

INTRODUCTION

I'm a ~~VICTIM~~ Damsel in Distress:

How Female Tropes Hurt Girls and Young Women

A growing portion of the feminist community urges young women who've experienced sexual assault to see themselves as "survivors" rather than "victims" of circumstance. I can understand this position. Historically speaking, women have been defined as victims of many inequalities, including gender-based violence and assault. Women have been convinced we are inherently vulnerable before society—admitting victimization often signals our defeat as a gender.

In this thesis, I claim that victimhood and vulnerability can be used as a form of agency. I argue that many of the problems associated with the concept of vulnerability come from an outdated and binary way of thinking about gender. A brief review of media and literature reveals that this way of thinking has a history of plaguing the YA novel, thus limiting the ways in which YA readers think about women and vulnerability. Using elements of queer, feminist and trauma critical theory, I prove Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy creates the opportunity for the trauma of victimhood and vulnerability to be used for individual agency.

As a young woman, feminist, and victim of gender-based violence, I have my own hang-ups regarding vulnerability. I don't want to give the impression that I'm too fragile, or that I'm somehow incapable of taking care of myself. ("I am woman, hear me roar!" right?) I also want other girls and young women to feel comfortable as individual people with support from their environment. They should not have to experience trauma or numerous instances of dismissal due to their gender before coming to the realization that they deserve better.

The media doesn't make the battle for acceptance any easier for young women and girls. There are multiple films and television programs in which girls and young women are reduced to stock characters which exist in helplessness and/or for the sole purpose of complimenting male characters¹. For example, the traditional fairy tale: "Once upon a time" there was a young woman who needed to be saved by a chivalrous man—except it wasn't once upon a time (or even twice or thrice upon a time). With the exceptions of progressive and more recent films like Brave (2012) and Frozen (2013), Disney has capitalized on "once upon a time" in a way that has helped normalize women as victims— as the "Damsels in Distress" As a result, young women are further manipulated into believing they are inherently victims or objects of society.

Disney often takes the fall for perpetuating the "Damsel in Distress" trope due to its history of adapting traditional fairy tales to animated film, but there are also a variety of authors who choose to stick to a simplistic script for their female characters (description courtesy of "TV Tropes," an online directory licensed through a Creative Commons Attribution):

Damsel in Distress

[A character, usually female] put into immediate danger in order to put the cast in motion. Her plight unites the cast, causing them to put aside their differences [in order to save her].²

I have found there's wealth of Damsels (or perceived Damsels) in Distress throughout young adult (YA) leisure literature, including, but not limited to: Bella Swan of *The Twilight Saga*

¹ In his 2010 publication, *My Year of Flops: The A.V. Club Presents One Man's Journey Deep Into the Heart of Cinematic Failure*, Nathan Rabin establishes the term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG)" as a way to expose the sexist implications of popular culture, MPDGs are "bubbly, shallow cinematic creatures[s] that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures (2007)."

² The "Ingénue" is one of the most common damsels in distress. She is "a young virginal woman with the purity of a child" and is captured and locked away "awaiting rescue and afraid for her life and virtue."

(Stephanie Meyer 2005-08), Lena Kalagaris of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Ann Brashares 2003), and Serena van der Woodsen of *Gossip Girl*, (Cecily von Ziegesar 2001).

These characters make me uncomfortable not only because they are damsels in distress, but that they are young women who are sought after by men because of their purity, their innocence or their likability. They represent the idea that women should strive to be nonthreatening, smiley creatures while men can behave however they choose without recourse.

Early Research

In this thesis, I suggest new models for female protagonists which consider their ability to maintain agency in times of vulnerability—because many times, agency and vulnerability will be simultaneous attributes by which to identify. This relationship between agency and vulnerability is what drove my initial research of the *Hunger Games* trilogy and *The Twilight Saga*. Though these series may seem drastically different at face value, both protagonists struggle to maintain their agency as young women in their respective societies.

I also explore the personal effects of young adult literature (YAL) on young women readers. While I remember enjoying some of the novels listed in the previous section as a young reader, I realize now that they coddled and even possibly enhanced some of the insecurities I felt as a young woman. This phenomenon isn't necessarily the fault of the genre or any specific author. Young adults are vulnerable and impressionable. Many times, they are searching for a beacon of hope or direction in their lives.

The following questions are part of a larger survey titled “The *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* Series: Effects on Girls and Young Women.” The survey was presented to 32 girls and

young women³ ages 15-22 in order to gather insight on how other young women responded to two of the most popular series within the YA genre:

1. Which of the following *Hunger Games* and/or *Twilight* novels have you read?
2. About how old were you when you read these novels, and how did you become interested in them?
3. What about the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* novels held your interest or caused you to lose interest?
4. Which character do you most accurately identify with in the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* novels? Why?
5. Do you wish you were more like another character in the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* novels? Who would that be and why?
6. What do you think are the goals/ambitions of the main characters in the *Hunger Games* and *Twilight* novels?

These questions generated critical thinking among girls and young women regarding female protagonists and their relationships to their supporting characters. One respondent, age 16, wrote that Bella's main goal was "just to find happiness [because] she said how she always felt like she never fit in until Edward came along" (2015). This sentiment was echoed in many of the other younger respondents' surveys, which instills a sense of anxiety for me when I think about how young girls define their own happiness. If Bella Swan's happiness depends on the attention she receives from young men, she is required to alter her behavior to achieve that

³ All young readers who identify with the gender "girl" and/or "woman" were welcomed to participate in this survey, despite their race, physical sex or sexual orientation/preference. The information was gathered according to the requirements of the Human Subject Review Committee at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

attention. In other words, her happiness is inherently related to her likability—a factor which is almost always determined by the male other.

When I read the *Twilight* series, I noticed that at first, Bella is the intelligent girl who reads and understands classic literature (i.e. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* 1847). The YA reader can identify with Bella. While she knows what she wants in life and looks forward to the future, she (like many teenagers) tends to feel invisible among her peers. But then, she's swept off her feet by not one, but *two* mysterious young men who proceed to compete for her attention. She craves Edward Cullen both emotionally and sexually, which in theory, can be empowering. However, if these things are her goals, they're shrouded by near immeasurable examples of emotional and sometimes, physical abuse.

Here's what I learned from *The Twilight Saga*:

- Being likable is the most important thing in life, especially if that likability lands you a relationship.
- If you don't have a relationship, or lose your relationship, you will and should be vulnerable and depressed.
- You should hold onto and internalize rejection in case a boy changes his mind and wants to be in a relationship with you.

When Edward leaves Bella at the beginning of *New Moon*, she becomes completely helpless. While I understand grieving a relationship, I think Meyer got lazy by promoting Bella's unhealthy pining after Edward for 500+ pages. There is truth to the pressure of being likable as a young woman, especially in terms of romantic prospects, but I think Meyer could have tried harder to maintain Bella's self-sufficient attitude captured in the early pages of

Twilight. Through book series like *The Twilight Saga*, and films where women are hardly ever stand-alone characters, we are manipulated into feeling sorry for young women. Bella lacks tangible support from her family and friends. As they focus their attentions on protecting her from the supernatural world, they tend to simultaneously limit her agency. As a result, she ends up representing *their* ideals rather than her own principles.

Take for instance, Bella's wishes to become a vampire. She firmly maintains the decision to end her human life at the adult age of 18, but is consistently warned that she might later regret said decision. The parallels to abortion rights and a woman's right to choose is one of the reasons I was inspired to write about Bella's agency through a feminist lens. However, I ran into trouble when trying to argue for the sustainability of her principles, as she is consistently the character who makes compromises for others. We start to categorize them as vulnerable or incomplete if they aren't desired by young men, or if they refuse to compromise their agency for men.

This message is not good enough for young women. In fact, it's detrimental. Young women should have access to more books which treat femininity as a form of independence rather than dependence. If it is understood that "woman" is synonymous with "weak" and "man" is synonymous with "strong," what happens to the young people who don't meet these criteria? These young people do exist, and they long for their society's acceptance of individuality.

Thus, I chose to narrow the focus of this thesis project to the YA book series which shirks social norms while remaining relevant and captivating. In this thesis, I explore the many ways in which Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy complicates the traditional female narrative. I interrogate the terms "victim" and "survivor" according to Katniss Everdeen's experience as a traumatized young woman.

More specifically, I ask the following questions in terms of Collins' novels:

- What does it mean to follow and subvert social norms?
 - More specifically, what does it mean to be “feminine” or “masculine”?
- What are the complications behind notions of weakness?
 - And is that “weakness” really such a bad thing?
- Who has the power to declare these things for society?
- What do the YA readers think about all of this?

Using queer and feminist theory, I analyze the functions of gender and performance as they translate through Panem's dystopian society in order to come to an understanding about gender and performance in our own (Chapter 3). This analysis is accompanied by elements of trauma theory in order to examine the ways in which a dependence on normative⁴ performances can produce personal and historical traumas.

In the spirit of performance, I have included a collection of creative interludes described as “transcripts” from the fictitious “First Annual *Hunger Games* Convention.” The information in these sections is presented as a Q&A session with Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian, and also includes the information I received through Human Subjects Research. Some elements of this data are communicated through graphic representations. Others are integrated into the conversation through the use of anonymous quotations.

As I compose this thesis, I realize the difficulties of writing critically about the books I love. I consistently compare Katniss Everdeen and Panem to the problems I notice in our own society. I've read the *Hunger Games* trilogy so much that the pages have started to fall out. I

⁴ This thesis distinguishes norms in *The Hunger Games* from those in our own society. The term normative is used here as a subjective term but is still relevant to the arguments in this research.

watch the film adaptations friends and recommend them to strangers. This near obsession has led to an ongoing difficulty to separate my young adult self; who read about young women, from my academic self; who writes critically about them.

The following chapter is a representation of me coming to terms with my relationship with *The Hunger Games* and YA genre as a whole. It combines elements of reflection and critical thinking as a way of entering the conversation as YA reader as well as a scholar. The subjectivity of each perspective is useful and contributes to the focus of this thesis: to track the effects of YA literature on young women and to conceptualize new models for female protagonists.

CHAPTER 1

My History with the Hunger Games Trilogy:
How I Learned to Think Critically about my Favorite Books

The Hunger Games and a Closer Look at YAL

I was first exposed to *The Hunger Games* trilogy when I was a junior in college at the State University at Fredonia. The first film adaptation had just been released in theaters and was receiving high praise from film critics as well as my peers. I thought the premise was interesting, but I had a rule against going to see film adaptations before reading the original text. In my experience, fiction was always better because they were more detailed and subjective. I was, and still am, better at forming the many connections within the plots and subplots. I imagined myself in these worlds by reading them over and over again. (By the end of my high-school career, I had read the *Harry Potter* series no less than 5 times cover-to-cover. I can still quote large passages of Rowling's text and think Hermione Granger is one of the most underrated fiction/fantasy characters of all time.)

But as I sank deeper into my college career, I began to lose my passion for reading. I was an Early Childhood Education major at the time, so I spent several hours skimming children's literature and monotonous textbooks for lesson plans and presentations. I didn't really have the time or patience to start reading a new book series. So when I heard about the *Hunger Games* trilogy, I decided to buy the box set for my sisters. I would read them during the summer and then rent the movie adaptation later.

And then I broke my own rule. I went to see The Hunger Games (2012) after a very persistent aunt convinced me that it was acceptable to see the film first, *just this one time*. (She was obviously excited about the film). When I walked out of the theater, I was shaken. This

movie was the definition of science fiction. I started thinking more critically about our country's dependence on media and public spectacle. I started thinking about how our choices as seemingly "free" citizens are often manipulated by authority figures; more specifically, how those manipulations are often related to gender and gender performance.

With these new thoughts in mind, I started paying attention to how young women and girls are represented in the media, but also how they are represented in YAL. Though it has been overlooked in the past as a legitimate genre, YAL has been proven to be very influential for the development of young readers. Mary Owen defies previous research which has stated the genre is simply "a 'sub-literature' not worthy of discussion," by arguing in the *Orana Journal of School and Children's Librarianship* that "YAL offers teenagers something that adult literature does not" ("Developing a Love for Reading" 11).

She continues: "The stories tend to have a sense of immediacy, rather than nostalgia, and their focus is on the experience of an individual, usually a teenage protagonist. It does not always provide the answers, but rather portrays a young person in search of them" (11). I've noticed this pattern with one of my favorite YA authors, Laurie Halse Anderson. Her 1999 novel, *Speak* validates the immediacy of trauma and silencing that is felt when one experiences sexual violence. This story is told from the perspective of Melinda Sordino, a character who is working through her trauma of being sexually abused. Additionally, her novel *Wintergirls* (2009) is meant to deconstruct the stigmatized eating disorders and body dysmorphia experienced by so many young women and girls.

Lois Lowry's protagonist, Kira, tries to move on after her mother's death in *Gathering Blue* (2002). When I read Anderson and Lowry's books, I ended up feeling sorry for the protagonists, either because I understood their situation or because they were soft and quiet. I

appreciate these books because they confront difficult topics such as sexual violence, trauma, and loss. However, I wonder about the message young women receive. Do traumatic narratives cause young women to see themselves as victims? Is that necessarily a bad thing? Perhaps owning one's personal victimization can be a form of agency in itself. Perhaps that agency can reveal underlying issues of abusive power.

These topics are uncomfortable, but they are a realistic and often present aspect of the aforementioned demographics' experience. Consequently, the supposedly controversial nature of YAL is what makes the genre valuable. Owen explains that YAL characters demonstrate the ability to "mature and accomplish new values and a deeper understanding of self through the difficult circumstances they encounter" (13). For this reason, I argue that YAL can be influential for young women and girls. *Speak* and *Wintergirls* deal with the vulnerability and self-doubt we all feel as human beings at one point or another. By creating characters who are struggling with the same or similar issues as her readers, Anderson gives young women and girls the optimism that their life will improve with time.

Katniss as a New Model for YA Female Protagonists

When I finally got around to reading *The Hunger Games* myself, I couldn't put it down. Compared to most prior young female protagonists, Katniss Everdeen is a badass. Her character works with the YA script by dealing with difficult issues such as trauma, loss and coming-of-age experiences, but she performs in a way which simultaneously disrupts conventions of her age and gender.

After her father dies in a mining accident, Katniss must sacrifice her own childhood for the preservation of her family. When we are introduced to Katniss, she remembers losing her

father, but his death is now distant and intangible. She doesn't process her father's death in the same way as her mother, so she doesn't recognize her mother's catatonic state as a valid way to deal with their loss. She ends up feeling abandoned and is not the "forgiving type" (*The Hunger Games* 8). Thus, she becomes the provider for their family and has trouble accepting help from others, even when her mother's mental health improves later in the series.

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth determines the following: "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). While her mother seems to be experiencing the intrusive phenomena which renders her incapable of childcare, Katniss is able to avoid this conscious return to that trauma.

In this light, Katniss' performances are somewhat alarming. However, *The Hunger Games* continues to blow other YA books out of the water; especially when we consider the state of the dystopian/fantasy subgenres. There are very few YA books in the subgenre driven by a female protagonist. Historically, dystopian YAL was almost exclusively male-driven, especially in terms of the titles required/suggested for YA and high-school classrooms; for example, George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and *Animal Farm* (1945), *Brave New World* (Huxley 1931), *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury 1953) and *Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954). Even more recently, titles such as *The Giver* (Lowry 1993), *Shade's Children* (Nix 1997), and *The Last Book in the Universe* (Philbrick 2002) feature a male protagonist. By writing Katniss Everdeen as protagonist of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Collins opened the publishing floor for authors such as Veronica Roth (*Divergent* 2011).

Unlike other YAL protagonists in this subgenre, Katniss Everdeen is a young *woman*. Collins did not lazily construct her according to outdated tropes. (In fact, I think Katniss would be highly offended if she were to be referred to as a Damsel in Distress⁵). She instead works to deconstruct conceptions of YAL women and their experience with trauma, loss and gender performance.

Katniss as our Favorite Dislikable Character

The Hunger Games is now within the top 5 recommended dystopian titles for many online book lists. The following lists were discovered by a quick Google search: “If you like *Divergent*, you’ll like these YA Novels” and “YA Fantasy/Paranormal/Dystopian” (Goodreads.com 2015). “Rank Your Favorite YA Dystopian Series” (Epicreads.com). Perhaps this is because YA readers want more out of their literature than teen angst with a sprinkle of romance (or vice-versa).

Perhaps they crave more meaningful stories. “For this reason,” Mary Owen determines, “YAL produces some of the most contentious and insightful as well as profound and fulfilling novels currently available” (12). Collins certainly provides this depth in her novels. The parallels to real-world corruptions in government and society are prevalent in the *Hunger Games* series, and have led to discussions about such issues amongst readers of all ages.

When on the topic of government corruption, we can’t help but discuss instances of manipulation. They are almost always related. Thus, manipulation is another overarching theme of the *Hunger Games* trilogy. This thesis will discuss manipulation terms of the binary perspective with which young women are expected to comply in order to preserve their

⁵ This is not to say that Katniss is exempt from experiencing weakness. She simply chooses to not be defined by it.

femininity. If young women fulfill these expectations, they are agreeable. In turn, they are deemed “likable” by society.

Author Roxane Gay writes in her 2014 controversial text, *Bad Feminist*: “likability is a very elaborate lie, a performance, a code of conduct dictating the proper way to be” (Gay 85). Gay admits to struggling with likability in her personal and professional life. As a young woman and writer, I can relate to this struggle. Growing up, I was pressured to please other people in academic and social situations in order to feel good about myself. Eventually, I internalized this pressure so much that my self-worth seemed dependent on my apparent likability. But a person can’t keep up with such expectations. They aren’t always going to know how to act appropriately.

I don’t doubt that people of all gender identities experience the problem of likability at one point or another. However, as I previously explained through my analysis of the Damsel in Distress trope, society often leaves women feeling inadequate, incomplete, or unable to make appropriate decisions for themselves. This trope is a damaging aspect of fiction.

When young women are likable, they are not only boring, but nonthreatening. Young women aren’t always going to “behave,” nor should they feel obligated to do so as a requirement for fulfilling the expectations of their gender. They shouldn’t have to be likable all the time. Their unlikable behavior is unexpected, and therefore interesting. Because they “do what they want with varying levels of regard for their consequences” they empower women to take charge of their own lives without the fear of disappointing others. They empower women to make change.

Collins contributes to the small faction of subversive young women through the construction of Katniss Everdeen. In the film adaptation of *Catching Fire* (2009), Haymitch comments on her “strangely dislikable” personality. (*Catching Fire* 2013). While she is a teenager, and thus by definition unlikable at times, she has no impulse to increase her likeability. Gay notes that unlikeable women in fiction “won’t or can’t pretend to be someone they are not. They have neither the energy for it nor the desire” (*Bad Feminist* 95). Katniss doesn’t follow her government’s regulations because she can’t afford to do so, and she doesn’t see her gender as an excuse to appear helpless. As a result, Katniss’ list of priorities does not include making friends or chasing male attention as a way to increase her likability to benefit herself or other characters. She takes an active role in her own survival.

Take Katniss’ relationship with Gale Hawthorne, for instance. Katniss doesn’t waste time worrying about her likability as a young woman, and she notices this is a difference from other young women in town: “You can tell by the way girls whisper about him when he walks by in school that they want him. It makes me jealous but not for the reason people would think. Good hunting partners are hard to find” (*The Hunger Games* 10). From this small excerpt, it’s clear that Katniss holds no interest in performing for Gale’s attention, nor does she find worth in being romantically involved with him. This information is important to remember in regard to the discussion later in this chapter, which discusses Katniss’ gendered performances.

By denying the importance of likeability, characters such as Katniss break rules of gender performance. In doing so, they tend to expose the fragility, and therefore falsity of strictly defined gender systems. This leads to the validation of new options for future literary women and their perspective YA women readers. When Katniss performs her gender, she proves “femininity” a subjective term, in that not all women (or all people for that matter) desire the

same things. She takes pride in her self-sufficiency and therefore strives to avoid displays of weakness and/or helplessness.

Her journey into adulthood is decidedly atypical of women protagonists because of this attitude, and young women are eating it up. The following section begins with the first interludes which have been designed to support my performance framework. Each is written in the form of realistic fiction based on the proceedings at Comic Con International: San Diego, a nonprofit educational corporation which is “dedicated to creating awareness of, and appreciation for, comics and related popular art forms, primarily through the presentation of conventions and events that celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture” (San Diego Comic Convention 2015).

The dialogue is a fictional interaction between the flamboyant host of Hunger Games events, Caesar Flickerman and theorists Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian. It is accompanied by data gained through a Human Subjects Research of 32 young women between the ages of 15-22.

Panel Interlude:

Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy

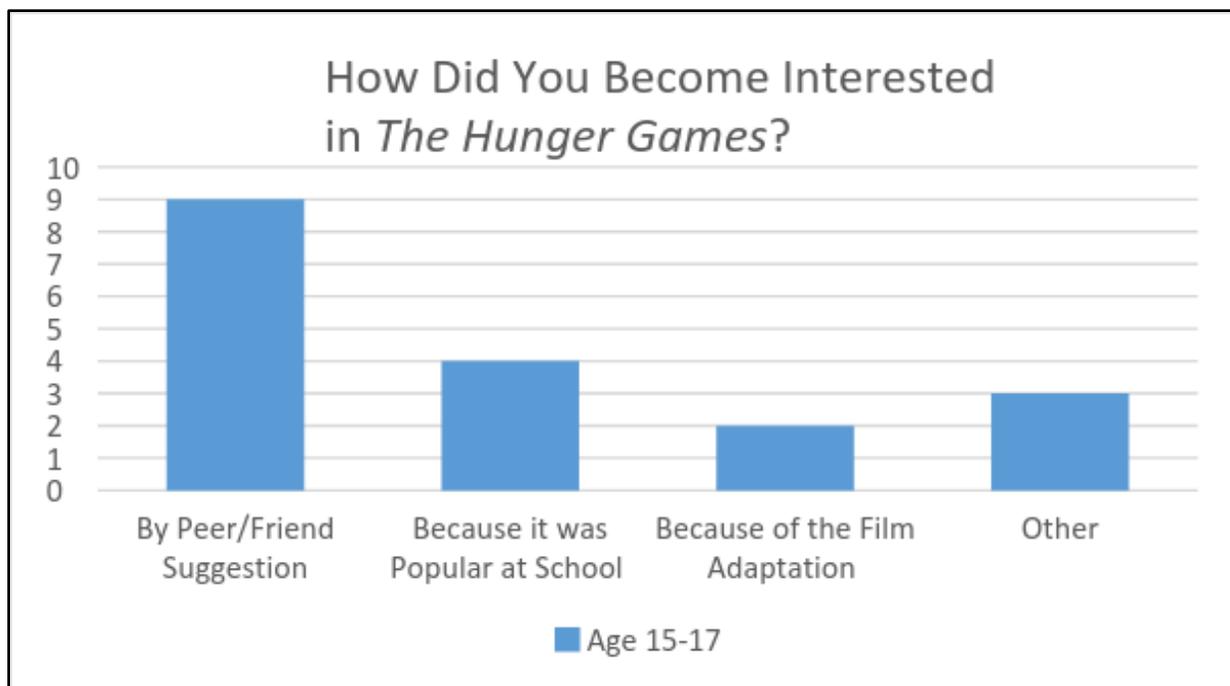
CAESAR FLICKERMAN: Welcome, to the first annual Hunger Games Convention! During this panel discussion, we will be hearing from Drs. Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian, who have contributed a wealth of information to feminism, queer and trauma studies over the years. For those in the audience who do not know, Ms. Butler is one of the primary voices of queer theory.

Impressive, yes? Let's give her a hand! (*muffled applause.*) I must say that on behalf of everyone here, that we are so honored to have you both here with us today!

MARDOROSSIAN: Thank you Caesar.

BUTLER: Yes, thank you.

FLICKERMAN: Okay, let's get started. Before this panel began, we collected the results of a survey about the *Hunger Games* from your audience. Like you, the majority of young women wrote that they became interested in the series through the influence of their friends and/or peers. Let's take a look at the graphic representation:

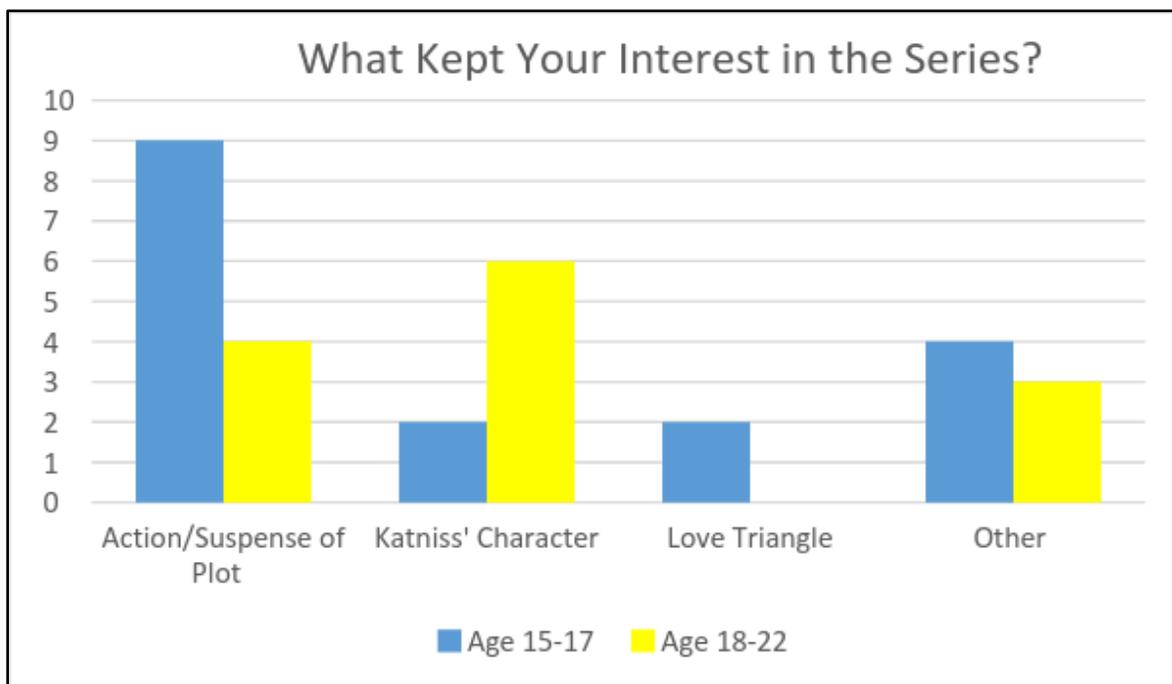


This graph breaks down the ways in which our young women in the audience were introduced to *The Hunger Games*. The age range is 15-17 because most of these young women started reading the series in high school. (Those who started reading them at 18+ were not included.)

FLICKERMAN: What do you think of this information?

MARDOROSSIAN: Based on just this audience, it looks like young women are looking for something different in their literature, and they are ready to take risks. I think they want to share this experience with each other. I wonder, did their interest hold through the series? And how?

FLICKERMAN: We were wondering the same thing, and received what I think are some surprising results. Let's look at the next graph, which is divided between high school and college age women:



Some readers lost interest after the first book because of the increasingly political plot, but many remained engaged due to the action and suspense throughout the series. Girls age 15-17 were especially absorbed by the action. Most women age 18-22 kept reading because they loved Katniss.

FLICKERMAN: One reader, now age 15, admitted: “The last book had me less interested because it was based around politics and I was only 13 so that didn’t interest me, but now I

realize it applies to reality and actual government problems so I'd like it more at the age I'm at right now" (2015).

BUTLER: This makes sense. Older readers seem to me more attached to the political aspect of the books and are irritated by the media's handling of the franchise. The love triangle was interesting to some readers, but an after-thought. It's almost like it's ingrained. A seventeen-year-old reader responded: "The suspense that each novel left me with caused me to keep reading. Also, the question of who Katniss would choose: Gale or Peeta?"

These young women are capable of more intellectual thought than the predictable, hetero-romantic script in YAL which posits young women as "Damsels in Distress," and according to their responses today, they want YA authors to rewrite that script. When asked which character she aspires to be, a 17-year-old girl responded: "I wish I were more like Katniss because she is so brave. I am afraid of a lot of things and even though she is scared of certain things, she is brave enough to do them anyway" Another young woman, age 16, noticed Katniss' complexity and desired her "skill, smarts, strength [and] courage."

One college student responded "I still have interest in the Hunger Games; but unfortunately, the media paints the Hunger Games as a romance instead of what it really is." Now, I'm not sure what this young woman thinks the series "really is," but this statement alludes to the fact that she is disappointed that the media has rebranded it through their pattern of compulsive heterosexuality.

MARDOROSSIAN: And women are definitely noticing these compulsions. My favorite response is from a 22 year old reader: "I didn't like how they kept throwing the 'love interest' wrench into things. The story is stressful enough, why do we need to have every female

protagonist fall in love with someone? The guy in *Hatchet* didn't fall in love with anyone, and Jack Kerouac just slept around. Come on.” I think the “they” this woman is referring to is the media. Even though romance isn't the main event in Collins's series, the films play up that storyline in a way I can't imagine if the series featured a male protagonist.

FLICKERMAN: I think you're right. These young women don't want to be able to predict what will happen in their books. One very critical thinker responded: “The Hunger Games series kept me hooked throughout the trilogy because there was such a high suspense level and I always felt like I needed to know what happened next. I also liked that Katniss was a very realistic character, but still managed to be heroic without being ‘special’. The ending of *Mockingjay* (2010) left me feeling less than fulfilled over all though, I felt like the author had conned me into believing that the good guys would win in the end and that's not really what happened. Although I recognized that this was intentional in order to teach a lesson, I still didn't appreciate how hopeless it made me feel.” I think she hit the nail right on the head don't you?

BUTLER: Yes and no. While I agree that the series leaves us with a sense of hopelessness, the “good guys” she mentions, I presume, are President Coin and the members of District 13. Are they really that “good?” If we compare the way Katniss is manipulated by the Capitol and how she is treated by 13, we find the treatment isn't that different. Because Katniss has performed as rebellious in the past, she is expected to make that behavior performative.

I think of what Audre Lorde wrote in her 1995 essay, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” When we discuss oppression and social change, Lorde suggests that “Traditionally in American society, it is the members of the oppressed, objectified groups who are expected to stretch out and bridge the gap...to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and the manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of

protection” (Lorde 53). For Katniss, the oppressors may change, but she remains the “watcher” in order to maintain her illusion of protection, and is consistently at the mercy of those oppressors to “bridge the gap” as a symbol of that illusion.

FLICKERMAN: This is a disappointing turn of events for a woman with such a strong sense of self. Another reader, age 22, responded with frustration over her relationship with District 13: “I liked Katniss. But she let herself be manipulated by the rebels” (2015).

MARDOROSSIAN: This goes back to what I was saying about vulnerability. Even though Katniss prides herself in being self-sufficient, she is still vulnerable to the powers that be. If Collins wrote Katniss as an impenetrable Hunger Games survivor, she would not only be an unbelievable character, she would also be the one-dimensional female character we want to avoid in YAL.

Katniss is not a “perfect” character by any means, but her indifference for outside approval is validating: she presents a more complicated model with which young women can contend. The difficulty in normalizing strong women boils down to the idea that in order for literary women to be interesting, they must exhibit idealistic characteristics which are otherwise unachievable for living, breathing women. There are so few examples of strong women who’ve been able to avoid some type of compromise due to their gender. Consider the small fraction of woman superheroines by Marvel and DC. It is not enough for these women to be superhuman. They must also maintain the sought-after hourglass figure and a mysterious or flirtatious disposition.

I think much of this stems from media influence, and when potentially empowering characters are translated to film. While I enjoy Scarlett Johansson, I think her portrayal of Black Widow is interrupted, rather than empowered, by her gender. I noticed this more recently in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Not only does her suit continue to accentuate her “womanly” curves as a sort selling point—her story is driven by an unnecessary romance with Bruce Banner and her inability to one day have children.

If the female protagonist isn't a Damsel in Distress, she's a “Femme Fatale.” If she's too complicated, she is often dehumanized as mysterious Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG). There aren't only three kinds of women, so there shouldn't be only three kinds of female characters. Katniss doesn't fit neatly into the good/virginal or bad/impure categories, neither does she support the MPDG trope. She doesn't really fit into any established trope and this is what makes her an appropriate, more *believable* model for literary women.

When considering this new model for literary women, we can pay special attention to Katniss' relationship with male characters. In her experience, survival has nothing to do with flirtation or romance, so when Peeta professes his love to Katniss on Capitol television, she is not flattered. Frankly, she's offended. Katniss and Peeta would be fatal competition with each other, and he made her look “weak” before they even entered the arena. Katniss refuses to appear less capable than her fellow tributes, regardless of their gender, but from that first interview on, she is expected to perform as Peeta's accessory, rather than an individual person. This is where her aversion to weakness and the speculative acts of gender comes into play. Her anger with Peeta's public performance insinuates she will not adopt the “Damsel in Distress” trope.

In addition to her disregard for male attention, Katniss displays a variety of gender performances which could be considered subversive of the YA genre. Previous scholarship interprets these subversions according to binary, or otherwise limiting, frameworks. For example “Hunting Girls: Patriarchal Fantasy or Feminist Progress?” questions whether or not Katniss actually ends up contributing to some type of male fantasy because she’s a hunting girl who may be transforming the act of hunting into something “sexy” for men to watch (Oliver 2014).

I could not deny in good conscious that characters who exhibit traditionally “masculine” tendencies or interests are objectified or over-sexualized—especially when I consider these women in terms of media representations.⁶ However, I do not agree that Katniss is one of these women. I would sooner argue that Katniss denies performances of what we consider “femininity” altogether. For example, she shuts down when exposed to excessive makeup, dresses, high-heels, lessons in decorum, etc. In this way, she continues to formulate a new model for literary women.

Finding characteristics which support this new model was exciting in the early stages of my research. I must admit I got a little carried away. The section below was taken from my notes on the article “‘Killer’ Katniss and ‘Lover Boy’ Peeta: Suzanne Collins' Defiance Against Gender-Genred Reading” by Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel (2012):

Problem: Katniss is more confident when acting on her masculine qualities. For example, instead of embracing her beauty, she is often threatened by it. She feels better and more

⁶ Characters which immediately come to mind here are modeled after the “femme-fatale,” who relies on her sexuality to advance her agenda. (i.e. Halle Berry as “Catwoman” [2007] and Angelina Jolie as “Lara Croft” [2001]). According to TV tropes, this woman “is sexy and she knows it...she manipulates and confuses The Hero with her undeniable aura of sexiness and danger” (2015). Others are simply sexualized because they are physically threatening, which speaks volumes to our society’s beauty standards. While Beatrice/Black Mamba of *Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2* (2003, 2004), should be fairly muscular from years of training in martial arts, she is instead very slender and dressed in tight body suits which showcase her chest and buttocks. This sexualization is not only unnecessary for powerful women characters, it is an example of the unachievable standard to which the media expects real women to comply.

confident when hunting. I wonder about her singing, does she avoid it because of her father's memory only or because it also makes her vulnerable? (girly thing that makes her think about the pain she experiences?)

As I catalogued her more "masculine" performances, I began to make overreaching assumptions about Katniss' identity as a whole. I tried reading Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* to help me distinguish between her gender identity and individual performances, but ended up making haphazard assertions such as: "*Katniss is queer because she is pressured to 'pass' as the Mockingjay like lesbians are pressured to pass as straight.*" "*Katniss is queer because she is kind of a tomboy.*"

These assumptions aren't necessarily true. At best, they are forced comparisons between Katniss' disregard for gender roles and the subversiveness of butch identities in our heteronormative culture. In other words, the only thing these phenomena have in common is their deviation from the binary female/feminine/straight identity.

In my efforts to prove Katniss a new model for YA women, I had manipulated her performances into supporting a flawed social agenda. Katniss is not queer simply because she chooses to perform in ways we are used to seeing men perform. Her role as Mockingjay is a performance, but is not treated in the same manner as performances of lesbianism. This is presumptuous of Katniss' overall character, but also of the complex implications of gender performances and lesbian identities.

A more appropriate theoretical approach for the discussion of Katniss' subversive gender performances can be found in Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988). In this text, Butler asserts that gender,

as it is understood through the binary male/female system “contradicts its own performative fluidity [and] serves a social policy of gender regulation and control” (Butler 528). Katniss recognizes the falsity of public performance by this same logic. When she is introduced to the lavishness of Capitol lifestyle, she finds the experience nauseating. She is disgusted with the Capitol due to its exorbitant spending and has no respect for its privileged citizens and considers their personalities to be ingenuous. Her true aversion, then, is to the very concept of performance as displayed by her Capitol and government, as it must always be validated by public spectacle.

Realizing the Value of Vulnerability

The assertions I have made thus far for Katniss representing the new model for female protagonists has been focused mainly on the character’s ability to find strength in the subversion of gender and gender performance. But what if I were to suggest that Katniss simultaneously represents a new model for feminine vulnerability?

Katniss is determined to perform with the confidence and stoicism despite the loss of her father and the mental incapacity of her mother. This characteristic isn’t exactly atypical of YA literature at first glance. Laurie Halse Anderson, for example, often writes about protagonists with emotionally distant or absent parents in order for the protagonist to gain agency⁷. Many times, they are forced to become their own parent and/or care for their siblings in their parents’ stead.

But when considering the extent of Katniss’ *over*protectiveness of Prim, her behavior seems particularly primal and nostalgic in the way a parent would speak of their child. The

⁷The following titles fit this description: *Speak* (1999), *Catalyst* (2002), *Wintergirls* (2009), *The Impossible Knife of Memory* (2014).

following excerpt is taken from Chapter 3 of *The Hunger Games* right before Katniss is taken away to the Capitol:

I reach out to Prim and she climbs on my lap, her arms around my neck, head on my shoulder, just like she did when she was toddler. My mother sits beside me and wraps her arms around us. For a few minutes, we say nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must remember to do, now that I will not be there to do it for them.

In this moment, Katniss demonstrates the extent to which she has become her family's provider and the head of the household. She takes control of the situation at hand with patience and control, as if she is just leaving for vacation and not being sent to an arena to potentially die.

Katniss stoicism and bravery are performances which stem from her initial experience with trauma (i.e. her father's death). Consider the following assertion by Judith Butler: "...performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 146) While it seems Katniss has sufficiently grieved for her father (in comparison to her mother), her performances as the primary caregiver and provider are impeding her ability to move on. This is the framework with which I discuss Katniss' ambivalence toward established gender norms in Chapter 4.

As Collins' series progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that her protagonist survives through an internalized sense of rebellion. As the "stand-in" parent in her household, Katniss is performing as father and mother and thus blurs the lines of traditional gender roles. When she is cast as tribute, she follows the same lines to rebel against the overall system and escape the arena.

While Katniss proves her ability to succeed through rebellion and subversion, these performances catch up to her after the fact. As a subversive victor, she is now a liability to the Capitol's power. In fact, she becomes a larger target of manipulation with each refusal or inability to follow her script as a public figure. The roles she is being forced to play after the 74th Hunger Games are traumatic. In one way or another, they link her mind to the arena, where she experienced real violence, emotional whiplash and loss. Thus, they are often too painful and/or artificial for Katniss to perform well before an audience. (This concept is examined more closely in Chapter 4 of this thesis, when I combine some of the theories in Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Unmaking and Unmaking of the World* [1988] and Carine Mardorossian's *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* [2013].)

As Katniss is exposed to more death and loss, she becomes deteriorated by other people's expectations of how she should deal with her trauma. This happens to real women, if only in a different, more terrifying context—more terrifying, because it has become socially permissible. I'm speaking, of course, about sexual violence. According to the National Sexual Abuse Resource Center, 1 in 5 women will experience rape in her lifetime (NSARC 2015). This statistic should not be taken lightly. As women, we are told we are responsible for this violence either by the way we dress or by the way we present ourselves publicly.

We are told we can avoid being raped if we behave "appropriately" (yet another problem I find associated with the pressure to be likable). I do not mean to suggest that only women experience rape and sexual assault, but when 1 in 5 women is sexually assaulted, the victims don't seem so random. We are expected to react as if we aren't traumatized by emotional and/or physical pain. We are rarely given the opportunity to put ourselves back together.

I understand the recent push in feminism to move away from using the word “victim” when discussing sexual assault. It’s hard for women to admit vulnerability, because we are sick of being branded “weak” or “dependent” as a result. In *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* (2014), Carine Mardorossian explains how “calling people ‘victims’ is often seen as a willful misrecognition of people’s power of self-determination as an ideological instrument of subordination that encourages them to remain stuck and conceals their ability to change the unfortunate circumstances of their life (Mardorossian 41). In other words, the term “victim” is increasingly associated with the inability to make decisions. Calling yourself a “victim” is more like *admitting* yourself a “victim.” This is the message Panem’s citizens receive from their government, and the message is pretty explicit: citizens must pay for their history of rebellion against tyranny. They must pay for the mistake of standing up for themselves.

CHAPTER 2

Previous Analyses of the Hunger Games Trilogy:
And Where the Discourse Should be Heading

If gender is instituted through acts, which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.

Judith Butler

Performative Acts and Gender Constitution (1988)

In this thesis, I analyze Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy to complicate notions of identity and the performances by which it is formed. The YA series has attracted significant attention from feminist and queer studies scholars who are interested in gender performance, but their research falls flat through dependence on binary framework.

Therefore, I have chosen to broaden the analysis of Katniss Everdeen as a young woman through elements of queer theory. In her book, *Queer Theory Gender Theory* (2004), Riki Wilchins determines, "Assuming a commonality to *any* identity, even one as apparently uncomplicated as Woman, can mean assuming a unity that doesn't exist in reality" (124). The assumption that all who identify as Woman will perform similarly or work toward the same goals is neither accurate nor beneficial.

For example, Wilchins discusses exclusion of individuals who have been refused the title of Woman, such as those who claim the identities such as "butch," "trans," "intersex," "queer," and "drag." She determines that this exclusion establishes new hierarchies of womanhood rather than a "flattening" [or equalizing] of them (125). For this and other reasons, both Butler and

Wilchins notice a flaw in feminist theory. Although the purpose of this movement was designed as a collective attempt for equality among the sexes, the notion of who “counts” as Woman has been placed at the forefront.

This chapter will not be an analysis of Katniss’ sexual orientation or an inquiry of her gender preference, because Katniss identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual female. She takes no issue identifying as female and engages in heterosexual relationships. Rather, I will apply the theoretical framework of gender-as-performance to areas beyond gender, as I propose Katniss works to emphasize how performances are a key factor in forming identity and determining agency within her society.

Consider the following excerpt from “Hunting Girls: Patriarchal Fantasy or Feminist Progress?” which places Katniss in conversation with other female characters who perform the traditionally masculine role of “hunter” such as the vampire Bella Cullen (*Breaking Dawn* 2008) and Hanna from the 2011 film of the same name:

[The hunting girls’] position on the cusp between childhood and womanhood seems threatening, perhaps more threatening than the fully mature femme fatale, precisely because of their innocence. In other words there is something attractive about these pubescent warriors who bring together fantasies of innocence, innocence lost and phallic woman shooting arrows and guns

The article’s author, Kelly Oliver, also relates this transition from childhood to womanhood in terms of the hunting girls’ relationship to boys and men (“Hunting Girls” 10).

Oliver makes some good points about hunting girls, but her argument is fundamentally limited by an “us vs. them” male vs. female mentality. Perhaps involuntarily, Oliver continues to lead discussion based on the toxic elements of normative masculinity (i.e.

sexualization.) Without questioning the character's increasingly complicated narrative, she wonders if Katniss' empowerment is only a side-effect of her sexuality because heterosexual men *may* find her performances attractive. This continues to define Woman according to a binary which limits a potentially progressive conversation of gender performances and norms.

In a later article, "Ambiguity, Ambivalence and Extravagance in *The Hunger Games*," (2014) Oliver begins to move away from binary analyses. She broadens her discussion of Katniss, by taking note of her ambiguous gender expression and "ambivalent" desires (Oliver 675). She establishes: "Katniss is fighting neither for independence from men nor for (or from) the love of one of them... [and] promotes open-ended ambiguity rather than traditional or fixed gender roles or ideals [or] part of a new aesthetics of ambiguity" (677).

I agree with this assertion as a general statement; Katniss often enjoys manipulating traditional roles and performances. However, I think Oliver's analysis becomes a bit far-reaching (perhaps as compensation for her previous assertions in "Hunting Girls") when she suggests Katniss gender in itself is ambiguous. Yes, she performs as what we in western society would refer to as a "Tomboy"⁸, but there are no indications in *The Hunger Games* series of Katniss showing confusion or ambivalence regarding the label "Woman."

Oliver questions Katniss' sexuality as well, which is understandable considering the character's consistently flagrant disregard for male attention. Katniss shares frequently with the reader the discomfort of being viewed as Gale's potential love interest and Peeta's object of desire. However, Oliver traps herself yet again in a binary "either/or" argument between the two young men, by asking if she loves the more "paternal hunter adventurer or the more maternal

⁸ Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines the term "Tomboy" as "a girl who enjoys things that people think are more suited to boys" (2015).

sensitive baker?" ("Ambiguity" 677). The adjectives Oliver uses here prove that even when we try to disrupt expectations we can still find ourselves hung up on traditional ideals.

(What is more off-putting to me is Oliver's acknowledgement of the following concepts: "Given her committed relationships to Prim and to Rue, along side her conflicted and less amorous relationships to Gale and Peeta, an argument can be made for Katniss as a latent example of Freud's bisexuality" [Oliver 678]. This logic is not only highly suggestive of Katniss' sexuality; it misinterprets her relationships with the young women in her life. Katniss thinks and states aloud that her love for Prim and Rue is protective; even motherly.)

In each consecutive text (*The Hunger Games* [2008], *Catching Fire* [2009], and *Mockingjay* [2010]), there is an increasingly high rate of performed acts by Katniss in her various roles in the fictional society. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Judith Butler asserts, "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (Butler 528). Katniss is pressured to perform her roles as we are with gender, therefore supporting them for her own survival.

Thus, I expand Butler's original statement by replacing the term "gender" with "performance." Just as individuals are cast into gender and its corresponding expectations, Katniss is given various complicated roles which rely on conscious performance. In "Performative Acts," Butler clarifies how our society has constructed a seemingly authentic way of being which excludes multiple identities. She continues in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination (:" "Imitation [of heterosexual identity] carries the meaning of 'derivative' or 'secondary,' a copy of an origin which is itself the ground of all copies, but which is itself a copy of nothing" ("Imitation" 723). In other words, there is no essential system of gender because any

system which asserts authority as such must be validated by the imitation of its socially-constructed code.

Essayist Jennifer Mitchell writes, “Katniss’ ability to negotiate, try on, and experiment with various gender roles is a testament to the lack of stable substance underneath them” (127-128). This is especially apparent when she is revealed to be performing roles which are unnatural for her character outside the arena, (lover, fiancé, fashion designer, expecting mother) but are adopted as part of her performance as Hunger Games tribute and victor.

However, gender is not the only construction which Katniss proves to be unstable. Performances of absolute authority are also present in Katniss’ society and she sometimes challenges constructions of power through identity subversion/refusal. Even though her various Capitol roles seem like legitimate forms of expression to the public, she is only performing this way to survive the system. When she chooses not to perform or fails to perform, she is exposing the system as unstable.

Teresa de Lauretis furthers this discussion by focusing on the difficulty of achieving accurate representation of identity. With “Technologies in Gender,” she proposes, “The term gender is, actually, the representation of a relation, that of belonging to a class, a group, a category” (de Lauretis 716). Instead of representing one’s individual identity, gender represents an individual as it relates to a larger group; therefore, the individual is caught in a power struggle between the individual and group identity.

She continues, “gender constructs a relation between one entity and other entities, which are previously constituted as a class, and that relation is one of belonging; thus, gender assigns to one entity, as an individual, a position within a class, and therefore, also a position *vis-a-vis* other preconstituted classes” (716). The relation de Lauretis describes is a system of strict

classification where one's ability to navigate without suspicion is highly unlikely. I propose that Katniss would ideally exist outside a strictly ordered system of identity. She does not view her performances as simply gendered, but as part of a strategic plan to navigate through and challenge her prescribed roles in Panem and District 13's rebel government.

The *Hunger Games* is a trilogy which considers the various causes and effects of these governments' performative power over societal norms and individual identity. The story examines how public spectacle is often used as an active element of persuasion regarding a scripted socio-political agenda. Henceforth, I think it appropriate to frame my critical commentary according to said performance-based model, in order to reveal its manipulative nature.

CHAPTER 3

The Performance of Capitol Power

It must be fragile if a handful of berries can bring it down.

Katniss Everdeen

Catching Fire

My initial strategy to analyze Katniss Everdeen's performances in the *Hunger Games* trilogy was to begin by analyzing her experiences in District 12. We are introduced to Katniss years after her father was killed in a mining accident. With her mother still paralyzed from the loss, Katniss is left with the responsibility of caring for her little sister, Prim; effectively making her the head of the household. She hunts for food and trades her materials on the black market in order to ensure her family's survival. She also provides emotional support for her sister and her mother, despite her own difficulties coping with her father's death.

Through the creation of Panem and its Capitol, Suzanne Collins speculates upon the plausible future of government and societal organization. Collins composes narratives of oppression through a totalitarian government born out of insecurity and fear of revolt by its citizens. On page 6 of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss reveals her Capitol government as a fear-mongering system:

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death, the things I would blurt out...Eventually I understood this would only lead to more trouble. So I learned to hold my tongue...I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or the food shortages, or the Hunger Games. Prim might begin to repeat my words and then where would we be?

Through Katniss's "blurring out" of tricky topics, we are introduced to her inherent urge to challenge strict authority. Despite this urge, she, like many other district citizens, is conditioned to "hold her tongue" as to not upset the balance. Questioning Panem's government, even

through the innocence of childhood curiosity, is interpreted as a form of treason against the established power dynamic, and therefore punishable by law.

The Capitol's reign may be unjust, but it's a realistic representation of global power relations. From Adolf Hitler to Kim Jong Un, Dictators have been proven to do almost anything to preserve their power. For example, the satirical film The Interview (2014), starring Seth Rogan and James Franco was banned from appearing in theaters for spoofing the leadership of North Korean Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un. Although the leader has no authority over American affairs, his supposed tyrannical hacking into SONY entertainment network left America feeling threatened by North Korea.

In this chapter, I use queer theory as a lens to explore how this type of power works in Panem's Capitol government. Jennifer Mitchell proposes that *The Hunger Games* "centers on questions of power: how one accesses it, uses it and abuses it" ("Of Queer Necessity" 129). In Panem, citizens who speak out against the Capitol's power are treated as criminals. They are categorized as undesirables in a manner from which there is no return, as described on pages 77-78 of *The Hunger Games*:

"What's an Avox?" I ask stupidly.

"Someone who committed a crime. They cut her tongue so she can't speak," says Haymitch. "She's probably a traitor of some sort. Not likely you'd know her."

"And if you did, you're not supposed to speak to one of them unless it's to give an order," says Effie. "Of course you don't really know her."

Katniss is to understand the institution of Avoxes as a necessary evil of government authority. The process should seem normal. Expected. In reality, the very idea of creating a new human category such as "Avox" expresses the notion that Panem's government as it stands holds

natural dominance over its citizens. In practice, the category represents an intentionally permanent assertion of said dominance over different and/or unfamiliar performances thereafter. In other words, they are performing a fiction of absolute power that can only be realized and maintained through constant attention. Thus, this gruesome procedure demonstrates queer theory's assertion that rigid categorization of performances is a presumptuous abuse of power.

While condemning "traitors" to Avox status is standard procedure by the Capitol government, Katniss is perturbed by Effie and Haymitch's tone during this exchange. She ponders to herself in response to Effie: "But I do know her. And now that Haymitch has mentioned the word *traitor* I remember from where. The disapproval is so high I could never admit it" (*The Hunger Games* 78). Once again, the narrative suggests that Katniss "hold her tongue:" only this time, Collins hints to a more explicit memory of trauma related to her Capitol's tyranny. Katniss' silence in this situation indicates how her identity continues to be molded by the government as she enters the public eye. Consequently, she begins to function as a tool of her own oppression as well as the rest of her country.

There are multiple situations which cause Katniss to perform in an uncharacteristic manner due to her role as tribute, victor, and eventually, Mockingjay. If she were to perform according to her own preferences, her attitude could potentially warrant recategorization as a traitor (Avox). Consider the following excerpt from pages 163-165 of *The Hunger Games*, which gives us insight into such conscious performances:

Until I work out how I want to play that, I'd better at least act on top of things...I cock my head slightly to the side and give a knowing smile. There! Let them figure out what that means!...Maybe people will think it's something we plotted together if I seem like it amuses me now.

Katniss knows this performance will appear as if she's going along with proceedings, and is therefore, not a threat to the Hunger Games or the overall government. She continues to follow this plan to the best of her ability.

When Katniss fails to keep up with these performances on her own, she is encouraged to follow a script which prevents her from appearing too rebellious. They often become gendered or what we recognize as gendered in our own society because they are performances which pacify her. However transparent her relationship with Peeta is in reality, Katniss' media representation in *Catching Fire* is based solely on her impending wedding day and supposed pregnancy in order to distract the public from her accidental and intentional acts of defiance.

In her essay, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler asserts that heteronormativity requires certain "stylized acts" to appear as clear, authentic representations which then fit the given script (Butler 722). The heteronormative script dictates that there are two genders, male and female, and that these two genders align perfectly with biological sex, sexuality and the "stylized acts" to which Butler refers. Consequently, we are prompted to perform before an audience—whether it be a literal gathering of spectators or any other form of communicated expression—in ways that may not necessarily feel inherently normal for us as individuals.

Yet the system maintains resilience. How? Consider the voices of perceived authority who work to develop and sustain it. Butler refers to these voices as the "authors of gender" on page 522 of "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution:"

The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities

materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress.

There is a strong correlation between Butler's "authors of gender" and what I call the Capitol's "authors of performance." The "author" we are introduced to in *The Hunger Games* is President Snow, because he is the current authoritarian ruler of Panem.

We can assume that Snow comes from a long line of performance authors due to Panem's history described in the following narrative, which is paraphrased by Katniss during the 74th Hunger Games reaping: "In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy...the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins" (*The Hunger Games* 18). The annual repetition of this story demonstrates how the authors of performance (Capitol government officials) are "entranced" by their own fiction of power. They believe the narrative is a sufficient tool to similarly entrance their citizens into submission.

However, President Snow is aware of his position's fragility. He admits to Katniss in *Catching Fire* that if the Capitol "released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse" (Collins 25). In this one statement, the president admits that his position, as well as the entire Capitol government, is only built through the perpetual *imitation of absolute power*.

Thus, I affirm that performance itself is the driving force of Capitol authority. The narrative quoted above is a manipulation of history which serves this authority, and leads to a performative⁹ script for Panem's government and the privileged citizens who populate the Capitol. An annual Hunger Games, I presume, would be devastating for all Panem's citizens *at*

⁹ Judith Butler explains: "To say that gender is performative is a little different [rather than saying gender is a performance] because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (*Your Behavior Creates Your Gender* 2011). Therefore, the repetition of the acts formulates an identity which, in effect, appears natural.

first. But as Butler says of gender, the Capitol's performance of asserts absolute power eventually creates an "*appearance of substance...a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief*" ("Performative Acts" 519). In Panem, the Hunger Games become a performative accomplishment of the government, as they mold citizens into a "mundane audience," which comes to believe the Hunger Games are not only a natural, but a necessary performance.

In this conversation, it is pertinent to mention that citizens living in the Capitol are exempt from becoming tributes in the Hunger Games. They are also being completely provided for by the twelve districts in one way or another. These two facts give Capitol citizens a significant and visible privilege over the rest of the country, demonstrated by the appropriately named "reaping" process, which links the selection of tributes to their geographical location and socio-economic¹⁰ status.

This is no mistake. The Capitol, or driving author of performance, shapes this specific class of people as the ideal "mundane audience" in order to distract from and eventually legitimize the underlying exploitations of Panem's citizens.

There are many different strategies which the Capitol uses to reach this goal, but the majority of them share a commonality. Through the Hunger Games, Victory Tour, and general day to day Capitol news programming, the "mundane audience" is subjected to media-based propaganda which highlights the ideal performances to which they should aspire.

¹⁰ All district children between the ages of twelve and eighteen are eligible for the reaping, but if a family is starving, the children can opt to enter their names more times in exchange for government assistance, or tesserae. The more assistance a family needs, the more times their names are entered, so the system punishes district citizens for their lack of privilege.

One of these media-encouraged performances is the engagement in public spectacle. During the Game “season,” reappings, tribute interviews, and the games themselves are recorded live: resembling the most extreme aspects of reality television¹¹. During the “off-season,” games are replayed, and the Victory Tour for the most recent Hunger Games victor is recorded live. Thus, the Hunger Games become a phenomenon—like the Super Bowl or “The War on Terror”— in which Capitol citizens are encouraged to indulge through their constant access to media sources.

Another performance encouraged by government propaganda is the obsession over physical appearance. Jennifer Mitchell makes an astute observation of Caesar Flickerman in her essay “Of Queer Necessity: Panem’s Hunger Games as Gender Games.” On pages 134-135, she writes:

His appearance has remained eerily similar after more than forty years...referencing the Capitol’s use of surgical procedures to hold on to the illusion of youth...Caesar is the quintessential representation of the Capitol’s ideal of style and popularity, and the necessary bodily alterations therein.

Like America’s A-list society, the Panem’s Capitol is preoccupied with the illusion of youth. Katniss observes, “They do surgery in the Capitol to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early...Wrinkles aren’t desirable. A round belly isn’t a sign of success (*The Hunger Games* 124-125).

¹¹ Tributes are forced to actualize the “elimination” aspect from contemporary television programs in our own society such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* when they enter the arena. They are even encouraged to compete for “voters” (sponsors) like contestants in *American Idol*, stressing the performance aspect of the Capitol-funded program.

When Flickerman and his fellow Capitolites display them on television, they are promoting the sense that these and other similar performances are necessary for all citizens to enact in order to fit the government's performative script. ("Performative Acts" 522). This leads to a domino effect of conformity among Capitol citizens, which eventually recognizes public spectacle as the natural mode of performance. In turn, they recognize performances which do not rely on public spectacle as examples of deviance (thus, again, the institution of the Avox category).

Audre Lorde makes a similar observation of performances in western culture, which causes her to suggest that "too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all...we speak not of human difference, but human deviance" and that as members of constructed societies, "we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing" ("Redefining Difference" 53).

In Panem, Capitol citizens respond to performances by district citizens with such outright "fear and loathing" that they openly condemn their difference. This happens automatically for certain characters, even when they are attempting to grant compliment and/or engage in pleasantries. Consider the theatrics by which Effie Trinket describes Katniss and Peeta's condition as tributes (*The Hunger Games* 74):

I've done my best with what I had to work with. How Katniss sacrificed herself for her sister. How you've both successfully struggled to overcome the barbarism of your district...Everyone has their reservations, naturally. You being from the coal district. But I said, and this was clever of me, I said, "Well, if you put enough pressure on coal it turns to pearls!"

This single excerpt showcases the extent to which the performance of public spectacle dictates Capitolite experience. Not only is Effie's statement scientifically inaccurate, it is part of a larger, cruder opinion of the underprivileged citizens of Panem. Her comment regarding "barbarism" illustrates the inherent dehumanizing attitude with which Capitolites¹² have come to view difference.

And so, the tributes are forced to conform in kind in order to eliminate the possibility of displaying their difference on television. If, by chance, they manage to speak freely about their differences on live television, they are ultimately censored by Capitol authors. This is just another example of how Panem's government uses performance to control relations between Capitolites and district citizens. Katniss explains this on page 283 of *The Hunger Games*:

It's interesting, hearing about [Rue's] life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don't want people in different districts to know about each other.

Based on numerous exchanges between Katniss, Peeta and the "mundane audience" of Capitol citizens, I claim district and Capitol lifestyles have been placed in such opposition, that their dehumanization of each other becomes a performative act.

As Katniss' team completes her image overhaul for interviews on Capitol television, Flavius exclaims, "Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!" insinuating that before her engagement with them, she was far less than human (*The Hunger Games* 62). I stress this overt dehumanization (or as the Capitol would say, re-humanization) of Katniss' personhood

¹² Portmanteau meaning "Capitol socialites"

because the process allows Panem's authors to systematically absorb her into Capitol culture; thus refashioning her as Hunger Games propaganda.

The tribute makeovers function as one of the compulsory processes of the performative script. They effectively rebrand these children from "district citizen" to "tribute," acting out imitation of their own identity which they must carry out through public performance. Consider the following scene (61-62):

Apparently [Cinna] has no interest in seeing me until Venia and the other members of my prep team have addressed some obvious problems...I know I should be embarrassed, but they're so unlike people that I'm no more self-conscious than if a trio of oddly colored birds were pecking around my feet.

Katniss' description here eludes to the mechanical ways in which Capitol citizens correct "deviant" performances. Although she admits to feeling "incredibly vulnerable," in this situation, her tone is ultimately sarcastic. She doesn't understand her prep team's compulsive attitude toward appearance and public performance.

I mention earlier in this chapter that Katniss' physical alterations may seem to function as a method of increasing her feminine appeal. She is forced to engage in etiquette lessons with Effie in order to perfect her performances as a public figure. All the while she is learning how to perform in dresses, high heels and makeup. However, the majority of these forced performances are not meant to represent her gender so much as her public support for Capitol proceedings. For example, Katniss complains about the pain of having her body hair waxed off before entering the arena but also acknowledges that the male tributes remain remarkably clean-shaven for the performance as well (*Catching Fire* 59). This contributes more so to Mitchell's observation of Capitol's preservation of youthful images than to any gender system.

In other words, her public image as “Katniss Everdeen: tribute, girl-on-fire, victor, etc.” are pacified versions of her District 12 self; the self to which we are originally introduced. This pacification process is not surprising considering the fact that YAL complies with the heteronormative script which requires young women and girls to perform as passive and/or non-threatening to their social environment. This narrative is repeated by YA authors time and again, resulting in an explicit or implicit suggestion that they and their audience rely on a binary gender system which excludes the wide spectrums of gender, gender expression and sexual orientation.

However, Panem’s society does not follow this gender system (If Collins does imply a gender system, she does not overtly explain or strictly enforce its rules in the same manner in which our gender system is explained and enforced). Thus, I include the second interlude from my fictional “*Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy*” panel, which uses Judith Butler’s work with gender in order to discuss the implications of these phenomena in Western society and culture. More importantly for this thesis, the excerpt interprets the effects of such implications in YAL.

Panel Interlude:

Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy

CAESAR FLICKERMAN: How did you become interested in *The Hunger Games* trilogy?

JUDITH BUTLER: This series has received much attention from scholars in feminist and queer theory due to the supposedly groundbreaking female protagonist. Much of the scholarly work focused on how this character (and the series as a whole) interrogated gender constructions in the young adult genre. I was particularly interested in an essay from the collection, *Of Bread, Blood and the Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*, because the authors

observe gender performances; particularly when the performances demonstrate gender subversion.

An essay by Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel titled, “‘Killer’ Katniss and ‘Love Boy’ Peeta: Suzanne Collins’ Defiance Against Gender-Genred Reading,” focuses on the long history of gendering books, by calling attention to the clearly distinctive audiences of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* versus that of *Heidi* and *Little Women*. Lem and Hassel also reminded me that before *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* was even published in America; Jo Rowling was denied publishing rights in the U.K. numerous times because she was not taken seriously as a female writer. She was told that her adventure-packed book would not sell if she people knew she is a woman¹³.

Their research is a reminder of how deeply YA genre as whole is rooted in heteronormative concepts, and uses the *Hunger Games* trilogy to subvert binary thinking and its reinforcement of the fictional phenomenon we know as “gender.” If other scholars are finding examples in YAL similarly question “gender,” I want to be part of that conversation.

FLICKERMAN: Do you think her attitude toward weakness has anything to do with her gender?

MARDOROSSIAN: If we are looking at the problem through a Western lens, then definitely. The problem with vulnerability and victimhood is that they have become feminized concepts in our society. As I write in *Framing*, “[The term ‘victim’] summons the image of the downtrodden, helpless, and usually female individual in need of assistance or counseling, all the more so since feminists themselves have acquiesced to the reframing of victimization

¹³ Rowling was convinced to change her pen-name to the supposedly gender-neutral “J.K. Rowling” in order to make her books more marketable to boys.

characterological or psychological trait rather than the result of experience ” (32). Katniss doesn't want to give the impression that she is helpless, even though she experiences vulnerability. However, I don't think this attitude stems from her gender-awareness. We just interpret her behavior as atypical and impressive because of our own cultural hang-ups about gender norms.

Unlike western society, which mostly focuses on performance within a gendered context, Panem's government uses the media to assert authority over performances in all areas. As proven by the institution of the annual Hunger Games and its extensive coverage, the Capitol government uses the media as its main tool for manipulating the entirety of public discourse. Performative accomplishments such as media control through Capitol news programming and the Hunger Games are stylized acts which allow Capitol authors to maintain a positive public image and firm grasp of their position. According to the Treaty of Treason, Panem has a long history of political unrest, and the last time rebellion broke out, the war was particularly nasty. The Capitol became so paranoid of Panem's citizens during this time that they developed genetically-altered birds known as “jabberjays” to spy on them (*The Hunger Games* 42). The government's release of “jabberjays” demonstrates how visual media is not always sufficient in maintaining control of public opinion.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss' prep team inadvertently reveals how the Capitol uses the daily news to conceal patterns of rebellious activity. When Octavia laments, “Oh Katniss, we haven't been able to get any seafood for weeks...You know, because the weather's been so bad in District Four,” she proves that media is her government's strongest tool of manipulation, because the message on screen is convincing enough (*Catching Fire* 200). Katniss also discovers that Capitol news programming has been recycling the same footage of District 13: the district that

was supposedly destroyed in the last rebellion. After catching a glimpse at the screen, she notices “The reporter has simply been incorporated into the old footage. She’s not in District 13 at all. Which begs the question, *what is?*” (197). By replacing the original and factually legitimate narrative with a story about weather, the Capitol erases the mere concept of rebellion from its audience’s minds, and works to normalize their overall behavior as a government.

Through the performative script, Capitolites are conditioned to objectify the district citizens’ experience as the source of industry and entertainment. Katniss and Peeta are harshly reminded of district inferiority when invited to the Capitol in *Catching Fire*, and are offered a concoction which will allow them to eat indefinitely (Collins 97-98). Peeta, who is always so eloquent, has trouble verbalizing his contempt for the Capitolites: “You go along, thinking maybe they’re not so bad and then...” (98).

The Game sites are tourist attractions; government funded museums which privileged citizens are encouraged to enjoy. As a result, the identity of tribute is blatantly dehumanized as a continuation of the Hunger Games spectacle. Katniss describes the arenas as “historic sites,” and recounts her knowledge of them with a haunting irony, as she bitterly remembers what she has heard about the food available to tourists (*The Hunger Games* 144-145):

The arenas...popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation. Go for a month, rewatch Games, tour the catacombs, and visit the sites where the deaths took place. You can even take part in the reenactments.

They say the food is excellent.

Collins employs a paragraph break for further emphasis of the Capitol’s reliance on performance for control with “they say the food is excellent,” because in the actual Games, tributes battle each other to avoid starvation. If the “mundane audience” was forced to accurately play out former

Hunger Games on their vacations, the Capitol's narrative would no longer feel natural to them. It would no longer be a performance.

In the following chapter, I use the critical analyses of Cathy Caruth, Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian to further interrogate the Capitol's performative script. I explain how this script uses media and public performance as a way to mask their most problematic practices: torture and abuse.

CHAPTER 4

Creating a Genderjay:

Trauma and the Spectacle of Gender

*A mockingjay is a creature the Capitol never intended to exist...
They hadn't anticipated its will to live.*
Katniss Everdeen
Catching Fire

Whether on live television or behind closed doors; citizens' bodies are being used to uphold Capitol power. The annual Hunger Games places tributes in a performance which is more or less taken as reality for Panem's Capitolites. But when viewed beyond the performative script, it is revealed that the arena is a distraction. The Victory Tour and televised interviews? Distractions. Every event which relates to Hunger Games programming is a distraction—a performance which is meant to disguise the Capitol's larger practices of systemic trauma and abuse.

This chapter is framed by my interrogation of the Capitol's exploitative practices which target Hunger Games tributes and victors. I discuss how these citizens' bodies are used publicly through performative roles, and more secretly through physical and sexual abuse. I also discuss how on all accounts, their exploitation leads to mental abuse and a lasting trauma which is meant to silence them in the face of Capitol authority.

As Hunger Games tributes, citizens are forced into roles of performance which causes not only physical harm in the arena but a future of mental instability and/or trauma thereafter— that is, if they manage to make it of the arena alive. Due to their established popularity with Capitol citizens, they have frequent media obligations, and are granted the security and comfortability of a higher social status than the common citizen. These reward system controls the public media

discourse and mask the exploitation of tributes as a sought-after contest. But it also invalidates the surviving tributes' real experience in the arena. While they experienced violent trauma and loss, the public only sees entertainment.

And thus, their personal cycle of trauma is established and maintained. Katniss describes the process as a newly declared victor on page 4 of *Catching Fire*:

If it were up to me, I would try to forget the Hunger Games entirely. Never speak of them...But the Victory Tour made that impossible...Not only are we in the districts forced to remember the iron grip of the Capitol's power each year, we are forced to celebrate it. And this year, I am one of the stars of the show.

Through the Victory Tour and numerous other obligations, Katniss and her fellow victors are forced to revisit their original experience in the arena (i.e. their trauma) in service of their performative roles. Each victor copes with their trauma differently: "I hunt. [Peeta] bakes. Haymitch drinks. We have our own ways to stay busy, to keep thoughts of our time as contestants in the Hunger Games at bay" (*Catching Fire* 18). Though she does not explicitly say "this is how we are dealing with our trauma," Katniss is clarifying the nature of each of character's coping mechanisms.

Thus, these roles are what Judith Butler refers to as a "formative power [which] precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were by its prior power" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 2). Since his own experience in the arena, Haymitch is forced to return to the Games each year afterwards as a past victor and current tribute mentor.

But since his pain cannot be properly communicated through language, his pain is not taken seriously. Elaine Scarry's observes in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1988): "pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an

immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 4). The essence of pain, then, is something which cannot be described in any written or spoken language. It must be felt to be fully understood.

Other people, including Katniss and Peeta initially disregard Haymitch’s behavior as “disgusting” or “comical” when he is taken over by alcoholism (*The Hunger Games* 25, 46). After being named tribute and meeting her new mentor, she decides: “I detest Haymitch...we rarely get sponsors and he’s a big part of the reason why. The rich people who back tributes...expect someone classier than Haymitch to deal with” (56). Unfortunately, Katniss can’t begin to understand his pain until she consciously experiences the effects of trauma herself.

Katniss’ experience as tribute and victor demonstrates the danger of casting individuals into roles of performance, especially when they are already attempting to cope with loss and other related psychological traumas. After escaping the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss thinks: “I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen...I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not...the pressure of Peeta’s arm around my shoulder feels alien” (371).

But the real question remains, “Who is the *real* Katniss Everdeen?” Before her direct involvement in the Hunger Games, we get the sense of her character, but her identity, as we know it, has always been defined by her experience with trauma. Due to her family’s socioeconomic status, she can’t always afford to follow the Capitol’s performative culture. Thus, she was never encouraged to follow the socially-constructed code.

Katniss’ subversive behavior only increases after the death of her father—a traumatic event which affects the entire family. Each member copes with this trauma differently, as proven by the discontinuity between Katniss and her mother. Elaine Scarry writes on page 365:

The events happening within the interior of [a] person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth.

Even though Katniss and her mother experience the same event of trauma, they are realizing the effects from different perspectives of widow and fatherless child. Since neither perspective can be communicated accurately through language, they each have a "remote character" which cannot be seen by the other.

Before she first leaves for the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* Katniss attempts to curb her mother's potential trauma threatening her: "You can't clock out again and leave Prim on her own...You have to promise me you'll fight through it!' My voice has risen to a shout. In it is all the anger, all the fear I felt at her abandonment" (*The Hunger Games* 35). Katniss' perspective in this situation is clouded by her childhood pain of feeling abandoned by her mother after her father died. She cannot comprehend the nature of her mother's continuous trauma as an overwhelming psychological condition.

The next panel interlude employs Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian's work with gender and trauma. I consider Katniss' relationship with the public performance of identity, as a way to interrogate the traumatic effects of casting (and recasting) Panem's citizens into performative roles.

Panel Interlude:

Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy

BUTLER: When the Capitol labels Katniss Everdeen and her peers "tribute," it is using language to force them into a subordinate, yet seemingly natural relationship. They are expected to

publically perform their roles to create an appearance of substance to Capitol power. They are expected to compete for the revered title “victor.” However, they (mainly Katniss) don’t always perform according to Capitol script, and this makes for an interesting read.

FLICKERMAN: How would you say Katniss avoids “Capitol script?”

BUTLER: I wouldn’t say Katniss refuses Capitol script as much as she manipulates it for her own survival—which is a process that begins long before her experience as a tribute. We are introduced to Katniss years after her father was “blown to bits” so to speak, in a mining accident. Her mother is seemingly traumatized beyond repair, so Katniss takes responsibility for her family by assuming both roles. Her main tool of survival is hunting, which is an activity she used to enjoy with her father. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, I explain: “performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go (143).” By continuing to hunt and provide for the family without her father, she is allegorizing a loss she cannot grieve.

I think this kind of trauma is what keeps Katniss from settling into the fictional expectations of the gender binary. It could be assumed she identifies as “heterosexual,” but she is slow to perform the role in the manner expected of YA women. Katniss has difficulty showing affection for anyone but her sister, and is often unsure of how to define her feelings for both Gale and Peeta. In “Of Queer Necessity: Panem’s Hunger Games as Gender Games,” Jennifer Mitchell observed that “transitioning [from the role of daughter to both father and mother] without awareness reveals that Katniss’ undefined and unstable gender is in fact, natural and intrinsic to her” (“Of Queer Necessity” 132).

I take issue with Mitchell’s assertion that Katniss’ unstable gender is “natural and intrinsic,” because this implies that gender is itself a stable concept. It would be more accurate to argue for

Katniss' gender subversion by discussing her lack of recognition of the roles attached to gender, because she performs as a genderless parent. This is not to suggest parents as a whole are genderless, but that Katniss performances are not dictated by a previously determined model. They are unique to her situation and have been determined by what she thinks she needs to accomplish.

When Katniss sings for Rue and decorates her body with flowers, she is asserting her uniquely parental identity, and thus intentionally challenging her government's authority. What Katniss consistently resists is the authority gender and other performative actions which assert social dominance over her. As I continued to read the series, I noticed how Katniss's identity became reduced to the language by which authority figures define her (tribute, victor, Mockingjay, etc) and how her trauma was extended because of this phenomenon. Carine?

MARDOROSSIAN: Yes, this reveals many problems with having predetermined identity categories. Much of the time we think of these categories in strictly in terms of gender and sexuality, Katniss reveals how instances of trauma affect how an individual expresses their identity. Katniss has been recast and renamed so many times that she doesn't remember who she is.

The Performative Role

*I keep wishing I could think of a way to...
to show the Capitol they don't own me.
That I'm more than just a piece in their Games*
Peeta Mellark
The Hunger Games

Through Katniss' experience with public performance, it is evident that performative roles can be a slippery slope when a person is coping with trauma. The trauma of losing her father makes her blind to appropriate performances. She describes the grueling process of becoming an acceptable Capitol performer: "The next two hours are agonizing. At once, it's clear I can not gush. We try me playing cocky, but I just don't have the arrogance. Apparently, I'm too 'vulnerable' for ferocity. I'm not witty. Funny. Sexy. Or Mysterious. By the end of the session, I am no one at all" (*The Hunger Games* 118).

Sometimes these performances are related to her gender, but most of the time they relate to her refusal to appear weak and/or nonthreatening before the Capitol's power. She shows confidence and wit during her private session with the Gamemakers: "I'm being upstaged by a dead pig...Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers' table" (101-102). Katniss does not respect the Gamemakers' dismissal of her skill, and therefore performs in a manner which cannot be dismissed. She receives the highest score: 11.

While Katniss' subversive acts can be beneficial at times for fulfilling her performative script, they can also be expressed as intentionally rebellious acts. Katniss is infuriated by Capitol performances, especially when they affect her loved ones. During Katniss' live performance in the arena, her ally, Rue's dies at the hand of another tribute. She has seen tributes die in the arena before this moment, but Rue's resemblance to Prim causes Katniss' parental identity to

take over. Suddenly she remembers how brutal the Games are: “I want to do something to shame 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 own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. That I am” (237). When Katniss ceremoniously decorates Rue’s body with flowers, she is publicly grieving a death caused directly by the Capitol. She reveals the Hunger Games as tool of oppression.

As we can see from her reaction to Rue’s death, Katniss’ performances can breed the type of propaganda which the Capitol is working to suppress. Thus, her actions can overshadow her sense of self-preservation. In order to save both herself and Peeta, she carefully suggests they perform their roles as “star-crossed lovers” to the end. Much like the dramatics of Romeo and Juliet, she knows that they have to have a show. “They have to have a victor,” because otherwise the Games are revealed as a tool of oppression to the “mundane audience,” thereby relinquishing Capitol authority (344). The authors of performance are equally aware of their delicate relationship with the final tributes, and therefore name both Peeta and Katniss victor.

Katniss is not performing according to their script. She is performing based on her own experience with hunting and survival techniques. Thus, she proves her ability to perform witticism and ferocity when they do not depend on public spectacle. She also proves that in a society full of performative expectations, she has an individual collection of attributes which may not always mirror those of the predetermined script. She needs assistance from a tribute that has not yet experienced performative trauma: Peeta Mellark. Peeta is the Baker’s son, so he knows how to be a salesman. Therefore, it makes sense for him to adapt more easily to the performative culture. Based on his interactions with most characters, we can assume he is a

people-person. He is better equipped to deal with the public than Katniss, who would rather spend her time alone in the woods.

In her refusal to be controlled by the system, Katniss embodies the Mockingjay, the hybrid species used previously during the Dark Days to infiltrate Capitol forces. With help from Peeta's ability to woo the "mundane audience" and Haymitch's knowledge of the Hunger Games system, she becomes Genderjay, with the ability to disrupt her government's messages, despite her performative roles. Peeta becomes emotional, and admits "there is this one girl. I've had a crush on her ever since I can remember [and]... she came here with me" (130). While there were plenty of opportunities for Peeta to communicate his feelings to Katniss, he chose to do so during a live interview that was broadcasted to every television in Panem. He takes control of the script publicly, and lays the groundwork for Katniss to subvert Capitol power from the inside.

Haymitch announces: "[Peeta] made you look desirable...You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!" Haymitch suggests Katniss and Peeta embrace the "star crossed lover" identity to make their performance in the Games more popular to viewers and sponsors. He understands that catering to the Capitol audience with this performance mimics the Games' constructions, reminding them "it's all just a big show. It's all about how you are perceived" and "You're going to have sponsors lined up around the block" (135, 137).

The live interview is a manipulative step for District 12, but also for the Capitol. In the aftermath of Peeta's interview, we see how the Capitol uses tribute bodies as an emotional distraction for the audience. When the tributes reach the arena, Katniss wonders if she should abandon the "star-crossed lover" identity because she thinks Peeta has, by forming an alliance with other tributes: "Maybe people will think it's something we plotted together if I seem like it

amuses me now” (165). She continues to perform her role as Peeta’s lover because this role supposedly protects her from Capitol control.

However, the Hunger Games phenomenon has exploited this narrative so greatly that Peeta and Katniss’ narratives are woven together indefinitely and publicly. Katniss reflects on her trick with the berries: “the Capitol will act as if they’ve been in control the whole time. As if they orchestrated the whole event” (358). Because the Capitol authors rescript the final Game scene as their own construction, Katniss and Peeta must continue to act based on their prior performances in the Games in order to publicly rescind Katniss’ perceived threat of rebellion. Therefore, Katniss’ role as victor is actually a case of forced, perceived performativity by the Capitol, with President Snow controlling her body through constructions of gender and sexuality.

When President Snow visits Katniss in her District 12 home, we see how the performative script has become increasingly gendered, as her role is now dependent on her relationship with Peeta. We also see that Katniss still has problems performing this role accurately in *Catching Fire*, when President Snow visits her home in District 12 on page 34:

“I’m only interested in how [Gale] affects your dynamic with Peeta, thereby affecting the moods in the districts,” he says.

“It will be the same on the [Victory] tour. I’ll be in love with him just as I was,” I say.

“Just as you are,” corrects President Snow.

“Just as I am,” I confirm.

President Snow manipulates Katniss into continuing to follow the performative script that was originally designed to protect her and Peeta in order to protect his power instead. He

threatens the lives of her family and friends and therefore manipulates her parental, protective identity as well.

Katniss decides marriage is the next step in validating her performances with Peeta. However, she realizes now that as a victor, she is being dehumanized more so than she was as a simple District 12 citizen: “Of course I could do a lot worse than Peeta. That really isn’t the point though, is it? One of the few freedoms we have in District 12 is the right to marry who we want or not marry at all. And now even that has been taken away from me” (*Catching Fire* 55-56). Before the Games, Katniss thought very little about romantic relationships and even less about marriage. She recognized her friend, Gale, as a handsome young man, but was not romantically interested in him.

When they discussed the possibility of raising families in the future, Katniss explicitly stated she did not want to have children. She did not want to expose more innocent children to the Hunger Games and Capitol oppression. However, the romance script continues to develop as the Capitol scrambles for ways to distract the mundane audience from rebel forces. Peeta continues to play along through his public displays of affection. He reveals that Katniss, who will soon be fighting in the arena with him, is pregnant.

Peeta’s confession, while following his performative script, has publically revealed the Hunger Games as a cruel practice. He also proves how the Capitol’s manipulations have come to rely on tributes’/victors’ performances of gender and sexuality, and not just their physical performances in the arena. (I return to this point later in the chapter in regard to other victors.)

The Rebels/District 13

Capitol performances, while emotionally draining, are not the only performances which Katniss must fulfill in the *Hunger Games* trilogy. We soon learn that two groups are casting

opposing identities for Katniss to perform. While the Capitol's script publicly manipulates Katniss behavior, rebel forces (and eventually District 13) are revealed to be appropriating Katniss' personal rebellions for an impending revolution.

At a first glance, this doesn't seem like such a bad thing. An organized group of rebels had been planning the logistics for many years, but they had apparently not yet found the proper representative and/or situation for which to implement their plans: until Katniss. Head Gamemaker and rebel organizer, Plutarch Heavensbee, tells her, "We had to save you because you're the mockingjay, Katniss...While you live, the revolution lives" (*Mockingjay* 466). Katniss' trick with the berries was interpreted by many citizens as a green light for active rebellion. They brand her as the Mockingjay: a symbol of rebellion as well as a victim of the Capitol.

Panel Interlude:

Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy

CARINE MARDOROSSIAN: I became interested in the book series after seeing the first *Hunger Games* film in theaters. The trailer alluded to some post-colonialism, which is one of my main fields of study. The film delivered. It demonstrated the emotional and physical struggle of a society oppressed by thinly-veiled imperialism. As I began reading the novels, I started to wonder how gender played into this system. What did it mean to have young girls and boys face the same oppressions? What did it mean for them to experience violence?

After completing my book, *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered*, this past year, I can't help but view the *Hunger Games* through the lenses of victimhood and

vulnerability, which I describe in my book on page 5. We need to remember the following facts when talking with or about victims:

Victims are people whose vulnerability to others has been abused rather than people who, as they are now increasingly defined, let themselves fall prey to a condition (vulnerability) to which the rest of us are supposedly impermeable... If we came to terms with the fact that we are all, by definition, characterized by vulnerability, then it becomes more difficult (if not impossible) to hold it against people that are vulnerable.

MARDOROSSIAN: Katniss Everdeen is a character who doesn't want to be labeled "victim." She, like many victims of oppression in our society, resents her vulnerability, because she somehow feels responsible for her situation. Although sexual violence is not overtly relevant to Katniss' situation, she is treated by her governments the way rape victims are treated by our society. Because the term "victim" has become so closely associated with weakness, feminists have adopted the term "survivor." This is supposedly a more empowering term for those who've experienced sexual assault. However, labeling a rape victim as a rape survivor doesn't automatically erase or heal the individual's trauma, nor does it automatically rectify the crime they've experienced. Renaming the victimized Katniss "victor" and "Mockingjay" doesn't erase her trauma either. In both cases, the "other" has attempted to erase the pain felt by the victim without giving them time to cope.

However well-intentioned their actions may be, the rebels begin to mirror Capitol behavior by taking advantage of her vulnerability and subversive performances. Katniss notices the similarities to her required Capitol performances: "What they really want is for me to truly

take on the role they designed for me...They have a whole team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances—as if that doesn't sound horribly familiar—and all I have to do is play my part" (*Mockingjay* 12).

Because Katniss wants to escape the vulnerability attached to performative roles, she is not keen on cooperating with their plans. District 13 doesn't trust Katniss to make her own decisions as rebel citizen, nor do they respect the agency she displays through her individual performances: "It isn't enough, what I've done in the past, defying the Capitol in the Games, providing a rallying point. I must now become an actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution...in some ways, District 13 is more controlling than the Capitol" (12, 43). While she was performing her roles in the Capitol, she was also able to perform as the gender jay—she was able to manipulate the system from within. But with the additional *Mockingjay* role, she is slowly transforming into a jabberjay propaganda machine.

We can see through her rebellious behavior that she is fighting to regain control of her life, but this usually just means she rebels against the daily schedule and ignores the rebel leader, President Coin's performative requests: "I pretty much ignore the [schedule] on my arm...I just go back to my compartment or wander around 13 or fall asleep somewhere hidden" (22). These small rebellions are the best Katniss can do, as she is transfixed by the PTSD of losing her home, multiple friends and her own identity.

The part of her identity which remains intact is her genderless parent identity and it is called to action when Peeta is accused of betraying District 13. President Coin realizes Katniss is attempting to maintain control of her life even though she has been taken over several times by traumatic events. She also realizes Katniss' protective tendencies will make it difficult to control

in her position as Mockingjay. Katniss uses her vulnerability to perform agency by makes the following demands on page 48-49:

[The tributes] will be granted immunity...You will personally pledge this in front of the entire population of District Thirteen and the remainder of Twelve. Soon. Today...You will hold yourself and your government responsible for their safety, or you'll find yourself another Mockingjay. I'll perform when you've made the announcement.

After listing these demands, Coin is pressured to receive Katniss' input on decisions regarding rebel action. She is to gain Katniss' consent before assigning Mockingjay performances, which is more than can be said for the Capitol, which consistently appropriated her performances for their own script.

Again, this is a step in the right direction for District 13, but not necessarily for Katniss' psychological well-being. During *Mockingjay*, it is evident that her sense of self has become almost completely overtaken by each government's propaganda. Her identity is traumatized from her constant performances in publicized roles (two consecutive Hunger Games, Capitol media attention and District 13 puppetry).

When she regains consciousness after being rescued from the Quarter Quell, she is prescribed pain medication and mood relaxers which cause her to hallucinate. She must actively remind herself who she is and what she knows to be true: "*My name is Katniss Everdeen. I am seventeen years old. My home is District 12. I was in the Hunger Games. I escaped. The Capitol hates me*" (5). Even when her psyche begins to improve, sometimes delivering a single line in front of a camera is too overwhelming: "It's impossible to be the Mockingjay. Impossible to complete even this one sentence...I am broken" (190-191). In moments such as this, Katniss is proven to be traumatized by her performative roles.

Rather than confront this trauma, Katniss is pressured to subdue and harness its effects through Mockingjay propos. This practice requires her to engage in public performance: a stylized act which she has consistently failed to execute correctly and is therefore a source of trauma in itself. Thus, Katniss' controlled performances, no matter the source of script, demonstrate how others thrive by unearthing her vulnerability.

Physical and Sexual Trauma

President Snow used to...sell me...my body that is...I wasn't the only one. If a victor is considered desirable, the president gives them as a reward or allows people to buy them for an exorbitant amount of money. If you refuse, he kills someone you love

Finnick Odair
Mockingjay

While her identity is made much more public than that of most victors, Katniss is not the only victim of physical control. Whether they are being forced to appear as a young bride or a sexual icon, these victims are forced to perform in performative roles which mask their exploitation. Thus, these victims continue to be cleverly disguised as public figures while their bodies continue to be abused by the Capitol. The final panel interlude uses Judith Butler and Carine Mardorossian's research to further explore how this kind of trauma relates to gender and victimology in the *Hunger Games* trilogy.

Panel Interlude:

Gender and Victimology in the Hunger Games Trilogy

BUTLER: Victims, as you stated earlier, are those whose vulnerability has been abused. These individuals have been violated and exposed for the benefit of another individual or system's supposed power. In reality, the state of vulnerability is a prototypical condition, and it should not be assumed that cannot enact agency and vulnerability simultaneously. Katniss does not initially

realize this concept, but as her story progresses, it seems she has no choice but to accept her vulnerability due the trauma she experiences.

FLICKERMAN: Hmm, okay that makes sense, and quite an interesting observation! It seems like you are suggesting gender has very little to do with Katniss' experience with trauma and vulnerability. As devil's advocate, however, I'd like to point out that the boys in this series are either level-headed or at least good under pressure. Don't you agree?

BUTLER: I don't really agree, because that statement is highly generalized. The boys in this series are interesting to deconstruct as characters in YAL. I noticed that whenever the focus drifted to Gale Hawthorne, the series started to demonstrate the performativity of gender constructions in young adult books, where friendly heterosexual relationships must always blossom into romantic heterosexual relationships

Gale is simply constructed in to maintain the expected allure of hyper-masculinity, fitting the "bad boy" or "dangerous" trope, much like *Twilight's* Edward Cullen. These men are brooding loners, who we are supposed to pity because of the weight of their savior complexes. They are quick to anger and violent actions as a result of their failure to keep others safe. Like Edward, Gale is revealed to be rather jealous and entitled in regard to Katniss' affections. This trope is overdone, and frankly unnecessary for the underlying plot of the *Hunger Games* series.

Over the course of the novels, he is reduced to District 13's war machine, and becomes just one more person pressuring to perform as an entity other than herself—pressuring Katniss to stay home to prepare for a fight and urging her to embody the Mockingjay title for the "greater good." Meanwhile, Katniss continues to experience a loss of self what I describe in my essay,

“Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (2009), as “a loss which is suspended and provisionally resolved through melancholic incorporation of some ‘other’” (727).

Gale is the first to volunteer for special missions and raids in District 13. He also invents the bombs which kill Katniss’ beloved sister. This hyper-masculine narrative is overdone in YAL, especially when the audience is predominantly feminine. The heteronormative culture also dictates that the young women in these stories be attracted to men which exhibit the most “masculine” qualities. We see this in the classic Jane Austen novels, when Catherine and Elizabeth question their perspective husbands’ social status. We see this in J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, when every girl at Hogwarts (including the brilliant and fairly self-sufficient Hermione Granger) is dazzled by Victor Krum’s impressive athleticism—while boys like Neville Longbottom that exude different masculinities were disregarded for most of the series.

In my essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” I discuss how the concept of gender is only a construction that has been written and enforced by a set group. These “authors of gender” have enforced the specifics of gender normatives so consistently that they become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (522). As demonstrated by YAL, it seems that for young men, hyper-masculinity is the necessary and natural mode of being. Thus, we can see how YAL authors remain entranced by the fiction of natural gender performance and give incentive for young adults to embody these fictions.

Though I was distracted by Gale, I noticed that Suzanne Collins does, in fact, challenge the authority of gender with other male characters. As I learned more about Peeta and Cinna, I began to wonder “*How do the expectations of gender and gender performance affect their actual gender performance and in turn, how do their performances challenge expectations?*” Peeta

doesn't follow the requirements for hyper-masculinity: he may be physically strong, but he does not shy away from public displays of emotion. He is gentle and artistic. Cinna also represents gentle and artistic masculinity. He uses his calm demeanor and creativity to upset Capitol authority from the inside. Carine, your expertise should explain why Finnick is so subversive...

MARDOROSSIAN: Yes, my interest in the books really peaked when I learned more about Finnick Odair. I was surprised to learn he was a victim of government regulated sex-trafficking. I thought it was quite subversive of Collins to introduce sexual violence in regard to a young man instead of a young woman.

Thomas Macaulay Millar writes: "We live in a culture where sex is not so much an act as a thing: a substance that can be given, bought sold or stolen, that has a value and a supply-and-demand curve... women have it, men want to get it...sex is the ticket...it's a transaction..." ("Toward a Performative Model of Sex" 30). Finnick's experience opens a more inclusive discussion of sexual assault, accounting for numerous victims who do not identify as cis-gender females in our culture.

Amy Montz observes that in America, "Fashion and dress are the most common visual representations [of] complicated factors specific to women, such as morality and sexual availability or invitation" ("Costuming the Resistance" 141). However, the Capitol dresses Finnick in provocative clothing to insinuate his availability to Capitol citizens, proving victors of all genders are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

MARDOROSSIAN: In *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered*, I determine that “rape is an issue that primarily affects women not because they are women but because they often—though not necessarily—occupy the position of the structurally subordinate in relations of domination” (8).

Furthermore, “Society breeds sexualized violence when it promotes normative rather than deviant forms of identity” (10). In our society, this means sexual violence is enacted to stabilize gender roles. For example, men should pass as straight and masculine and avoid passivity and other seemingly “feminine” performances. There are various examples of cisgender men and women who function through what Louis Yablonsky refers to as “macho-syndrome,” where displays of “tough-guy” behavior are meant to validate one’s masculinity and or power (5). HBO’s *Game of Thrones* comes to mind immediately. Not only are there infantile snubs about one’s “manhood” there is also numerous potential or completed rape scenes which somehow always relate back to some male character’s “right to the throne.”

I recognize *The Hunger Games* is infinitely different from *Game of Thrones*, but I can’t help but compare them because of the underlying concept of how we think about rape and sexual violence. In *Mockingjay*, I noticed Finnick is the first victor to actually reveal himself as a victim of the Capitol, whereas Katniss is encouraged to pose as a stoic survivor. When Finnick reveals the truth of his experiences, he de-legitimizes the term “victim” as a synonym for “woman.” As a young adult author, I don’t expect Collins to blatantly refer to Finnick’s experience as an example of systemic rape, but she sends a subliminal message to her readers that sexual violence, and therefore rape, is the most extreme form of violence to which someone of *any* gender is vulnerable.

CONCLUSION

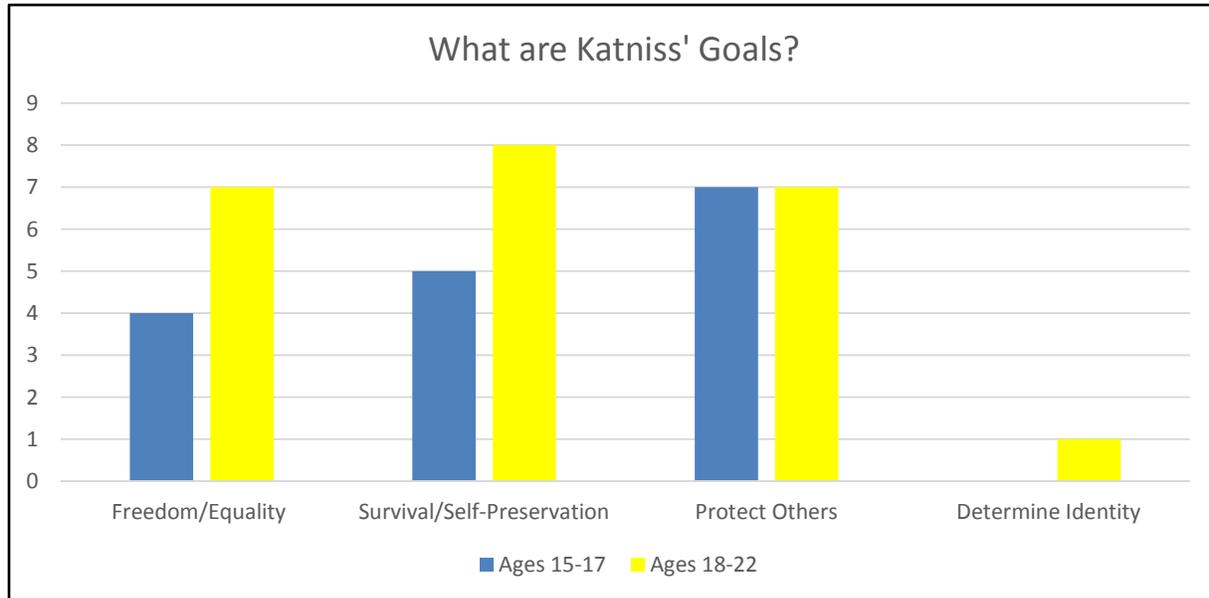
Reading New Vulnerabilities

How the Hunger Games Provides a New Model

In her *Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins uses a dystopian framework in order to write about difficult topics such as vulnerability, revolution and identity in a manner which is accessible to YA readers. Through the Capitol and District 13 performative scripts, she interrogates the manipulation of individual identity, causing many young readers to wonder: *Is this who I want to be?* When asked about the main goals of the series' protagonists, one young woman responded: "I thought identity was a huge issue for the characters...Are they true to themselves or how they should be according to society?" (2015).

Katniss Everdeen provides messages for YA girls and women especially. Katniss performs within both gender categories and therefore subverts the expectation of appearing as either masculine or feminine. She does not conform to what a woman or girl is expected to do. She does not view her male friends through the lens of potential romantic partners and she avoids the topic of marriage for the safety of her future family. Other characters depend on her. She is practical and strives to perform as an individual person, and has proven her ability to become nearly self-sufficient in times of distress.

In *The Hunger Games*, we see the genre going in a direction which recreates the female protagonist, and readers have noticed. When asked what Katniss' goals are as the protagonist I YA literatures, young women's descriptions can be categorized as such:



Knowing that readers observe Katniss' varying, yet empowering goals, it is important to disclose that young women want to emulate her character. Eleven out of 14 women ages 15-17 say they want to be more like her because she shows confidence and resilience. They admire her survival skills.

The most resounding conclusion I make from these YA female readers is in regard to the (hopefully) fading tropes which plague the YAL genre. These readers have become bored by strictly romantic scripts and are becoming more interested in action/adventure novels and dystopian literature. They are tired of reading about helpless young women and looking for more complex model for future literary women and characters in general. For example, a 15 year old girl disclosed that she “read the first 20 pages [of *Twilight*] and gave up because...I found the characters boring and underdeveloped” (2015).

Collins begins to combat this problem with her *Hunger Games* trilogy by writing about teenage vulnerability from a perspective which encourages the development of agency rather than submission. Though often placed on a pedestal for her performances of strength, Katniss

Everdeen is not without her personal traumas. She must learn how to accept her vulnerability as an inherent human trait rather than an expression of weakness. To quote Roxane Gay, “Just because you survive something doesn’t mean you’re strong” (*Bad Feminist* 143).

Collins exposes the damaging (sometimes traumatic) effects of performative roles and the agency which can be expressed through revealing their falsity. She also proves how such roles are often a spectacle designed to disguise the harsher exploitations of gender, sexuality and physical bodies. The following excerpt was taken from the series’ Epilogue (454):

The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there are no more Hunger Games...Peeta says it will be OK. We have each other...I’ll have to explain about my nightmares. Why they came. Why they won’t ever really go away.

Though this Epilogue suggests a resolution to the series, Katniss’ state of mind as described above suggests this resolution is subjective. The trauma which consumes both her and Peeta doesn’t disappear after the Hunger Games are put to rest.

Though Katniss is struggling to make it through each day, in the back of her mind is the source of her conscious trauma—Capitol and District 13’s performative power. This suggests that her pain and vulnerability can be used to fuel her individual agency as well as proof that such performativity should not be enacted. What we see in the final pages of *Mockingjay* (2010) is the notion that victims of trauma should not be made to feel that their resulting vulnerability will unceasingly be a source of helplessness. Rather, the idea should be encouraged that victims can use their vulnerability as a tool for developing their individual performance of agency.

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