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# The Ambiguity of Panem: Capitalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Suzanne Collins' The Hunger Games Series

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The Ambiguity of Panem: Capitalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Suzanne Collins'  
*The Hunger Games Series*

By

Megan Peters

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
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Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

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## Abstract

An abstract for the thesis of Megan Peters for the Master of Arts in Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota.

Title: The Ambiguity of Panem: Capitalism, Nationalism, and Sexuality in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* Series

The publication of and the critical and public success of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy marks a significant departure from the norms of traditionally-popular young adult literature, particularly in its portrayal of a fiercely active female protagonist. This thesis argues that despite the noticeable progress these novels make in representing a strong female character, *The Hunger Games* series fails to adequately challenge other important aspects of oppression. I conduct a feminist literary analysis of *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, focusing specifically on representations of capitalism and commodification, national and district pride, and sexual objectification and sexual harassment of female characters. Informed by feminist literary theory, this thesis provides a more nuanced analysis of the series and questions the degree to which it advances feminist goals. I demonstrate that, in addition to Katniss' lack of agency, the pro-capitalist and pro-nationalist aspects of *The Hunger Games* series signal a departure from an anti-oppressive, feminist agenda.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Since the release in 2008 of *The Hunger Games*, the dystopian young adult series has become increasingly popular, to the point that it is now something of a cultural phenomenon. Written by Suzanne Collins, who had previously achieved success as the author of the series *The Underland Chronicles*, the *Hunger Games* series has inspired audiences of multiple generations to renew their interest in reading. Indeed, each novel in the series has spent several weeks in the number one spot of the bestsellers list for *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*. The first book in the series, *The Hunger Games*, has spent over two hundred consecutive weeks on the New York Times bestseller list since its publication. Scholastic, the series' publisher, notes that as of July 2012 there are more than fifty million copies of the books in print and digital formats and the series has been translated into fifty-one languages. In addition to incredible sales figures, the series has also earned countless awards, including the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults and various states' Readers' Choice awards.

The popularity of the series also results from the immense success of the Hollywood film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, which was released in 2012 by Lionsgate. The film has grossed approximately \$408 million in ticket sales, for a rank of thirteenth all-time box office sales in the U.S. (Imdb). The film adaptation of *Catching Fire* is presently in production, and *Mockingjay* is already scheduled for a two-part adaptation, for a total of four movies in the franchise. In the film adaptations, the role of Katniss Everdeen is played by Jennifer Lawrence, now a winner of an Academy Award,

Golden Globe, and Screen Actors Guild Award for her role in the 2012 film *Silver Linings Playbook*. Lawrence's reputation and obsessive fan following will undoubtedly boost viewership for the upcoming films in the *Hunger Games* series and will likely increase sales of the novels.

Part of the reason for the massive success of the series is its notably complex themes. Unlike other recent popular literature, such as the *Twilight* series or *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the *Hunger Games* trilogy is acclaimed by both conventional audiences and critics alike. Indeed, many reviewers note the character development, sophisticated motifs, and distinct cultural criticism present in the novels as evidence of the series' value. Furthermore, many critics have identified similarities between the fictional world in the series and our present U.S. society and have latched onto the notion that the series presents an anti-oppressive message. Critics have pointed out allegorical critiques of consumerism and material culture, our reality TV obsession, the U.S. brand of anything-goes capitalism, and overreaching government (Stuttaford; Rosenberg; Roiphe; Smith and Foster; Dusenbery and Martin). Some even go so far as to suggest that Katniss represents the Occupy movement as the face of the 99% (Allan). Many critics eagerly offer praise for the series' cultural criticisms, an understandable tendency given its complexity.

In addition, the interpretations and comments of many readers and critics have earned the series a reputation as being pro-feminist. Indeed, a simple Google search for "The Hunger Games + feminism" yields over 1.1 million results. Many commenters are quick to point out that the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, is a strong female character, a

departure from the usual female characters in popular fiction (Pollitt; Sarkeesian).

Though reasons for labeling the series feminist range from sisterhood to self-sacrifice to girl power, a large portion of critics are impressed by and admire Katniss' strength (Stark; Lewit; Jordan; Blunden). However, in order for the series to truly benefit feminism, it must go beyond simply portraying a fierce female character.

Throughout this thesis I argue that the *Hunger Games* series has been exalted as a feminist, anti-oppressive work despite contradictory literary evidence. The reputation of the series is remarkably positive; few popular critics have illuminated the important ways this series contradicts itself outside of its conflicting messages about violence. This thesis demonstrates the pro-capitalist, pro-nationalist, and non-feminist sentiments in the novels of the *Hunger Games* series to reveal an ambiguous stance on each of these issues. My research adds to the existing conversation on feminist literature by critically analyzing a popular young adult series. By problematizing portrayals of sexualization, nationalism, and commodification, my scholarship fills the gap in existing feminist examinations of the *Hunger Games* series.

Given the popularity of Collins' series and the likelihood that readership will continue to grow as the film adaptations continue to be released in the coming years, this nuanced analysis of the novels is crucial. Because the target audience of this series is adolescents, who are just beginning to negotiate dating and sexuality, the importance of examining how heterosexual relationships and male-female interactions are portrayed cannot be overstated. Indeed, novels (and all cultural productions) both reflect and regulate societal norms, giving them incredible influence over what readers aspire to and

how they view themselves. Thus, a portrayal of coercive sexuality as normal and even desirable has the potential to distort teens' expectations of romantic relationships and acceptance of dynamics of unequal power. Likewise, glamorizing commodification can make readers less inclined to challenge dehumanization and lack of personal autonomy. Though the *Hunger Games* series alone is unlikely to cause any of those possible outcomes, the influence this series has over young readers is immeasurable. Considering the popularity of the novels and the movie adaptation, the necessity of closely examining this series is obvious.

### Important Definitions and Themes

Throughout this analysis I question the degree to which this series benefits feminism. My conceptualization of feminism, as it applies to this analysis, requires female empowerment in the form of choice and consent. Though a female character may fit anywhere on the spectrum of femininity and masculinity, it is important that her behaviors and actions are her choice. An empowered female character need not initiate every interaction, but she does need to consent to them. In this analysis, a strong female character does not require overbearing masculinity—being one of the men—but rather, a sense of activity and self-worth not defined relative to other characters. While I do not consider a character's inaction to be necessarily indicative of passivity, overall lack of autonomy is certainly incompatible with empowerment.

In much of this analysis I consider Katniss an active, strong character. She pushes the plot along, makes choices about her own life, is self-reliant and self-sufficient,



frequently helps and influences others, has complex emotions and desires, and has genuine talents and skills. The story centers on Katniss; it does not merely include her. However, despite these positives, many points in the series reveal Katniss to be not only disempowered, but at times completely lacking autonomy. In addition to the institutionalized powerlessness of all of the district citizens, Katniss also faces additional powerlessness in her personal relationships with others, particularly with Peeta, and in her relationship to the revolution. In short, she consents to neither, but regardless is forced to comply. Throughout this analysis I demonstrate Katniss' lack of agency as indicative of non-feminist sentiment in the *Hunger Games* series.

Beyond my conceptualization of a feminist character, this analysis also questions the degree to which this series benefits feminism. Because feminism is concerned with ending oppression of all kinds—most specifically gender-based oppression, but also racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, and classist oppression—this analysis reflects those ideals. Feminism is against the exploitation of people and resources, which means that feminists are generally critical of capitalism and corporate control. Most importantly, feminism champions equality in the form of egalitarianism and equal access: by acknowledging that inequality is institutionalized in our society, feminism recognizes the necessity of not treating everyone as identical, but rather, compensating for the structural barriers that limit freedoms and opportunities. The style of feminism used in this analysis emphasizes social responsibility as well as personal liberation.

The three themes examined in this thesis are sexualization, commodification, and nationalism. My investigation of sexualization focuses on the ways in which different

characters, Katniss in particular, are given sexualized contexts and forced to engage in romantic or sexual activities as a condition of their survival. My understanding of sexualization is framed by Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts' theory of objectification and by Edwin Schur's conceptualization of sexual coercion. My contention throughout this analysis is that a text benefitting feminism would challenge non-consensual sexualization by portraying it negatively. Frequently in this series, however, the opposite is true; most obviously Katniss' romantic relationship with Peeta is championed as "real" love.

Commodification is conceptualized in this analysis as the objectification of characters and their derivation of value from exchangeability, which is compatible with Karl Marx's definition of commodities. Luce Irigaray and Gayle Rubin expand this concept to explain the normalized exchange of women and bodies (through marriage and other methods) as commodification. Notably, Katniss' role as the Mockingjay is portrayed as a necessity to benefit the greater good. She is valuable insofar as she inspires and motivates the rebels; Katniss is a commodity. By definition, commodification is antithetical to feminist ideals.

I conceive of nationalism as pride for one's district or for Panem above and beyond what is required. This conceptualization blends M. Shamsul Haque's definitions of nationalism and patriotism in order to apply them to *The Hunger Games* rather than to the U.S., as Haque uses them. An example of this nationalism in the series is when Thresh spares Katniss' life in the arena because she had protected and cared for Rue, the female tribute from his district. Such loyalty goes beyond duty to one's district, and

indeed is even against the rules. As discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis, nationalism can often be dangerous such that it functions by obscuring dissenting opinions and favoring national duty. Presumably a feminist, anti-oppressive work would not promote a strong sense of nationalism.

### Summary of *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

The first book in the series, *The Hunger Games*, serves as introduction to the Capitol's oppressive reign and to the main characters. The story takes place in the future in Panem, a new country built on the ruins of North America, which is organized into twelve outlying districts that serve a geographically-protected Capitol. The narration starts on the day of the reaping, a lottery to select from each of the twelve districts one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen. These tributes, as they are called, must represent their home district in a televised fight to the death known as the Hunger Games. Whichever tribute "wins" earns for his or her entire district additional food rations for the next year, as well as money and a new home for the victor's family. The Hunger Games are used as a punishment for the rebellion seventy-four years earlier, in which one of the districts, Thirteen, was obliterated for daring to challenge the Capitol's power. Every year the Hunger Games serve as a reminder of the Capitol's strength and the districts' subservience.

The protagonist of the series is sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen, who lives in Twelve, the district that produces the nation's coal. Her father has died several years earlier, so Katniss breaks the law every day to hunt animals and gather food and

medicinal herbs in the woods in order to support her family. When her sister, Primrose, is selected as tribute in the Hunger Games, Katniss volunteers to take her place. The boy tribute chosen is Peeta Mellark, who once suffered a beating to give bread from his family's bakery to Katniss when her family was literally starving. That act of kindness forged a connection between Peeta and Katniss that both complicates and simplifies Katniss' trip to the Hunger Games arena.

Part of the strategy during the Games is to present Peeta and Katniss as "star-crossed lovers," forcing them to act as a romantic pair to manipulate the audience into sponsoring them, thus giving the District 12 tributes a better chance at survival. The only problem is that while Katniss is putting on a show, Peeta is showing genuine feelings. This sets up the series' love triangle, as it is implied that there might be romantic feelings between Katniss and her handsome friend and hunting partner, Gale. The star-crossed lover act is so popular with the audience that midway through the Games, the rules are changed to allow two winners if they represent the same district. Over the course of the Games, Katniss also allies with Rue, a tiny girl from District 11, and demonstrates her humanity by giving Rue a real funeral when she is killed. At the end of the Games when the rules are reinstated allowing only one winner, Katniss defies the Capitol by attempting a double-suicide with Peeta using nightlock, a poisonous berry, which would give the Capitol no victor and thus undermine the entire premise of the Games. Unfortunately, this act of desperation is perceived as an act of rebellion by both President Snow and many citizens in the districts, which puts Katniss' life in a lot more danger than she could have anticipated.

The second book, *Catching Fire*, demonstrates the growing tensions between the districts and the Capitol and sends Katniss back into the arena again. The narration follows Katniss as she attempts to quiet the discontent in the districts during the Hunger Games Victory Tour, but she only intensifies the unrest. Katniss and Peeta get engaged as a way to prove their undying love for each other (and not for the rebellions), but they inadvertently instigate stricter government control in District 12. When the Quarter Quell, the Seventy Fifth Hunger Games, is announced, Peeta and Katniss find themselves preparing to enter the arena for a second time against other past Hunger Games victors.

Despite their insistence on not having allies, Peeta and Katniss team up with several other victors: Finnick, the sex god from District 4, Johanna, the abrasive young woman from District 7, Beetee, the older technology guru from District 3, and a few others. The alliance works well, but various members sacrifice themselves to keep Peeta safe, which makes Katniss suspicious. She and Peeta plan to separate from the group, since there can only be one winner, but on the night they are planning to do so, Beetee comes up with a strategy to kill the Career team of tributes. The plan is complex and involves using a wire and lightning to electrocute the others. As Katniss and Johanna are stringing the wire down to the beach, things go awry. Eventually Katniss makes her way back up into the jungle to and uses the wire and her bow to blow a hole in the force field surrounding the arena, which results in her, Finnick, and Beetee being rescued from the arena by rebel forces. Peeta and Johanna, however, are captured by the Capitol. The rebels take Katniss and the others back to District 13, which had not actually been obliterated by the Capitol decades ago, and Katniss is reunited with her family and Gale.

District 12 was firebombed by the Capitol after Katniss blew out the arena; as a form of retaliation for Katniss and Peeta's Quarter Quell rebellion, the district was destroyed and the population decimated except for the few people Gale managed to evacuate to the woods.

The final book in the series, *Mockingjay*, details the revolution from the rebel side. Katniss becomes, rather reluctantly, the face of the revolution; as the Mockingjay, it is her job to inspire the populace to join the rebels and fight to overthrow the Capitol. Through a series of military and technological coups, the rebels eventually secure all of the outlying districts and prepare to invade the Capitol. Meanwhile, Peeta, Johanna, and several other past victors are tortured and District 13 is bombed by the Capitol. Eventually, the rebels successfully rescue Peeta and the others, only to find that Peeta's torture has left him so psychologically altered that he is a threat to Katniss' life and must be physically restrained and guarded at all times. Katniss, Gale, and Finnick are part of the troop assigned to invade the Capitol and capture President Snow, a mission they accomplish but at great cost. Several beloved characters die during this final battle, the government transition does not go smoothly, and Katniss lives out the remainder of her life back home in the recovering District 12.

### Upcoming Chapters

The methodology discussion in chapter two explains my rationale for choosing to analyze the *Hunger Games* series and the importance of each of the three themes of inquiry. Additionally, this chapter explains the value of literary analysis as guided by

feminist principles and addresses the limitations of using such a research method. I also acknowledge how my own unique positionality and standpoint influences this thesis project. In chapter three, I contextualize my research in the existing scholarship. My literature review consists of three main sections: literary theory, sexualization, and commodification and nationalism. The literary theory section covers feminist literary criticism, young adult literature, and dystopian literature. The section on sexualization includes feminist theories sexual objectification, sexual coercion, and sexual terrorism. The section on commodification and nationalism covers explanations and criticism of capitalism, feminist conceptualizations of commodification, and a brief examination of gender and nationalism. This review of related literature reinforces the importance of my thesis project.

In my critical literary analysis in chapter four of this thesis, I explain how the *Hunger Games* trilogy endorses several non-feminist principles. Despite challenging important issues like violence and the disposal of lower-class people, this series actually supports a pro-capitalist and pro-nationalist agenda. Moreover, the sexualization and commodification of women goes almost undisputed throughout the series. At best, the series is ambiguous and ambivalent on the issues of commodification, nationalism, and sexualization. The majority of my analysis concentrates on illustrating how the Katniss-Peeta-Gale love triangle is anti-feminist sentiment due to the men's frequent coercive behavior toward Katniss and her lack of consent in either relationship. A significant portion of my analysis extensively examines the ways in which commodification of the victors and Katniss as the Mockingjay is excused and even sanctioned in the series. The

final portion of my analysis considers how connecting District 13 so closely to the United States works to reinforce nationalism. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis project, the feminist, anti-oppressive reputation of the *Hunger Games* series contradicts much of the literary evidence. I offer a more nuanced analysis, acknowledging the ways in which the series both challenges and supports the dominant power structures. Finally, chapter five concludes this thesis with a review of the limitations of my research on the *Hunger Games* series and suggests future research building on this thesis.



## Chapter Two: Methodology

The commercial success enjoyed by authors of young adult literature seems to have grown in the past few years. Most notably, works such as the *Twilight* series and the *Harry Potter* series have enjoyed immense popularity and readership among audiences of all ages, acquiring a devoted base of readers whose teen years have long since passed. Indeed, these novels have been turned into blockbuster Hollywood films, further adding to their popularity and sales. Given the recent growth and financial success of the young adult literature genre, it is necessary to critically analyze the messages and implications of these types of novels and their perceptions by U.S. readers.

A recent young adult series to capture the attention of readers and filmmakers is *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins. Unlike *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*, the novels in *The Hunger Games* series have received a great deal of feminist applause for their progressive representation of complex institutional and individual realities. Of particular feminist interest is the use of an assertive female protagonist and situational social commentary on the dangers of capitalism and nationalism. Organizations like *The Nation*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Think Progress* have all published articles and reviews praising the progressive content of *The Hunger Games* series (Pollitt; Roiphe; Rosenberg; Smith and Foster). A more thorough overview of popular and critical feminist praise can be found in the Introduction chapter of this thesis.

While certainly a departure from traditional storyline and character stock in many popular young adult novels, a closer reading of *The Hunger Games* series reveals a much more complicated and ambivalent representation of gender roles and commodification

than the series' commercial and critical success seems to indicate. My purpose here is not to undermine *The Hunger Games*' notable progression from traditional young adult literature directed at girls; rather, I intend to problematize the popular reading of this series as feminist and anti-oppressive to reveal a deeply ambivalent representation of society.

There are several reasons that this research is important. Although *The Hunger Games* trilogy does illustrate certain feminist ideals, like any cultural production, it is not perfect. Invariably, readers are influenced by the character portrayals and human actions represented in fiction. This makes it necessary to critically analyze what we read, particularly when certain texts are being celebrated and encouraged so strongly. *The Hunger Games* trilogy is accessible to young readers but represents certain ideas that they may not have the tools to deconstruct. Issues like the sexualization of female characters and the inherency of violence are only superficially challenged in these novels. Although strong female characters and evident social criticism are important advancements, there are other aspects of the texts influential to readers' perceptions. For this reason, it is imperative that the novels in *The Hunger Games* series are analyzed for alternative interpretations.

This research uses feminist content analysis to examine the three novels in *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*. To begin, I performed a close reading of each of the three novels, looking specifically for depictions of nationalism, commodification, and female sexualization and sexual terrorism. To do this, I noted each time a character was described in a sexual way

or was described as fearing for his/her safety because of either implied or explicit sexual threats. This coding focused most extensively on the experiences of Katniss Everdeen, but did not exclude the experiences of other characters. Sexualization and sexual terrorism are important because they imply a lack of complicity on the part of the character, much like females in real life do not acquiesce to fearing walking alone or being objectified. That there are unchallenged instances of both in the series indicates a departure from the feminist ideals these novels are perceived to portray.

Identifying isolated incidents of commodification and nationalism was less straightforward. Any character statements or demonstrations of loyalty to the Capitol or Panem and any efforts to stop or stall the revolution were counted as instances of nationalism. For purposes of problematizing nationalism overall, I also included statements and demonstrations of extreme loyalty to one's District under this category. To code for commodification, I noted specific statements and incidents in which characters became part of an actual transaction, as well as instances in which characters had to trade part of their identity or personality in exchange for literal survival. Under this category I also included any statements or descriptions against or for a capitalist system more generally. Problematizing representations of nationalist pride and commodification is important because these are two tools in the workbench of power and control that are often taken-for-granted in our society. Their representation in novels marketed at young adults has a normalizing effect, thus making it more difficult to challenge those ideas in real life.

My analysis of these three categories of incidents was guided by Patricia Lina Leavy's assertion that content analysis can be used to "[study] the varied ways that resistance and feminist perspectives emerge in different representational forms" (230). Using this idea, I demonstrate that although *The Hunger Games* trilogy resists dominant ideologies in several important ways, a deconstructive analysis reveals that other aspects of feminist ideology are "missing, silenced, or absent" (Leavy 228). Because cultural productions, such as novels, are both reflective of and influential to the society in which they were produced, a feminist examination becomes necessary to understanding the messages young readers receive (Leavy 229). Although Collins' novels are widely read as challenging social norms, applying a critical feminist lens undoubtedly complicates that interpretation.

Content analysis is necessarily an unobtrusive process; the texts to be analyzed exist independently, a characteristic that grants a level of authenticity not necessarily afforded by other research methods (Leavy 227). Most other methods of research require that the audience trust the researcher's representation of interview or survey responses, for example; the average reader cannot verify that an interview took place as the researcher claims. With content analysis, however, the audience can examine for themselves the cultural text being analyzed. Due to the controversial nature of Gender and Women's Studies as a discipline, this additional level of authenticity bolsters the validity of my research.

In addition to the social science component of this research, my analysis is heavily informed by feminist literary criticism. Influenced by Angela E. Hubler's

argument in “Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality” that young adult literature must go beyond providing positive role models for girls to include a cognitive map of the social world, my analysis of *The Hunger Games* delves beyond superficial representations of feminist ideals. Indeed, my research aims to complicate general assumptions about what constitutes a critique of capitalism, patriarchy, or nationalism. Also formative in my approach is bell hooks’ article “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” I adopt hooks’ argument that different audiences view texts differently, often with a critical, oppositional response (269-282). Although hooks was discussing black female audiences and Hollywood films, her argument can be applied to *The Hunger Games* novels to highlight the ways in which readers are likely to construct alternative meaning for certain incidents. Although many readers interpret the trilogy as anti-capitalist, for example, alternative readings may imply a more pro-capitalist stance. The idea that there are multiple meanings in a text is a hallmark of deconstructive thought, which also helps to guide my analysis.

Conducting a literary content analysis of *The Hunger Games* series presented some practical and theoretical problems. My choice of texts and my research method act to limit the representative quality of my research. The conclusions I draw are applicable only to *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*, not to the body of young adult literature at large. Further, my use of content analysis, rather than an interactive process such as interviews or surveys, means that the interpretation offered in this thesis as an alternative to the popular perceptions is but one voice out of many. My analysis is informed by multiple feminist theories, but my reading of the novels is only my own.

Although I could have surveyed other feminists who have read the novels to understand their analyses, this is unlikely to have yielded an interpretation with the same depth or richness as the one provided here.

Finally, this work is limited by my own identity as a researcher. *The Hunger Games* series is marketed toward a younger (12-18 years old), primarily female audience, so as a female graduate student, I only partially fit those criteria. I hold a Bachelor's degree in English, with an emphasis in literature, and am working on a Master's degree in Gender and Women's Studies, so my analysis of the novels is heavily grounded in feminist and literary theory. Coming from a working class background, but upwardly mobile through my education, my interpretation of the novels differs from how readers from other backgrounds might interpret the novels, particularly in regards to identification with the protagonist and her actions. As both white and heterosexual, my privilege creates blind spots in my interpretation. Indeed, my focus on sexualization and capitalism, rather than racism, for instance, is indicative of my social position, though I favor an anti-oppressive agenda overall. My analysis of these novels is meant to problematize the popular reading of *The Hunger Games* series as a feminist, anti-capitalist work, instead offering a more nuanced understanding of Collins' novels.

### Chapter Three: Literature Review

The objective of this thesis is to complicate the popular reading of the *Hunger Games* trilogy as pro-feminist by demonstrating that the novels depict ambiguous and contradictory images of capitalism and sexualization. To do this, a review of the literature on three areas of scholarship is necessary: feminist literary theory, capitalism and commodification, and sexual objectification. These three bodies of knowledge will frame my interpretation of the series to accentuate the pro-capitalist and anti-feminist sentiments in the novels. My review of feminist literary theory encompasses a few sub-topics: feminist literary criticism, young adult literature (YAL), and dystopian fiction. This body of knowledge discusses the importance of evaluating texts beyond their portrayals of female characters. This section also evaluates the goals and effectiveness of dystopian fiction and discusses some common themes of young adult literature. The scholarship under the sexual objectification category discusses what objectification theory is and how it affects girls and women. This section also addresses the role of objectification and power imbalances in gender-based violence. The last body of knowledge, capitalism and commodification, ties well with objectification theory. This section addresses how capitalism works to erode social relationships and leads to the commodification of people, specifically women. In this section I will also discuss the role of gender in theorizations of nationalism, which helps to frame my interpretation of capitalism.

### Feminist Literary Theory

My analysis of *The Hunger Games* series posits that the books have received too much attention for the pro-feminist sentiments they contain, which overlooks the serious anti-feminist aspects of the texts. Much of the praise received is for the depiction of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, as a strong, independent, active female character. Although this is certainly an improvement on Bella Swan, the protagonist in Stephenie Meyer's popular young adult series *Twilight*, my analysis does not strive to compare protagonists. The arguments of several feminist literary theorists are presented here to provide context for my choice to move focus beyond character portrayals to analyze other aspects of the novels for pro- and anti-feminist sentiments. In particular, Toril Moi's "Images of Women' Criticism" and Angela E. Hubler's "Beyond the Image: Adolescent Girls, Reading, and Social Reality" helped to frame my analysis.

One of the primary works in conceptualizations of female characters is Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Combining feminism and psychoanalysis in her study of classical Hollywood films, Mulvey asserts that cinema has been unconsciously structured by patriarchy. Among her most influential arguments is the idea that women are simultaneously looked at and displayed as an erotic object for a heterosexual male audience (Mulvey 236). Mulvey ties this concept to scopophilia, pleasure in looking, and to narcissism. She argues that audiences get pleasure from the act of watching or looking at something, using peeping toms as an example of this phenomenon (234). Closely related, audiences also get pleasure from identifying with images on screen. For Mulvey, narcissism and scopophilia work together to form an



audience that identifies with the perspective on screen: that of the male gaze, and thus that of patriarchy.

Mulvey's line of reasoning is often criticized because it does not take into account those who might resist the representations on screen, but rather, assumes that most people will accept those representations instead of challenge them (hooks). In the article "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," bell hooks argues that audiences do not passively accept the cultural assumptions represented in film, but instead may take an oppositional viewpoint. This oppositional gaze, as she calls it, means that audience members may take a critical view of the film, refuse to watch it, or create new meanings for the representations on screen, thus going beyond simply "resisting" (hooks 280). In hooks' view, spectators vary according to their social positions and have agency; they do not simply accept the images or ideology represented.

Hooks is not the only scholar to espouse an understanding that the audience can have complicated and conflicting relationships with a text. Feminist literary theorist Toril Moi, in recognizing the complex ways that people identify with characters, argues for a more comprehensive analysis of literary works. The trend in early feminist literary criticism focuses on analyzing texts for "images of women" – determining if a text depicts strong female characters and positive role models for girls. Moi rejects this trend as insufficient for gaining an understanding of the ideologies in a text. Further, she argues that the demand for strong female characters clashes with the popular demand for authenticity in fiction, since studying "images of women" amounts to "studying false images of women in fiction written by both sexes" (Moi 266). Implicit in Moi's argument

is the necessity of representing and analyzing texts that are not necessarily feminist, a category under which, I would argue, *The Hunger Games* series falls.

Similar to Moi, feminist theorist Angela E. Hubler argues that feminist literary criticism must move beyond its focus on images of women. In addition to positive role models, Hubler argues that girls also need to have an understanding of social context. She advocates for texts that can provide a “cognitive map” (Hubler 92-3) of social reality and institutions so that girls might understand the complex nature of gendered behaviors. Much like hooks, Hubler argues that because audiences (girls in Hubler’s research) do not passively imitate characters, simply replacing stereotyped characters with liberated characters will not overcome women’s subordination. Audiences, in this view, have an active role in constructing meaning and forming a critical interpretation of the texts.

In a content analysis of HBO’s *The Sopranos*, feminist literary scholar Merri Lisa Johnson makes use of ideas from hooks, Hubler, and Moi. In her analysis, Johnson demonstrates that even depictions that seem extremely damaging to women may actually work to critique the dominant ideology. She argues that thoughtful juxtapositions of “good” and “bad,” masculine and feminine, subverts audience expectations by blurring the boundaries between stereotypes (Johnson 273). In this way, a text can both problematize and reproduce stereotypes, calling ideologies into question simply by representing them. Because certain representations may actually depict reality, readers are forced to question why such reality exists. For example, Johnson’s analysis draws attention to the extreme masculine posturing one character uses to obscure the class subjugation he faces. In this way, the audience becomes critical of social reality. My own

analysis of the *Hunger Games* series employs a technique similar to Johnson's: I conduct a subversive reading of the novels that aims to reveal the latent viewpoints represented. While Johnson looked past overt representations of violence and misogyny, I read beyond the surface feminism to reveal the pro-capitalist, oppressive messages in *The Hunger Games*.

Because the *Hunger Games* series can be considered dystopian science fiction, it is necessary to provide some background on this category of literature. Dystopias are the anti-utopia: they present a bleak outlook on the future. Many dystopian novels also contain some sort of science fiction element; in *The Hunger Games*, this might be the "muttations" used by the Capitol, for example. It is important to understand the functions of dystopian science fiction as they, too, frame my analysis of Collins' novels.

Dystopian science fiction is often perceived as a subversive genre (Baccolini; Jones; Roberts). In "Post-Modernism and Feminist Science Fiction," Robin Roberts argues that feminist science fiction often makes use of post-structuralist frameworks by using language as a way to criticize patriarchal society. Using Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as the example, Roberts asserts that control over language and the ability to speak freely amounts to control over one's life (144). In "Breaking Silences in Feminist Dystopias," Libby Falk Jones also uses Atwood to argue that dystopias encourage audiences to speak truth to power and not take our ability to speak for granted. Roberts and Jones both contend that the narratives in feminist science fiction can be used as a warning against complacency within the dominant ideology. Similarly, Raffaella Baccolini argues in "The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction" that science

fiction challenges traditional ideology. She asserts that science fiction already occupies a “potentially subversive” location, so feminists can “reappropriat[e] [...] generic fiction” as an oppositional strategy (Baccolini 519). In her reading, critical and ambiguous texts open space for opposition while pointing us toward change.

Given these characteristics of dystopian science fiction, it is also important to consider the significance of *The Hunger Games* series as young adult literature.

According to Anna Silver, most young adult literature tends to moralize and instruct teens on the proper way to behave (138). Although her analysis focuses on the *Twilight* series, the conclusions Silver draws can be applied to YAL as a genre and on the *Hunger Games* in particular. Silver argues that the ability of fantastic realism to represent an exaggerated version of real life is one of several reasons for its popularity among both teens and adults. While many parts of the *Twilight* novels are indeed anti-feminist, Silver argues that female power is merely conceptualized differently – linked to self-sacrifice and defense of others rather than to overtly masculine characteristics such as aggression. Like many of the feminist literary theorists above, she too argues that critics should not assume passivity on the part of the audience; readers, even young adult readers, actively interpret texts and the ideologies represented.

In the first chapter of *Gender Dilemmas in Science Fiction*, “Desire, Pleasure, and Romance: Post-Feminism and Other Seductions,” cultural theorist Kerry Mallan argues that much young adult literature follows a rite-of-passage quest for the “true self” and “true love” (31). Although Mallan advocates for a post-feminist framework of literary analysis, her attention to romance is useful. As a feminist critic, one of my goals in

analyzing *The Hunger Games* series is to read “against the grain,” which in the case of romantic elements means looking for depictions that reinforce patriarchy and misogyny.

Literature and gender scholar Anne Balay argues that a common theme runs through much young adult literature: girl characters often occupy roles and bodies reserved for boys (5). She argues that through this adoption of masculinity, females actually open and redefine femininity rather than outright rejecting it (Balay 7). In her analysis of several young adult novels that fit this motif, Balay suggests that young adult rules of fantasy require breaking the gender binary. Furthermore, she suggests that femininity takes more effort while masculinity is natural or inevitable, regardless of the character’s sex (17). Although Balay perceives this adoption of masculinity as evidence that girls are given more options for choosing gender, including the ability to make no choice at all, it nonetheless seems that masculinity is privileged over femininity, thus reproducing a gender hierarchy, if not a gender binary.

Though these representations of feminist literary theory vary greatly, some patterns do emerge that help to guide my analysis of *The Hunger Games* series. Overall, theorists believe in an active audience – readers create their own meaning and sometimes perform critical opposition as they traverse the text. Because audiences are not passive, a text must do more than simply present strong female characters in order to be considered feminist. Indeed, for a text to be valuable to feminism, it must represent the complexities of social reality and social institutions, though not necessarily in absolute realism and authenticity. Dystopian fiction in particular plays with binaries and challenges dominant ideology by subverting our expectations. Young adult literature tends to have an

instructive quality and is therefore steeped in ideology. These beliefs, however, may be exaggerated and critiqued explicitly, or they may require critics to read “against the grain” to expose the latent viewpoints. My reading of the *Hunger Games* trilogy is framed by these patterns in feminist literary theory.

### Feminist Theories of Sexual Objectification

Sexually-charged dialogue and actions are frequent in the *Hunger Games* series. Analyzing depictions of sexualization and sexual coercion in the novels becomes necessary when we consider the pro-feminist praise these books have received (see Introduction chapter in this thesis for a discussion). Feminist theories of sexual objectification will frame my evaluation of the series as perpetuating misogyny and traditional male dominance. Feminist theories of sexual coercion and sexual terrorism will inform my discussion of the issue of consent in the novels and my assertion that Katniss lacks agency as a character.

Discussions of sexual objectification theory must begin with Fredrickson and Roberts' psychology article “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks.” Though Fredrickson and Roberts were not the first to explore the ways in which the body conveys and shapes gendered experiences, they were the first to propose objectification theory, which posits that “the common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (174). They argue that objectification functions to socialize

females to “treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated” (Fredrickson and Roberts 177). Objectification takes the form of the gaze, which is enacted through various social encounters and media representations. The idea of being constantly on display leads girls and women to constantly monitor their bodies, even interfering with their thoughts and actions, which serves to inhibit their ability to enjoy life freely. In addition to constant interruptions, Fredrickson and Roberts argue, objectification plays a key role in the perpetuation of sexual violence and leads to serious psychological effects.

Lina Papadacki, a philosopher, builds on the work of several theorists in redefining objectification. Arguing that Nussbaum’s conceptualization of objectification is overly broad and that the definition of objectification espoused by Kant, MacKinnon, and Dworkin is too narrow, she offers a new definition:

Objectification is seeing and/or treating a person as an object (seeing and/or treating them in one or more of these seven ways: as an instrument, inert, fungible, violable, owned, denied autonomy, denied subjectivity), in such a way that denies this person’s humanity. A person’s humanity is denied when it is ignored/not properly acknowledged and/or when it is in some way harmed. (Papadacki 32)

Further, she contends that objectification can be intentional or unintentional and that unintentional objectification occurs most often. Although I do not disagree that many people are unaware that their behavior is objectifying, to label it “unintentional” seems a diffusion of responsibility. Such a distinction is necessary, according to Papadacki, because we need to judge the overall context of a relationship to determine whether a

person's humanity is harmed or merely "not fully acknowledged" (33). This conceptualization also allows for the possibility of women objectifying men, though this seems unreasonable by many counts when one considers the social imbalance of power that subjugates women to men.

Not all scholars are entirely satisfied with sexual objectification theory, however. Egan and Hawkes, sociology and gender scholars, argue that sexualization is framed as an "enduring social problem" and as the only way to show concern for girls' futures (292). As a result, they contend, sexualization is used to explain everything we find distasteful as a society, overlooking the control of corporations and media and the historical variations that drive certain behaviors. They also argue that anger over sexualization is more about controlling female sexuality than it is about challenging "corporate pedophilia" since the same worries about sexualization seem not to be a problem for boys (Egan and Hawkes 302). In addition, like many other theorists, Egan and Hawkes do not see children as passive consumers, but instead acknowledge children's ability to subvert producers' intentions by using products for different purposes.

Often discussions of sexualization are conflated with issues of female sexuality, as demonstrated by Egan and Hawkes. In "Feminist Ideals for a Healthy Female Adolescent Sexuality: A Critique," Sharon Lamb, a gender psychologist, explains the dangers of even well-meaning reactionary thinking about objectification. Lamb argues that the version of teen sexuality advocated by feminists, based on desire, subjectivity, and pleasure, is a response to objectification, abuse and victimization, and stereotypes of



female passivity (294-299). This idealized sexuality is problematic for several reasons, most importantly because it sets unrealistic goals and can actually reinforce the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Instead, Lamb argues for an adolescent sexuality based on mutuality. This last point is especially relevant to the *Hunger Games* series since very little of Katniss and Peeta's romantic relationship, particularly in the first two novels, is mutual.

In connection to Lamb's discussion of female sexuality, I use Susan Bordo's "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" to frame my evaluation of Katniss' agency throughout the series. In this article, Bordo, a cultural theorist, argues that because the body is a text of culture, it is also a form of social control. The modern preoccupation with female appearance works as backlash against progress toward gender equality, according to Bordo (461). One way for women to maintain control is by using certain pathologies, such as anorexia, as a form of protest. These acts feel liberating for the woman practicing them, but may actually reinforce patriarchal ideology; they can both subvert and support ideology simultaneously. Using the example of anorexia, refusing to eat may feel like a challenge to the system, but not eating results in a frail, passive woman, in other words: exactly the image of stereotypical femininity. Bordo's argument contextualizes my reading of Katniss as a depiction of, rather than a challenge to, dominant patriarchal ideology.

Moving beyond representations of the body as sexually objectified, I turn now to a discussion of the interrelated issues of sexual coercion and sexual terrorism. Sexual coercion "exists whenever an individual feels pressured into undesired sexual activity"

(Schur 87). According to sociologist Edwin Schur, sexual coercion is systemic: it is closely related to normal male-female interactions (88). There are several reasons for this normalization of coercion in U.S. life: depersonalization and sexual indifference, devaluation and objectification of women, socioeconomic inequality, and cultural propensity toward violence (Schur 95). When coercive sexuality becomes the norm, as it has in US society, women especially become stripped of agency. This conceptualization of sexuality frames my interpretation of interactions between Katniss and other characters in the *Hunger Games* series, particularly her relationship with Peeta.

Closely tied to sexual coercion is the concept of sexual terrorism. Coined by Carole J. Sheffield, sexual terrorism is the “system by which males frighten and, by frightening, control and dominate females” (111). Although men may also feel fear, women’s lives are actually controlled by the reality of sexual violence and the terror of such a reality. Of the three categories of behaviors that constitute sexual terrorism – nonviolent intimidation, threats of violence, and overt sexual violence – Sheffield argues that many acts of sexual terrorism are common and therefore trivialized, which helps to perpetuate fear. This can be seen as contributing to rape culture, which is a normalization of sexual violence against women. Sheffield outlines five components of sexual terrorism that explain its similarities to other forms of terrorism: ideology, propaganda, indiscriminate violence, voluntary compliance, and society’s perception of the terrorist and the terrorized (113-4). She also elaborates on the social factors that perpetuate sexual terrorism, which includes victim blaming and not taking sexual violence seriously, arguing that “violence against women is power expressed sexually” (Sheffield 128). This

concept of sexual terrorism is useful in evaluating the *Hunger Games* world to determine the extent to which Panem and district society is representative of patriarchy in this way, or if Collins challenges such norms. Whether or not female characters feel afraid of male characters in particular will be especially illuminating for this discussion.

Although discussions of sexuality and sexualization are complex and multifaceted, as the above authors demonstrate, they are important conversations nonetheless. Considering the role of romance and a “love triangle” in the narrative of the *Hunger Games* series, it is necessary to address issues of consent, coercion, sexual objectification, sexual harassment, and fear of potential violence. Even more importantly, since these novels are directed at adolescents, it is imperative to consider the extent to which Collins glorifies coerced sexuality. While I hesitate to suggest that Collins herself approves of coercion, the narrative itself glosses over Katniss’ consent. A large portion of my analysis addresses this very problem.

#### Conceptualizations of Capitalism, Commodification, and Nationalism

Very closely related to sexual objectification is commodification and capitalism. *The Hunger Games* has often been interpreted as a critique of capitalism and the dangers of the concentration of power and wealth into the hands of a privileged few. However, a subversive reading of the novels suggests that, at best, the text is neutral on the issue of capitalism, taking no strong position either way. This section will provide a contextual overview of capitalism using Marx and Engels and then turn to a discussion of feminist theories of commodification and capitalism. Because of the intricate ties between nation-

state and economy, this section will also briefly address the relationship between gender and nationalism.

In “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” Karl Marx explains one of the basic tenets of capitalism: the production of commodities. Marx describes the process of commodification as one of alienation. Workers become alienated from the products of their labor as goods acquire value from exchange rather than personal use. According to Marx, what is produced for oneself is not a commodity; instead, products have value only because the outside force of the marketplace says so. In addition, Marx argues, the value of a commodity is related only to its exchange value, not to the labor that produced it, thus the commodity is separated from the site of production and the producer itself. Friedrich Engels, in “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State,” describes the transition from subsistence living to modern capitalism. In the section most relevant to this thesis project, “The Origin of the State,” Engels argues that exploitation is a direct result of commodification and that the only way to be rid of such social ills is to move beyond private property. This concept is important to *The Hunger Games* as it organizes the entirety of Panem’s economy and creates the realities of district life.

Moving toward a gendered understanding of commodification, I focus now on the arguments of Irigaray, Rubin, and Hartmann to contextualize my view of capitalism in the *Hunger Games* series. In “This Sex Which is Not One,” Luce Irigaray theorizes an alternative sexuality centering on female pleasure. In this argument, she posits that women have traditionally been used as a commodity exchanged between men, deriving

their value as sexual commerce rather than as human beings. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin makes a similar argument in “The Traffic in Women,” asserting that women are exchanged as commodities through marriage and other arrangements, which limits women’s full rights to self (235). Rubin argues that the sexual division of labor functions to reinforce heterosexuality, but that sexism is not necessarily a by-product of capitalism. Likewise, in “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” economist Heidi I. Hartmann maintains that patriarchy and capitalism actually have different goals: capitalism would have women working in the wage labor market, whereas patriarchy would have women working within the home for the benefit individual men (303). Indeed, Hartmann argues that patriarchy has influenced capitalism such that working women become economically dependent on men, which, as Rubin contends, reinforces heterosexuality. This conceptualization of bodies for exchange provides some insight into the essence of the Hunger Games themselves.

Applying ideas of female commodification to popular culture, Ellen Riordan questions whether feminist messages can be authentically incorporated into the mainstream marketplace. Riordan argues in “Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism,” that “empowerment” has been co-opted into mainstream popular culture, but this “commodification of empowerment” contributes to dominant ideology without disrupting existing power relations (281-2). Asserting that the term “empowerment” connotes individual entitlement while the term “agency” connotes a sense of collective social justice, the use of “empowerment” in pop culture dialogue actually works to disempower females. Riordan claims that the use of phrases

like “girl power” dilutes feminist messages for capitalist gain. Despite potentially good intentions, images of “empowered” females like the Spice Girls and Buffy the Vampire Slayer actually function to reinforce the notion that the only way for girls to achieve power is through their looks and sexuality. Riordan refers to this as “commodified feminism” (290). This argument is extremely valuable to my analysis of the *Hunger Games* series. On the surface, the novels appear pro-feminist, but when we consider the money-making potential of young adult literature and the public desire for “strong” female characters, we can read the series as a capitalist endeavor that commodifies empowerment for personal gain. (Collins has profited significantly as the author of this series).

A brief overview of gender and nationalism is useful here considering the organization of Panem into thirteen districts with one omnipotent Capitol. Given the interrelationship of government structure and economic system, nationalism plays a key role in silencing dissent. The primary text I use to inform this discussion is *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition*, a compilation of essays about gendered nationalism in various countries. The two essays most applicable to the discussion here are “Gender and Nation” by Nira Yuval-Davis and “Back to the Future: Gender and Nationalism in Post-Socialist Societies” by Tanja Renner and Mirjana Ule. I also use M. Shamsul Haque’s article “Patriotism versus Imperialism” to contextualize the United States in this discussion.

Yuval-Davis argues that women are hidden in most “theorizations of nationalist phenomena” because of the historical split between the public and private spheres that

rejected women from public discussions (23-4). Furthermore, she believes that the myth of a “common destiny” is used to justify nationalist projects (Yuval-Davis 25). Using the former Soviet bloc as their frame of reference, Rener and Ule argue that images of “nation” and “woman” are invoked to constitute the idea of “community”; for example the idea of nation as “one big family” or as the “motherland” (121). Moreover, according to Rener and Ule, nationalist propaganda demands a return to traditional values in order to strengthen the nation-state. Women internalize these ideological demands and thus enforce national pride. In this view, individuals are considered “free” only if their actions align with nationally-defined roles (Rener and Ule 123). I am using this composite conceptualization of nationalism to frame my analysis of nationalist agendas in *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

M. Shamsul Haque, a political scientist, evaluates the United States’ actions after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to argue that countries use patriotism to legitimate imperialist endeavors. In “Patriotism versus Imperialism,” patriotism is defined as “one’s feeling for his or her community, devotion to the nation, or allegiance to the state” while nationalism is considered the prioritizing of “collective national interest over fragmented individual or group interests” (Haque 451). Haque asserts that patriotism works by silencing critical or dissenting voices, thereby ignoring issues of consensus, legitimacy, and public opinion to enforce a “new imperialism” (453). Applied to my analysis of the *Hunger Games* series, Haque’s argument helps to explain how the Capitol is able to control and manipulate the district populations.

The arguments put forth by the theorists in this section embody the current feminist conceptualization of commodification. As discussed, in the pursuit of individual profit, capitalism exploits workers. Taking a gendered lens, capitalism commodifies women and feminist issues for financial gain. Although the *Hunger Games* series does not explicitly address a gender division, the exchange of bodies for the possibility of profit is a central theme of the novels. Moreover, the *Hunger Games* series has been interpreted by many as a critique of capitalism, but given the political and economic structure of Panem, a more critical reading becomes necessary. The discussion of scholarship on capitalism and commodification will contextualize my analysis of these phenomena in the series.

### Conclusion

My analysis of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy is grounded in feminist literary theory and in feminist theorizations of commodification and sexual objectification. These bodies of knowledge provide context for my argument that the *Hunger Games* is not the feminist, anti-oppressive series that many popular critics have claimed it to be. Indeed, the above theories are supportive of my research objective and indicate the need for further examination of cultural productions.



#### Chapter Four: Analysis and Discussion

Though the *Hunger Games* series is written for young adults, its themes are notably multiple, diverse, and complex. The plot of the series follows two main story lines: the political revolution of Panem and the romantic relationship between Katniss, the protagonist, and her two possible love interests, Gale and Peeta. The first book, *The Hunger Games*, sets up Katniss and Peeta's romance as a strategy for surviving the Hunger Games and details the harsh realities of being a citizen of Panem. *Catching Fire* sends Katniss and Peeta back into the Hunger Games for a second time. *Mockingjay* centers on the districts' revolution against the Capitol and Katniss' final decision between her two admirers. Despite the multitude of issues presented in the series, the relationship between Katniss and Peeta is arguably the driving force behind the novels and is a primary cause for their consumer success.

In this thesis I argue that the feminist label has been applied to this series too soon. That is, despite ambiguous and sometimes contradictory literary evidence, the *Hunger Games* series is considered by many to be an anti-oppressive work; this thesis offers a more nuanced analysis of the series. This analysis focuses on three main themes: sexualization, commodification, and nationalism. Present in discussions of each of these throughout the series is the question of consent; to what extent is Katniss complicit in her sexualization or her role as a political player? Much of my analysis focuses on coercion and choice, both of which are absolutely essential to most theorizations of feminism, particularly as they relate to women's bodies, sexuality, and work. In addition, I also focus on the ambiguous and conflicting messages about commodification and nationalism

present in the series, challenging the assumption that these novels reflect a pro-feminist agenda. Indeed, though there are numerous examples of anti-oppressive social commentary, there are also multiple instances in which sexualization is normalized, commodification is beneficial, and nationalism is desirable. Taken together, the tone of the series is one of ambiguity and equivocation.

### **Sexuality and Sexualization**

This portion of my thesis demonstrates the non-feminist aspects of Katniss' sexualized character. Though certainly one's control over his or her own sexuality and sexual expression is a feminist notion, I argue that Katniss never truly exercises control over her body or her sexual activity (or lack thereof). Instead, outside forces and characters dictate Katniss' sexual choices and her portrayal as a sexualized character despite her personal resistance toward such behaviors. This is visible in the body modification she undergoes multiple times; the number of times Katniss, and other characters to a lesser degree, are described as "naked"; the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale; and the sexual exploitation of victors in the Capitol and of the poorest citizens in the districts. While several of these episodes in the series may serve to critique such sexualization, I question whether this criticism is useful in supporting feminist goals given that this sexualization is often glamorized.

### The Peeta-Katniss-Gale Love Triangle

One of the main areas of sexual content in the novels is the relationship between Katniss and Peeta. Given that the romance angle is part of what makes these books so popular, this relationship requires a detailed investigation. Because the *Hunger Games* series is written for a young audience just beginning to navigate relationships and male-female interaction, a critical examination of Collins' portrayal of romance is required. Furthermore, because Katniss is such a strong female character in other aspects of the novels, the role she plays in romantic relationships will be especially influential to readers. Even the fact that the novels utilize a first-person narration from Katniss' perspective gives weight to her action and inaction; readers more easily identify with her motivations and opinions, thus reinforcing that how Katniss behaves or how others behave toward her is the "right" way. This part of my analysis examines extensively Katniss and Peeta's relationship, but also addresses Gale's role in the love triangle, to reveal the feminist and non-feminist aspects of this portrayal of love and romance.

Though Peeta and Katniss had not been friends prior to being "reaped" in the seventy-fourth Hunger Games, they share a unique history: at age eleven, Peeta, earning a beating from his mother, purposely burns some loaves of bread at his parents' bakery so that he can give them to Katniss, who had been scavenging for food in the alley behind the towns' shops. This was shortly after Katniss' father died in a mine explosion and the family was literally starving to death, so even such a small gift carried enormous weight (*Hunger Games* 28-33). Indeed, throughout much of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss talks about her relationship with Peeta in terms of "owing" him for her survival five years prior

(32, 137, 206, 293). Thus, when the strategy from the first night of the Games is to present the tributes from District 12 as partners rather than adversaries, it lays the foundation for the unequal and non-consensual nature of Katniss' relationship with Peeta.

During the pre-Games interviews in the Capitol, Peeta declares his love for Katniss in front of both the studio and national audiences, as the Hunger Games are mandatory viewing. Katniss was not informed of this public announcement ahead of time, nor did she know that Peeta had a romantic interest in her, so she is reasonably upset (*Hunger Games* 130-135). When she expresses anger over Peeta's announcement, claiming that he made her look "weak" and like "a fool," her concerns are not taken seriously: "He made you look desirable! And let's face it, you can use all the help you can get in that department" (135). Because it is Katniss' mentor, Haymitch and stylist, Cinna encouraging her to be grateful for the advantage she gets via desirability, she is compelled to accept her sexualization. "[A] subtle coercion," according to sociologist Edwin Schur, "exists whenever an individual feels pressured into undesired sexual activity" (87). If Katniss had refused her romantic pairing with Peeta, she would be neither as likeable nor as protected, and therefore much more likely to die in the arena. This exchange of sexuality for life—literally—is indicative of non-consent and even exploitation. It is worth noting, too, that Katniss gains sponsors, and thus a better chance of survival, because of sexual and romantic "desirability" rather than intelligence, craftiness, or pure deadliness as tributes from other districts do.

As Katniss is forced to maintain the illusion of a romance with Peeta throughout the Hunger Games, or risk exposing that their "love" is actually strategic, she must

continually act in ways that make her uncomfortable. After the announcement that two victors may be crowned if they come from the same district, Katniss tracks down the injured Peeta to reunite as a team. Though she chooses to find Peeta, as opposed to waiting for him to find her or not pairing with him at all, she knows that much of the audience, including herself if she were watching, would “loathe any tribute who didn’t immediately ally with their district partner” (*Hunger Games* 247). She does not have a choice but to team up with Peeta if she wishes to leave the arena and not become an outcast in District 12. This sacrifice for self-preservation is valiant, but not necessarily ideal in a relationship between equals.

Once she finds Peeta, the pair is most successful when Katniss sufficiently fills her “star-crossed lovers” role. Because Katniss finds Peeta severely wounded and caked in mud and earth camouflage, she must help clean the gash in his thigh and wash his clothes. Peeta uses this opportunity to tell Katniss, “we’re madly in love, so it’s all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it” (*Hunger Games* 253). Though Peeta is clearly joking with Katniss in this instance, it serves as a clear reminder that Katniss must still present herself as one half of the “star-crossed lovers” if she wants support from sponsors. This entire bathing scene is sexualized, from Peeta telling Katniss that he doesn’t care if she sees him naked despite her clear discomfort with the idea, to his multiple requests for a kiss (253-258). Although Katniss does not act on any of Peeta’s requests right then, on some level they both know that eventually their relationship will have to become more physical to maintain the interest and empathy of audience and sponsors. In this way, we see that Katniss’s sexual “activity” with Peeta is coerced. This is not to say that all sexual

contact in their relationship is problematic, but rather, to point out that a significant portion of Katniss's seemingly romantic behavior in the arena is achieved by pressure, not simply sexual desire (though that, too, is present at certain points). That distinction is important to note in trying to understand the dynamics in their relationship.

This coercion is clearly evident in the scene in which Peeta and Katniss are gifted a cup of broth from wealthy sponsors. In a fever-induced conversation, Katniss "impulsively" kisses Peeta to stop his talking about his own probable death (*Hunger Games* 260). Though this is the first time Katniss has kissed a boy, it does not register as a romantic act for her; instead, she notes that Peeta's lips are unnaturally hot from his fever and that this kiss is long overdue in the eyes of the audience. As reinforcement for positive behavior from Haymitch's perspective, the tributes receive a bowl of hot broth immediately following the kiss; as Katniss notes, the message could not be clearer: "[o]ne kiss equals one pot of broth" (261). If they want to survive, they must appear to be in love. It is the spectacle of the kiss that is problematic; the fact that it was solely for audience enjoyment, rather than personal enjoyment, indicates a subtle coercion. Moreover, because Katniss' reaction to the kiss is framed as one of concern over Peeta's well-being rather than awkwardness at being on camera, the fact that children's sexuality is being exploited for an adult audience is minimized.

Because this dynamic of coerced affection continues for the remainder of their time in the Games, the boundary between the relationship for the cameras and the genuine emotional connection between Peeta and Katniss is often lost or blurred. After Katniss goes to the Cornucopia against Peeta's wishes to get the medicine he badly

needs, the two have an emotional conversation about their feelings. When Katniss realizes that Peeta is actually in love with her, and not simply pretending to be, she tries to keep up the act in the hopes that sponsors will send more gifts: “I’m startled by his intensity but recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up” (*Hunger Games* 297). Halfway through her pronouncement, however, she has an epiphany: “And while I was talking, the idea of actually losing Peeta hit me again and I realized how much I don’t want him to die. And it’s not about sponsors. And it’s not about what will happen back home. And it’s not just that I don’t want to be alone. It’s him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread” (297). If this intermingling of real and pretend feelings is confusing for Katniss, it is doubly so for readers, who may interpret Katniss’ realization as proof that Peeta and Haymitch “know better” than Katniss what she wants or needs. Katniss’s present recognition of desire seems to excuse previous coercion as being something that Katniss actually enjoyed.

After this realization, Katniss stops short of declaring her love but realizes that Haymitch is “probably cursing [her] out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment” (298). Peeta, however, “catches it” and moves in to kiss her, which causes Katniss evaluate her feelings: “This is the first kiss that we’re both fully aware of. [...] This is the first kiss where I actually feel a stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another” (298). Though she wants to be more physical with Peeta, her head is bleeding so he tells her to “lie down” because “it’s bedtime anyway” (298). Peeta insists that Katniss sleep in the sleeping bag with him, putting one arm around her and having her use his other arm as a pillow.

Katniss notes that since her father died, “no one else’s arms have made [her] feel this safe” (299). This alternating between Katniss acting on her desires and being compelled to act according to Peeta’s wishes demonstrates the subtle complexity inherent in any relationship.

Moreover, this scene serves to legitimize coerced behavior by presenting Katniss’ prior actions (like kissing) as something she wanted “deep down,” but did not want to admit. This idea that women, particularly young women, do not know what they really want and that simply engaging in physical relations will clarify their desires is representative of both misogyny and rape culture. Because this scene juxtaposes coerced declarations of love with genuine feelings, readers are likely to see Katniss as having acted on her desire all along, despite clearly being surprised by how much she cares about Peeta. This serves to excuse pressuring Katniss into the relationship in the first place. Because Katniss feels some level of sexual desire at certain points in her activity with Peeta, this may seem to some readers like justification for coercion; if one person has unrequited romantic feelings for another person, they simply need to “be persistent,” “keep fighting for love,” and “never give up.” Though Collins may have intended the relationship as a critique (of our culture’s heteronormativity, for example), it is easy for audiences to get caught up in the love story and overlook any underlying symbolic criticism that may be present.

Throughout the series, the non-consensual nature of Katniss and Peeta’s relationship is constantly reinforced. After Katniss defies the Capitol by threatening to use nightlock to leave them without a victor, Haymitch warns her that she must keep up



the star-crossed lovers act if she wants to keep herself and her family safe: “Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren’t responsible for your actions” (*Hunger Games* 357). When Katniss is preparing to go on the Victory Tour, President Snow tells her that he knows she was merely pretending to be in love, but that to quiet the rumblings of discontent in the districts she must continue to present herself as crazy-in-love with Peeta:

“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.

“Only you’ll have to do even better if the uprisings are to be averted,” he says. [...]

“I know. I will. I’ll convince everyone in the districts that I wasn’t defying the Capitol, that I was crazy in love,” I say. (*Catching Fire* 28-29)

This conversation demonstrates that Peeta and Katniss’ relationship is almost entirely controlled by external forces; Katniss only agrees to the continued romantic pairing on the threat of death to her loved ones. When Katniss shares President Snow’s threat with Haymitch, he explains to her that the in-love act is not just for this Victory Tour, but forever, since Peeta and Katniss will be mentors to future District 12 tributes and their love story will be continually rebroadcast during the Games: “you’ll never ever be able to do anything but live happily ever after with that boy” (*Catching Fire* 44). As further encouragement that this is the way it has to be, he adds, “You could do a lot worse, you know” (45). Although Katniss understands that everything Haymitch has told her is true,

she still laments the loss of one of the “few freedoms” of District 12—“the right to marry who we want or not marry at all” (45). Though Katniss certainly cares about Peeta, from this perspective, the relationship is far from consensual.

The problem with this arrangement is not that Katniss and Peeta are forced into a relationship, since Collins clearly portrays this as undesirable. Rather, the problem is that the nonconsensual aspects of the relationship are incorporated with the consensual aspects to create a feeling of “real love” at the base of it all. It appears that, because Katniss really does care about Peeta and because Peeta truly loves Katniss, it is “not so bad” that their relationship is coerced. Because at some level Katniss loves Peeta, their arranged relationship seems like “the right thing to do”; other people know better than Katniss what she wants, needs, and desires. This line of reasoning is steeped in misogyny, disempowers women, and neutralizes women’s agency. With other characters being cast as knowing “what’s best” for Katniss, it serves to excuse their control over her. Without the right to choose for herself whether to engage in a romantic relationship regardless of personal desires, Katniss lacks authority over her body and her life. It is this aspect of Katniss’ sexuality that is particularly non-feminist.

The problematic aspects of Katniss and Peeta’s relationship go beyond issues of consent and coercion to include more overt sexualization. Up until this point, my analysis has focused on the lack of choice Katniss has had in her romantic relationship with Peeta. I now turn my attention to the ways in which Katniss is sexualized by Peeta (and others) as evidence of a “real” relationship and explain how this reinforces traditional gender

roles. At various points throughout the series, Katniss' sexualization is presented as normal and even desirable within the context of romantic love.

At the end of *The Hunger Games*, after Katniss and Peeta emerge from the arena as victors, there is an extensive post-Games interview process in which Katniss must pretend to be deliriously in love with Peeta to avoid being killed for rebelling against the Capitol. The primary way Katniss displays her "love" is through excessive physical affection (which speaks volumes about what our society expects love to look like): "I sit so close to Peeta that I'm practically on his lap, but one look from Haymitch tells me it isn't enough. Kicking off my sandals, I tuck my feet to the side and lean my head against Peeta's shoulder. His arm goes around me automatically [...]" (361). Although she technically initiates this physical contact, it is clear that Katniss feels uncomfortable and unnatural being that affectionate with Peeta in front of an audience. This behavior is necessary, however, if she wants to be perceived sympathetically by the audience. Indeed, if Katniss had refused the culturally-approved sexual behaviors, it would be much more likely that President Snow would harm her; it is Katniss's sexual objectification that makes her a valuable political pawn, thus saving her life.

Understandably, both Katniss and Peeta suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after their horrific ordeal during the Hunger Games. On the train during the Victory Tour, Katniss and Peeta get into the habit of sleeping together as a way to survive the nightmares that sleep regularly brings: "We manage the darkness as we did in the arena, wrapped in each other's arms, guarding against dangers that can descend at any moment" (*Catching Fire* 72). Though the *only* thing they do is sleep, others on the train quickly get

the impression that some amount of sexual activity is occurring. Effie, Katniss and Peeta's escort, approaches only Katniss about their sleeping arrangement, suggesting that the two should be more discreet. This expectation that the woman must exercise more control over sexuality within the relationship is representative of current gender roles in society. As Deborah L. Tolman suggests, adolescent girls are culturally scripted to "keep a lid on the sexual desire of boys" without recognizing their own desire (324-326, 333-334). Though Katniss' behaviors are assumed sexual by other people, it is still her responsibility to quiet any gossiping or misunderstandings.

In an effort to prove the legitimacy of the relationship she has been coerced into, Katniss suggests that Peeta publicly propose. Though she has made it clear to both Haymitch and Peeta that marriage is not something she wants, Katniss believes the proposal will help convince any final non-believers that her love with Peeta is real and that the marriage will make Peeta happy. Considering the traditions associated with marriage and particularly the wedding night, it is difficult to see the proposal as anything but sexualization. Though Katniss and Peeta are only seventeen and thus not yet consenting adults, their wedding is not just accepted, it is celebrated. Indeed, the wedding turns into an extravagant Capitol gala, compounding Katniss' sexual objectification as the audience gets to choose her dress and President Snow himself makes all of the arrangements for the celebration (*Catching Fire* 76, 133, 166, 170). Katniss is neither excited nor interested in the whole production that has become her love life, but she does not protest it, either. Because Katniss is an otherwise strong character, this inaction

effectively reinforces stereotypical gender expectations; it seems she would be more resistant if there was something truly wrong with her situation.

A scene reminiscent of Peeta's original public declaration of love plays out in the tribute interviews in the Quarter Quell, the seventy-fifth Hunger Games into which both Katniss and Peeta are reaped. Each of the tributes are interviewed about their feelings and strategy for going into the arena again, as all of the tributes are previous Hunger Games victors, and as the night wears on, the tributes increasingly appeal to the audience and President Snow to reconsider the rules for the Quarter Quell. In his interview, Peeta informs the audience that not only were he and Katniss already married in a small, private wedding ceremony back in District 12, but also that Katniss is pregnant with their child (*Catching Fire* 255-256). Of course, neither confession is true; Peeta's intention was to infuriate the Capitol citizens and urge their cries of "barbarism and cruelty" (256). Much like with the original love declaration, Katniss was neither informed of nor consented to this announcement. Moreover, unlike with a simple romantic crush, this disclosure is abundantly sexualized—marriage implies sexual activity, but pregnancy absolutely necessitates it. In this scene, Peeta's announcement is solely for the audience rather than being an honest progression of a loving relationship; his declaration of sexual prowess reduces Katniss to a sexual object.

This scene is troubling for several reasons. First, of course, Katniss is not a consenting party. Not only did she not have sex, she certainly did not authorize Peeta (or anyone else) to discuss the intimate details of their relationship. This is a huge violation of Katniss' privacy and personal autonomy. Second, because Peeta was trying to prove a

point to the Capitol, and was effective at doing so, it appears as though the ends justify the means. Peeta succeeded in forcing the Capitol to consider the injustice inherent in the Games, if even for a minute, which works to excuse his “by any means necessary” approach. Finally, this scene is troubling because at the end of it, when Peeta asks if he needs to apologize for anything, Katniss replies, “Nothing” (*Catching Fire* 258).

Furthermore, the event registers positively in her mind: “It was a big leap to take without my okay, but I’m just as glad I didn’t know, didn’t have time to second-guess him, to let any guilt over Gale detract from how I really feel about what Peeta did. Which is empowered” (258). While it is, of course, wonderful for a female character to feel empowered in her sexuality, it is problematic when that sexuality is coercive. Though we cannot expect any literary work to be a perfect representation of feminist ideals, we can be critical of its contradictions. When an admirable, independent female character reacts positively to non-consensual sexual objectification, it can reasonably be interpreted as a non-feminist point in the text.

A notable scene in which Katniss actually controls her sexuality occurs in *Catching Fire*. While in the arena during the Quarter Quell, Peeta confesses to Katniss that he has been trying to keep her alive ever since the first reaping, and because only one tribute can be the champion, he wants it to be her. As he explains why she needs to be the one to leave the arena, Katniss realizes that she is the “one person [who] will be damaged beyond repair if Peeta dies” (352). Unlike in any other scene, however, neither Katniss nor Peeta is pretending for the cameras—their conversation and actions express genuine

feelings. Katniss seizes the opportunity kiss Peeta and this becomes the second time she feels genuine sexual desire:

I feel that thing again. The thing I only felt once before. [...] [T]here was only one kiss that made me feel something stir deep inside. Only one that made me want more. [...] This time, there is nothing to interrupt us. And after a few attempts, Peeta gives up on talking. The sensation inside me grows warmer and spreads out from my chest, down through my body, out along my arms and legs, to the tips of my being. Instead of satisfying me, the kisses have the opposite effect, of making my need greater. (352-353)

Unsurprisingly, when Katniss is allowed to say, feel, and do what she chooses, she actually enjoys herself. Indeed, at the end of this scene, as she drifts off to sleep, she contemplates what it would be like to have a child with Peeta without the threat of the Capitol and the Hunger Games. When Katniss has control over her body, her sexuality, and even her future, she feels almost peaceful. With this scene it seems that Collins makes a strong argument for empowered female sexuality and thus promotes feminist goals.

In addition to having a romantic relationship with Peeta, Katniss is conflicted over her feelings for Gale, her best friend and hunting partner from District 12. Initially, their friendship is portrayed as purely platonic but increases and decreases in intensity as the series progresses. The first introduction of Gale is as “the only person with whom [Katniss] can be [herself]” and “good-looking” and “strong,” the object of desire for many girls (*Hunger Games* 6, 10). After Katniss is reaped into her first Hunger Games,

Gale is one of the few people allowed to say goodbye to her, setting up a possible romance between them: “[...] maybe there is nothing romantic between us, but when he opens his arms I don’t hesitate to go into them. His body is familiar to me [...] but this is the first time I really feel it, lean and hard-muscled against my own” (39). In much of her time preparing for the Games and in the arena, Katniss wonders what Gale thinks of her romantic pairing with Peeta and how he might be reacting to seeing her kiss another guy, though she has not kissed Gale herself (280). For people who are supposed to be “just friends,” there is a good deal of sexual tension relayed in each of their interactions. That Katniss grows in awareness of her own sexual desire throughout the series is a point of positive female sexuality, and thus a pro-feminist sentiment.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss’ relationships with both Peeta and Gale are decidedly romantic and therefore conflicting, resulting in a bona fide love triangle. Shortly after Katniss arrived back in District 12 after winning the Games, she and Gale shared their first kiss out in the woods while hunting. Much like her kisses with Peeta, this one was also not initiated by Katniss: “Then suddenly, as I was suggesting I take over the daily snare run, he took my face in his hands and kissed me. I was completely unprepared” (27). She describes that his lips were “warm,” that his hands “entrap[ped]” her, and that her “fingers, curled tightly closed, rest[ed] on his chest” (27). Furthermore, Katniss explains that she had to decide later how she felt about their kiss, if she “liked it or resented it” (27). This description of both the kiss itself and Katniss’ uncertainty about it indicate a lack of consent.



Later, when Gale tells Katniss he loves her after she suggests running away from District 12 together, the only response she can come up with is “I know” (*Catching Fire* 97). When he gets upset, she adds,

“I know! And you ... you know what you are to me. [...] Gale, I can't think about anyone that way now. All I can think about, every day, every waking minute since they drew Prim's name at the reaping, is how afraid I am. And there doesn't seem to be room for anything else. If we could get somewhere safe, maybe I could be different. I don't know.” (97)

Though Katniss makes it clear that she does not feel capable of having a relationship with either of her admirers, she feels pressured to offer up some alternative, in this case, suggesting that she might be able to change. Moreover, Gale gets angry and disgusted and eventually storms away when Katniss confesses that she also wants Peeta in her life (98-102). This pressure of not hurting Gale's feelings or upsetting him indicates coercion and even manipulation, since it is obvious that Gale is looking for a single, particular response from Katniss—“I love you, too.”

Later that day, as Gale is being mended following a severe whipping from the new Head Peacekeeper (the law enforcement officers sent from the Capitol to the districts) for poaching, Katniss realizes that she loves Gale: “Gale is mine. I am his. Anything else is unthinkable. Why did it take him being whipped within an inch of his life to see it?” (117). She apologizes and kisses Gale, and though he is in a sedative-induced sleep, he surfaces long enough to register the kiss (118). When Katniss wakes up at Gale's bedside the next morning, Peeta is sitting in the chair watching her and she feels

guilty about stringing him along: “No matter what I do, I’m hurting someone” (120). That Katniss is portrayed as conflicted in her feelings for the two men is not an issue; what is problematic is that she lets their desires override her own: when Peeta is hurting, she feels closer to him, but when Gale is injured, she sides with him. What makes Katniss feel more strongly for one or the other is not her own desires, but rather a sort of emotional manipulation. Both men know that Katniss would be with them if they were hurting physically or emotionally, so neither tries to hide their feelings or adopt a blank face, as Katniss so often does.

Although Gale seems to be more concerned with Katniss’ enthusiastic consent than Peeta had been during either of the Games, he still initiates physical contact when Katniss is in a distressed state. In a scene shortly after Peeta is rescued from his torture chamber in the Capitol and is revealed to be psychologically altered, Gale presses Katniss to finally make a choice:

“I’ll never compete with that [Peeta]. No matter how much pain I’m in. [...] I don’t stand a chance if he doesn’t get better. You’ll never be able to let him go. You’ll always feel wrong with me.”

“The way I always felt wrong kissing him because of you,” I say.

Gale holds my gaze. “If I thought that was true, I could almost live with the rest of it.”

“It is true,” I admit. “But so is what you said about Peeta.”

Gale makes a sound of exasperation. (*Mockingjay* 197)

Despite her admission that she can never fully choose to be with either Peeta or Gale, later that night she engages in sexual contact with Gale anyway “to make up for all the kisses [she] withheld,” “because it doesn’t matter anymore,” and because she is “desperately lonely” now that it seems Peeta will never come back to her (198). Although Gale stops kissing Katniss when he realizes that she is not mentally present, he makes her feel guilty for not being romantically aware. Furthermore, when he confesses that he was jealous of any man who had flirted with her—Peeta, Darius, even Finnick—she takes it as a sign of his affections, despite his admission that he has kissed “too many [girls] to remember” (199-200).

There are several problematic points in this scene and in Katniss and Gale’s relationship more generally. First, this clear double-standard between acceptable behavior for Katniss and acceptable behavior for Gale is portrayed as a positive, as an expression of real love. However, a more critical view reveals Gale’s jealousy as an attempt to control Katniss’ sexuality. Portraying Gale’s concern over the protection of Katniss’ virtue as demonstrative of “real love” helps to perpetuate traditional gender roles and to reduce women’s agency. Second, Gale repeatedly makes Katniss feel guilty about not “choosing” him as her lover. Though he refuses to engage in any extended physical contact without her approval, his anger and hurt feelings function to manipulate Katniss into agreement. Third, near the end of *Mockingjay*, Katniss overhears Peeta and Gale talking about how she will choose which of the men with whom she will spend her life. Though the men both agree that it is Katniss’ decision, I question whether Katniss could choose neither of them. In the end, Katniss accepts Peeta as her partner, but only because

Gale's snare technique kills Prim, her sister, and because Katniss and Peeta both end up in District 12. In this case, the illusion of choice is not really choice. Katniss does not "choose" either man; her decision is made by default. Though she is largely an active character throughout the series, Katniss completely lacks agency in all aspects of her love life. Finally, I question the overall necessity of including Gale as a romantic option for Katniss, thereby creating a love triangle to add to the plot of the whole series. Because a substantial part of what makes this series compelling to readers of all ages is this love triangle, it seems that the lack of choices available to Katniss is something of an evasion detracting from the other pro-feminist qualities of the series.

### Other Sexualization

Beyond the Katniss-Peeta-Gale relationship triangle, there are several other areas throughout the series in which characters or situations are distinctly sexualized. This portion of my analysis addresses body modification, sexual exploitation, and nakedness in the novels.

One of the most obvious ways in which characters are sexualized in the *Hunger Games* series is through being described as "naked." Over the course of approximately 1,200 total pages in the series, Katniss is described as naked twenty times: eight times in *The Hunger Games*, seven times in *Catching Fire*, and five times in *Mockingjay*. Interestingly, Katniss' nakedness seems to decline as her relative value increases; once her usefulness as a rallying point for the revolution is actualized, she is rarely described as naked. Accordingly, when Katniss is merely a tribute in the Games and after she has

been discarded by the rebels, she is described more often as naked. This association of nakedness and sexualization with Katniss' perceived lower value may be coincidental, but it seems surprising that such a correlation would exist.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether Katniss even needs to be described as "naked" at most points in the series. She could just as easily wear pajamas to bed (*Hunger Games* 54), or her morning routines could be described in lesser detail (*Catching Fire* 32); while these depictions add realistic richness to the novels, they add little in the way of plot or allegorical value. For example, when Katniss is getting ready for her pre-Hunger Games interview, Collins unnecessarily includes "naked" in the preparation process: "I can feel the silken inside as they [the prep team] slip [the dress] over my naked body, then the weight. It must be forty pounds" (*Hunger Games* 120). There is no justification for choosing "naked body" over "head" in this instance; instead, the primary reason for such inclusion seems to be titillation. Likewise, in a scene in which Katniss awakes from a nightmare leading up to the Quarter Quell, Collins describes her nakedness: "I strip off my sweaty clothes and fall back into bed, naked, and somehow find sleep again" (*Catching Fire* 221). Again, such inclusion is gratuitous and seems to serve a primary purpose of sexually arousing readers.

Moreover, as a character, Katniss routinely attempts to avoid or refuse sexual content. When Haymitch vomits on himself and needs to be cleaned up, she and Peeta drag him to the shower, but Katniss admits not wanting to help him "strip down" or "wash the vomit out of his chest hair" (*Hunger Games* 48). Later, she feels anxious about the possibility of being naked for the opening ceremonies of the Games (66). When she

rescues Peeta from the river, she is horrified at the thought that he might be naked underneath his camouflage, and even when scrubbing his wound clean, hesitates to have him take off all his clothes and later makes him cover up with a rag so she can wash his underwear (254, 256-258). Throughout the Hunger Games especially, Katniss is decidedly anti-sexual. Indeed, other characters even tease her for being “pure” and attempt to make her uncomfortable by displaying their own naked bodies (*Catching Fire* 208-210, 214-216). In spite of her constant refusal of sexuality, Katniss is repeatedly described as naked and placed in a sexualized context. These choices by Collins indicate an adherence to, rather than digression from, traditional female requirements.

At other points when Katniss is described as naked, she is clearly uncomfortable with such sexualization but does not challenge it. Katniss’ first meeting with Cinna, her stylist and closest friend in the Capitol happens when she is completely naked. After the prep team finishes polishing and plucking her body, they leave to retrieve Cinna and Katniss “resist[s] the impulse to retrieve [her] robe” (*Hunger Games* 61-63). When Cinna arrives, the first thing he does is survey Katniss’ body: ““Just give me a moment, all right?” he asks. He walks around my naked body, not touching me, but taking in every inch of it with his eyes. I resist the impulse to cross my arms over my chest” (64). They have a short conversation about Katniss’ hair and it being Cinna’s first year as a stylist in the Games before Katniss is allowed to cover herself with a robe. As a stylist, of course, it is necessary for Cinna to be familiar with Katniss’ shape, but this scene is striking in its sexual undertones. The language Collins utilizes to describe Katniss and Cinna’s introduction demonstrates the power imbalance between the two characters and leaves

Katniss sexually objectified. Because Katniss does not receive Cinna's evaluation of her body negatively, readers unconsciously identify with Cinna's gaze—the male gaze. In this scene, the objectification of female bodies is normalized rather than challenged, thus supporting traditional gender roles instead of advancing feminist goals.

Katniss is not the only character described in a sexualized way. Finnick Odair, a champion from District 4 who allies with Katniss and Peeta in the Quarter Quell, is the most hyper-sexualized character of the series. (Unlike other characters, however, Finnick also serves as a clear critique of sexualization, which will be discussed later). Readers' first real introduction to Finnick is also Katniss' first meeting with him, a highly sexually-charged encounter:

[...] when I turn my head, Finnick Odair's famous sea green eyes are only inches from mine. He pops a sugar cube into his mouth and leans against my horse.

"Hello, Katniss," he says, as if we've known each other for years, when in fact we've never met.

"Hello, Finnick," I say, just as casually, although I'm feeling uncomfortable at his closeness, especially since he's got so much bare skin exposed.

"Want a sugar cube?" he says [...]. "They're supposed to be for the horses, but who cares? They've got years to eat sugar, whereas you and I ... well, if we see something sweet, we better grab it quick." (*Catching Fire* 208)

Katniss is aware of his libidinous reputation and his long list of lovers in the Capitol and thus feels somewhat superior to and disgusted by him during their conversation. She admits that he is “one of the most stunning, sensuous people on the planet” but refuses his offer: “‘No thanks,’ I say to the sugar. ‘I’d love to borrow your outfit sometime, though.’ He’s draped in a golden net that’s strategically knotted at his groin so that he can’t technically be called naked, but he’s about as close as you can get” (209). When Finnick continues talking to Katniss, he “wets his lips ever so slightly with his tongue,” touches Katniss’ clothing, and puts his face so close to hers that their lips are “almost in contact” (210). In this encounter, Finnick is described primarily in sexual but positive terms; his allure and sexual promiscuity is portrayed positively by Collins, which is one way the series glamorizes sexualization.

Another character, Johanna Mason, a former victor and ally in the Quarter Quell, is also strongly sexualized. Though she won her Hunger Games by being a vicious killer, her first interaction with Katniss ends with Johanna naked: after the opening ceremonies, Johanna, who had been dressed like a tree, rips off her costume and shares an elevator with Peeta and Katniss wearing only her “forest green slippers” (*Catching Fire* 215). Johanna spends the whole elevator ride talking to Peeta “while the light of his still-glowing costume reflects off her bare breasts” (215). Katniss is uncomfortable and angry, but for Johanna, this is normal. Indeed, during the training sessions, Johanna is “naked again and oiling her skin down for a wrestling lesson” (227). Even when in the hospital recovering, Johanna flirts somewhat aggressively with Gale (*Mockingjay* 221). Unlike Katniss, Johanna appears to have complete control over her sexuality and uses it both to



intimidate others and segregate herself from them. Her sexualization is empowered, which comes off as disarming for other characters, partly through Collins' portrayal of Johanna as both vicious and erotic. In my evaluation, however, Johanna seems to be the most feminist of the characters in the series due to her unwillingness to let others control her choices.

Another point of sexual content in the series is the body modification common in the Capitol and used on the tributes during their preparation for and recovery from the Games. Like most things in the Capitol, the fashion is exaggerated, impractical, and grotesque to outsiders. The prep team assigned to Katniss consists of three individuals who exemplify Capitol body modification: Venia, a woman "with aqua hair and gold tattoos above her eyebrows," Flavius, a man with "orange corkscrew locks" and "purple lipstick," and Octavia, "a plump woman whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green" (*Hunger Games* 61-62). Keeping up with the latest fashions requires that the prep team, and most other Capitol citizens, are constantly updating their body's color palettes and undergoing new surgical modifications. Indeed, when Katniss sees the prep team again leading up to the Victory Tour, Venia has more gold tattoos around her eyes and Octavia's skin is a new "light evergreen" shade to "stay abreast of the capricious fashion trends of the Capitol" (*Catching Fire* 35).

To the citizens of the districts, especially the outlying districts like 12, this body modification is the ultimate symbol of the absurdity and gluttony in the Capitol, but the fashionistas who undergo such procedures to maintain relevancy see them as an absolute necessity. Despite efforts to stay on top of trends, however, sometimes body modification

goes too far, even by Capitol standards. During their infiltration of the Capitol in *Mockingjay*, Katniss, Peeta, and Gale are concealed by a woman named Tigris, a former stylist for the Hunger Games who now runs a fur clothing shop in the Capitol. According to Katniss, Tigris is “an extreme example of surgical enhancement gone wrong”: her “skin has been pulled back tightly and tattooed with black and gold stripes,” her “nose has been flattened until it barely exists,” and she has the longest cat whiskers Katniss has ever seen on a person (*Mockingjay* 318). Tigris had once been a stylist in the Games but apparently “had one operation too many and crossed the line into repulsion” (319). As Katniss notes, Tigris has “outlived [her] use” to the Capitol simply by being overzealous in accepting the Capitol’s grotesque interpretation of beauty.

To a lesser extreme, the tributes each undergo a body modification process in preparation for the Games and in their recuperation from them. Leading up to her first Games, Katniss endures an extensive makeover process lasting “more than three hours” and consisting of everything from a deep body scrub to full body hair removal (*Hunger Games* 61-62). At the end of it, Katniss’ prep team excitedly tells her she “almost look[s] like a human now!” (62). Human, in their definition, is not the real, suffering, starving person who came to them, but the modified, artificial image they created. Upon returning from the arena after winning the Games, Katniss finds that Capitol doctors have restored her hearing and that her body has been completely perfected: “I [...] am arrested by the sight of my hands. The skin’s perfection, smooth and glowing. Not only are the scars from the arena gone, but those accumulated over the years of hunting have vanished without a trace. My forehead feels like satin, and when I try to find the burn on my calf,

there's nothing" (*Hunger Games* 351). Flavius tells Katniss that they did a "full body polish" on her and that there is "not a flaw left" (353). Furthermore, it is revealed that the Gamemakers wanted to surgically augment Katniss' breasts to better fit the image of the healthy, vibrant Hunger Games victor they need to present in order to avoid outrage in the audience.

When the tributes and victors undergo body modification, it serves a different purpose than when Capitol citizens alter their bodies. The Capitol could not dump into the arena twenty-four children in varying degrees of health and starvation and reasonably assume the Hunger Games would effectively control all of Panem. Indeed, without the body modification and abundance of food offered the tributes during training, the poverty and structural inequalities in the districts would become more apparent, thus making the Games seem much more unfair. Because the audience sees the victors crowned in peak healthful, rejuvenated appearance (after undergoing surgical and chemical modification, of course), it gives the impression that the Games are not inherently exploitative or unequal—that truly any of the tributes can win if they simply try hard enough. Body modification is used to reinforce the Capitol's power and silence any possibility that the districts might be suffering from the political and economic arrangement of the nation. That Collins portrays the Capitol's actions as exploitative is one of the strongly anti-oppressive messages of the series. Though at some points it might seem that Katniss and the other victors get the Cinderella treatment, Collins is abundantly clear that the Capitol's sexualization of children and teenagers is abusive.

The final example in my analysis of sexuality in the *Hunger Games* series is the sexual exploitation experienced by Finnick as a victor in the Capitol. Although the first introduction to Finnick leaves readers with the impression that he is sensual and seductive by his own personality and choosing, it is revealed in *Mockingjay* that Finnick was forced into sex slavery: “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. So you do it” (170). Though Finnick is gorgeous and talented, his situation is far from glamorized or enviable; his story acts as a clear critique of sexual exploitation present in U.S. society. Indeed, Katniss immediately feels remorseful for misjudging him and recognizes that, if not for the revolution, she, too, would likely have become a sex slave since “Snow could have gotten a really good price for the girl on fire” (*Mockingjay* 170, 172).

The other mention of prostitution in the series relates to Cray, the former Head Peacekeeper from District 12. In addition to working for the Capitol, Cray had a “habit of luring starving women into his bed for money” and “in really bad times, the hungriest would gather at his door at nightfall, vying for the chance to earn a few coins to feed their families by selling their bodies” (*Catching Fire* 114-115). Again, this exploitation is portrayed negatively, and again Katniss recognizes that she, too, might have had to prostitute herself if she had been older when her father died (115). These two instances challenge the conventional perceptions of prostitution as a job lazy or sex-crazed women hold, instead presenting sex work as exploitative and driven by desperation. Collins’

critique of coercive sexuality, exploitation, and objectification is distinctly anti-oppressive and is one of the strongest arguments for assigning the pro-feminist label to the series.

My interrogation of sexuality and sexualization in the *Hunger Games* series reveals an ambiguous stance. At times, Collins' narrative sharply criticizes sexualization, such as in the case of Finnick or Cray's prostitution. At other times, however, the narrative seemingly supports traditional gender roles regarding sexuality, such as in the non-consensual Katniss-Peeta-Gale love triangle. Taken together, the end result is a deeply ambiguous portrayal of sexualization. This partly reflects the reality of our present U.S. society's ambivalence toward sexuality in general, as it is expected that cultural productions will mirror the society in which they were created. However, this series represents a missed opportunity to stimulate a change in attitudes and expectations for adolescent heterosexual romantic relationships and for gender roles more broadly.

### **Commodification**

This section of my analysis investigates the process of commodification to demonstrate the pro-capitalist messages throughout the series. Although feminist ideology does not require an anti-capitalist approach, it is undeniable that structural inequalities are inherent within capitalist systems. As such, they are often oppressive. Commodification is conceptualized in this analysis as any instance in which individuals derive value from their ability to be exchanged. In order to be supportive to feminist

goals, one would expect this series to challenge commodification. However, as this analysis shows, this series presents conflicting messages about this issue.

Many instances in the *Hunger Games* series represent the commodification of people as normal and necessary. In many cases, when the character being commodified is valuable to other characters, Collins seems to present that commodification as a necessary evil; Katniss' role as Mockingjay for the revolution is a primary example of this. When the commodification is perceived as benefitting a righteous cause, it is nearly beyond reproach. Furthermore, much of the commodification within the novels is also sexualized: Finnick's prostitution and Katniss and Peeta's romance, for example. The examination of commodification in this analysis demonstrates that although the series challenges commodification broadly, certain uses of commodification are actually supported.

One overarching message of the series is that children should not be seen as expendable or used as leverage to punish past and future generations. Indeed, the sacrificial use of children to maintain social order is problematized throughout the series and would be impossible to refute. That district children are exchanged for relative peace is indisputably portrayed negatively by Collins throughout the series. There are countless interpretations of the symbolism within the reaping and Hunger Games system, but it is not my purpose to dissect those here. This challenge of commodification is the predominant point on which rests the anti-oppressive label applied to this series, and certainly this is an important cultural critique the novels make. However, other points of

commodification exist within the novels and must be addressed prior to declaring the series “feminist” or otherwise.

A major source of commodification in the novels is Katniss’ role as Mockingjay, the face of the revolution. Katniss is first used by the Capitol to quiet any discontent in the districts, many of whom viewed Katniss’ nightlock stunt as an act of rebellion rather than an act of desperation. On the Victory Tour, her job was to prove to the citizens in the districts that she is crazy-in-love with Peeta and had no other motivations for suggesting a double-suicide in the arena. Of course, in this endeavor Katniss fails miserably, as there is a massive uprising in District 8, and she realizes she has been used: “President Snow has been playing me for a fool. All of the kisses and endearments in the world couldn’t have derailed the momentum building up in District 8. Yes, my holding out the berries had been a spark, but I had no way to control the fire” (*Catching Fire* 149). Katniss recognizes that President Snow had been using her as a distraction for the Capitol and district citizens. In exchange for providing persuasion and diversion, Katniss is allowed to live, but this commodification limits her full rights to autonomy and self-definition.

Later, in the Quarter Quell when Katniss blows a hole in the force field and is rescued by the rebels, she recognizes that once again her value resides in instruction; that is, Katniss is sure that the Capitol will use her death as an example to others considering rebelling—her death is too valuable to happen privately (*Catching Fire* 381-383). When Katniss learns that it was actually a rebel plot that resulted in her rescue, she is understandably upset: “It’s an awful lot to take in, this elaborate plan in which I was a piece, just as I was meant to be a piece in the Hunger Games. Used without consent,

without knowledge. At least in the Hunger Games, I knew I was being played with” (385). As Plutarch, Haymitch, and Finnick explain her survival to her, Katniss realizes that she was saved because of her value to the revolution, not her value as a human being: “We had to save you because you’re the mockingjay. [...] While you live, the revolution lives” (386). Katniss becomes the symbol of the rebellion despite her contradictory desires and intentions; while she is supportive of the rebels’ mission, she did not consent to being its figurehead. Her life is valuable only because of her utility to advancement of the rebellion. Katniss is a commodity.

This role of Mockingjay is something Katniss neither sought nor desires, but as a commodity, she has no choice. She knows that the rebels want her to “truly take on the role they designed” for her, meaning she must go beyond “providing a rallying point” to “become the actual leader, the face, the voice, the embodiment of the revolution,” “the person who the districts [...] can count on to blaze the path to victory” (*Mockingjay* 10). Though others are better suited to the job, Finnick and Peeta especially, Katniss was chosen as mouthpiece of the revolution because the districts were already so familiar with her face, name, and nonconformist attitude. Katniss is valued not because of any inherent skills or capabilities, but because her image can be exchanged for rebel uprisings. This epitomizes commodification.

Despite her initial refusal of the role prescribed, Katniss eventually realizes that being the Mockingjay comes with a certain amount of power. Not realizing how important she is to the cause, it takes a reminder from Prim that Katniss can “demand almost anything” and the rebels would “have to agree to it” to get Katniss to cooperate



and follow through with their plans (*Mockingjay* 34). Her value, even if derived from commodification, grants Katniss a fair amount of bargaining power and influence over rebel, district, and Capitol populations. Because power is portrayed as a positive outcome of commodification, the exploitative effects of such commodification are minimized in the novels. Katniss' ability to influence others is both a cause and result of her commodification. In this way, the series is ambiguous on the issue. Considering that Katniss' commodification ultimately supports a righteous cause—the revolt against an unjust government—it is not challenged within the novels but is instead presented as a necessity. This, of course, is not indicative of a feminist, anti-oppressive text.

Throughout her tenure as Mockingjay, Katniss has little to no say in the tasks and duties she performs. Her day is scheduled according to what the rebel forces need from her and all aspects of her duties are choreographed by other people—she has no agency in her Mockingjay role. Although she knows others are dictating what she says and does, Katniss is outraged when she realizes that Haymitch, the primary betrayer in her continued use as a political pawn, has “some measure of control” over her again (*Mockingjay* 73). Indeed, she and Haymitch are connected at all times by an earpiece in Katniss' Mockingjay uniform, which Haymitch threatens to have surgically implanted if she disobeys his orders (110-111). Though she wants to take part in legitimate action and military maneuvers, Coin, the president of District 13, decides it would be too risky to put Katniss in actual battle situations (75-77). Instead, she is sent to District 8 to tour the rubble and interact with the wounded recovering in the hospital, a place that is “safe” but still allows for Katniss to be spontaneous and thus able to create a good propaganda spot.

As she interacts with patients, she realizes that she had been the districts' Mockingjay "long before [she] accepted the role" and that she possesses power because of it (90-91). This existence of power and the realization of it minimize the detrimental effects of commodification on personal autonomy, thereby failing to fully challenge commodifying processes. Indeed, because Katniss gains some level of command over others, her own loss of agency is unlikely to be perceived by readers as problematic.

Katniss is not the only character who is commodified within the series. During the rebel attempts to take over the Capitol, Finnick, Gale, and Katniss are all assigned to the special unit of sharpshooters who become the "Star Squad," the "on-screen faces of the invasion" (Mockingjay 257). They are not supposed to engage in actual combat, but instead will be filmed "putting on a good show" to use in propaganda films, or as Katniss puts it, they will be "televised puppets" (258). Though Katniss, Finnick, and Gale are the best shooters the rebels have, they are more valuable for their good looks and ability to influence and inspire the revolution. Plutarch wants "as many victors as possible" to be filmed infiltrating the Capitol because it makes for "better television" (254). Furthermore, despite Peeta's psychological instability, he is put into training so District 13 can film him "fighting for the rebels" to help show that all the victors are against the Capitol and President Snow, and it is even suggested that Katniss and Peeta be filmed as a couple once again to reinvigorate the districts (247). The tributes are repeatedly used as political pawns rather than as actual soldiers or human beings with desires and motivations outside of what is dictated to them by the government. Their value derives from their ability to influence the masses, as opposed to their individual attributes and combat skills.

Though Katniss and the others dislike being used for pageantry rather than insurgency, none of them take an active stand against such commodification. Indeed, when Peeta is sent in as a replacement for one of the fallen members of the Star Squad, Katniss realizes that she is of more use to Coin “dead than alive”—Coin wants Katniss to be a martyr to give the rebels something to fight for (*Mockingjay* 261, 265-266). Because she has already succeeded in giving the districts a unified rallying point, her only influential value left for the rebellion is in her death (266). Despite knowing all of this, Katniss does not desert her squad or attempt to alter their mission; the most she does is write off Peeta as a “mutt” (a Capitol mutation) and an easy kill. Moreover, although Katniss admits having no intention of fulfilling her assigned duty, she does not start her own mission of killing President Snow until after Boggs, her commander, dies in the Capitol. Because Katniss is an active character in many other aspects of the series, this inaction reinforces the notion that commodification, valuing people for their ability to give an advantage or profit, is a normal or necessary component in social change.

Within the series, much of the commodification of characters is also sexualized. The “star-crossed lovers” strategy Katniss and Peeta use throughout the series is both sexualization and commodification: in exchange for survival, they both must promote a sexual product the viewers can sympathize with and live through vicariously. Their value comes not from being tributes, but from being romantically involved; if the Gamemakers had chosen to deliberately kill off either of them in the Hunger Games, the public would be outraged, which would “jeopardize the success of the Games” (*Hunger Games* 247).

Moreover, many of Katniss' sexualized behaviors are motivated by the need to market herself as an object of desire to ensure her survival; she has to sexualize herself if she hopes to win sympathy or sponsors. In the arena with Peeta during their first Games, Katniss is constantly attentive to maintaining the appearance of being in love. In the cave while Peeta is recovering, she feeds him, caresses his face, and kisses him solely for the purpose of "sustaining the star-crossed lover routine" (*Hunger Games* 264, 281). When the duo go a few days without receiving any kind of gift or communication, Katniss is sure it is because Haymitch is "dissatisfied with [their] performance" and decides to "ramp up the romance" by starting a personal conversation with Peeta (299-300). After the nightlock stunt ends the Games, the interview dress chosen for Katniss makes her look "like a girl" and "harmless," but has padding in the breast area (354-355). Still, Katniss must present herself as crazy-in-love with Peeta, which requires a perverse sexualization of innocence if she wishes to mollify President Snow's suspicions. This interaction between commodification and sexualization goes largely unchallenged throughout the series.

The only point of contention with Katniss' sexualized commodification comes in *Mockingjay*, when Katniss states that she needs Gale with her when they go hunting. Coin asks if Katniss wants Gale "presented as [her] new lover," but Plutarch suggests they "continue the current romance" because such a quick switch between lovers "could cause the audience to lose sympathy [...] especially since they think she's pregnant with his child" (*Mockingjay* 39). They decide to continue the star-crossed lovers act, but assure Katniss that "Off camera, [Gale] is all yours" (40). This conversation leaves her

feeling scandalized: “The implications that I could so readily dispose of Peeta, that I’m in love with Gale, that the whole thing has been an act. My cheeks begin to burn. The very notion that I’m devoting any thought to who I’m presenting as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning” (40). This scene represents the only significant challenge to Katniss’ sexualized commodification within the novels, but adds to the overall ambiguity of the series on this issue.

Conversely, Finnick’s prostitution is read not only as a critique of sexualization, as described previously in this analysis, but also as a critique of commodification. That his body is used against his will for President Snow’s profit is undeniably an evaluation against such actions. However, if only outright sexual exploitation is challenged while other forms of sexualized commodification are normalized, then the feminist label cannot be fully applied to these novels. Though not distinctly anti-feminist, the series is certainly ambiguous on this issue.

Finally, my analysis of commodification within the series moves beyond the plot to examine the series as a whole. Despite the probability of Collins’ good intentions with the series, many important aspects of the novels refute rather than support feminist goals. Many readers and critics, however, still perceive the series to be pro-feminist and anti-oppressive. However, I question the degree to which that reputation actually results from what Ellen Riordan calls “the commodification of empowerment” (281-282). Katniss is mostly an active character within the series, which is somewhat unusual for female characters in popular young adult literature. Unlike characters such as Bella Swan, the protagonist in the *Twilight* series, Katniss takes action rather than be acted upon; she

makes a lot of mistakes and acts immaturely at times, but she does operate according to her beliefs rather than wait for things to happen to her. The presence of a strong female lead character has led many readers to consider the series “feminist.” A more nuanced analysis, however, demonstrates that Katniss and the series as a whole fail to challenge many of the existing power structures, instead presenting sexualization and commodification as the primary sources of power for females. In reality, Katniss lacks agency throughout most of the series; she functions as a symbol of empowerment without actually being empowered. Collins, as the author, gains financially based off of the series’ reputation regardless of whether it accurately represents the books’ content. Considering the money-making potential of young adult literature and the public desire for “strong” female characters, the series can be read as a capitalist endeavor that commodifies empowerment for personal gain.

### **Nationalism**

This section of my analysis interrogates the uses of nationalism and district pride within the *Hunger Games* series to demonstrate that the series includes pro-nationalist and anti-nationalist messages. Borrowing M. Shamsul Haque’s definition, I conceptualize nationalism as the prioritization of national interests over group or individual interests (451). For the purposes of exploring district pride in addition to Capitol or Panem pride, I also include feelings of devotion or allegiance to one’s district in my discussion of nationalism. Throughout the series, characters frequently display and are influenced by nationalism, generally in the form of district pride. I argue that much of the Capitol-

encouraged district pride is actually a result of imperialism, whereas when individuals choose to act on pride for their district, it functions as resistance. A portion of this analysis also includes an examination of District 13 and its similarities to our present United States society. The series presents instances of both support and challenge to nationalism, once again offering an ambiguous message.

### District Pride

Some of the most notable instances of district pride revolve around Katniss and District 12. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the intense poverty in District 12, there is a considerable amount of pride and community many of the citizens feel toward their district and neighbors. District 12 is also one of the smallest districts, approximately eight thousand people, which also helps to produce a sense of community (*Hunger Games* 17). When Katniss' sister, Prim, is reaped into the Hunger Games and Katniss volunteers as tribute to protect her, the audience refuses to celebrate: "To the everlasting credit of the people of District 12, not one person claps. [...] So instead of acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone" (23-24). Furthermore, the crowd instead uses an old district hand gesture to show their appreciation for Katniss, but not for the Capitol: "At first one, then another, then almost every member of the crowd touches the three middle fingers of their left hand to their lips and holds it out to me. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our district, occasionally seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means good-bye to someone you love" (24). This simple

gesture of refusing ceremonial applause for Katniss' imminent death in favor of a poignant district farewell is one of the strongest examples of district pride in the series. In this case, district pride is cherished, encouraged, and appreciated; for the first time, Katniss gets the feeling she is actually cared about in District 12 (24). Knowing that she has the support of her community is one of the things that drives Katniss' will to survive and succeed in the arena. In this instance, district pride, or nationalism as I am calling it, is a form of resistance to the oppressive, totalitarian system run by the Capitol.

There are other examples of pride for District 12 scattered throughout the series. In the pre-Games interviews before the Quarter Quell in *Catching Fire*, Peeta announces to the crowd that he and Katniss already got married in a private ceremony back in District 12. The traditional ceremony involves a toasting, in which the married couple makes their first fire together and toasts a bit of bread over it; according to Katniss, "no one really feels married in District 12 until after the toasting" (249). As Peeta explains in his interview, "we knew if we were married in the Capitol, there wouldn't be any toasting. [...] And to us, we're more married than any piece of paper or big party could make us" (255). This scene reinforces nationalism in the form of devotion to and pride for one's district.

After being rescued from the arena during the Quarter Quell, Katniss learns that President Snow has retaliated by firebombing all of District 12, leaving nothing but the Victor's Village standing. Against the better judgment of the authorities in District 13, Katniss insists upon going back to District 12 to see for herself that her home and community are gone. She picks up a few items from her house to take back to District 13



to help it feel more welcoming, but mostly she just had to see the destruction for herself (*Mockingjay* 3-14). After the revolution ends and Katniss assassinates President Coin, she is sent back “home” to live in District 12 (mostly because the authorities cannot find a use for her) with Haymitch and Peeta as her neighbors (377-379). Katniss takes up hunting in the Meadow again and slowly comes back to life in the recovering District 12, the place where she feels safest and most at home. This connection between safety and devotion to District 12 has the effect of supporting nationalism as meritorious and right.

While certainly it is expected that Katniss would feel strong ties to her former home, I question the unequal expectations of nationalism for different characters. When Katniss learns her mother will not be coming back to District 12 with her, she notes that “between my father and Prim and the ashes, the place is too painful to bear. But apparently not for me” (*Mockingjay* 380). A few other people return to District 12 from District 13 to start the cleanup and rebuilding process, but mostly the former residents of District 12 stay away. Even Gale, who cared about his community so much he managed to evacuate a fair number of people before the firebombing started, moves to District 2 for a “fancy job” after the war (384). It is interesting to note that Peeta, Katniss, and Haymitch, the only three living Hunger Games victors from District 12—who were willing to die for their district in the arena and outside of it—all return to their former home. It seems that the victors are expected to have a stronger sense of nationalist duty than other citizens; since readers are supposed to like all three characters, this encourages nationalism as “the right thing to do.”

There are also several instances of district pride in interactions between Katniss and members of District 11. In her first Hunger Games, Katniss allies with Rue, a tiny girl from District 11 who reminds her of Prim. When Rue is fatally speared by one of the Career tributes, Katniss holds and sings to her until she dies, then surrounds her in flowers to give her a proper funeral (*Hunger Games* 233-237). Katniss' final goodbye to Rue is the hand symbol from District 12, the one given to Katniss at the reaping. This small act of humanity and solidarity is both a challenge to the Capitol and a demonstration of district pride. Right after the funeral, Katniss receives a parachute containing a small loaf of bread from District 11 to acknowledge her kindness: "[...] this is a first. A district gift to tribute who's not your own" (239). Understanding the full enormity of the cost and meaning behind this gift, Katniss makes sure to thank "the people of District Eleven" in full view of the cameras so her message is certain to be heard (239). Later, when Katniss runs into Thresh, the boy tribute from District 11, at the Cornucopia, he lets her live because she treated Rue so well (288). It is against the rules not to try to kill the other tributes in the arena, so Thresh is clearly demonstrating an abundance of district pride, just as the viewers back in District 11 did when they sent Katniss the bread. This nationalism is portrayed as good and right; indeed, these instances of district pride are a form of resistance to the totalitarian control of the Capitol.

Finally, when visiting District 11 during the Victory Tour after the Games, Peeta offers Thresh's and Rue's families a portion of his and Katniss' winnings to thank them for the help Rue and Thresh provided to them in the arena (*Catching Fire* 59). When Katniss thanks District 11 for the bread, someone in the crowd whistles the four-note

mockingjay tune she and Rue used to communicate in the arena, and then the whole crowd raises their hand to give Katniss the traditional District 12 salute and farewell (67). This act of nationalism is also an act of defiance: though Peeta, Katniss, and the members of District 11 were acting out of pride and gratitude for each other's districts, this kind of act violates the Capitol's strict rules about friendship and communication between the districts. Victors are supposed to be excited and honored to bring home glory and riches for their district, but are not allowed to be anything more than cordial to members of other districts because it undermines the Capitol's control. Like many other displays of pride for one's own district and displays of admiration for other districts, this nationalism is actually a reaffirmation of the value of the oppressed group—the districts. As both defiance and nationalism, Peeta's, Katniss's, and District 11's actions reinforce the notion that the district citizens are valuable as human beings, even if the Capitol disagrees.

### Nationalism as Disguise

In his article "Patriotism versus Imperialism," M. Shamsul Haque argues that patriotism is used to silence dissenting voices and justify imperialism (453). In the *Hunger Games* series, district pride is encouraged and enforced by the Capitol in order to disguise the weaknesses within the Capitol-controlled imperialist system. President Snow himself admits that "the entire system would collapse" if the Capitol "released its grip on the districts," which is one reason that communication and travel between districts are not allowed (*Catching Fire* 21). Of course, Snow makes it sound like "his primary concern is the welfare of the citizens of Panem," despite his obvious disregard for life (22). This use

of collective, national interests—nationalism—as justification for the horrendous conditions in the districts is actually a form of imperialism. Indeed, when Katniss and Rue are discussing what life is like in their districts during the Games, Katniss is sure “the Gamemakers are blocking out [their] conversation” so people in other districts do not learn about each other (*Hunger Games* 203). The districts are pitted against each other by the Capitol to keep individual districts powerless and to prevent any kind of uprising. Hearing about conditions in District 11, Katniss decides that District 12 is a “safe haven” because people *just* die from starvation rather than being killed by Peacekeepers (204). This encouragement of devotion to one’s own district and overall trust in the Capitol’s goodness is a technique used by the Capitol to give the illusion of government omnipotence. District pride is used to disguise the imperialist system.

#### District 13 versus United States

There are several interesting connections between District 13 and our current United States culture. When Katniss is first told about District 13 by Bonnie and Twill, the refugees from District 8 she meets in the woods, she learns that they manufactured nuclear weapons before the Dark Days (*Catching Fire* 147). After being transferred to District 13 upon her rescue from the arena during the Quarter Quell, Katniss learns that Thirteen is now a thriving, self-sufficient society. Each citizen over the age of fourteen is referred to as “Soldier,” is trained for a job, and must follow a strict schedule of duties and training sessions each day (*Mockingjay* 16-18). Like the U.S., District 13 had to “pull itself up by its bootstraps” to prosper: “it always managed to pull through due to strict

sharing of resources, strenuous discipline, and constant vigilance against any further attacks from the Capitol” (17). This mirrors perfectly the story passed on about the first settlers in “the new world.”

Over the past seventy-five years of independence, District 13 learned to “be self-sufficient, turned their citizens into an army, and built a new society with no help from anyone” (29). However, as Katniss notes, District 13 is “militaristic, overly programmed, and somewhat lacking in a sense of humor” (29). This, too, mirrors our U.S. society; we take our dominance and independence very seriously, and we have the military size and weaponry to prove it. Furthermore, like the U.S., District 13 is very concerned with security and protecting against threats brought in by new immigrants (67). District 13 also has an extensive prison system and houses prisoners for reasonably petty crimes: Katniss’ prep team were being held in a dungeon-like prison cell, “half-naked, bruised, and shackled to the wall,” for stealing food (48). Also like the U.S., District 13 plans to form a republic once they defeat the Capitol: “the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government” (83-4). Indeed, this government system is modeled on the system of “their ancestors”; because Panem is set in the ruins of North America, we can be sure District 13 is modeling our current republic. The similarities between District 13 and the United States are striking. Given that District 13 is positioned as the salvation of Panem—the honorable revolutionaries who overthrew the tyrannical Capitol—the striking similarities it shares with the U.S. sets up readers to conflate the two societies. These similarities function to

foster nationalism by reinforcing that the goals, methods, and ideologies of the United States are “right.”

Overall, the *Hunger Games* series presents a complicated and sometimes conflicting view of society. Though Collins’ novels do offer a critique of certain aspects of our culture, they are not perfectly feminist or anti-oppressive, as many popular interpretations imply. As this analysis demonstrates, the *Hunger Games* series is ambiguous on many issues regarding sexualization, commodification, and nationalism. This analysis complicates the dominant reading of these novels and calls into question the degree to which this series benefits feminist goals. Indeed, while the series is a definite improvement on many popular young adult novels, it often supports rather than challenges existing power structures.

### Chapter Five: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy has received a good deal of unwarranted commendation for its advancement of feminist goals. My examination of the series demonstrates that, despite challenging certain power structures within our society, this series often supports dominant ideologies. In particular, these novels tend to normalize the sexualization of women, excuse the commodification of individuals, and justify nationalism. My analysis problematizes several plot themes to reveal the non-feminist sentiments in the series. First and most importantly, Katniss' relationship with Peeta legitimizes sexualization and coercion: she does not consent to their romantic arrangement, but her later realization of genuine feelings for Peeta trivializes her original protests as irrelevant and unfounded. Second, the treatment of Katniss, Peeta, and the other tributes as commodities is seen as normal and acceptable because their commodification serves the greater good. Finally, the devotion to their districts displayed by Katniss and other characters promotes nationalism as an expectation of "true" and "good" citizens. Although throughout the *Hunger Games* series there are scenes that critique sexualization, commodification, and nationalism, the preponderance of support for these issues within the novels produces overall ambiguity toward anti-oppressive frameworks.

My choice to analyze the *Hunger Games* series for this project was not without reservations. Coming into this thesis, I was fully aware of the cultural phenomenon this series had become, hugely accelerated by the 2012 release of the Hollywood film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*. My own introduction to the series was through the

movie, rather than the books, which somewhat biased my first reading of the novels. Like many people, I, too, was told that I “just had to” read the series and that it would be “a real treat.” They sang the praises of Katniss, a fierce female character, and of the strong cultural criticism in the novel, particularly the perceived critique of “big brother” government and corporate control.

Reading the series was indeed a real treat. Having been an English literature major during my undergraduate degree and a book enthusiast prior to that, I have read my fair share of fiction. Many of the classics and even popular fiction are written by men from a male protagonist’s perspective; the female characters are generally stereotypes or serve as props rather than active characters (Buell; Eardley; Showalter; Gualtieri; Langlinais; McDonald). In the *Hunger Games* series, however, Katniss Everdeen is a fully-developed, multi-dimensional character; as the protagonist, it is her thoughts, beliefs, and actions that drive much of the plot. Furthermore, she is an imperfect character: her actions are sometimes misguided; she makes mistakes and gets confused, and is quite unlikeable at times. As far as female characters go, Katniss is a realistic portrayal of the complexities of womanhood in our modern U.S. society. In this light, Katniss the character does help to advance the feminist goal of providing strong, capable, realistic portrayals of women in young adult literature to give girls positive role models.

In addition, compared to the storyline in other popular fiction directed at females, such as the *Twilight* saga or the more recent phenomenon *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the *Hunger Games* series is remarkably complex, considering crucial issues like oppression, privilege, wealth stratification, exploitation, and voyeurism. Certainly the *Hunger Games*



series has provoked more intellectual discussions and criticism of our culture's values than has either of the aforementioned series. This has led many readers to celebrate this series as particularly feminist, and justifiably so, for any challenge to oppression is beneficial to feminist goals. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by this thesis, the feminist aspects of this series tend to be overstated and require overlooking the frequent, positive portrayals of capitalism, commodification, and sexualization.

As a whole, I find this series to be mostly ambivalent toward feminist and anti-oppressive frameworks. Despite that, *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* remain three of my favorite books. While I would never completely disregard the value of this series, as surely many people reading this thesis could infer, I do encourage readers to carefully consider the messages these books send and question whether they live up to their popular reputation. Considering the influential and regulatory nature of cultural productions, particularly the instructive qualities of young adult literature on tween and adolescent readers, I advocate using this series as a catalyst for discussion—of respectful male-female interactions, consent and sexuality, oppression and exploitation, and even reality television. Because this series represents both positive and negative aspects of these issues, it necessitates critical thinking. Educators, families, and peers can easily use the *Hunger Games* series to provoke meaningful conversation and encourage reading more generally.

Given the diverse number of themes in the novels, this thesis barely scratches the surface of possible research on the *Hunger Games* series. One area of further study would be a deeper examination of sexualization in the novels: What role does sexuality play?

How is it portrayed? What actions constitute sexual harassment? This would require a critical look at Katniss' relationships with Cinna and Haymitch, as well as with her similar-aged peers. Other areas of analysis in the series might include an analysis of other female characters, the parallels to religious texts and imagery, and the differing representations of masculinity. I am left with a few questions outside the scope of my own research: To what extent do these books encourage traditional gender roles and heteronormativity? How did the probability of financial success influence the content of the books? Does the reputation of the series or its messages have any effect on public perception and opinion of social justice issues? To what extent has the success of these novels spurred production of similar genre fiction?

Although the response to this series has been largely positive, I am aware that readers may not be receiving the full benefit of everything this series has to offer. Furthermore, touting these novels as "feminist," when they are, at best, ambivalent on feminist issues, misrepresents and even degrades core feminist values. This gives the impression that feminism is irrelevant and outdated, no longer worthy of consideration. Considering the cultural prominence the *Hunger Games* series will continue to have in the coming years, particularly as there are three remaining film adaptations to be released, the necessity of a more nuanced analysis of these novels cannot be overstated. As the success of the Hollywood version of this series continues to draw more readers to the novels, the demonstration in this thesis of the non-feminist sentiments of the *Hunger Games* trilogy becomes increasingly important. It is my hope that by acknowledging the

non-feminist aspects of these novels, we will have a better understanding of what a feminist text might look like and be more likely to see such a work in the future.

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