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Beyond Sensation:

The Hunger Games and Dystopian Critique

> Hey, hey, give 'em what they want
> If lust and hate is the candy
> If blood and love tastes so sweet
> Then we give 'em what they want
> Hey, hey, give 'em what they want
> So their eyes are growing hazy
> 'Cause they wanna turn it on
> So their minds are soft and lazy, well
> Hey, hey, give 'em what they want
> From "Candy Everybody Wants"
> by Drew and Merchant (1992)

The Hunger Games trilogy and high-grossing film are popular culture phenomena.[1] But what drives readers' enthusiasm for the series? As a work of dystopian literature, reading the Hunger Games trilogy should be a disturbing experience. Ryan (2010) writes:

> [I]if there is one truth that can be taken away from the Hunger Games [trilogy] it is this: we, the reader, tuned in and boosted its rating. Even while Katniss rails against the Games as disgusting and barbaric, we the readers turn the pages in order to watch them. We become the citizens in the Capitol, glued to the television, ensuring there will be another Game the following year. (p.111)

Grossman (2009) writes, "One of the paradoxes of the book is that it condemns the action in the arena while also inviting us to enjoy it, sting by sting. Despite ourselves, we do" (para. 5). As Ryan and Grossman point out, there is a valuable, dystopian experience within the series; however, popular responses to the Hunger Games suggest that many readers do not interrogate the text or read self-reflectively. Entranced by the horror of the violent premise and the sensational speed of the narrative, readers overlook elements of the text that fuel the series' appeal and weaken the text's dystopian purpose.

Reader-response theory considers the individual and personal transactions that occur silently between reader and text. As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) points out, "The reading of a particular work at a particular moment by a particular reader will be a highly complex process" (p. 75). This transaction, arising as it does from a silent interaction with the text, is difficult to collect or examine. However, literary phenomena such as the Hunger Games trilogy produce visible fan responses that are available for interpretation. In this article, I suggest that aspects of the text that fuel its popularity, the dynamics of reality television, the interruptions and silences of the first-person narrator, and the portrayal of gender also create a text that evokes that which it attempts to condemn. As a result, the trilogy invites a passive response from viewers and does not elicit the active social critique that is the hallmark of dystopian literature. Readers do not seem to ask *why* they take such pleasure in a story about children murdering children for televised entertainment. They do not question the similarities between American entertainment culture and the culture of Panem, and they do not seek ways to change their society.

In *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003), Hintz and Ostry outline the long, rich history of utopian and dystopian literature and note its attraction to readers of all ages. Utopian and dystopian fiction, they argue, asks readers to

imagine other worlds and compare them to their own. In his foreword to this book, Zipes writes, "we are in need of this literature, especially for young readers, to provide hope for a different and more humane world" (p. ix). In "Dystopian Novels: What Imagined Futures Tell Young Readers about the Present and Future," Hill (2012) writes, "By witnessing futuristic societies no one would want to inhabit, adolescent readers can imagine a future they desire, envisioning a present that can begin to build toward that future" (p. 102). Thus, the dystopian novel "mingles well with the coming-of-age novel, which features a loss of innocence" (Hintz & Ostry, 2003, p. 9) and is a particularly appropriate form for young adult literature.

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And yet, adult and young adult dystopias differ. Booker (2013) affirms that the foundational impulse of dystopian fiction is "a critique of existing social conditions or political systems" (p. 101). Dystopian literature and film "should encourage the reader or viewer to think critically about it, then transfer this critical thinking to his or her own world" (p. 5). But, as Sambell (2003) observes, true dystopias contain inherent problems for authors of children's and young adult literature. Dystopias for younger audiences address problems of society without the "protagonist's final defeat and failure" that is so "absolutely crucial to the admonitory impulse of the classic adult dystopia" (Sambell, p. 165). There is reluctance to write or publish dystopian fictions that might overwhelm young readers ill-equipped to question, much less challenge, the ideologies and institutions in which they and their families participate. As Cadden (2012) explains in "All Is Well: The Epilogue in Children's Fantasy Fiction," hope and reassurance remain essential elements of children's fantasy fiction.

Collins seems to recognize the dilemma facing authors of dystopian young adult literature. At the end of *Mockingjay*, Katniss reflects on what she will tell her (curiously) unnamed children. She asks, "How can I tell them about that world without frightening them to death?" (p. 389). This question encapsulates why the Hunger Games series is problematic as a dystopian text: it tells the story of a society that uses murder as televised entertainment and a political weapon *without* "frightening them [readers] to death."

Intention and Response

In numerous interviews, Collins speaks of her hope that the books will stimulate social critique and combat audience passivity. In an interview with Deborah Hopkinson (2009), Collins states "I hope they [the books] encourage debate and questions. Katniss is in a position where she has to question everything she sees. And like Katniss herself, young readers are coming of age politically." In an interview with James Blasingame (2009), Collins states: "The sociopolitical overtones of The Hunger Games [series] were very intentionally created to characterize current and past world events, including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations" (p. 726). When asked what she hopes readers will come away with after reading the book, Collins answered that she hopes they will ask "questions about how elements of the book might be relevant in their own lives. And, if they're disturbing, what they might do about them" ("Interview," n.d., para. 9).

However, fans of the series do not seem to have responded with thoughtful reflections or insightful connections between the text and the social and political realities of the twenty-first century. Instead, fan responses to the Hunger Games series suggest that it *is* merely entertainment: the series has no more resonance with readers than a video game or a reality television show. Readers draw attention to how quickly they can read the books. "I raced through all three books in one weekend" says Rosemary Shearer (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Rafe Singer enjoyed the "exciting pace" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Stephanie Meyer, author of the Twilight series, wrote "I was so obsessed with this book" (Hunger Games website), and Stephen King describes them as "a jarring speed-rap" (2008, para. 4). The books are (to many) pleasures to be consumed rapidly without serious reflection.

In response to the text, young fans dress up as "gamemakers" and enact scenes from *The Hunger Games* by hunting one another with Nerf weapons. When interviewed by *USA Today*, readers dismissed concerns about the violent premise of the books. One young person states: "I'm 18. I've played video games

more violent than *The Hunger Games*. I've seen a lot of war coverage on TV" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). Another fan states: "The violence is pretty exciting" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. 2). In an effort to connect literacy and physical activity, educators at Southside Middle School in Florence, South Carolina, organized a "Hunger Games" field day. Their physical education teacher, dressed as Effie Trinket, had student "tributes" move between activities such as "tracker-jacker" tag and "power struggle tug of war" (Meder, 2013, p. 6A). Clearly, this type of role-playing is done in the name of fun—young people show enthusiasm for novels and films by dressing up as they did for Harry Potter and Star Wars.

However, when considering texts such as the Hunger Games books, this impulse is not without implications. Muller (2012) observes in "Virtually Real: Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games Trilogy" that the "entertainment value of the virtual modes in and of the text, with their capacity to diminish moral perspective, has clearly appealed to young readers" (p. 62). She argues that the books' examination of the dangers of virtual entertainment risks "perpetuating their entertainment value" (p. 51). The desire to act out scenes of slavery, oppression, and murder, as performed for a privileged television audience, suggests that young readers do not recognize the dystopian aspect of the series or their society's complicity in perpetuating a culture of consumption, violence, and social injustice.

Fan responses to the book and film replicate the desire for commodity acquisition similar to the citizens of the Capitol. Citizens of the Capitol, watching the tribute interviews, applaud the numerous fashion makeovers integral to the competition and appropriate Katniss's Mockingjay pin as a fashion accessory. *People* magazine (All about *The Hunger Games,* 2012), mirroring Caesar Flickerman, encourages readers to get to "know" the actors in a collector's edition featuring interviews and a glossy cover photo of actress Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss. A breathless fashion layout encourages fans to "Get Katniss' Look: Her functional style works as well on the weekend as it does in the games" (pp. 76–78). Exploitation and trauma have become a fashion choice. A nail polish advertisement for Capitol Colors asks, "What will you be wearing to the opening ceremonies?"[2] Readers who imagine dressing like Katniss or painting their nails in the "colors" of the enslaved and starving districts of Panem have not shifted their gaze from the book and onto themselves or their society. They do not recognize that the Capitol mirrors the privilege and passivity of American culture; they do not recognize that they identify with the population that engineers and watches, but not the one that fights in the Hunger Games.

Such responses from young people may simply demonstrate their lack of critical reading skills and lack of life experience. However, professional reviewers also avoid engaging critically with the violent content of the novels or reading them critically as a dystopian text. Younger readers may not register the violence as "real," but adult reviewers who do recognize the violent content minimize it; they reassure readers that, although the violence is graphic and prevalent, it is safe. King (2008), Grossman (2009), and Miller (2010) suggest that violence in the Hunger Games is secondary and that the numerous, and ultimately repetitive, acts of murder are not the primary focus of the novels. King, in fact, observes that the "shoot-it-if-it-moves" quality of the books offers the pleasures of a video game (2008, para. 3). His short, practical review suggests that, like a video game, the escalating violence is ultimately meaningless.

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The book's "efficiency," that is, the absence of significant reflection, is also accompanied by "displays of authorial laziness" (para. 4). By the time readers accompany Katniss and Squad 451's block-by-block attack on the Capitol in *Mockingjay*, they, like Katniss, are desensitized to the escalating attacks reminiscent of videogame levels. In her essay "Fresh Hell," Miller (2010) also notes uneven aspects of the text and the absence of a clear dystopian project. The book, she writes, does not "even attempt to abide by the strictures of science fiction" (para. 13). *The Hunger Games*, she writes, "could be taken as an indictment of reality TV, but only someone insensitive to the emotional tenor of the story could regard social criticism as the real point of Collins's novel." Miller labels the text a work of "fable or myth" (para. 8). Similarly,

Grossman (2009) writes that the violence in the book, "rather than being repellent . . . is strangely hypnotic. It's fairy-tale violence, Brothers Grimm violence—not a cheap thrill but a symbol of something deeper" (para. 5).

Grossman's and Miller's reading of The Hunger Games series as a fairy tale minimizes its violent content and the dystopian admonitory impulse. (Note, for instance, Grossman's use of the word "sting" to describe murder in *The Hunger Games*.) Unlike dystopian literature, traditional folk- and fairy tales are not critical of their culture or politically subversive. Indeed, one of the functions of the fairy tale is to uphold traditional gender roles and power structures. The power of the aristocracy is always reasserted. Beauty's value is her appearance and her obedience to her father and husband. Marriage is Cinderella's only goal, and the upstart maid in "The Goose Girl" is torn to pieces for stepping beyond her social class. Zipes (2006) argues that folktales and fairy tales maintain dominant institutions of power and oppressive class structures.

Readers of the Hunger Games *watch* the novel and avoid the transactional interrogation of dystopian fiction.

> Folktales and fairy tales have always been dependent on customs, rituals, and values in the particular socialization process of a social system. They have always symbolically depicted the nature of power relationships within a given society. Thus, they are strong indicators of the level of civilization, that is, the essential quality of a culture and social order. (p. 79)

If the Hunger Games trilogy constitutes a fairy tale, then it is worthwhile to consider what it reveals about our cultures' values as well as our "attitude toward the young and [our] cultural construction of youth" (Clark & Higonnet, 1999, p. 5).

Comparing the text to a video game explains why readers minimize the violence in the series. Connecting the work to fairy tales reveals its support of commodity acquisition and conventional gender roles. But the strongest explanation for the absence of dystopian reflection in readers may be found in the series' use of reality television. Viewers of reality television know that although the emotions of characters appear "real," they are staged. Ellis (2009) writes that this awareness is central to the appeal of reality TV:

> Reality TV is based on a paradox. Its situations are unreal or artificial, yet reality is what we seek from them: the reality of the individuals involved. Viewers are keenly engaged in the process of decoding the "real" people, of judging the sincerity of what they are putting on display. They are required to perform "naturally," to give the kind of performance of self for a viewership that was created in the early years of TV. But it has to be a performance of sincerity itself since it will be judged harshly if it seems to be evasive, duplicitous, or scheming. (pp. 111–112)

Participants on television shows seem to express real feelings and thoughts, but they are always aware of their performance; viewers cannot know what they are truly thinking or feeling. What is genuine and what is performance? In the Hunger Games books, this question alters the relationship between the reader and Katniss by replicating the relationship between viewer and reality television character. As a result, the performative nature of reality television becomes both the subject of the Hunger Games dystopian critique *and* the reason why readers do not think critically about their society—the emotional distance between reader and text encourages readers to consume the books' content as sensation without self-reflection. Readers of the Hunger Games *watch* the novel and avoid the transactional interrogation of dystopian fiction. Like Capitol viewers, readers sit back at a distance and enjoy the story because the fast pace of the plot offers them the pleasures of reality television: commodity acquisition, sensational violence, and passive voyeurism: it's just a story—it has nothing to do with them.

Interruption and Silence

This is where adult readers, educators, and literary critics can intervene. In order for the dystopian critique to be successful, certain aspects of the text must be recognized and resisted. The first element is the use of the first-person narrator. The first-person narrator is a popular device in children's and young adult literature because it creates a sense of immediacy and connection. However, Katniss, always aware of her onscreen presence and ever-present surveillance, avoids introspection. As a result, the narrative interrupts moments when the character might begin to explore her emotions or think about the situations she encounters. Like a television commercial interrupting

the climax of a movie or a show, Collins diverts readers' attention away from uncomfortable emotions and difficult questions.

These are moments readers should focus on—what Katniss is not saying, and why. Following tribute selection in *The Hunger Games*, for instance, Katniss is distraught about leaving her home and her family; however, the allure of material comfort overwhelms her emotional response. Instead of conveying the brutality of the situation or her feelings of loss, Collins draws readers' attention to sheets "made of soft, silky fabric. A thick fluffy comforter gives immediate warmth" (p. 54). Instead of considering her predicament or the government responsible for such injustice, Katniss is "too tired or too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else. So I let the train rock me to oblivion" (p. 54).

This pattern of interruption and silence continues in *Catching Fire*. Returning for her bouquet during the Victory Tour to District 11, she accidentally witnesses the execution of the old man who whistled Rue's song. Katniss steps back in to see the Peacekeepers "Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head" (p. 62). The shooting provides a shocking ending to Chapter 4, but as Chapter 5 opens, Katniss is whisked away. In response to Effie's questions, Katniss is silent. Peeta redirects the conversation by replying, "An old truck backfired," and shifts the conversation to complaints about his treatment and the real purpose for their Victory Tour: convincing the Districts that they are not rebels, just two kids in love (p. 63).

Readers know Katniss is upset by the shooting because she sits down on an inferior piece of furniture: "[A]ll I've done today is get three people killed, and now everyone in the square will be punished. I feel so sick that I have to sit down on a couch, despite the exposed springs and stuffing" (Collins, 2009, p. 65). Despite the shock, she remains aware of material culture. Readers know Katniss is vaguely aware of the poverty in District 11, but "Everything is happening too fast for [her] to process it" (p. 68). This pattern of interruption and silence creates the fast-paced plot, but it also distracts and diverts the reader: "'Come on. We've got a dinner to attend,' says Haymitch" (p. 68). In order to resist the pace of the text, readers must recognize that opportunities for self-reflection or connection to current culture are quickly undermined by dinner parties and fantasy makeovers. Just as television shifts from reports of tragedy to commercials advertising face cream or automobiles, questions about power, social justice, and the complicity of the entertainment culture in sustaining oppressive policies are pushed aside by a new dress, new food, and the excitement of sudden celebrity.

Throughout the series, Katniss does not understand the situations she finds herself in and cannot anticipate the results of her actions. Her limited understanding of the political environment makes her dependent on others for information and explanation, but the first-person narration limits the voice of adult characters who might educate Katniss and the reader. Therefore, readers must work to see what she cannot. A striking example of Katniss's inability to observe and decode the world around her occurs at the dinner party in *Catching Fire*. Her mockingjay pin, now "a new fashion sensation" among the Capitol residents, appears on the unique gold watch of the new Head Gamemaker, Plutarch Heavensbee.

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> Plutarch has run his thumb across the crystal face of the watch and for just a moment an image appears, glowing as if lit by candlelight. It's another mockingjay. Exactly like the pin on my dress. Only this one disappears. He snaps the watch closed.
>
> "That's very pretty," I say.
>
> "Oh, it's more than pretty. It's one of a kind," he says. (pp. 82–83)

Alert readers may recognize that Plutarch is not what he appears to be, but Katniss does not figure out until the denouement that Plutarch is part of the rebellion. Following her rescue, Haymitch admonishes Katniss for her political naïveté, "'So it's you and a syringe against the Capitol? See, this is why no one lets you make the plans.' I stare at him uncomprehendingly" (p. 384). The first-person narrative glides past serious interrogations of power and resistance, so, understandably, many fans remain at the surface, engaging in games of tug-of-war, dress up, or reenactments with Nerf guns.

Gender and Power

The second element readers need to attend to is the performance of gender. Many readers find Katniss "incredibly brave" (Minzesheimer, 2012, p. D1). Katniss's independent spirit and hunting prowess are viewed as evidence of a new, powerful female character, but this reading, as appealing as it is, overlooks the many ways the books reinforce conservative gender codes.[3] Understanding Katniss's performance of gender is important because, as Vallone (1999) writes, "Arguably, it is in adolescence that girls need feminism most" (p. 197). Rubinstein-Avila (2007) observes that female characters in young adult literature "strive to meet the expectations of a socially conservative and sexist patriarchy" (p. 363). Representations of girls and women in the Hunger Games reinforce the idea that becoming an object of desire and finding fulfillment in a heterosexual relationship is a primary goal for female characters in young adult literature:

Katniss may be tough, she may be feisty, but her survival hinges on her ability to become an object of desire.

> [O]ne way to contain the girl who has learned to imagine her future as a healthy, strong, well-educated professional is to teach her that romance is at the core of life; that without erotic satisfaction—without eliciting male desire—she will be forever unfulfilled. The man, rather than the self, becomes the focus of her interest in the strong and active years when she might be developing her own potential. (Mitchell, 1995, p.188)

Katniss may be tough, she may be feisty, but her survival hinges on her ability to become an object of desire; thus, she evokes a fantasy of female power that does not disturb conventional conceptions of gendered behavior for teenage girls. Throughout the series, Katniss is nurturing, beautiful, submissive to adult male authority, and, above all, chaste.

The numerous makeovers in each book reinforce and validate the importance of physical beauty for female identity. Despite her token resistance, her newfound beauty brings Katniss attention and pleasure:

> The creature standing before me in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels. Because my dress, oh, my dress is entirely covered in reflective precious gems, red and yellow and white with bits of blue that accent the tips of the flame design. The slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire.
>
> I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun. (p. 128)

The transformational makeovers take Katniss beyond "pretty" or "beautiful" to an appearance that is transcendent, yet, her appearance is out of her control. She does not own her image or her body, and she is incapable of wielding either. Her stylist, Cinna, uses fashion to express political resistance[4]; Haymitch coaches her actions and modifies her reactions; Katniss remains unaware. Even after she becomes the Mockingjay, the symbol of the rebellion, Katniss resists authority or leadership. She remains an image; any power she may have is an act.

> What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me. The symbol of the revolution. The Mockingjay. . . . I must now become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution. . . . I won't have to do it alone. 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. (Collins, 2010, p. 11)

In order to see how Katniss conforms to stereotype, it might be helpful for readers to consider how different the story would be if Katniss was not beautiful. What if Peeta and Gale did not desire her? What if Katniss embraced her leadership role and was an active member of the rebellion? Instead, her nurturing impulse, her pleasure in each makeover, and her resistance to leadership reinforces conventional gendered behavior for girls: be attractive, nurture others, keep quiet, and let the boys lead.

If, as Seelinger Trites asserts in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), "Young adult novels are about power" (p. 3), then the Hunger Games teaches readers that Katniss's strengths are her capacity to love and her ability to perform love for an audience.[5] Katniss nurtures virtually every character she encounters: Prim, Rue, Peeta, Haymitch, her allies, and, of course, her own mother. Her strengths reflect a modern feminism that values "[s]uch virtues as connectedness, caring, and personal accountability" (Clark, Kulkin, & Clancy, 1999, p. 73).

The limits Collins places on Katniss's political

awareness and capacity for leadership, however, reduce her performance of gender to a tradition in which women resist engaging in the public sphere. At the Reaping, she appears to emulate masculine heroes who step forward to fight for their people or defend their nation, but Katniss does not step forward for District 12. It is Prim's "untucked blouse forming a ducktail" (p. 22) that triggers her instinctive response to defend her "child." In contrast, Peeta, who as a baker and artist seems to bend or transgress traditional gender roles and is valued for his capacity to love and his acts of selflessness, understands the political system they inhabit and attempts to subvert it. Throughout the series, Peeta is able to work the crowd and, until he is tortured, resist the Capitol. The night before their first Hunger Game he articulates his desire to maintain his identity, "I want to die as myself" (Collins, 2008, p. 141).

Interrogating Katniss's gendered silence may be one of the most productive ways for readers to resist the sensation of the text. Gale and Peeta describe the oppression of Panem and voice their disgust and hatred for the Capitol. Katniss may think angry thoughts, but she has been effectively silenced: "I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask. . . . I avoid discussing tricky topics" (Collins, 2008, p. 6). Katniss listens as Gale "rant[s] about how the tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our district. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another" (p. 14).

Readers should ask why acts of resistance are rarely of Katniss's making. Katniss's dramatic gamble that the gamemakers will prevent their double suicide is a reaction to Peeta's understanding of how the games are used for political purpose—"We both know they have to have a victor" (pp. 343–344)—and his decision to sacrifice himself for Katniss by opening the tourniquet on his leg. In *Catching Fire*, aghast at the excess and gluttony of the Capitol, she silently remembers the starving children in District 12. Peeta, however, verbalizes his revulsion and translates it into thoughts of rebellion:

> "Maybe we were wrong, Katniss."
>
> "About what?" I ask.
>
> "About trying to subdue things in the districts" (p. 81).

But the most significant moment of silence occurs in *Mockingjay* when Gale and Beetee devise a bomb that will kill civilians and those who aid the wounded.

> "That seems to be crossing some kind of line," I say. "So anything goes?" They both stare at me—Beetee with doubt, Gale with hostility. "I guess there isn't a rule book for what might be unacceptable to do to another human being."
>
> "Sure there is. Beetee and I have been following the same rule book President Snow used when he hijacked Peeta," says Gale.
>
> Cruel, but to the point. I leave without further comment. I feel if I don't get outside immediately, I'll just go ballistic. (p. 185)

Despite their difference of opinion about the ethics of warfare, Katniss does not challenge the men or attempt to prevent their work. Readers may decide that her response, "Cruel, but to the point," legitimizes the plan. Her silence at this moment avoids discussion of the plan's immorality or the ethics of using the same tactics as the Capitol. Her silence allows readers, again, to avoid making connections between the text and America's use of torture and twelve years of war by diverting the narrative and minimizing reader discomfort.

Despite her courage, strength, and training, Katniss's gendered performance is also visible in her physical and sexual vulnerability. The bow and arrow symbolically link Katniss to Artemis, the virgin huntress and goddess of transition who guides young boys and girls to adulthood, but it also protects her from direct contact with bloodshed. In *The Hunger Games*, she is quickly overpowered by the knife-wielding Clove. In contrast to Katniss, Clove is aggressive and sexual.[6] Clove sits astride Katniss and taunts her with references to Peeta, her "Lover Boy." Cato has promised to let Clove "have" Katniss so that she can give the audience a "good show" (p. 285). Clove uses her knife in a suggestively phallic way to threaten Katniss: "I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade" (pp. 285–286). Helpless, Katniss is rescued by Thresh's powerful masculinity.

After Thresh kills Clove, Katniss uses her gender to avert Thresh's attack. She reminds him that she nurtured his fellow tribute, Rue. I "'buried her in flowers' I say, 'and I sang her to sleep' . . . . 'To death. I sang until she died'" (p. 288). The contrast in this scene alludes to the virgin/whore dichotomy and

draws attention to the muted role of sexuality in the series. Despite their freedom from parental control and the harsh reality of their world, neither Katniss, Peeta, nor Gale succumb to desire or use sexual pleasure as a means of escape.

Although Cato's death is described in detail over the course of four pages, references to sexual desire or activity in the Hunger Games is almost nonexistent. There are chaste kisses and a brief allusion to sex and power in Finnick's back story—he has been threatened into prostitution—but the traditional romance triangle reassures readers and avoids uncomfortable questions that might arise about Katniss's sexuality. Who will Katniss choose? The kind, thoughtful, handsome Peeta? Or the rebellious, impulsive, tall-dark-and-handsome Gale? Questions about gender politics and power, and the fate of Panem, are smoothed over by the love triangle; the only question that matters is resolved on the last pages of the last chapter of the last book. In the epilogue of *Mockingjay*, Katniss fulfills the role of literary heroine by committing to Peeta and bearing his children. Hope is restored through the heterosexual nuclear family.

Educators who choose to engage dystopian literature must also be prepared to make the connections between the text and American culture explicit.

Beyond Sensation

Journalist and author Darer Littman (2010) draws direct parallels between the citizens in *Mockingjay* and Americans during the Bush presidency. This moment in time, she writes, is an example of when "the American public preferred to lose themselves in 'reality tv' than pay attention [to] the erosion of civil liberties during the War on Terror; 'asking no more' in the way of evidence from their government when confronted by policies that so clearly contradict our laws and our national values" (p. 175). Darer Littman asserts that *The Hunger Games* is "a brilliant book for our time" and hopes that "it will encourage all of us to become more politically aware and active, and not to ever allow ourselves to risk the erosion of our democracy and civil liberties for *panem et circenses*" (p. 178). In contrast, Muller (2012) asks whether there is "a danger that the texts become what they condemn, a simulacrum that eventually fails to move beyond its own terms of reference" (p. 62). Reader and fan response supports Muller's analysis: the series evokes that which it seeks to condemn.

However, Collins's message that audiences play a role in perpetuating violence and that citizens must not be passive when faced with oppression is valuable for young adult readers. Therefore, educators who choose to engage dystopian literature must also be prepared to make the connections between the text and American culture explicit. This includes domestic and foreign policy and entertainment culture. Dystopian literature "is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century . . . [such as] exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease . . . and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life" (Moylan, as cited in Booker, 2013, p.4). Interrogating the text, as opposed to consuming it, requires acknowledging the political impulse of dystopian literature and actively resisting the passive reading the books create. Readers of the Hunger Games series should consider propaganda and news reporting, discuss what the use of torture at Abu Ghraib means to America, and discuss how the government's decision to not show images of coffins returning from Iraq and Afghanistan alters our perception of war. Teachers need to talk with students about the bombing at the ending of *Mockingjay* and consider what the consequences are for accepting assassination of a leader. Simulating the odds of a Reaping or performing Tribute interviews are safe ways to engage the text, but these activities will not move readers past the sensation of the story.[7] Instead, readers excited by the physical, mental, and emotional carnage of Panem will continue to consume reality television, paint their nails in Capitol colors, and view reports of war and poverty on television as another form of entertainment.

When readers understand what is at stake in Collins's text, and make explicit connections to twenty-first century culture, then they will no more play at the Hunger Games than play at the release of the infant in *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), the enslavement of African Americans in *Kindred* (Butler, 2004), or the sexual exploitation of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*

(Atwood, 1998). Reading against the text, reading self-reflectively, and looking critically at one's culture and political institutions are not easy at any age; neither is dystopian literature.

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Endnotes

1. Scholastic reported in 2012 that *The Hunger Games* had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over 200 consecutive weeks and that there were over 50 million copies of the book in print (Scholastic, 2012).
2. Dr. Julia Klimek of Coker College first brought the Capitol Nail Colors advertisement to my attention.
3. My reading is influenced by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.
4. See Clark, 2010, "Crime of Fashion."
5. Borsellino offers a strong argument about the importance of love.
6. Katniss and Clove are not the only women who reinforce traditional gender roles. Katniss's mother, subject to crippling depression, and younger, emotional sister, are nurturing healers who remain undeveloped characters. Coin, with her two sides, evokes the stereotype of the older woman threatened by the younger, more beautiful woman. Coin reinforces fears about women in positions of power, for she, ultimately, is more depraved than President Snow. She orders the horrific carnage that concludes the series, makes sure Prim is part of the emergency response force, and seeks to re-instigate the Hunger Games using children of the Capitol.
7. These are from a sampling of activities suggested by online teacher resource sites, blogs, and Hill (2012).

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