

Hope is the Thing with Feathers
The Potential Impacts of the Political Implications of Popular Young Adult Literature:
A Close Reading of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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I, Julia Clifton, pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

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Introduction

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy is an unlikely candidate for scholarly literature analysis for two reasons: it is popular, and it is a Young Adult series. However, this paper argues that the political implications of Collins' works in combination with these two factors can assist in making these works more impactful and, therefore, worthy of serious analysis. By using a Marxist critical lens, we can interrogate the systems of power within these works and consider how the *Hunger Games* and other examples of oppression gradually lead to a full-scale rebellion.

To understand the potential impact of the political implications in Collins' works on real-world rebellions, we can look at the recent Thai protests as an example of the oppression and subsequent resistance Collins discusses. Tensions began to rise after the government once again delayed voting in the 2019 election, and protests broke out in 2020 when the Thai government dissolved the Future Forward Party, a progressive party dedicated to demilitarizing the government and reducing inequality. The protests grew in the wake of the pandemic as the emergency decrees issued by the government limited freedom of speech (Human Rights Watch). Applying Marxist media theory to the way media works within the series to enforce the existing oppression, the eventual subversion of it against the oppressor, and the way these uses of media are also present in Thailand furthers the comparison between the political implications of *The Hunger Games* and the Thai protests. Ultimately, we must understand these political implications to fully comprehend how the popular status of these works and their designation as a Young Adult series work together to increase their potential to impact their readers and makes them worthy of serious analysis.

The Hunger Games was the most popular dystopian YA series in the early 2010s. It was on *Time's* "Top 100 YA Books of All Time" (Time), ranked second only to *Harry Potter* on

NPR's list of the "100 Best-Ever Teen Novels" (NPR), and Madeleine Deliee reported in 2020 that, "*The Hunger Games* books have sold over 100 million copies worldwide and are translated into 54 languages." However, scholars often dismiss popular works like *The Hunger Games* due to the distinction between popular culture and high culture derived, in part, from Marxist critical theory (Easthope). Antony Easthope explains the argument many scholars use to support their dismissal of popular literature, stating "the popular novel paints a world in which right and wrong, truth and falsehood 'are clear with statutory distinctness,' [while] the literary text reaches certainty not easily but only by testing alternatives through irony so that the certainty 'must be earned'" (87-88). The understanding that popular literature lacks the complexity for analysis because it is accessible to the masses causes many scholars to dismiss it.

Due to the fact of its easy accessibility, popular literature does not possess the exclusivity and complexity of high culture literature; however, that does not mean it should be dismissed, as it can still influence its readers. Common examples of the impact of popular literature are Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the television movie *The Day After*. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the only book in the 19th century to outsell the Bible. This popularity allowed the content of this work to impact a greater audience, which contributed to the rising tensions between the North and the South that eventually led to the Civil War (Harriet Beecher Stowe Center). Similarly, over 100 million people watched *The Day After* during its first broadcast (Poniewozik). Ronald Reagan himself said in his journal, "It's very effective & left me greatly depressed...My reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war." A few years later, Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty which banned specific types of missiles. It is impossible to claim this movie was the sole driver of Reagan's desire to prevent nuclear war, but it was most certainly a factor.

Similar to popular literature, scholars often exclude Young Adult literature from serious scholarly analysis for the same reason—the works are less complicated to cater to their younger audience, meaning they lack the complex language and ideas that encourage analysis (Soter). But this belief is not necessarily true, especially for the dystopian subgenre. This subgenre has been around for a long time, but it rose in popularity around 2005 (Ames). Melissa Ames explained this revival, saying, “the post-9/11 climate has contributed to the popularity of these YA dystopias, as they present fictional fear-based scenarios that align with contemporary cultural concerns” (4). The works in this subgenre, specifically during its surge in the late 2000s and early 2010s, usually focused on post-apocalyptic societies with controlling governments and disempowered protagonists fighting against them.

Political and social commentaries within these works expose younger readers to nuanced takes regarding the state of the world around them. Caroline Jones writes that dystopian YA books essentially have two purposes: “First, the literature cautions young readers about the probably dire consequences of current human behaviors. Second...it is driven by the impulse to counsel hope and present the case for urgent social change ... If people do not change, it warns, the future looks devastatingly bleak” (229). Though YA authors write these books to be accessible to younger audiences by catering to their experiences and interests, that does not negate their ability to possess complex ideas that have the potential to seriously impact their readers. Moreover, this “younger audience” is exactly why humans should be studying the implications of these works more; younger audiences mean a more impressionable audience and, therefore, the potential for an even greater impact (Jarrett).

In his article, Easthope, having presented the common but mistaken understanding of popular literature, goes on to argue that “popular culture is doing something specific and

different from high culture, something which should not be denied from serious analysis" (95). I argue that it is the potential effect caused by the expansive reach of popular literature and the impressionable audience of YA literature that makes *The Hunger Games* and books like it worthy of analysis. *The Hunger Games* books were substantial to popular culture in the early 2010s, therefore, they are an important factor in understanding how literature from the YA genre can affect the real world. In this trilogy, Collins provides a commentary against corrupt authorities through the development of her dystopian world, and, through the upheaval of that world, she provides a blueprint for rebellion. Analyzing these works through a Marxist critical lens for their political implications and looking at real-world examples of controlling governments and rebellions allows us to see the potential long-term impacts that these works could have on readers as they grow up.

The Hunger Games and Oppression in The Country of Panem

It is useful to consider *The Hunger Games* trilogy through a Marxist critical lens, as the class structures within these works are essential to understanding their political and social implications. The series consists of *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*. Collins centers the series on 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to take her sister's place in the Hunger Games—a yearly punishment from the totalitarian government of Panem, called the Capitol, for an attempted rebellion seventy-four years ago. Each of the twelve districts of Panem, excluding those who live in the Capitol, randomly select two young tributes in the Reaping to compete in an arena where they will fight to the death until one remains as the victor.¹ When

¹ Victors earn a house in the Victors Village in their district, income from the Capitol for the rest of their lives, and can never be entered in the Games again unless it is a Quarter Quell. Their districts are granted food and other resources from the Capitol once a month until the next Games. They are required to mentor the tributes from their district every year until their death.

Katniss and the other tribute from her district, Peeta, defy the Capitol and become the first pair to walk out of the Games, they spark the beginnings of the rebellion. In the last two books, Katniss becomes the face of this rebellion as the Mockingjay² and works with the rebels to overthrow the Capitol. The power imbalance and hierarchy that Collins establishes in the first book are core components of these works, thus any analysis of them needs to interrogate these power structures. The Marxist lens, which focuses on class and power relations, is perfect for this type of analysis.

To understand the Capitol's full scope of power over the districts, we must look at how the Capitol exerts its authority and the resulting oppression that occurs. The Hunger Games are the biggest example of Capitol control in these works, but there are smaller ways that the Capitol oppresses the districts that are important to note. All forms of the Capitol's control helped prevent the districts from rebelling. In the first book, Katniss explains how her district, Twelve, is the poorest in Panem. The poverty that she describes informs the reader who the oppressed are within this society. It is not a coincidence that the Games are called "The Hunger Games" as hunger and starvation run rampant in the districts, especially in Twelve. Katniss, who is from the poorest part of her district, The Seam, explains just how prevalent the hunger crisis is:

Starvation is not an uncommon fate in District 12. Who hasn't seen the victims? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines. Straggling through the streets. And one day, you come upon them sitting motionless against a wall or lying in the Meadow, you hear the wails from a house, and

² A type of songbird in Panem created when a Mutt called a Jabberjay, a bird designed to repeat speech, crossbred with a Mockingbird. In her first Games, Katniss wears a Mockingjay pin given to her by a friend from home.

the Peacekeepers³ are called in to retrieve the body. Starvation is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one. (*THG* 28)

The vivid imagery in this passage makes the harsh reality of this district clear, at least for the people who live in The Seam like Katniss. The people that she describes dying from starvation are all essentially helpless—old people, children, the disabled. The last sentence reflects the true power of the Capitol. Everyone knows exactly what is happening in the district, and who is responsible for covering it up, but none of them can do anything about it because they lack the power to stand up to the Capitol.

In contrast, the Capitol has no such problems of starvation, which Collins shows throughout the first book as Katniss and Peeta prepare for the Games in the Training Center. Their awe at the apparent abundance of expensive food makes this difference clear, but it becomes especially obvious in *Catching Fire* when Katniss and Peeta attend a party in the Capitol at the end of their Victory Tour, “‘I can’t hold another bite,’ I [(Katniss)] say. They all laugh as if that’s the silliest thing they’ve ever heard. ‘No one lets that stop them!’ says Flavius. They lead us over to a table that holds tiny stemmed wineglasses filled with clear liquid. ‘Drink this’” (*CF* 79). The liquid, which is common at Capitol parties, makes partygoers vomit so that they may eat more. Katniss is horrified, saying:

All I can think of is the emaciated bodies of the children on our kitchen table as my mother prescribes what the parents can’t give. More food...And here in the Capitol they’re vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of mind or body, not from spoiled food. It’s what everyone does at a party.

Expected. Part of the fun (*CF* 80).

³ “Peacekeepers” are essentially the police officers and Capitol enforcers of Panem. They maintain order in the districts.

This scene shows the clear divide between the districts and the Capitol. It is not just that the government exempts the children of the Capitol from the Games, but that the people of the Capitol as a whole have fundamentally different lives than those in the districts.

The relative states of poverty are not the only factors keeping the districts from rebelling. There is also a complete lack of communication between the districts, which Latham explains as the Capitol controlling information “in an effort to discourage resistance as much as possible, particularly any kind of widespread resistance” (37). By keeping the districts isolated, the Capitol prevents them from uniting against the government. But the system is not perfect. When Katniss enters the arena, she befriends a tribute from Eleven named Rue and finally learns about life in another district. Katniss even wonders as they talk if “the Gamemakers⁴ are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in the different districts to know about one another” (*THG* 203). Though Katniss says the information they discuss is probably harmless, the way she acknowledges the likelihood that the Gamemakers are blocking it implies that this conversation is more powerful than it seems. Their conversation revolves around the food in Eleven. Katniss thinks that they would have more to eat because all the food in Panem is grown there, but Rue explains that the government does not allow them to eat it, and stealing is punishable by a public whipping. The apparent contrast between the two districts becomes clear as Katniss says:

I can tell by her expression that ... [public whippings are] not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping’s a rare thing in District 12...Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol (*THG* 203).

⁴ “Gamemakers” are people in the Capitol in charge of controlling the Games. They decide what gets broadcasted to Panem and interfere in the arena when necessary.

Even though Katniss thinks this lack of attention from the Capitol is an advantage and it seems like the two districts are quite different, Collins has already made it clear that Twelve does not have it better than Eleven. The people in both districts are starving. The only reason the Capitol does not need to police Twelve as much as Eleven is because Twelve is weaker by virtue of being the poorest district.

This comparison shows that all the districts are still at the mercy of the Capitol, regardless of the degree of Capitol control. Furthermore, Collins makes it abundantly clear in *Catching Fire* that the Capitol has always had an equal amount of control over all of the districts. When the Capitol realizes that Katniss sparked a revolution, they try to control her by exerting more influence in her district in the hopes that they can quell the rebellion. They bring in more Peacekeepers and crackdown on the people of Twelve. The Peacekeepers whip Katniss's best friend Gale for hunting. In the first book, Katniss thinks that the lack of Capitol presence in Twelve was because they did not know about the illegal things happening there like the existence of the black market, known as the Hob, where Katniss and Gale would trade their hunting spoils. But the reality is that the Capitol was never ignoring Twelve. They sent more Peacekeepers because they knew about the Hob and the illegal hunting. They knew that destroying these things would hurt Katniss. It is clear that the Capitol knows all of this information as they burn down the Hob and cut off Katniss and Gale's access to the woods by fixing the fence around the district. Twelve was never a threat before Katniss sparked the rebellion and, therefore, the Capitol never needed to police it as closely.

This reactionary behavior from the Capitol to quell all forms of dissent is one that readers can connect to the real world. Ames wrote about this potential impact, broadly saying, "In general, Utopian and dystopian 'literature encourages people to view their society with a critical

eye” (16). The examples of oppression by the Capitol may be extreme, but that is the point, as it makes it easier for younger readers to examine the world around them for the same red flags like overt force from the government in response to protest. Collins did not pioneer the idea of a reactionary government. It has been a part of history for millennia—though the French first gave it a name during the French Revolution when conservative groups formed to move against the progressives—and it is still happening today. The current rebellion in Thailand is just one example of this phenomenon. The protests have been ongoing for two years and the Thai government has not received them well (Human Rights Watch). Similar to the Black Lives Matter protests in America and the overt shows of rebellion in *Catching Fire*, the Thai government and police responded to these protests with force, using “water cannons mixed with purple dye and teargas chemicals, as well as teargas grenades and pepper spray grenades to prevent a demonstration organized by the People’s Movement from reaching the parliament” (Human Rights Watch). Collins’ examples of this kind of government might impact readers and their perception of the world so that they could recognize similar examples in the real world, like Thailand, and potentially fight back against them.

Collins takes the concept of a totalitarian government further than generally seen in the real world with the Games and, in doing so, she shows readers a potential future if this type of government is left unchecked. The last time the Capitol dealt with a rebellion in a reactionary manner, it resulted in the creation of the Hunger Games. 74 years before the first book takes place, there were 13 districts of Panem. The thirteenth district led a failed rebellion against the Capitol that ended with their supposed demise and the Hunger Games. Katniss explains the purpose of the Games when she says, “Taking kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their

mercy. How little chance we would stand at surviving another rebellion” (*THG* 18). It was not enough for the Capitol to simply oppress the districts by keeping them separate and impoverished after the rebellion because it would leave too much room for another rebellion. By overtly punishing the remaining districts for the actions of Thirteen, the Capitol makes its authority clear.

However, the Capitol fails to consider that such drastic forms of control often lead to the sowing of dissent. The fact that the tributes are children shows that the Capitol has a complete disregard for life as these children are innocent and pose no threat to the Capitol’s power while they remain in their districts. The Capitol values control over human life, which is a recipe for an uprising as they overlook the well-being of the people to maintain that control. No society that values absolute control over its people is sustainable as literature, like *The Hunger Games*, and real-life examples, like Thailand and other revolutions in history, show us. Furthermore, the choice to make the tributes innocent children seems extreme, but that is the point. The shock value makes the overall understanding of the heartlessness of the Capitol stronger. It shows how far a totalitarian government like this could go if no one steps in, which serves to warn readers about the potential consequences of “current human behaviors” (Jones 229) before giving them examples of how to stand up against oppressors like the Capitol.

Moreover, there are also elements of the lead-up to the Games where the Capitol exerts its control over the districts. The reaping system, where a Capitol official chooses the tributes from a bowl of contender’s names, and the tesserae, a system where contenders can enter themselves more times than necessary in exchange for resources, are examples of this oppression. Contenders for the Games enter into the Reaping once when they turn twelve, twice when they turn thirteen, and so on until they turn eighteen, when they enter a minimum of seven

times. However, the reaping system preys on the poor citizens of the districts with tesserae, which Katniss explains:

Say you are poor and starving as we were. You can opt to add your names more times in exchange for tesserae. Each tessera is worth a meager year's supply of grain and oil for one person. You may do this for each of your family members as well. So, at the age of twelve, I had my name entered four times...every year I have needed to do this. And the entries are cumulative. So now, at the age of sixteen, my name will be in the reaping twenty times. Gale, who is eighteen and has been either helping or single-handedly feeding a family of five for seven years, will have his name in forty-two times. (*THG* 13)

The poor are consistently at a disadvantage when it comes to the risk of being chosen for the Games. The Capitol takes advantage of the hunger crisis in the districts by making the odds even worse for impoverished citizens.

Similarly, there are many instances in the real world of government measures, like the tesserae, that put poor people at a disadvantage in relation to their rich counterparts. In Thailand, there is a huge wealth gap between the poorest and the richest citizens, and the Thai government prioritizes the rights of the wealthy over the poor. One example of this inequality is the forced conscription law which states that "every Thai man from the age of 21 is required by law to undergo conscription unless he has a valid reason for postponement" (Thai PBS World). Though this law says "every," most of the people drafted are from poor families, as the wealthy actively avoid conscription by using bribes, familial connections, and "undergoing training as 'territorial defense students' in high school" (Thai PBS World). Furthermore, many of these men forced to join the military suffer terrible treatment, reporting that they are "being cheated of their salaries and being forced to work as servants in the homes of their commanding officers" (Thai PBS

World). In even worse cases, men have been “found dead at military bases after being punished” and their deaths are ruled “to be suicides by officers in charge, despite the protestations of the bereaved families” (Thai PBS World). This inequality and gross mistreatment have led to major pushback from the progressive parties in Thailand, who have sought to get rid of the law that forces conscription. We can tie this real-world example back to the tesserae system in *The Hunger Games*, where rich citizens are at less of a risk of participating in the Games, and citizens of the Capitol are exempt from the Games altogether, leaving the poor at a disadvantage because they, like the people of Thailand, completely lack any agency in this system.

The tesserae system also creates a divide in the social classes within even the poorest districts like Twelve. In the first book, Katniss and Gale go to the mayor’s house to sell him strawberries before the reaping. His daughter Madge, who is the same age as Katniss, greets them and makes a comment about her name being pulled at the reaping which makes Gale angry, seemingly out of nowhere. However, Katniss explains his reaction, saying,

You can see why someone like Madge, who has never been at risk of needing a tessera, can set him [(Gale)] off. The chance of her name being drawn is very slim compared to those of us who live in the Seam. Not impossible, but slim. And even though the rules were set up by the Capitol, not the districts, certainly not Madge’s family, it’s hard not to resent those who don’t have to sign up for tesserae. (*THG* 13)

The option for tesserae not only puts the poor people at a disadvantage but also exacerbates the division between the classes, even those who are not benefitting from the Hunger Games like Madge. It makes the idea of rebellion even less possible because the districts are divided within themselves.

Oppression Begets Rebellion

Throughout the trilogy, the Capitol fails to realize that the divisions they created between the classes, both on the larger scale of the Capitol versus the districts and the smaller scale within the districts themselves, are causing dissent that will lead to an eventual uprising. The rebellion in *The Hunger Games* officially starts with Katniss' actions at the end of the 74th Hunger Games, where she and Peeta refuse to kill each other, and instead, choose to die together by ingesting poisonous berries. But there are examples of smaller forms of resistance leading up to and after this moment that show the progression from weak expressions of dissent to full-scale rebellion.

The first instance of actual action against the Capitol comes after Katniss volunteers for the Games when a Capitol official calls her 12-year-old sister Prim's name at the reaping. This action in itself is a small resistance against the notion that someone as young and innocent as Prim should experience the horror of the Games. However, the citizens of Twelve respond to Katniss' resistance and, in doing so, make it stronger. Katniss describes their reaction to her taking the stage saying, "Instead of acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they [the citizens of Twelve] take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong" (*THG* 24). Their refusal to play the roles that the Capitol wants them to and pretend this is a day of celebration is the first moment of true rebellion in these works, and it continues when the people of Twelve do this, "At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love" (*THG* 24). The Capitol demands that the people in the districts treat Reaping Day as a holiday but, at this moment, the people of Twelve make it clear that the reaping is

essentially a funeral. It is not a celebration. It does not matter if one of the tributes comes back as the victor because it means the other tribute and twenty-two other children have died.

This act of resistance might seem small in this moment, but the gesture comes to mean exactly what Katniss first says about their silence, “We do not condone.” The three-finger salute comes back twice more in the books as it becomes a symbol of rebellion. During the Games in the first book, Rue, the tribute Katniss befriended, dies. Rue was the youngest tribute in the arena—the same age as Katniss’ sister—and her death is a powerful moment that emphasizes the depth of the Capitol’s horridness as Rue was a completely innocent child, and the Capitol is entirely responsible for her death. Katniss sings to Rue as she dies and stays with her until she is gone, which is already a sign of resistance as the tributes are supposed to leave the body immediately to be collected. Instead, after Rue dies, Katniss says, “I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them [(the Capitol)], to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games” (*THG* 236-237). She covers Rue in flowers and when she leaves, she does this: “I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction” (*THG* 237). This moment is another where a member of the districts uses this symbol to directly condemn the Games and, by extension, the actions of the Capitol.

This symbol grows to be an intentional, planned form of rebellion against the Capitol by its third and final usage in *Catching Fire* when Katniss and Peeta are on their Victory Tour throughout the districts. In each district, they make a speech, and the families of the fallen tributes are directly in front of them. When they go to Eleven, Katniss does not give the speech written for her, instead thanking the families of the tributes as they both helped her during the Games. When she finishes speaking, the people of the district do this: “What happens next is not

an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It's our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena" (*CF* 61). This moment shows how that small resistance at the beginning of the first book has grown into a full-blown rebellion. It is more than a sign that they do not condone what is happening because it also shows that the districts are learning. They are doing exactly what the Capitol has tried to prevent them from doing all this time because the gesture they use is not from Eleven. They learned it from Katniss because the Gamemakers could not censor her when she did it in the Games. Katniss explained that they have to show when they collect the bodies of fallen tributes, and she used this gesture right before they collected Rue's body (*THG* 237). The first time they used this gesture it was resigned. It was a goodbye that said, "We accept that we cannot do anything, but we need to show we do not agree." This time it is an act of rebellion. It says we do not condone, *and* we won't be silent anymore. The first time, it was accompanied by silence and was very impromptu. This time it was intentional and planned. Rue's whistle⁵ from the first book accompanied and cued the gesture. Now, it is not just a show of dissent, it is a promise that they will not suffer this treatment any longer.

This symbol shows the progression of the rebellion in the books, but it is also important because of what it symbolizes—resistance. This gesture made its way into the real world in 2014 when Thai protestors began using it during demonstrations against their military-controlled government. Protestors in Thailand continue to use it even now, over ten years later. The current protests consist mostly of young people who would have read these books. The Human Rights Watch has been reporting on the current protests and wrote that "Youth-led democracy protests

⁵ During the 74th Games, Rue shows Katniss a whistle she uses to signal the end of the workday in her district. They use this signal to communicate when they are separated during the Games.

started in universities and schools across Thailand after the Constitutional Court dissolved the opposition Future Forward Party in February [2020]” (Human Rights Watch). Though the details of the oppression and facts of the governments are different, the use of this gesture in the real world as a sign of rebellion shows the potential impact of books like these because of their political implications. Collins condemned the government of Panem through this gesture and, by extension, she condemned any government like it that valued control over its people.

The final use of this symbol in *Catching Fire* is only possible because of Katniss’ actions with the berries at the end of the 74th Hunger Games. After the death of Rue, the Gamemakers announce that they have changed the rules of the Games so two victors can win if they are from the same district. This change leads Katniss and Peeta to team up and take out all of the other tributes. However, when Katniss and Peeta are the only two tributes left, the Gamemakers retract the rule, meaning one of them will have to kill the other or the Gamemakers will intervene in some horrible way as they have before when they forced Katniss toward other tributes with a wall of fire and when they sent Mutts⁶ after the remaining tributes. Katniss refuses to let either of these things happen and reasons that “They have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country. If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were...” (*THG* 344). She comes up with a plan for both of them to eat the berries at the same time and kill themselves, depriving the Capitol of a victor. Even if they die, they still win. But Katniss is smart enough to know that the Capitol would never let that happen, and she is right. Before they die, it is announced that they both won. Even though letting them both live technically means they beat the Capitol, it is still

⁶ Mutts, or muttations, are mutated creatures created by the Capitol. In this usage, the Mutts created were wolves designed to look like each of the tributes that had already been killed.

the lesser of two evils because the government believes that letting them both die has more potential to start a rebellion which is incorrect. Katniss uses the Capitol's control of the media and the Hunger Games against them by showing every single person in the districts that they can outsmart the Capitol and, in doing so, she unintentionally starts a revolution.

Marxist Media Theory and the Capitol

Media is a huge part of the way that the Capitol controls the districts in the trilogy and later, in the third book *Mockingjay*, it is one of the primary forms of resistance that the rebels use. It is useful then to consider Marxist media theory when looking at the use of media within these works. This theory maintains that all media is under the control of the ruling elite, even if it does not appear as such (Chandler). Kperogi explains further that, "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production" (63). This phenomenon manifests in the real world with governments controlling the media. Thailand is just one example as the BBC reported that "The government and military control nearly all the national terrestrial television networks and operate many of Thailand's radio networks" (BBC), which allows them to control information output and perceptions of the government. In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol has a similar, though more severe, control over the media. Before the rebellion begins, we see how the Capitol, the "ruling elite" that is in control of the districts and therefore the means of production, also has complete control over the media in Panem. They maintain that control by deciding what the people of the districts can know and what they cannot know.

The way the Capitol forces the districts to view the Hunger Games is an example of information they force upon the population. Katniss explains before the reaping that "attendance

is mandatory unless you are on death's door" (*THG* 16) and it is difficult to avoid viewing the Games. The Capitol controls the broadcasting of the Games, and all other kinds of broadcasts, by limiting the electricity to the districts. When she is in the Training Center in the Capitol, Katniss tells us, "The Capitol twinkles like a vast field of fireflies. Electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day...The only time you can count on it is when they are airing the Games or some important government message on television that it's mandatory to watch. But here there would be no shortage. Ever" (*THG* 80-81). It is clear by the state of the Capitol that there is no shortage of electricity in Panem. The Capitol's technology is also significantly more advanced than that of the districts, which is just one way that they control the flow of information. They have reliable electricity, computers, hovercrafts, and high-speed trains, and they are the only people with access to the technology required for media output like cameras and studios. The people of the districts have neither the technology nor the control of it to find information. The Capitol decides what the districts know. The Games are one of the pieces of information forced upon them because it is a punishment, and the Capitol can control every second they see. That is clear when Rue is telling Katniss about Eleven. This is information Katniss has never heard before because the Capitol has not permitted anyone to know things about the other districts beyond the basics. But the people of the districts will never see the footage of that conversation, as Katniss said, because the Capitol would never allow it.

While Katniss' conversation with Rue is one example of the Capitol's control over media, the best example of that control is in *Catching Fire*, when Katniss meets two refugees from Eight in the woods outside of her district. These refugees tell her about Thirteen, the district that the Capitol bombed to dust in the Dark Days when they rebelled. The refugees, Bonnie and Twill, tell Katniss they are heading to Thirteen. Katniss is confused as she has seen the footage

that shows there is nothing left in Thirteen other than rubble. However, the Capitol has been lying to everyone as Bonnie and Twill explain, ““They’ve been using the same footage for as long as anyone in District Eight can remember... You know how they always show the Justice Building?... If you look very carefully, you’ll see it. Up in the far right-hand corner... A mockingjay. Just a glimpse of it as it flies by. The same one every time”” (CF 146). The people of Eight have theories about what actually happened, saying, ““We think the people moved underground when everything on the surface was destroyed. We think they’ve managed to survive. And we think the Capitol leaves them alone because, before the Dark Days, District Thirteen’s principal industry was nuclear development.’ ‘They were graphite miners,’ I say. But I hesitate, because that’s information I got from the Capitol”” (CF 147). Although Katniss is well aware of the Capitol’s control at this point in the trilogy, she still does not question facts that the Capitol has given her until they come into question here. Even then, she still does not entirely believe Bonnie and Twill.

Katniss’ indoctrination shows the full extent of control that the Capitol has over the media as even someone like Katniss, who has always been wary of the Capitol, can still be fooled by them. She does not truly believe Bonnie and Twill until she sees the news footage for herself a few chapters later:

I see the smoldering remains of the Justice Building in District 13 and just catch the black-and-white underside of a mockingjay’s wing as it flies across the upper right-hand corner. That doesn’t prove anything, really. It’s just an old shot that goes with an old tale... Just before they cut back to the main newscaster, I see the unmistakable flash of that same mockingjay’s wing. The reporter has simply been incorporated into the old footage. She’s not in District 13 at all. Which begs the question, *What is?*” (CF 162-163)

Katniss sees the mockingjay in the footage twice before she is willing to believe there is a chance the Capitol has lied. This uncertainty connects back to Marxist media theory as Chandler explains it with the term hegemony which, in part, refers to “the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'commonsense' and 'natural'” (Chandler). The Capitol’s hegemony proves that this control is not always overt and easily identifiable as we see with Katniss. It can be so ingrained in people that they think that is just how the world works. The Capitol’s tactics of control via media are so pervasive that the people of the districts do not even think to question basic facts like the history of the first rebellion. The Capitol makes it such that even people who do not trust the government still accept some facts told to them by the Capitol, especially when there is no discernible reason why the Capitol would lie.

Katniss begins to realize after this interaction with Bonnie and Twill just how deep the Capitol’s control goes and learns how to actively fight against it. It is clear when Katniss says, “But then I hesitate, because that’s information I got from the Capitol” that she is already beginning to question the sources of her information and its validity. Latham explains the skills Katniss learns as media literacy referring to “the ability to understand how media messages are constructed and the ability to use media to create effective messages for particular purposes” (35). As Katniss learns media literacy, there is a chance the reader might as well, and these examples of media control might help readers to identify the same forms of media control in real life. The development of these skills would allow readers to better understand the media they consume and prevent them from succumbing to media control. Furthermore, Latham correctly points out that there is a dire need for younger people to have these media literacies in the age of technology and goes on to say that “One reason Katniss Everdeen resonates so profoundly with

21st-century teens is that her information and media literacy skills reflect those they need to survive and thrive in the multiple games they must play in today's world" (45).

Subversion of Marxist Media Theory

Katniss provides readers with an excellent example of how to understand the way media can be controlled and more importantly how to subvert that control. Sean Connors considers this subversion through the concept of "the gaze." The gaze is the surveillance that any person or group in power performs. Connors explains it in the context of these books by saying "*The Hunger Games* acknowledges that, under some circumstances, people are able to turn the gaze back on itself and work within oppressive power systems to accomplish their own ends" (11). This idea of subverting the gaze for one's benefit against oppressors connects back to the idea of Marxist media theory, in which the oppressed take control of the media and use it against the oppressors.

The use of media against those who control it is a significant part of the way the rebellion works in *Mockingjay*. After the catastrophic end to the 75th Hunger Games and the destruction of Twelve, the Capitol takes Peeta and the rebels take Katniss to Thirteen, where she finds that Bonnie and Twill were right. The people of Thirteen did move underground and have been plotting to overthrow the Capitol. The rebels push Katniss into the role of the Mockingjay, the symbol of hope that drives the rebellion, as she is the reason it began. One of the main aspects of their plan is to take control of the Capitol's broadcasts with an "Airtime Assault," in which they will "make a series of what we call propos—which is short for 'propaganda spots'—featuring you [Katniss], and broadcast them to the entire population of Panem" (*MJ* 44). However, before

they manage to broadcast any of the propos, the Capitol tries to use Peeta to stop the rebellion with an interview broadcast all over Panem. During this interview, Peeta makes this speech:

I want everyone watching—whether you're on the Capitol or the rebel side—to stop for just a moment and think about what this war could mean. For human beings. We almost went extinct fighting one another before. Now our numbers are even fewer. Our conditions more tenuous. Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely? In the hopes that—what? Some decent species will inherit the smoking remains of the earth... We can't fight one another, ... There won't be enough of us left to keep going. If everybody doesn't lay down their weapons—and I mean, as in very soon—it's all over anyway... I'm calling for a cease-fire. (*MJ* 26)

The argument Peeta makes on behalf of the Capitol is riddled with fallacies. It appeals to the emotions of the viewer by claiming that the rebellion will cause the extinction of everyone, in the hopes that fear will stop the rebellion. It completely ignores the problems that caused the rebellion to make it seem irrational to risk extinction. The Capitol uses Peeta because he can appeal not only to the masses but also to the rebels, as most of them were close to Peeta before his capture. At this point in the final book, three of the tributes from the 75th Hunger Games that had allied with Peeta have joined the rebels, including Katniss. Those friendships are part of what makes this tactic so effective, but it is also Katniss who is the key to this effectiveness. It is clear to everyone that Katniss is an essential component of the rebellion, and it is clear that she loves Peeta. President Snow knows that Peeta is the only person who could convince Katniss, and by extension the rebels, to stand down, and that makes him the most powerful weapon in the Capitol's arsenal.

However, the Capitol once again underestimates the rebels and Katniss as they are not moved by the broadcast and their retaliation to it is an incredible subversion of media control. The rebels responded by hacking the Capitol's broadcast network and playing a propo, in which Katniss also makes a speech, though hers is notably different:

I want to tell the rebels that I am alive. That I'm right here in District Eight, where the Capitol has just bombed a hospital full of unarmed men, women, and children. There will be no survivors...I want to tell the people that if you think for one second that Capitol will treat us fairly if there's a cease-fire, you're deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do...President Snow says he's sending us a message? Well, I have one for him. You can torture us and bomb us and burn our districts to the ground, but do you see that?' One of the cameras follows as I point to the planes burning on the roof of the warehouse across from us. The Capitol seal on a wing glows clearly through the flames. 'Fire is catching!...And if we burn, you burn with us. (*MJ* 99-100).

The decision to have the propo shot in one of the districts currently rebelling, instead of in Thirteen where Katniss now lives, allows the rebels to show the people what the Capitol has been hiding in the districts. None of the people in the districts know that rebellions are happening all over Panem. The Capitol wants them to think their rebellions are happening in isolation in the hopes that the districts will just give up. However, Katniss makes it clear that people are still fighting, and no one is giving up. She also reminds them of a fact everyone in the districts is well acquainted with—the Capitol does not care about their lives. They have just bombed a hospital. There is no mercy here and there certainly would not be if there was a cease-fire. The rebels systematically disprove every one of Peeta's claims and use the Capitol's control against them.

Furthermore, the Capitol's use of Peeta backfires later in the work when the rebels manage to break through a broadcast interview of Peeta with President Snow. Peeta sees the interjected footage from the rebels on a monitor as they are filming. Katniss describes it:

“Snow plows forward, saying that clearly the rebels are now attempting to disrupt the dissemination of information they find incriminating, but both truth and justice will reign. The full broadcast will resume when security has been reinstated. He asks Peeta if, given tonight's demonstration, he has any parting thoughts for Katniss Everdeen. At the mention of my name, Peeta's face contorts in effort. ‘Katniss...how do you think this will end? What will be left? No one is safe. Not in the Capitol. Not in the districts. And you...in Thirteen...’ He inhales sharply, as if fighting for air; his eyes look insane. ‘Dead by morning!’” (*MJ* 133)

The Capitol again underestimates the power of free will and emotion enough to believe they still control Peeta. Peeta has been in love with Katniss since they were children and, though his captors have been torturing him relentlessly, he still wants to save her. Peeta's warning allows the rebels in Thirteen enough time to go deeper underground before the Capitol bombs them. He still tries to help the rebels by using what little power he has. The Capitol's failure to understand how the propos will affect Peeta causes their overall failure in this moment of the text. The rebels later use the propos as a means of distraction to rescue Peeta and the other captive tributes. They continue to use the media throughout the rest of *Mockingjay* to successfully turn the tide of the rebellion.

This usage of media reflects its significance and shows readers the power they can have with the subversion of control. In the real world, we can see a similar shift in power as people have begun to use social media platforms for political purposes to share thoughts and opinions

that may not be seen in traditional forms of news. People can also use social media to make change by spreading petitions and raising awareness for important causes. The young people in Thailand have been consistently using social media platforms to speak out against the government and its policies. Even as the Thai government places restrictions and bans, the Thai people are finding ways around them to make their opinions known (Ebbighausen). Connors explains this phenomenon perfectly, saying, “People might operate in view of institutions, but, as de Certeau explains, in doing so they adopt ‘tactics’...tactics are moves that allow people to work within existing power systems to accomplish their own ends” (5). As the Thai government bans social media pages criticizing them, hundreds of new ones take their place (Ebbighausen).

We can also see this increase in social media usage for political purposes in America. A research study from the Pew Research Center found that “Around half of Americans have engaged in some form of political or social-minded activity on social media in the past year” (Anderson). It is impossible to say that the Hunger Games was the cause of this increase in media usage, but it does allow us to see a connection between the two things and consider how the usage of media in the Hunger Games could have impacted how young people use media in their political activity—especially as it is a way for young people who are not old enough to vote to engage in politics. As Connors says, “By inviting students to reflect on occasions when they, like Katniss...engaged in tactics designed to resist authoritarian practices, educators can create opportunities for them to understand themselves as people capable of resisting the unprincipled use of surveillance and of working for change within society” (20).

Furthermore, while the Capitol uses the media to their advantage for most of the trilogy, they are not the only authority that does, which is an important part of Collins's message about media and authority in these works. There are two authorities in the final book: the Capitol and

the rebels. Thirteen has its own government including President Coin, their leader, and the leader of the rebels. She functions as an alternative form of authority but her connection to the rebels does not make her authority automatically good. Katniss is wary of her from the moment she meets her, and Coin proves Katniss right later in the book. Towards the end of the rebellion in *Mockingjay*, Katniss and the rebels take the Capitol by force. The invasion forces the people of the Capitol from their homes, and many flee to President Snow's mansion, where he has promised them a place to stay. Peacekeepers herd the children into a barricade of sorts in front of the mansion to act as a human shield for the president against the rebels. This action leads to the final blow that ends the war as a hovercraft bearing a Capitol seal appears and drops silver parachutes on the children. They recognize these parachutes as the ones from the Games that deliver gifts from sponsors, so naturally, the children pick them up. However, these "gifts" are actually bombs that detonate. Rebel medics, including Katniss' 13-year-old sister Prim, rush in to help when the second wave of bombs goes off. The seal of the Capitol, the use of the parachutes, and the death of the rebel medics make it seem like the Capitol is responsible for this attack, but Katniss points out in the moment that the Peacekeepers did not seem to have any idea that this bombing was about to happen.

Katniss continues to think about this event as she mourns her sister and realizes it was President Coin that sent the bombs, not Snow. Snow would not benefit in any way from dropping those bombs, but Coin would get the people of the Capitol on her side if they thought Snow was responsible for killing their children. Coin manipulates the events such that, in the aftermath, the media will make it seem like the Capitol are the ultimate senseless villain. This moment is when it becomes clear to Katniss that it does not matter that they have overthrown the totalitarian government of Panem because the new one they are forming under Coin will not be that

different. The authority— Coin and her advisors—still believe that it is acceptable to kill children to maintain or gain control. Katniss chooses to kill Coin and break the cycle, explaining, “Snow thought the Hunger Games were an efficient means of control. Coin thought the parachutes would expedite the war. But in the end, who does it benefit? No one. The truth is, it benefits no one to live in a world where these things happen” (*MJ* 377).

The Hunger Games books do not delineate good and bad sides. In these books, both sides are bad because they are both authorities that do not value human life. This subversion of the traditional understanding of good and bad as a black and white concept reflects Collins’ understanding that all authorities operating under the chief goal of maintaining control are bad. Thailand is a real-world example as there have been a total of *twelve* coups in its history, the most recent of which happened in 2014 after months of protests against the corrupt government (Sombatpoonsiri). However, their current military-controlled government suffers similar problems to the one it replaced, which has only led to more protests. Readers can easily draw lines between Collins’ point—that societies where the authority's number one concern is not the good of *all* the people under their care—and examples of that in the real world at which point, they can look at Katniss and follow her lead by standing up against those authorities.

Conclusion: The Actual *Hunger Games* Effect

The Hunger Games series was a significant part of popular culture in the early 2010s, which caused many people to dismiss it as not being serious literature worthy of discussion. But that dismissal misses the two biggest reasons why it is so essential to study them—their popularity and their audience. The underlying belief in Marxist critical theory on popular culture versus high culture was that the purpose of studying popular culture was different than the

purpose of studying high culture. Scholars often conflate this belief with the idea that high culture is better or the only one worth studying (Easthope). But the importance of analyzing popular culture stems from the fact that it is popular. It can have an impact on people from all social classes and entire generations which means that the implications these works contain have a greater potential to change the world.

Similarly, YA books and films are worth discussing, especially when they are also popular because more of the population can read and understand them. That is how YA authors intentionally wrote these pieces of literature—to be understandable to a younger audience and, therefore, understandable to anyone with a middle school level of reading comprehension. These books can seriously impact the adolescents that read them, but they can also expose older people to complex political and social commentaries even if those people did not have access to or interest in higher levels of education. High culture is exclusionary by definition, but popular culture allows the masses to participate in conversations about issues like injustice and corruption in politics. Collins' books are an excellent example of accessible literature that makes easily understood arguments and statements on capitalist societies, corrupt governments, and injustice. Furthermore, she goes beyond that commentary by giving her readers an example of how they can stand up against these forms of oppression when they see them in their own societies.

When considering the younger audience of these works, their popularity becomes all the more important. There are very few people in their twenties today who have not heard of *The Hunger Games*. That makes the political implications and overarching themes of these works, and other popular YA novels, so incredibly significant as they can help us theorize how these works might impact their audiences.

The Pew Research Center has done extensive surveying of Generation Z's political leanings on controversial topics and their views in general. Generation Z, as the Pew Research Center defines them, are people born between 1997 and 2005 and they were the exact audience that was being targeted by the YA genre at the time when *The Hunger Games* was popular. The Pew Research Center has found that "When it comes to views on political issues and the current political climate, younger generations have consistently held more liberal views than older generations" (Parker). More specifically, they concluded that Gen Zers are more likely to believe that "ordinary citizens can do a lot to influence the government in Washington" and they can more readily identify inequality and injustice with more Gen Zers, and Millennials, agreeing that Black people are "treated less fairly than whites in the U.S." than older generations (Parker). They have also noted that younger people are more likely to use social media as a means to find information about "rallies or protests happening in their area" (Auxier). This data does not prove causation between the popularity of *The Hunger Games* and the development of liberal ideologies in its audience, but the correlation there is enough to argue that the popularity of *The Hunger Games*, and its pervasiveness in pop culture, could have contributed to this shift in attitude. Furthermore, the way the Thai people have been using the three-finger salute to stand up against their oppressive government shows that these books *do* have an impact on their readers.

Educators have also been theorizing for years about the potential impacts that books in the dystopian subgenre of YA could have on students, specifically drawing on *The Hunger Games* as it was the most popular at the time. Ames wrote that "reading these [YA dystopian] texts may be a small step in the direction of engaging students in social justice issues and, perhaps, sparking more overt political action" (4). If these books were taught in classrooms, it would increase their overall effect as students could go deeper in their analyses. Jones furthers

this idea as she explains, “In Katniss's awakening to her role as hero, she offers readers the opportunities to seek their own heroic opportunities, and to find—and realize—their own potential” (245). These books have the power to inspire readers to make change in the real world and that potential is crucial to consider when deciding if they are worthy of scholarly discussion.

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