Burn with Us: Sacrificing Childhood in The Hunger Games

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The Hunger Games

Susan Shau Ming Tan

Let the Games Begin

Katniss Everdeen, the girl who was on fire, you have provided a spark that,
left unattended, may grow to an inferno that destroys Panem.

(Collins, Fire 27)

God gave Noah the rainbow sign,
No more water, the fire next time!

(Baldwin, The Fire Next Time 105)

The vision of the dead child is one of the most horrific images in our
cultural imaginations. It is also one of the most pervasive. The trope of
the burning, sacrificial son stretches back through time and history: we
need only look to Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac and Jesus’s role as the
ultimate sacrificial body to see its cultural centrality (Miller). It was this
vision that Freud explored and gave name to in his iconic “Dream of the
Burning Child,” and Lacan reinterpreted in Seminar XI.

Central to Lacan’s interpretation of the dream is the “impotent cry of
the son’s passion heard, but unheeded, before his death” (Ragland 97). As
the dream recognizes the child’s identity and desires, it does so through
the knowledge of his loss. This acknowledgment of the child, made violent
in his death and the fact that he will never attain that which he burns for,
makes his cry all the more powerful. The child’s wants will never be sati-
ated, and this must always leave a void.

Lacan’s burning child lives today in multiple incarnations. The burn-
ing child can be the “real” within ourselves, which must be sacrificed in
order to reach the Symbolic—adulthood. It can be the ideal child, frozen...
in memory and time, or Jacqueline Rose’s constructed child: the child who only exists in the adult imagination. Indeed, coming-of-age often involves a recognition of a culturally defined childhood as well as loss: loss of innocence, loss of child-self. But as the “wounded child may symbolise a damaged self . . . it may equally stand for a damaged culture” (Reynolds 91). As children are often labelled our “hope,” so we must recognize that this phantom—the child who never existed, the child we wish we might have been, the child who was lost—is often indicative of fears for the future. Child sacrifice is a common trope in our society. And beneath it lurks questions of desire, identity, and humanity.

I begin with “The Dream of the Burning Child” because Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* trilogy dreams the same dream, representing a childhood that is threatened, lost, and unheard. As Katniss Everdeen is sent to the Hunger Games, she is driven by a desire to survive. But, as Katniss’s efforts to preserve her life must come at the expense of other children’s lives, desire in all forms—the desire to survive, to eat, to love—is troubled. Children are lost and voices are silenced, and as Katniss fights against the dictates of a society that demands this sacrifice she becomes “the girl on fire,” fighting against the impotency of the burning child’s cry, demanding that the adult world take notice (Collins, *Hunger* 177). Katniss, a sacrificial child, burns with passion, desire, and eventually, with literal flames, as children are forced to become killers and technology and social pressures enable the warping of the human form and mind. The void that Lacan imagines so intertwined with the body of the burning child is made manifest: violence, absence, and trauma irrevocably enmeshed in conceptions of self.

This article explores the trope of sacrificial children in *The Hunger Games* trilogy and its impact on the development of mind, body, and nation. Examining the book’s violence toward children, I will ultimately explore the trilogy as cultural critique. For, set in the ruins of America, the trilogy forces us to recognize aspects of our own, current culture within the dystopian world of Panem. Indeed, the power of the trilogy seems to lie in this vision: in an engagement with the uncomfortable tensions between real, current culture, and this all-destructive world.

*The Hunger Games* presents us with a future: with a society that demands children as sacrifice for entertainment. As we consume these books, as we thrill at their adventure, we must ask ourselves how different we truly are from this vision of society. For as we read, catharsis comes at the expense of the most vulnerable, reached through the destruction of childhood and the child-self as literal children burn and figurative children die to make way for bereaved, traumatized adults. Generations have dreamed of the burning child. And, as the popularity of *The Hunger Games* trilogy rages on, we see that perhaps, we still do.
The Sacrificial Self: A Child’s Screams and the Struggle for the Symbolic

“I volunteer!” I gasp. “I volunteer as tribute!”
There’s some confusion on the stage. District 12 hasn’t had a volunteer in decades and the protocol has become rusty. . . . [I]n District 12, where the word tribute is pretty much synonymous with the word corpse, volunteers are all but extinct.

(Collins, Hunger 26–27)

Desire is death.

(Shakespeare, Sonnet 147 42)

The Hunger Games trilogy is ostensibly a bildungsroman. In Panem, however, the physical process of maturation is dangerous: the journey to adulthood less a process of coming-of-age than it is the result of odds and luck. Lacan writes that identity is only formed upon entry into the Symbolic, a stage marked by the acquisition of language (2). Crucial to this development is mirror-recognition, an acknowledgment of self and other. And yet, this recognition of “other” is denied on the most intimate of levels within Panem, as childhood and adolescence are characterized by erasure, and the ages of maturation constitute a time of perpetual threat. In terms of adult survival, however, the Hunger Games turn adolescents into valuable assets. An eligible child can re-enter their name in the lottery of the Hunger Games in exchange for tesserae—a “meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person”—and can do so for each member of their family (Collins, Hunger 15). Thus, the system is constructed to turn children into agents of their family’s survival: adults cannot provide, but children can. Childhood is stripped away as families and adults offer up their children as potential sacrifice. In what will emerge as a common trope throughout the series, survival is intimately linked with death—in this case, adult survival meaning child death. All children in the districts of Panem live under this threat of adult culture, and one can imagine that when a child threatened by such violence looks at himself in Lacan’s mirror, a recognition of this vulnerability must accompany any recognition of self.

As violence is inscribed in the very act of growing up, it invades home: one of the most sacred and central spaces in children’s literature. While Katniss is devoted to her family, home is a space of alienation, which reminds Katniss of her father’s death and her mother’s neglect. Home not only provides no respite from the violence of Panem’s society, but in fact, becomes one of its most dangerous spaces. While the consequences of expressing herself in public would only put Katniss at risk, to be herself at home would endanger
her younger sister, “the only person in the world” she’s “certain” she loves (Collins, Hunger 11). Thus, Katniss becomes an “indifferent mask,” guarding and repressing all thoughts and opinions both outside and within the home (Collins, Hunger 7). Articulation in Panem is denied—there is no safe or sanctioned space for any expressions of self or identity.

There is, however, one place where Katniss can escape the restraints of her society: the freeing, illegal space of the woods. Only in the woods is there freedom to “rant” (Collins, Hunger 16) or “yell” (Collins, Hunger 17), and the woods are the sole place where Katniss can formulate and root a sense of self, a process enacted in a literal moment of mirror-recognition:

“I was washing up in a pond when I noticed the plants growing around me . . . “Katniss” I said aloud. It’s the plant I was named for. And I heard my father’s voice joking, “As long as you can find yourself, you’ll never starve.” . . . That night, we feasted on fish and katniss roots until we were all, for the first time in months, full. (Collins, Hunger 63–64)

Gazing into the reflective surface of the pond, Katniss “finds herself.”

Lacan writes that the mirror stage is “an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes places in the subject when [she] assumes an image” (2). And indeed, as Katniss gazes into the reflective surface of the pond and sees her namesake, this image cements identity. Looking into the mirror, Katniss assumes her role of provider, and, for the first time, satiates her family’s and her own desire, their hunger. Katniss has taken on a new place in her world, and as she hears her father’s voice, looks up from the proverbial mirror to “see” the father behind her, recognizing difference and acknowledging the desires of others, which Lacan argues are so crucial to the definition of self.

Katniss’s experiences in the woods immediately set her apart from the rest of her society. Her sense of self is characterized by inherent rebellion, by independence and self-sufficiency. At the same time, however, “self” still incorporates the violence implicit in Panem’s culture of childhood. Katniss’s vision of self cements her commitment to the woods—to danger, to violence—solidifying her identity as protector of her family, and with this, her willingness to take out tesserae and her refusal to allow her younger sister Prim to do so. Indeed, that Katniss unhesitatingly sacrifices herself to take Prim’s place as tribute aligns completely with an identity that has always considered itself as a potential sacrificial object.

Katniss’s maturation, however, is not yet complete. It is not enough that the subject knows herself: the subject must be able to articulate who she is in relation to others, to recognize herself as a signifier, a member of the Symbolic order. In Panem this articulation, and the entry into the greater social order that it implies, is impossible. The adults of Katniss’s world might
be termed prisoners of a “mute Symbolic”—stunted into silence by their society—without voice, recognition, and through them, true identity. Indeed, as children are forced into adulthood by the mechanisms of the Games, we see adults conversely infantilized as adult disempowerment emerges as the result of its own childhood traumas. If the adult world impresses violence, sacrifice, and objectification onto childhood, if children grow up as tools of their parents’ survival, if children are denied entry into the Symbolic because the adult world denies them voice, then those children will grow into the same adults, who can only sit by and enable as these same ideologies are impressed onto their children.

The pressurized space of the arena, however, unwittingly provides Katniss with a chance that no others have—to truly take her place in the Symbolic order. While the arena itself is a prison, it ironically acts as a space of unprecedented freedom between the tributes. Initially, Katniss’s sole focus is survival—a desire in line with her assumed identity of provider and survivor. Occupying Lacan’s “ideal I”—a narcissistic viewpoint in which the child sees only herself, and views others as wholly related to herself—Katniss lacks the ability to relate to the world outside of the confines of her constructed identity, focused solely on brute survival (2). In the arena, however, Katniss is forced into contact with others from outside her district. And, as she finds herself unable to ignore their humanity, Katniss is finally allowed voice, able to hear and be heard. Allying with Rue, a young tribute who reminds her of Prim, basic interaction with an “other” eventually makes way for care and love. As Rue forces Katniss to acknowledge the limitations of her constructed identity, Rue becomes the voice that calls her, quite literally, into the Symbolic, as Katniss hears: “[A] child’s scream, a young girl’s scream. . . . And now I’m running, knowing this may be a trap . . . but I can’t help myself. There’s another high-pitched cry, this time my name. ‘Katniss! Katniss!’ ‘Rue!’ I shout back . . . ‘Rue! I’m coming!’” (Collins, Hunger 280).

Rue’s death wrenches Katniss from the narcissistic impulse of the ideal I, as her concerns for survival fall away. As Rue calls and Katniss answers, Katniss is articulated into being. Recognizing Rue as “other,” Katniss is allowed to see herself as “other”—to see beyond basic significations of hunter and survivor. Jarred into a new impulse, Katniss “[wants] to do something . . . to show the Capitol that whatever they do . . . there is a part of every tribute they can’t own” (Collins, Hunger 286). And, as she wreathes Rue’s body in flowers, this recognition of Rue’s humanity asserts her own.

Katniss has become a subject of the Symbolic, accepting her desire to live while acknowledging the more complicated desires that dwell alongside this most primeval one: the desire for others to live, the desire for expression, the desire to define herself. It is this self-knowledge, this voice, that leads
to her own unexpected role as revolutionary symbol. Katniss becomes a figure of enormous power, a power nebulously described as an “effect she can have” (Collins, *Hunger* 111). No one is able to articulate why Katniss is so powerful, but as she assumes this new identity, her draw is unmistakable. Even moments after she honors Rue, this contact with an “other” expands exponentially as Rue’s district sends Katniss bread—an unheard-of gesture of solidarity, an unprecedented moment of communication between the districts.

Robyn McCallum writes that adolescent novels often employ an image of a “double, or *doppelganger*,” a “motif . . . used to express the idea that a sense of personal identity is shaped by a relation with an other and to represent a dialogue between different conceptions of the subject” (19). While there are no literal “doubles” in the trilogy, Katniss’s image comes to serve the same function. As Katniss and her actions are televised across Panem, this opportunity to see herself on-screen allows Katniss to grapple with the same questions of identity as McCallum’s *doppelgangers*. Presented with various images of herself, like the “parade of . . . phantasies” before the mirror, Katniss is ultimately able to choose which she will accept (Payne 32).

The mirror stage is thus reimagined, as: “I see myself on the television screen. Clothed in black except for the white patches on my sleeves. Or should I say my wings. Because Cinna has turned me into a mockingjay” (Collins, *Fire* 304). Katniss recognizes her power as she accepts this vision of herself, understanding what she signifies: “the bird, the pin, the song, the berries, the watch, the cracker, the dress that burst into flames. I am the mockingjay. . .The symbol of the rebellion” (Collins, *Fire* 466). This is evoked again as Katniss decides to join the rebellion, finally given the power to determine who she wants to be: “I take a deep breath. My arms rise slightly—as if recalling the black and white wings Cinna gave me—then come to rest at my sides. ‘I’m going to be the Mockingjay’” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 37).

The conclusion of *The Hunger Games* trilogy indeed ends with growth into adulthood. But for Katniss, we see that “adulthood” in itself is not a victory. At the trilogy’s conclusion, as she gazes upon her own children, Katniss wonders how she will tell them about the past. But even amid her fears, she knows that: “it will be OK . . . we can make them understand in a way that will make them braver” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 455). Katniss has won the right “to explain about [her] nightmares. Why they came. Why they won’t ever really go away” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 455). The mute traumas of the past are gone. Subjects may speak, and as children are allowed humanity, so too are adults. While the subject may be scarred, while the subject may suffer from “flashbacks” and “nightmares of . . . lost children,” those traumas and scars are no longer passed down in silence, and the very fact of their articulation points to the potential for healing (Collins, *Mockingjay* 452–53).
The Burning Body: Mutts, Mockingjays, and the Anatomy of Punishment

I am on fire. The balls of flame that erupted from the parachutes shot over the barricades, through the snowy air, and landed in the crowd. I was just turning away when one caught me, ran its tongue up the back of my body and transformed me into something new. A creature as unquenchable as the sun.

(Collins, Mockingjay 407)

It is not accidental that in the torturers’ idiom the room in which the brutality occurs was called the “production room” in the Philippines, the “cinema room” in South Vietnam, and the “blue lit stage” in Chile: built on these repeated acts of display and having as its purpose the production of a fantastic illusion of power, torture is a grotesque piece of compensatory drama.

(Scarry, The Body in Pain 27–28)

To speak of sacrificial children is to speak of bodies: of violence done to the individual. Moving from the formation of the internal subject, I will now turn my attention to the physical, for as self is warped by the Games, so too are definitions of the body fragmented. The commodification of children in The Hunger Games is part of a Foucaultian ritual of punishment, one that represents “crime,” and the government’s power to see and discipline crime, within punishment itself. Demanding an audience to witness and thus affirm existing political structures, the Games wield public punishment as an instrument of political control. While the Games are “justified” as a means of historical remembering, the Capitol’s “real message is clear. ‘Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you’” (Collins, Hunger 22).

This emphasis on the body of the child is telling. Indeed, while Panem is a world of routine violence to all, it is only violence toward children that must be brutally displayed. Thus, the child’s form becomes the locus of government supremacy, the destruction of the child’s body integral to political dominance. At the same time, this centrality of the child is enacted on a cultural level, as the traditions surrounding the Games elevate the child’s body, transforming children into commodities: objects of obsession, celebrity, and veneration.

The elaborate rituals preceding the Games cement this emphasis on the child, or more specifically, on the child as object. From the moment Katniss is selected as tribute she becomes public property. Her body is not her own, and as she sees herself prepared for an interview her own image is made strange, “the creature standing before [her] in the full-length mirror has come from another world. Where skin shimmers and eyes flash and apparently they make their clothes from jewels” (Collins, Hunger 146). Katniss’s commodification has made her object, animal, and alien: inhuman, or perhaps, posthuman.
The very idea of becoming a consumer item, of being changed and defined by the demands of an audience, is posthuman in a sense, or at least suggests the porousness of posthuman boundaries (Haraway). Indeed, as the ceremonies of the Games elevate the tributes and then reduce them to items of sport, Panem emerges as a posthuman world in the most terrifying of ways: where humanity is to be given and taken away. On stage, Katniss can be a compelling figure, an object of admiration and desire. But, in the arena, she is nothing but a source of bloody spectacle.

The dual violence and veneration surrounding the objectification of the child’s body cannot but strike us as familiar. Capitol culture centers around a fascination with youth, and all undergo “surgery in the Capitol, to . . . appear younger and thinner” (Collins, Hunger 150). Within this glorification of youth, and indeed, desire for youth, we can see underlying tensions between the body of the child and the adolescent. As the Games threaten children between the ages of twelve and eighteen, vulnerability to the Games encompasses a spectrum that includes definitions of both “child” and “adult.” Thus, as tributes are made objects of display, an attempt is made to differentiate the child’s body from the adolescent’s. One older tribute is presented as “provocative in a see-through gold gown. . . . [H]er body tall and lush . . . she’s sexy all the way” (Collins, Hunger 151). This extreme sexualization of an adolescent is contrasted with the presentation of the distinctly “child-like” Rue, “dressed in a gossamer gown complete with wings,” a “magical wisp of a tribute” (Collins, Hunger 152). Just as the adolescent tribute’s sexuality is emphasized and her body put on display, Rue’s “childness” is similarly highlighted, the child presented as an “inhuman” fairy, hearkening, ironically, to Romantic visions of childhood as a time of innocence and fantasy.

This division between the innocent child and the sexualized adolescent, however, is not as stable as we might like to believe. Reflecting the liminality within the period of maturation, Katniss is represented as both for different purposes, first made to look desirable as “an object of love” (Collins, Hunger 165) in a quest for sponsors, and then made to look “very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless” as she faces the Capitol’s wrath (Collins, Hunger 431). Thus, children are made into acceptable items of adult desire—admired for their “magical innocence,” their sexual potential, or even both. Indeed, this adult desire manifests itself physically, as Capitol residents literally “purchase” youth through surgeries and through child prostitution of the victors. The citizens of the Capitol are what Kimberley Reynolds might label “cultural necrophiliacs,” adults who “effectively prey on and feed off young people, surrounding themselves with the paraphernalia of youth at least in part because it gives the illusion that they are still young” (77).
Indeed, the label of the “necrophiliac” is disturbingly apt. For of course, the Capitol obsession with and desire for the child’s body is intimately connected with a literal desire to see it devoured. Consumer culture is made manifest: the corporeality of the body, and more specifically, the limitations of the body, implicit in entertainment. Posthumanism is brought to its most nightmarish conclusions as entertainment is located in the actual deconstruction of human boundaries, in death and dismemberment. To watch a tribute eaten alive is “the final word in entertainment” (Collins, *Hunger* 412). It is not simply death that entertains: it is gory spectacle. Katniss remembers one Hunger Games where the tributes, trapped in a cold wasteland, simply froze. Those “quiet, bloodless deaths” were “considered very anticlimactic in the Capitol” (Collins, *Hunger* 48). The celebrity objects that the culture of the Games has created are now items that the audience demands be vividly consumed.

The simultaneous cultures of hysterical celebration and sacrificial violence that surround the body of the child can be seen to carry a religious valence. Indeed, the notion of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity creates an intimate link between religious sacrifice and the culturally central body of the child-as-tribute. René Girard identifies a connection between communal violence and the sacred, arguing that in identifying and punishing a “scapegoat,” communities are defined (Girard, *Scapegoat* 3). This leads to a veneration of the victim, whose transgressive crimes are refigured as a sacrificial act, as “the apparent cause of disorder becomes the apparent cause of order . . . rebuild[ing] the terrified unity of a grateful community, at first in opposition to her, and finally around her” (Girard, *Scapegoat* 50). For Girard, this “sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding” (*Violence* 7). By inflicting communal violence upon a scapegoat, communities project and expel their own violent tendencies. This cathartic and defining act of violence can only operate, however, if the community believes it is somehow demanded by the sacrificed figure, or by inescapable religious or cultural dictates, rather than their own violent nature. Girard points to Christ as the first to break this pattern of communal violence. Through an articulation of the violent cycle that necessitated his willing sacrifice, as he stated that human beings “do not know what they are doing” (Girard, *Scapegoat* 111), Christ removed the veil of “misunderstanding” in what Girard terms “the first definition of the unconscious in human history” (*Violence* 111). In doing so, Girard argues, Christ provided the first model for human behavior that presented an alternative to definition through violence.

Within *The Hunger Games*, we can see this equation of the sacrificial child with the sacrificial religious body in two rare rules, or rule changes, in the Games themselves. While the Games are ostensibly without rules, two exceptions emerge, both to do with the body and the most intimate
aspects of the merging of the physical and the political. The first, the taboo of cannibalism, is twofold. It “doesn’t play well with the Capitol audience,” perhaps taking the Capitol lust for blood and gore too far (Collins, *Hunger* 173). However, cannibalism comes dangerously close to enacting political realities. The consumption of another tribute’s body makes literal the power plays implicit in the Games, as districts are pitted against each other to politically “consume,” sapping their own strength and identifying each other as the enemy rather than the Capitol. Evocative of the Eucharist, cannibalism in the arena functions much like Girard’s vision of removing “misunderstanding,” revealing the underlying power structures and impulses at play within the bloody ritual of the Games.

The second rule change—the exception that allows both Katniss and Peeta to live—demonstrates a similar emphasis on the power of the sacrificial body, and presents a similar problem in the political structures of the Games. Love, and with it, the willingness to sacrifice your life for another’s, elides the power of the Games altogether. As Katniss and Peeta prepare to die together, they demonstrate that their bodies are no longer a site of punishment, denying the Capitol the ability to exercise power through them and denying Capitol culture the ability to be “defined” through their deaths. Indeed, Katniss’s impact on her world, born of love and a willingness to sacrifice and be sacrificed, positions Katniss as a savior. While I do not have space here for an in-depth analysis of Katniss as a Christ-like figure, this connection between the sacrificial body of Christ and the saving power of the body of the child through Katniss, is compelling. Like Girard’s vision of Christ, Katniss’s sacrifice disrupts the violence that has hitherto defined her culture. Katniss’s ability to act as a mouthpiece for her world, as I discussed in my previous section, becomes evocative of Girard’s vision of Christ’s expression of the human unconscious, and her willingness to sacrifice herself—for Prim, for Rue, for Peeta—is continually cited as catalyst for the rebellion. Like Christ, Katniss demonstrates the alternatives to simple submission to the cycles of communal violence. By offering her body as sacrifice, and willingly making herself vulnerable to physical destruction, but on her own terms, Katniss inspires her world to take action.

This denial of the body as punishment, however, opens dangerous avenues, as the government attempts to reclaim power through the physical mutilations of “mutts.” In a telling violation of its own rule against cannibalism, the Capitol unleashes genetic “mutations” against Katniss and Peeta (Collins, *Hunger* 52). All mutts “are meant to damage you,” and “the true atrocities . . . incorporate a perverse psychological twist”: the grotesque inclusion of human body parts (Collins, *Mockingjay* 364). Kaniss comes face-to-face with the possibilities of this genetic manipulation as she is attacked by a mutation
designed to resemble Rue. Mutt-Rue again evokes nightmarish visions of posthumanism as humanity is challenged by this appropriation of the body. With the dismemberment of Rue, the Capitol undermines Katniss’s earlier reclamation of Rue, demonstrating that Rue is still a “piece in their Games” (Collins, *Hunger* 172). Rue’s body is vulnerable even in death, still subject to power and punishment.

Similarly, Katniss’s use of love for survival comes to reflect the commercialization of the adolescent, sexualized body. Unaware of the political implications of Katniss and Peeta’s act, Capitol audiences view Katniss and Peeta’s love as the ultimate consumer item. Katniss is shown her mockingjay symbol “on belt buckles, embroidered into silk lapels, even tattooed in intimate places,” as the obsession with Katniss as a love object is brought into the physical realm (Collins, *Fire* 96). “Everyone,” Katniss reflects, “wants to wear the winner’s token,” to “own” some part of her, to take part in her love (Collins, *Fire* 96).

With its visions of posthuman monstrosity, *The Hunger Games* seems to fall into the category of posthuman narratives that “point towards the antihuman and the apocalyptic” (Hayles 291). However, as the books draw to a close, attitudes toward the posthuman must change. As Katniss faces the aftermath of war, definitions of human become enmeshed in questions of trauma. Almost burned to death, Katniss, like the muttations that tormented her in the arena, must be genetically modified and melded with synthetic parts. Bereaved and scarred, Katniss no longer views herself as human, describing her body as “a bizarre patchwork quilt of skin” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 412), and labelling herself a “fire-mutt” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 407).

The ambiguities of Katniss’s self-image are reflected in a realization of the ambiguities of the rebellion and the future that they point to. The bodies of Capitol children are to be used in one final Hunger Games: the exercise of power through violence toward children to continue. And, in another show of power through public violence, Katniss is enlisted to execute President Snow—the symbol of the sacrificial child across Panem to be used once more to enforce political strength. As Katniss denies President Coin this affirmation, killing her instead of Snow, Katniss’s “symbolic” last arrow, meant to “[fire] the last shot of the war” truly reaches its mark, finally pointing a way forward (Collins, *Mockingjay* 428).

With Coin’s death, the public spectacle of the Hunger Games is truly destroyed, the child’s body no longer a target or means of inscribing law and punishment. And, as the body is freed, Katniss is freed. Like Girard’s vision of Christ, Katniss’s sacrifices have bought peace, ultimately ending the cyclical violence of the Games. Katniss has liberated her world, and is finally able to come-to-terms with her own hybridity, free to mourn and heal. Katniss is no
longer an object or commodity, and while she will always remain a symbol, she is free to simply watch as the world is rebuilt around her—this continuation perhaps the ultimate triumph of “the Mockingjay.”

Indeed, the bird, evocative of the reincarnate and immortal phoenix, truly embodies this evolution. In a vision of technology reclaimed by nature, the hybrid mockingjay is a mutation that has become a symbol of hope, beauty, and the creation of a new world. However, with this hybridity something is undeniably lost. The punished body has been released, but it will never be the same, never quite be whole. Humanity has had to find solutions in a hybridization that requires a sacrifice: no longer the sacrificial bodies of children sent to the Games, but rather, the loss of the bodies, or the wholeness of the bodies of the children and adolescents who fought for this new world. It is this that leads me to my final argument. For, as the child’s body is mutilated, and questions of adult humanity troubled alongside it, so too is nation—the ultimate body, the sovereign body—called into question. As the Hunger Games have destabilized notions of self and humanity, a national self and body are troubled. And this national vision is all-too familiar, as we gaze on Panem, the future body of the United States of America.

A Future on Fire: Silver Parachutes and the Playground of Reality

There’s no going back. Gradually, I’m forced to accept who I am. A badly burned girl with no wings. With no fire. And no sister.

(Collins, Mockingjay 409)

On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes. Between the . . . profusion of plant genuses and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of the utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: “What are you doing after the orgy?” What do you do when everything is available—sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America’s problem and, through America it has become the whole world’s problem.

(Baudrillard, America 30)

In 1630, standing before what would eventually become one of the founding thirteen colonies of the United States, John Winthrop envisioned a “city upon a hill,” a new nation based on religious principles and the goodness of its people: a utopia (31). At the same time, he cautioned: “The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world” (31). From its inception, America was aware that its utopian dream was being watched, and that succeed or fail, its fate would be broadcast throughout the world.
In the same way, *The Hunger Games* trilogy broadcasts its own vision of America: of thirteen colonies that dwell in a parasitic union of dystopian control. This vision of the future is completely self-contained. Winthrop wrote of the eyes of the world. In Panem, however, there is no outside world. No mention is ever made of another nation, of any space outside of the ruins of America. Thus, as a similar focus on witnessing emerges within the trilogy, we realize that the only subjects to watch are the subjects of Panem. Similarly, as Winthrop spoke of a new nation, one that would break away from the oppression of an “old world,” the oppression of Panem resides internally. The stakes of America are removed from their global context—there is no colonizing force to be liberated from, no audience of nations to watch and follow. America oppresses itself, and American audiences watch and broadcast their own oppression.

Baudrillard writes of hyperreality, where all has been replaced by “simulations” (1). In this state, the difference between reality and construction becomes impossible to discern. The real world falls away, replaced by facades and simulations. Baudrillard brings hyperreality specifically to bear on America and American culture. Like Foucault’s public punishment, hyperreality revolves around spectacle. Nation becomes drama: a pageant and display that demands audience.

The citizens of Panem’s Capitol live in a world of Baudrillard’s signs and constructs, where the natural is unnatural, where the “liquidation of all referentials” is made manifest in the liquidation of the body itself (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 2). The human body is a simulation of perfection or style, casually dyed, tattooed, and surgically altered with each new fashion. As Capitol citizens alter their bodies, they too are dehumanized. Katniss reflects that the members of her prep team are “so unlike people” that she views them more as “oddly coloured birds” or pets (Collins, *Hunger* 75–76).

Reflected in the construction of their bodies, the citizens of the Capitol are incapable of separating real from simulation, a worldview with sinister implications as they are similarly unable to separate the realities of violence from televised violence. Television is a central aspect of the hyperreal, a medium that enables and proliferates hyperreality by turning real events into distanced, filtered images. As television seeks only to entertain—to leave an impression rather than impress an image—these images lose meaning. Like Barthes’ “flat death” (92), the mediation of the screen reduces child death to “simulation,” and as Katniss listens to her prep team recount her first Hunger Games, she reflects that “it’s all about where they were or what they were doing or how they felt when a specific event occurred. . . . Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena” (Collins, *Hunger* 429–30). For her prep team, there is no connection between the Katniss in
the arena and the physical Katniss; Katniss becomes simulacra the moment she enters the realm of the screen.

Indeed, Panem seems a nation based on scopophilia. Even as Katniss herself views footage of past Games, her experience is disturbingly reminiscent of entertainment: “[Peeta] puts in the tape and I curl up next to him on the sofa with my milk, which is really delicious with honey and spices, and lose myself in the Fiftieth Hunger Games” (Collins, *Fire* 235). Even for citizens of the districts, as “[they] grit [their] teeth and watch because [they] must and try to get back to business as soon as possible,” the Games become nightmarish routine, disturbingly normalized (Collins, *Hunger* 430). All are united by the viewing event of the Games. All are spectators, all bear witness, and as the Games are broadcast, culture becomes centred around the hyperreality of the televised image.

As Baudrillard’s critique of hyperreality is drawn from a critique of modern America, so too does scopophilia extend beyond the pages of the trilogy. As we read *The Hunger Games*, we are forced to confront our own “pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 16), the reality that we most resemble the audiences of the Capitol: remotely watching, and even enjoying, the book’s violence, even as we recognize its horror. Our shared scopophilia is perhaps best embodied in the silver parachutes of sponsorship, which Capitol audiences send into the arenas. The parachutes, which can mean a tribute’s survival, allow Capitol audiences to reach through medium, to touch a “fictional world,” taking part in the Games as they reach ever-so-slightly through the divide of the screen. In an era of reality television, we cannot help but see a reflection of ourselves in this desire for the scopophilic and beyond: in the desire to lose ourselves in a fictional world, to participate in one.

This critique of modern readers and society is broadened as the trilogy appropriates and distorts American traditions. Represented as a “time for repentance and a time for thanks,” the Games evoke the utopian dreams of founding America and the holiday of Thanksgiving (Collins, *Hunger* 22). This is brought into the arena itself with the central Cornucopia, which like its mythic counterpart “[spills] over with the things that will give . . . life,” brimming with “food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters” (Collins, *Hunger* 179). However, this Cornucopia is designed to force the tributes to fight. The Cornucopia of Thanksgiving—in its representation of life, plenty, and the potential to live off the land—is distorted beyond recognition, as “around the Cornucopia, the ground appears to be bleeding. . . . Bodies lie on the ground and float in the sea” (Collins, *Fire* 331). The Cornucopia also marks “one of the heaviest days of betting,” as Capitol audiences eagerly watch the narrowing pool of tributes (Collins, *Hunger* 184).
This desire to follow and participate in the Games continues after the Games themselves are over, as the exotic arenas are opened to the Capitol public. The arenas are “historic sites,” and “popular destinations for Capitol residents to visit, to vacation,” where families can “rewatch the Games, tour the catacombs . . . even take part in re-enactments” (Collins, *Hunger 175*). Violence is not only made “unreal” through the watching of the Hunger Games; with these visions of “theme-park” atrocity, violence is made fun, the arenas a further step in the participatory fantasies of silver parachutes, turned into site of warped play. It is here, in the culturally central, nationally central, and almost mythic stature of the Games, that we see yet another troubling familiarity. What to the tributes is a “hell on earth” becomes uncomfortably reminiscent of the “happiest place on earth.” For the arenas of the Hunger Games bear a striking resemblance to our own version of a world of unreal tourism and plastic play: Disneyland.

Disneyland has long been recognized as an attempt to embody the “essence” of America. Its different components encompass idealized versions of nation—“the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc.” (Baudrillard 12). As Disneyland demonstrates power in terms of cultural memory and history, the Hunger Games emerge with this same function. All knowledge of Panem and its past comes from the Hunger Games. Like Disneyland, the arenas preserve landscapes long forgotten. And, as they preserve history, the Hunger Games are simultaneously some of the only accessible historical recordings and artifacts since the Dark Days. While the Dark Days are evoked as the meaning behind the Games, the Games—the resulting simulation—have surpassed the “real event”: an event so clouded in propaganda that its facts are never quite clear. The Hunger Games, however, are recorded and often rebroadcast for the public. It is not simply that the Hunger Games denote a time in history. The Hunger Games are history.

Baudrillard argues that Disney’s appeal lies in “the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America” that Disneyland offers (*Simulacra* 12). And indeed, Capitol audiences seem to endow the Hunger Games with a similar, almost religious valence, culture essentially worshipping itself (Durkheim). However, Baudrillard takes this idea further: Disneyland is not simply an America on a smaller scale, but rather “a cover for a simulation of the third order” (13). For Baudrillard, “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (13). Thus, the facades of Disneyland do not simply represent an attempt to recreate ideal America. Rather, it is in these plastic landscapes that we find ‘real’ America, for it is only in Disneyland that we allow ourselves to acknowledge constructed reality. It is by losing ourselves in the fantasy of Disney that we are able to deny the hyperreality of our own society. Juxtaposed with the rest of the world,
Disney grounds our denial: for if Disneyland is fake, and we revel in its “fakeness,” then the world outside of Disneyland, we reason, must be “real.”

When brought to bear on Panem, Baudrillard’s critique is horrifying in its simplicity. As the Hunger Games emerge as Baudrillard’s “reality,” these same dangers emerge in the everyday. The Capitol is revealed to be deadly, laced with traps designed by the same Gamemakers who create the arenas. Violence once filtered through television screens is brought intimately home to the very city blocks of those who annually sent children to their deaths. Foucault writes: “is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (228). And, as punishment has become entertainment, we see that nation has become a space of punishment. We should not be surprised that the Capitol city of Panem is the Hunger Games. Panem was an arena—a prison—all along.

As the hyperreal collides with the real, what Capitol audiences viewed as fiction comes to life with a vengeance. For it is not the audiences of the Hunger Games who are punished, but their children. As silver parachutes fall upon the children of the Capitol, the sins of their culture literally rain down upon them. Accepting these gifts, children once again pay the price for adult violence. And, as the parachutes explode, this violence, like the Games themselves, cannot be contained: for Katniss, the Mockingjay, the fiery symbol of rebellion, must watch her little sister “become a human torch” (Collins, Mockingjay 412). Prim is the innocent child, the protected child, the future that Katniss fights for. But with this, we see that those who are protected, those who are spared from Games, war, and first-hand violence are denied a place in the future world. The price of hyperreality is the future: is the death of all children, of all innocents. And indeed, the cycle of child death, perpetuated by a hyperreal culture that used children as its tools, draws to a close with the same violence. For Katniss discovers that the silver parachutes are not controlled by the Capitol, but by the rebels: the “human shield” of children orchestrated by the rebellion, not President Snow. The bombs that consume Prim are dropped in a strategic decision, one final “sacrifice,” aired live on television, designed to turn Capitol citizens against their government. The act that ends the war is one more act of hyperreality—of televised death, of the confusion between real and unreal—bought with the bodies of children.

The ending of The Hunger Games trilogy is ostensibly positive. Retreating to District Twelve, Katniss and Peeta work together to accept their traumas and scars. However, as I have explored throughout this article, “wholeness” is no longer an option: the subject is fragmented, the body is scarred, and the reality of nation and world can never be wholly trusted. Katniss and Peeta have witnessed and been victims to a society that has lost sight of reality, and in doing so, has enabled the death of its children, pushing humanity to the brink of destruction, discovering death traps lurking beneath its feet.
After his mental hijacking, Peeta devises a game—“Real or Not Real” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 317). Peeta plays his game to distinguish between true and implanted memories, questioning “real or not real?” whenever he is in doubt (Collins, *Mockingjay* 317). This game perhaps provides a cue for us all. *The Hunger Games* trilogy has emerged as a critique of us, of modern American culture, forcing us to recognize our complicity as audience. We are the “eyes of the world” that Winthrop envisioned, watching as the utopian dream has failed, has been warped not beyond recognition, but more terrifyingly, distorted yet utterly recognizable (31). Real or Not Real? It is a question we all must ask ourselves, a game we all must play.

_Coda: Don’t You See I’m Burning?_

It’s time for the show. This will last exactly three hours and is required viewing for all of Panem. . . . I realize I’m unprepared for this. I do not want to watch my twenty-two fellow tributes die. I saw enough of them die the first time. . . . The first half-hour or so focuses on the pre-arena events. . . . There’s this sort of upbeat soundtrack playing under it that makes it twice as awful because, of course, almost everyone on screen is dead.

(Collins, *Hunger* 439–40)

*Harry Potter* has decades-long “Potterheads” and *Twilight* its hardcore “Twihards,” so it’s only natural that the vocal *Hunger Games* followers would end up with their own nickname now that the first movie’s release is less than nine months away. But after E! Online’s “The Awful Truth” referred to Katniss devotees as “Jabberjays” yesterday, fansite “Down With the Capitol” launched a campaign to get the fans themselves to decide what they’re called and Lionsgate followed suit on the official Facebook page. Suggestions on Twitter and message-boards ranged from character-specific (“Peetaphiles,” “Katniss-heads”) to the obvious (“Tributes,” “Gamers”).

(“*Hunger Games* fans, what should we call ourselves?”)

*The Hunger Games* emerged one year after Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series concluded. Many have argued that as *Harry Potter* envisions a future based on magic, it suggests that peace and meaning are found in a world that is mainly void of technology (Reynolds 162). *The Hunger Games* trilogy, then, can perhaps be seen as the American response to *Harry Potter*. As *Harry Potter* draws on traditional British structures to create its world, so too does *The Hunger Games* trilogy draw upon specifically American traditions as it envisions a future. But this future could not be farther from the world of *Harry Potter*: the American imagination envisioning a dystopia, where technology rages uncontrollably, where meaning and humanity are questioned. *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* share intriguing parallels, each drawing on
a specific cultural-narrative to envision children “righting” the future, and each story resonating powerfully with its audiences. And, following in the footsteps of Harry Potter, The Hunger Games trilogy is currently being turned into a highly anticipated movie series, the three books broken into four films.

But of course, this is where any connection between Harry Potter and The Hunger Games must end, for the adaptation of The Hunger Games is highly problematic. The troubling boundaries I have explored are taken a step further. Collins has written a book that condemns consumerism, which speaks with horror of a culture that makes spectacle of child death. Yet, she is caught in the very mechanisms she critiques, cowriting the screenplay to dramatize the very images of child death and violence, which so distort Panem. The burning children of The Hunger Games trilogy are to be dreamed once more, the horror of child death to be put on-screen, inserted into the culture of celebrity objectification, which Collins so closely links with a loss of humanity, with an objectification that can only end in the fragmentation of mind, body, and nation.

Before our eyes, the Hunger Games are beginning anew. “Burn with us,” the title of this article, is taken from Katniss’s words to those who oppose the rebellion: “If we burn, you burn with us” (Collins, Mockingjay 118). It is a threat, but also a plea: a plea for the districts to stand united against the barbarism and oppression of the Capitol and its culture. And, as The Hunger Games trilogy critiques and reflects our own society, it can and should be taken quite literally, perhaps even by Suzanne Collins herself. As The Hunger Games burn, as children burn, we must remember that we too are at risk: for, “fire,” as we are continually reminded, “is catching” (Collins, Mockingjay 118).

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