collins can reveal a genuine confusion in Katniss's thought process when she writes, "But if this is Prim's, I mean, Rue's last request, I have to at least try" (234). Katniss has apparently collapsed Prim and Rue in her mind, as evidenced by her mistaking the young tribute for her own sister. However, the similarities between Prim and Rue are fairly obvious already, a point Katniss has already made, explaining, "Rue. Primrose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet" (99). Rue reminds Katniss of Prim—there's not really any extra stipulation required here. But during Rue's death, the two have become so intertwined to Katniss that she mixes up their names. So why does Collins take the extra step to show how they occupy the same space in Katniss's mind? By likening Rue and Prim such that they inhabit the same symbolic space, Collins calls upon Prim's being physically outside the Games to emphasize Rue's metaphorical separation from the rest of the tributes. Katniss's accidentally calling Rue by Prim's name further allows Rue to be the exception; the youngest, most innocent one who doesn't belong with the others even as they are also children. Such a comparison once again brings Rue's innocence to the forefront. All the tributes are technically children, but Rue is the only one Katniss, and by extension Collins, refers to as *child*. While the diegetic audience watching the Games on TV may be allowed and even encouraged to forget the real ages of the contestants they bet on, Collins ensures that the reader has a different experience as she uses the youngest tribute as a constant reminder of the dystopian world's barbarism and injustice.

Prim's—I mean—Rue's Death

In a sort of third-act Shakespearean climax, Rue's death comes more-or-less in the middle of the novel and represents a turning point for Katniss. As she imagines her sister dying in Rue's place, Katniss's resolve to win renews, both to avenge Rue and get home to her sister. Such a pivotal moment in the scheme of the novel introduces avenues for Collins to weave rebellion into its very language, as the dynamics of Rue's death emphasize Rue's innocence relative even to the fellow tributes. Katniss calling Rue by Prim's name in her mind is not the only time the two young girls appear to occupy the same space; particularly in her death, Rue echoes Prim literally and calls attention to their shared role as the innocent.

Rue dies when she gets caught in a net and, unable to escape, is speared through the stomach by the boy from District 1. Katniss fires an arrow and kills the boy immediately—her first kill in the arena—but Rue's gory wound is beyond help, leaving Katniss with no option but to sing Rue to sleep until the cannon fires. At this point, Katniss knows she needs to leave, but can't quite bring herself to as she describes, "I can't stop looking at Rue, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting" (236). In crafting such an image, Collins via Katniss not only refers to Rue as physically small but a *baby*, once again using diction to bring Rue's age to the forefront and remind readers that not only are the tributes children but Rue, not even a teenager, is the victim of an extremely brutal death. "Smaller than ever" is almost a caricature of her petiteness, given that Katniss previously estimated the twelve-year-old to weigh less than seventy pounds. But what makes this passage go beyond just diction is Collins's allusion to the motif of the artificial versus natural—that which is touched and influenced by the Capitol and, for lack of a better term, innocent. Katniss describes Rue in a "nest of netting," the phrase ending the sentence and embodying the dynamic of Rue's death at the hands of the Capitol. *Nest* is the

home of a bird, the exact animal that Rue is constantly associated with through her whistle which the mockingjays echo and the birds' general pervasiveness throughout the entire arena. It's a place where birds lay eggs and shelter their young, and it connotes safety, comfort, and protection. Rue being in a nest implies her safety as well as an element of naturalness, as if she is a bird untouched by the oppressive Capitol influence. *Netting* immediately undermines this effect, shattering the illusion of safety and placing Rue literally and metaphorically in the hands of the Capitol Gamemakers. The irony in placing these two terms together to describe Rue reveals the true terms under which Rue's death has come to pass in that the Capitol has taken something once innocent like a baby bird and ensnared her, allowing Rue to be hunted and killed for sport. In this way, Collins subtly encourages the reader to see the true circumstances of Rue's death, the Capitol's influence, and Rue's utmost innocence as she is caught in the proverbial crossfire.

Rue representing a bird or, more specifically, a mockingjay is something Ebony Elizabeth Thomas elaborates on in her chapter entitled "Lamentations of a Mockingjay: *The Hunger Games*' Rue and Racial Innocence in the Dark Fantastic." Thomas cites how Rue is often positioned like a bird about to take flight, how both in the Games and at home she is constantly in the trees, and her winged costume from the pre-Games interviews. Moreover, Thomas makes the connection that Rue, as the symbolic mockingjay, further adds to her innocence by recalling Harper Lee's classic canonical work *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) in which it is a sin to kill a mockingbird because of their own inherent innocence. Thomas quotes from Lee's novel, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing except make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corn cribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us" (44). So, as if Rue was not already positioned as the portrait of innocence in *The Hunger Games*, her

likeness to a mockingjay certainly seals the deal when compared to one of the most famous works of literature of the 20th century.

However, what truly caught my attention in Thomas's textual evidence was Rue's winged costume, as I realized one aspect of the bird I had yet to consider: their ability to fly. As such, birds come to symbolize freedom, something that seems especially prevalent in a dystopian world governed by an oppressive regime. Is it pure coincidence, then, that the youngest tribute is likened to something connotating freedom? Looking back to the very premise of the book and the Games, children are undoubtedly important to society if sacrificing them instills fear and quells thoughts of rebellion. In the series' third installment *Mockingjay,* during his final conversation with Katniss, President Snow says, "We both know I'm not above killing children, but I'm not wasteful. I take life for very specific reasons" indicating that the Games and their implication of children is extremely strategic and politically significant (356). Snow knows that children represent hope for the people and for the future and sacrificing them keeps that hope squashed. Rue, then, as the youngest tribute, the purest *child*, also becomes a symbol of hope. Combined with Rue as the mockingjay, her representation of freedom evolves into a symbolic hope for a future free from its current oppression, and when Rue dies, it's not just a little girl dying but the image of freedom and hope for the future. Harkening back to Collins's image of Rue in a "nest of netting," a bird in a nest has potential. Despite its lack of flight, it is presently safe and has the promise to fly in the future. A net, this contraption to ensnare Rue, effectively dismantles this, trapping not just the little girl but the option of freedom and hope she represents.

Katniss seems to be echoing this sentiment when, in the same scene immediately following Rue's death, she observes that the little girl is "past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless" (236). Upon first inspection, it's a paradoxical statement; after all, how can

something be beyond harm but still need defending? Evidently, though, there is something about Rue that does still require defending, and I would argue that it goes beyond just her physical body in death that, admittedly, Katniss does go to lengths to care for. Still, Katniss appears to subconsciously acknowledge that Rue is a symbol for something larger, and that even though Rue is dead, everything she stood for metaphorically is still very much in danger. As the character representing innocence, freedom, and hope, this scene goes beyond the death of one twelve-year-old girl to show Katniss and remind the reader of the extent of the Capitol's brutality toward *all* the innocents, all the other Rues out there. The very notion of an innocent child is vulnerable. In Katniss's statement, she begins talking about Rue, calling her "past harm," since she has died and can no longer feel mental or physical pain. But something besides a literal Rue is "utterly defenseless," as if Katniss switches to now reference Rue's symbolic meaning that, with Rue physically dead, requires protection now more than ever. Perhaps what is not said in Katniss's phrasing is while Rue herself is physically past harm, the innocent child she stood in for remains immensely vulnerable.

For Katniss, this innocent child that still requires protecting is not metaphorical at all when she has her sister Prim at home and actively on her mind since she has collapsed the two girls. At the beginning of the novel, as Katniss readies Prim for her first reaping ceremony, she calls her sister "little duck," courtesy of the blouse that continuously pulled out of the back of her skirt, making it look like a duck tail. Consequently, Katniss repeatedly likening Rue to a bird echoes how she thinks about her sister, the portrait of innocence. Given that it has already been established that these two characters occupy the same space in Katniss's mind, her tendency to call them both by animals is intriguing. It separates them from humanity, but while animal metaphors often emphasize violence, brutality, or wildness, these seem to do the opposite,

highlighting their small size and peaceful nature while ultimately removing them from the oppressive social order Katniss is well acquainted with. Like the text separates Rue from the other tributes due to her even purer form of innocence, Katniss separates both Rue and Prim from human society entirely, as if she does not believe they—as the innocents—belong among its corruption and artificiality, instead placing them in the untainted animal world.

Nevertheless, while Katniss collapses Rue and Prim, Rue's vulnerability is undoubtedly more severe than Prim's due to her racial identity. As Butler writes, "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" pointing to the inherently varied nature of gender (6). Though Katniss is undoubtedly subject to a different set of expectations than her male counterparts, as a Black girl, Rue has yet another rulebook; the ideas of gender and consequent vulnerability I've explored thus far are not applied *coherently* to someone like Rue. Though Collins appears to imagine Panem as a post-racial society, or at least one without overt racism, myriad clues in the worldbuilding say otherwise such as District 11 being largely Black, the agricultural center, and having much more law enforcement than the other districts (and violent enforcement at that). There is also the matter of District 12 in which the wealthy merchant class have blonde hair and blue eyes while the poor, the miners, and those in the Seam boast darker hair and eyes and olive-toned skin. Although, arguably what is actually in the book doesn't matter much when the readership exists in a world which is certainly not post-racial. All this to say, in creating Rue as a dark-skinned, presumably Black character and a Black girl, Collins had to contend with not only gender but the element of race. In Thomas's chapter on Rue, she includes several tweets from the public when, via the film adaptation, they realized Rue was cast as Black; one in particular is pertinent to this section: "Kk call me racist

but when I found out rue was black her death wasn't as sad #ihatemyself" (60). It points to an important, often subconscious, societal perspective of the Black child being less sympathetic.

As Thomas brings up via Robin Bernstein who has traced the origins of racialized innocence to before the Civil War, "Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment...this innocence was raced white" marking the inherent innocence associated with children as actually only associated with white children (56). Christina Sharpe theorizes on this, the impossibility of the Black child, in her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), asking, "What is a Black child?" then concluding, "the meaning of *child*, as it abuts blackness falls...apart" (80). Sharpe asserts, "Black children are consistently seen as being older than they are and are therefore, never really considered children," and it is this presumption, completely at odds with Katniss's own perception of Rue as the ultimate innocent, that speaks to the lack of sympathy toward Black children's pain (80). The exact effect is showcased in the tweet stating Rue's death was less sad *because* she is Black. Hence, in creating Rue as a tragic character and the pure innocent, Collins has to contend with these societal beliefs and, in order to subvert them, allow Rue and Prim to occupy the same space. Associating Prim and her ideal form of whiteness—her blonde hair and blue eyes from her merchant class heritage as well as her ability to be protected in Katniss's volunteering for her—with a Black child allows Rue to become the same version of innocence, validating her Black pain and vulnerability through its parity to Prim's.

Collins codes the connotations of the white child and the Black child into Prim's and Rue's very names. Primrose is a plant known for its yellow, pink, or white flowers that bloom early in the spring, and though Katniss says in the novel that Rue is "a small yellow flower that grows in the meadow," the first definition of rue in a dictionary would be regret or sorrow (99).

Just in their names, Collins creates two sides of the same coin: one young girl associated with spring and positivity, the other her despondent twin. They are just alike barring Rue's inherently tragic name and Prim's intrinsic loveliness. To continue erasing these differences and collapsing them such that Prim's sympathy can become Rue's, Katniss collects flowers and places them on and around Rue after the little girl has died. She adorns Rue's body and hair with the flowers, wreaths her face, and covers up the brutal wound in her stomach before the hovercraft collects her. In doing so, Katniss effectively overlays the metaphorical symbol of her sister onto Rue's physical form, further fusing the girls and allowing Prim's easily digested innocence to be transferred to Rue. It's the culmination of Collins contending with the intersection of race and gender, physically shrouding Rue with Prim. Rue's portrayal as the ultimate innocent and her death as tragic is made possible through her likeness to Prim that goes beyond mere similarity, allowing them to occupy the same symbolic space.

Telling the Reader Who to Blame

Rue's sudden and brutal death infuses Katniss with a new drive to win the Games and take down the rest of her opponents. However, the text doesn't skip straight to a revenge arc, but lingers on the Capitol's role in not just Rue's death but all of the tributes' inevitable demise. Through logical reasoning even in a time of immense emotional turmoil for Katniss, Collins uses her protagonist to ensure the reader knows exactly who is to blame for the atrocity she just laid out. As usual, Collins is quick to ensure the reader doesn't get caught up in the diegetic heightened emotions of the Games and is able to look from the outside and see who the real enemy is. In the same breath as describing Rue in the "nest of netting," Katniss narrates, "To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us" (236). In a concise yet rich two sentences, Katniss

redirects her outrage at the death of the innocent to something larger than another adolescent, encouraging the reader to see it this way, too. It's no coincidence that the boy who killed Rue was from District 1, which is essentially Capitol-adjacent. As one of the Districts the Careers hail from, tributes who have been training for years especially for the Games are eager to volunteer in the hopes of bringing fame and wealth back home. "District 1 makes luxury items for the Capitol...They are always favorites," Katniss relays during the tribute parade, clearly defining the relationship between District 1 and the Capitol as extremely close (69). The very embodiment of luxury and privilege is responsible for spearing and killing Rue, and yet, when he, too, is dead, Katniss calls him vulnerable—susceptible to physical or emotional harm. But to what or to whom is he vulnerable? The Capitol. Even if District 1 is as close to the Capitol as a district can get, ultimately they are subject to the Games all the same. The precise language, calling him a *boy*, is telling, highlighting that he was a *child* sacrificed to the institution of the Games like everyone else. So when he is dead, no longer emanating the superiority and crude violence associated with the luxury district, it becomes clear to Katniss that despite District 1's proximity to the Capitol, this boy is a victim, nonetheless.

Still, this isn't to say that Katniss does not hate this boy and all District 1 stands for at all, but rather to indicate that merely placing blame here is, to echo Katniss, inadequate. It's this specific diction that indicates a sort of hierarchy of blame and placing it only on a cog in the system is not enough. She can hate him for killing Rue, but ultimately, Katniss has enough rationale to firmly say that despite his horrible acts, one boy from District 1 is not her enemy. Simultaneously, she never blames herself for taking her first human life in the arena, despite likening his vulnerable state to Rue's. In no unclear terms, Katniss tells the reader to look beyond the immediate cause and find the source, exactly as she does when she states, "It's the Capitol I

hate, for doing this to all of us." Though implicating the Capitol directly is not the only textual detail of interest here. Katniss names all the tributes as victims of the Capitol by saying that the Capitol does "this to all of us," not just herself or Rue or those from the poor districts. In an extraordinary gesture of empathy toward the boy who just killed the symbol of innocence and mirror to her sister, Katniss recognizes that even the Careers are victims of the Capitol when she groups everyone together in this phrase. Once again, Collins uses Katniss's calm clarity to point out exactly how blame should be distributed, essentially acquitting her fellow tribute and herself and instead condemning the larger institution.

This effect is compounded by Katniss's introspection, as she reveals, "Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us" (236). It points toward Rue's death being an inciting incident for Katniss, a fundamental shift in her mentality as she begins questioning, "There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?" but more than that, Katniss constructs a distinct "us" versus "them" (236). It is a matter of what *they* inflict on *us*—those with power and those who are victim to it.

Up until now, there appeared to be a range of supposed enemies for Katniss. Naturally, there was the overarching Capitol, but closer to her included Glimmer who had the bow and arrow, Clove who tried to kill her in the bloodbath, Cato as the de facto leader of the Careers, Thresh as a tremendous physical threat, and even Peeta when it appeared that he betrayed her and allied with the Careers. Katniss's statement now washes all that away. In the wake of the greatest injustice Katniss has witnessed yet, she looks beyond the limited and entirely artificial landscape of the Games to Panem, to the Capitol, to President Snow. She recognizes who the true perpetrator is and who the victims are and unites all the tributes as an "us." In a world aimed to divide via the Districts and the Games which encourage districts to harbor resentment toward

others, it's a massive act of defiance to instead unify them all as victims of an authoritarian, oppressive government. Haymitch's iconic line, "remember who the enemy is" doesn't come until the next installment of the series, *Catching Fire*, but its roots are evident in Rue's death as Katniss begins her resistance by refusing to merely blame the boy from District 1. Demonstrating a pivotal act of the dystopian genre, Katniss rightly directs blame toward the greater institution and by extension encourages the reader to do the same not just in the world of the novel but in their world as well. Such is the value in reading dystopia, to consider dramatized fiction and draw conclusions that can be applied to real life.

Conclusion

Collins published *The Hunger Games* in September of 2008, landing conveniently in the height of the Great Recession, the longest and deepest economic downturn in the United States since the Great Depression of the 1930s (Duignan). The dystopian future society that sets intense poverty opposite garish wealth is fitting and likely contributed to the novel's instantaneous success. Katniss's ability to survive the hand she was dealt and ultimately take down the oppressive institutions that dealt it is a story of triumph, allowing readers to see that there is a way forward even in immense adversity. A unique facet of *The Hunger Games*'s is its ability to continually speak to these insecurities. As I write this in 2025, *The Hunger Games* is just as relevant if not more so. The world is polarized, democracy on the rocks, and the future of the United States uncertain. In these times, dystopia serves two crucial purposes.

Firstly, as this thesis has described, the dystopia can act as a mirror for the real world, but with the stakes amplified, the world dramatized. In a fictional setting, readers are more apt to recognize injustices at play, as they are the defining characteristics of the dystopian society. Then, if these inequities can be recognized in a fictional world, maybe more people will see it in their own lives and work to change them. Secondly, as ironic as it may be, since they are books purposely highlighting a worst-case-scenario world, dystopias offer hope. I told myself that the scope of my research would remain solely on the book series, but if I may make one exception to reference the movie adaptation of the same name directed by Gary Ross (2012), I will use it for this quote spoken by President Snow: "Hope, it is the only thing stronger than fear." Snow does not speak in the first book, and rarely in the movie, but this line seems to me to encapsulate the timeless importance of the dystopia. The world was scary when the book was first published, it is scary now, and reading about Panem and its yearly sacrifice of 24 children wouldn't help much

if it weren't for Katniss fighting back, surviving, and liberating others, providing a light at the end of the tunnel. In times when we cannot see it in our own lives, dystopia is a reminder that the light is still there. I won't argue that a dystopia needs a "happy" ending to be successful (the ending of *Mockingjay* is actually very bleak), but its glimmer of hope is another reason that Collins's work has stood the test of time thus far.

The Hunger Games is a rich text and boasts nearly infinite research possibilities, my focus on Katniss's relationship to femininity and the gender codes at play being just one. Still, I believe it to be one of the most important (if underrepresented compared to political or environmental angles) aspects of Collins's most prominent work. Panem hinges upon surveillance, a concept that shouldn't be unfamiliar to readers, and it is only heightened in the Games themselves. Gender performance that may have once been subconscious for Katniss is now forced to the forefront as she must intentionally choose her actions according to the desires of an audience she cannot see. Outside the arena, Katniss becomes a mannequin for those around her to dress how they see fit, and she has no choice but to be malleable despite the violation of her physical body and the growing chasm between how she looks and how she feels. Once in the Games, Katniss is temporarily free from beauty expectations, but, under the watchful, panoptic eye of the audience, her actions are magnified and become crucial as ever. Throughout the Games we see Katniss perpetually aware of the invisible camera as she manages portraying a strong girl capable of taking on the Games, reinforcing the Capitol's belief in the Games, and allowing herself to be submissive to Peeta, making herself desirable through playing up their ploy as star-crossed lovers. This precarious balancing act, while ultimately successful in achieving Katniss's goal of survival, demonstrates society's contradictory, often antithetical, expectations of young girls.

It is a standard distinctly different from Peeta's, the boy who stands opposite Katniss and consistently embraces traditionally feminine gender-codes without consequences or fear of repercussions. Peeta, too, succeeds in his ultimate goal—to remain true to himself in the Games—but it is only through Katniss's contortions that he gets to survive. Peeta does not mold himself to fit audience expectations the way Katniss does, allowing him to, in theory, be an embodied self, but he has no need to perform, either. He demonstrates consistent inaction, deference, and passivity despite their feminine connotations, but the audience does not demand the complex gender performance of him that they do of Katniss. For all his relative freedom, he would have died (albeit, as himself) if not for Katniss's mastery of audience expectations and their requirement for her to find Peeta and resume their love affair.

An especially critical aspect of this novel is the textual subtlety that forces the reader to experience the plot differently than the diegetic audience, the most prominent example lying in Rue's death scene. Collins does more than just tell an exciting story in *The Hunger Games* when she writes a guidebook on how to recognize innocence even in the enemy and point blame toward the institution fundamentally responsible. A close-reading analysis of this scene reveals Collins highlighting Rue's youth even in an arena of other children, consequently amplifying the Capitol's cruelty and role in her brutal death. Through strategic syntax, even amidst the intense action of the scene—Rue's scream, the District 1 boy spearing her, and Katniss killing him—all occurring in quick succession, Collins ensures the reader's experience is fundamentally different than that of a Capitol citizen watching on TV who is entirely detached. In this sense, she conducts a sort of rebellion in her own writing by not allowing the reader to become complacent in the violence.

I've argued thus far of Katniss's relative powerlessness against societal pressures and gendered expectations of her. This kind of close reading analysis and the theoretical frameworks I've introduced are key to developing *The Hunger Games* as a text with the capacity for literary complexity, which has always been my goal. However, I want to redirect now to the public's perception of Collins's work because, at the end of the day, I knew this series was powerful before embarking on my research. On the surface, the public sees Katniss as a badass, and rightly so. Her ability to adapt and survive even under oppressive conditions is a massive testament to her character and ability to be a role model for young girls. *The Hunger Games*, as the series progresses, at least, has an element of hope, but even more than that, it's a testament to possibility. If speculative fiction is true, as Le Guin attests, Katniss can be true as well. She doesn't have to wield a bow and arrow or volunteer for a state-sponsored fight to the death, but she can navigate the world as a young girl and defy the odds again and again. She can come out on top even when it feels like the whole world is against her. It's the enduring and unique ability of speculative fiction, inspiring possibility where it feels like there shouldn't be any. In a world seemingly ready to ban books on tyranny and revolution, stories that incite this feeling are invaluable.

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