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BEASTS IN CIRCUSES: ENVIRONMENTAL WEAPONIZATION IN *THE HUNGER*
GAMES

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY
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ABSTRACT

BEASTS IN CIRCUSES: ENVIRONMENTAL WEAPONIZATION IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

BY MARIANA DE OLIVEIRA SOUZA

In this thesis, I attempt to explore the ways in which nature can be both used as a weaponized political tool for counterinsurgency and a catalyst for resistance in the dystopian setting presented in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. This is emphasized through the exploration of themes of pastoral depictions, social class divisions, humanism and posthumanism, and self-identity, primarily through the series' main character, Katniss Everdeen, and how her relationship with natural environments contributes to significant change in her world. The first chapter focuses on the relationship between class and nature, showing how the Capitol attempts to control both natural resources and people by manipulating access to food, landscapes, and education. I argue that through Katniss's interactions with the natural world, the narrative diverges from traditional pastoral ideals, revealing that even seemingly free natural spaces remain subject to domination. The second chapter examines the blurred boundaries between humans and animals, drawing on posthuman and humanist theory to analyze how they are exploited within the Capitol's system. Through the recurring symbol of the Mockingjay and other genetically modified animals, I explain that the Capitol's attempts to control nature ultimately fail because natural forces are unpredictable, and how Katniss herself becomes a posthuman figure with a hybrid identity that challenges the limits imposed by the government and exposes their fragility.

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PREFACE

Growing up in Southeastern Brazil, my childhood was deeply intertwined with nature. As I'd spend my days playing outside, making sure to keep spaces clean and respect local wildlife, I believed that the preservation of our natural spaces was of utmost importance. Yet, in my early years, I lacked the true understanding of what a natural crisis could truly look like. Surely I was no stranger to litter on the streets or to tailpipe smoke. They were indeed uncomfortable to be around and contributed to an unpleasant sight. But still, at the end of the day, I saw no visible impact on the ecosystem I was surrounded by. My yard's mango trees still stood strong at over one hundred feet, their fruit never losing its sweetness. The grass surrounding my house never lost its lush green hue, and neither did the vines twining across our brick walls. For many years, environmental harm to me did not go beyond drawings in textbooks.

However, as I grew in age and height, leaving behind picture books, the works available at my eye level reflected the new literary trend. I found myself coming of age at the height of the 2010s dystopian fiction boom, when such novels became increasingly visible and accessible, gradually steering my reading toward the genre. Although the novels I read told stories of distant futures, I noticed that the struggles the characters went through and the configurations of their societies did not feel completely foreign. The exploitation of natural resources, disease emergence, global wars, food shortages, rising temperatures, and other issues all resembled the conversations we often had at school about the effects of the ongoing environmental crisis. Over time, this exposure led me to understand that environmental change does not happen overnight but rather results from centuries of harm and negligence. This discernment fueled my desire to engage in climate action, to which I've dedicated the past decade, mostly doing so through community service, assisting people in my community to have access to basic necessities, city resources, and academic support. This experience has

accompanied me over the years and led me here, where I now seek to take a different step in my journey, now through literary studies, exploring in depth one of the works that shaped my interest in environmentalism.

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes exponentially globalized, discussions about the effects of emerging technologies, economics, and politics on the environment have reached new heights. The introduction of constantly evolving AI systems, the defunding of quality education, and the loosening of environmental protections worldwide, to name a few, lead to the exploitation of natural resources at unprecedented levels that are detrimental to the planet's well-being. Both the natural world and humanity face a serious, and potentially irreversible, ecological crisis that may threaten life as we know it.

Given the cultural significance of this ecological crisis, humanist scholars across several fields have begun to explore its impacts, leading to the development of areas of study such as ecocriticism. In this discipline, it is believed that these issues are not only to be discussed in scientific fields but should also be addressed in literary studies¹. That is due to the belief that it is by understanding how nature is portrayed in works of fiction that one can understand how different cultures and ideologies perceive the environment and how these works can influence people's perceptions of the matter. The way perceptions of the world are framed in literature not only says much about how people tend to perceive nature in the cultural context in which the work was constructed, but also offers direction to understand how people may perceive the environment due to the influence of such works. Understanding some of these trends makes it possible to identify more specific causes and potential solutions for the planet's current crisis.

Any literary work has the potential to contribute to these studies. Yet in light of the current historical period, it is worth considering the Young Adult, or YA, genre as a diverse field to explore. That is because the early 21st century is not only the era of globalization but is also recognized as the golden age of Young Adult fiction², where works like *The Hunger*

¹ Wenzel, 2-3.

² Burke, 544.

Games, *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, *Percy Jackson*, and many others have become multimillion-dollar entertainment empires with legions of devoted fans. These works are marketed to young readers ages 10-18, who are at the age of constructing their own beliefs and becoming more deeply immersed in the culture that surrounds them, especially regarding consumerism and technology. Although YA has a variety of subgenres, dystopian fiction is by far one of the most popular ones and is a subgenre that frequently puts a young protagonist in a dysfunctional world that has fallen victim to an imbalance between nature and society.

In this thesis, I delve into *The Hunger Games* to address its environmental aspects through ecocritical lenses. The story is set in Panem, a dystopian, futuristic, post-apocalyptic version of the United States. Panem consists of thirteen districts and the Capitol, which serves as the headquarters of a virtually totalitarian government commanded by its leader, President Snow, and his allies, who all share a thirst for absolute power. As punishment for a previous revolution attempt, the Capitol exerts control over the districts, monitoring their citizens closely while hoarding the majority of the resources they produce. While the districts starve to death, Capitol citizens live lavish, wasteful lives, causing a constant natural imbalance. As further punishment, the Capitol hosts an annual “Hunger Games” where they choose two children from each district (deemed “tributes”) through the Reaping, a televised lottery system, to fight to the death until only one child remains in an arena filled with genetically modified natural elements used to exterminate as many of them as possible in gruesome ways, while all citizens are forced to watch. Hence, the Capitol's strategy of political control extends to the weaponization of the natural world, transforming it into a tool for psychological and physical terror. Within five books, the series accompanies the lives of three main characters as they navigate this system from its origins to its dismantlement. This thesis discusses the political order of the Capitol in connection with themes of pastoralism,

counterinsurgency, class divisions, humanism and posthumanism, and self-identity, mostly in relation to the original trilogy's main character, Katniss Everdeen.

In the first chapter, I survey how natural landscapes are modified and restricted in ways that limit people's affinity with them, in order to subjugate individuals and enclose them within the narrow, heavily policed spaces of their world. What could once be a source of hope and optimism becomes the epitome of hostility, eliminating any association with hopefulness it may once have held. I explore this idea through Katniss and her relationship with the natural spaces in and outside her district and the Games' arena, where she must grapple with nature presented to her both in its raw and modified aspects. I also emphasize and expand on how a dystopian, virtually totalitarian government can construct a system so deeply embedded in its society's culture that individuals become disconnected from human nature and, ultimately, from their own identities, mostly regarding inequitable food distributions and distorted consumeristic cultures. Finally, I will begin introducing the extent to which the Capitol uses the natural environment as a weapon both within and outside the epicenter that is the games arena. The overarching theme of Part 1 is thus the interactions of class and nature and how each can significantly affect the other.

Throughout the chapter, I use the terms totalitarianism, dystopian, pastoral, and American Dream to characterize some of the ideas I intend to convey. Hence, for clarification, while there is significant disagreement on what comprises a totalitarian regime, for this thesis, I define it as a government that exerts complete control over its constituents through brutal means, deliberately fostering division and positioning citizens in opposition to one another, often making explicit its antagonism toward particular groups, which are characteristics that Phillip W. Gray identifies as common to such regimes in his work on the topic.³ I explore this concept through the lens of the dystopian genre, which is constructed as

³ Gray, 3-6.

an exaggerated and pessimistic take on the existing parameters defined by modern society, as an attempt to delve into and critique these systems by stressing their absurdities at an intensified scale. As Fatima Vieira argues in “The Concept of Utopia,” the dystopian genre is constituted by the interplay of scientific and technological progress alongside the type of totalitarianism mentioned above.⁴ I must also note that I characterize the Capitol as virtually totalitarian, instead of fully. Although this government does exert totalitarian control in several aspects of Panem’s world, there are minimal flaws within its system—elements that fall outside of its control and eventually contribute to its ruin.⁵ Also, I discuss pastoralism as a trope where rural ways of living are seen as ideal for humanity, away from the troubles of ever-evolving urban spaces. Lastly, I categorize the American Dream briefly in the chapter as the common ultimate goal sought by people in American territory to achieve upward mobility in society through hard work and dedication to fit in with modern societal expectations.

In the second chapter, I examine how the construction of the society of Panem can be further explored through an analysis of the depiction of animals throughout the series and how these portrayals shape the narrative. I also categorize the mechanisms through which the Capitol attempts to exert its control, as explored in Part 1, here as dystopian humanism: a distorted version of humanism that seeks to create its own sense of truth and morality to further secure power. I approach these with a consideration of posthumanistic ideals. Inspired by Cary Wolfe’s approach to posthumanism, I work to move beyond common assumptions about the place of people, animals, nature, and artificiality in the world, so that I can recontextualize human experience in relation to non-human animals⁶ I argue that the conventional hierarchies separating humans and animals become increasingly blurred, producing a dynamic of people as animals and animals as people, resulting in the exploitation

⁴ Vieira, 18.

⁵ This is further developed in Part 2 of this thesis.

⁶ Wolfe, xxv.

of both groups for the benefit of those in power. Specifically, I analyze how wild animals, Capitol-engineered mutations, and district citizens are all positioned as inferior to the governing authority. By stripping these groups of their agency, the Capitol legitimizes a system in which those in power assume the right to manipulate, control, and overall use them as they see fit.

While the first part of this thesis discusses the characteristics of Panem's government as a virtually totalitarian power within its urban setting, with the capability of amplifying its control into the natural world that surrounds it, Part 2 aims to expand this idea by pointing out how the government's desire to expand beyond its borders creates a significant flaw in its authority. This chapter points out that the series's narrative leads to the understanding that attempts to control nature, although momentarily successful to certain extents, are bound to fail, given that natural powers are unpredictable and exist beyond artificial sets of rules that compose a society. This is mainly represented by the figure of the Mockingjay, a bird species created from the mating between Capitol-engineered birds called Jabberjays and Mockingbirds found in the wild. The creation of such birds was an unexpected event, something the Capitol could not keep under control, and eventually led to its ruin. This chapter also explores how other animals play a role in the narrative, highlighting both the Capitol's strengths and weaknesses. These include wolf mutts (wolf-human hybrids), genetically-modified monkeys, and the lizard-like creatures Katniss encounters on her way. I also analyze Capitol citizens and their relationships with body image, often having beauty standards that envision looking animal-like, and what that further reveals about the role nature plays within urban settings. The overarching theme of Part 2 is thus the exploration of how attempts of absolute control by artificial governments in this dystopian world are bound to fail due to nature's refusal to be fully contained or predicted.

Overall, the goal of this paper is to analyze how the weaponization of nature in a dystopian universe, in this case, *The Hunger Games*, can shape the way we understand the relationships among fauna, flora, citizens, and dystopian governments.

PART 1- CLASS AND NATURE

“District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety,”⁷ she mutters. Early in the morning of July 4th, sometime in a futuristic post-apocalyptic United States, Katniss wakes up in preparation for another yearly Reaping.⁸ But before heading to the ceremony that will forever change her life, she puts on her old hunting gear and heads into the woods beyond her district.

From this place, we are invisible, but a clear view of the valley teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, [...] the day is glorious, [...] the food is wonderful. [...] Everything would be perfect [...] if all the day off meant was roaming the mountains with Gale, hunting for tonight’s supper. But instead we have to be standing in the square at two.⁹

If it weren’t for the haunting thoughts of the reality that awaits her back home, in this state, Katniss could live happily. Her familiar woods provide the sustenance and comfort her district never could. The trees and bushes provide the food and shelter she needs to spend the day. Her father’s bow and arrows help her catch the rabbits and squirrels that make up supper and some extra income back home by selling them to wealthier residents. In the woods, even among the wild animals the fence keeps from the district, Katniss feels momentarily safe, safer than she would ever feel under the totalitarian control of the Capitol.¹⁰ Yet, in this lull, thoughts of the incoming ceremony remind her of reality. Although her routine serves for her brief enjoyment in the wild, it is ultimately constructed to provide for her and her family’s survival back home. Ever since her father’s death, she has become the sole provider for her

⁷ Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press, 2008, p. 6. Subsequent references to Collins’s works will be cited using abbreviated titles (*THG*, *CF*, *MJ*, and *TBOSAS*) followed by page numbers.

⁸ In *The Hunger Games* series, the Reaping is an annual drawing event on July 4th where a boy and a girl from each of the 12 districts of Panem, their country, are chosen to enter a deadly conflict inside an arena where the winner is determined to be the sole survivor.

⁹ *THG*, 09.

¹⁰ *THG*, 8-13.

family through poaching, though any activities done by trespassing the district's borders are punishable by public execution. As the Capitol's system refuses to provide enough means for survival to its people, it is up to some citizens like Katniss to break rules to make ends meet. When she hunts for food to feed her family, she briefly comes into contact with a less surveilled part of her world that seems to be somewhat free, but it isn't. The Capitol's hoarding of resources may result in the electric fences being dead most of the time due to the lack of power coming to the districts, which facilitates Katniss's escape. But she is aware that the smallest mistakes made in the wilderness can trigger the Capitol's surveillance apparatus, which rarely, but possibly, hovers above the trees.¹¹ Thus, the government of urban spaces has also acquired control over nature, consequently causing her happiest moments to operate under the shadow of the government's control.

Katniss's fondness for nature as an escape from the brutal realities of urban settings is a demonstration of a kind of pastoral ideology. Throughout literature and in common thought, ranging from early Western settlers' accounts to current pleas for traditionalism, there has been the idea that living in urban spaces has led people to live unhappy lifestyles and that the return to a simpler, pastoral life connected to nature ought to be the ultimate way to happiness and comfort. The idea presented was usually created as a way to soften reality, to confirm hope, and to show that the world can be a better place. Lawrence Buell expands on this idea in *The Environmental Imagination* by explaining how pastoralism is a "conceptual apparatus" present in Western thoughts of people who want to live more connected with nature. Yet, this is often an illusion created to avoid dealing with real problems in the world or as an excuse for oppression.¹² Hence, the pastoral settings become a kind of utopia, an imagined place of perfection that presents solutions to current problems of civilization. The utopian pastoral, therefore, conflicts directly with the dystopian world of Panem. Although it has been

¹¹ *THG*, 82.

¹² Buell, 31-33.

relatively common to associate retreating to nature with a peaceful utopian dream, Katniss' journey in *The Hunger Games* blurs this dichotomy by introducing a world where urban powers have constructed both physical and psychological barriers between people and nature.

In the same opening scene mentioned at the beginning, Gale briefly mentions to Katniss, "We could do it, you know, [...] Leave the district. Run off. Live in the woods," an idea she immediately calls "preposterous" at the thought of leaving her family or having them in the woods. Attempting to make her brief moment of peace into a possible permanent one may have its appeal to the character, yet the connections she has to her urban setting are far stronger than her desire to flee. Thus, the idea of the pastoral for Katniss may be problematic at first, when she uses it to entertain running away, leaving her urban world behind. It is impulsive, not considering the further consequences of not knowing what is beyond the few places in the woods she knows, or what challenges may come with it. Yet the connection with her friends and family gradually grounds her thinking, exposing her to the reality that she cannot escape and would not be successful in doing so if she tried. In reality, she herself breaks the illusion and admits to herself that she wouldn't have a real plan, and running to the woods with her inexperienced family wouldn't give a real solution to her problems.¹³

In truth, Katniss depends on the wilderness to sustain her life in her urban setting, not as a utopian fantasy. It may temporarily bring her comfort, but ultimately, the life that awaits her return haunts her actions in the wilderness, revealing how her government has acquired nearly omnipotent control over their reality. Back in the district, when the time comes for tributes to be selected, Katniss finds herself volunteering to go in place of her little sister. Her worst nightmares seem to have become true. Beyond being constricted to her fenced home, she is now required to enter a competition designed to kill her as quickly as possible. Now that she will be going to compete in the Hunger Games, she can no longer provide for her

¹³ *THG*, 10.

family and worries about what might become of their future. In that moment, she briefly reflects, from the Reaping's stage, "I can see the hills I climbed this morning with Gale. For a moment, I yearn for something... the idea of us leaving the district... making our way in the woods... but I know I was right about running off. Because who else would have volunteered for Prim?"¹⁴ Even in moments of desperation, her thoughts of a possible escape are interrupted by her commitment to her family—her commitment, that is, to engaging in the world as it is.

This dependence exposes an uneven relationship to the wilderness between Katniss and those around her. After all, the skills she has acquired in nature are unusual within the social contexts of her district. Her family's inexperience in the natural world can be attributed to the Capitol's aims of disconnecting humans from their natural means of subsistence. Districts are surrounded by fences that get in the way of any connection with the woods, and even if other citizens were able to get past them as Katniss does, they would not have the knowledge to use such spaces. Katniss can ground herself thanks to her father's experience with nature, which was passed on to her. In contrast, her family lacks this knowledge and experience and receives a limited education, which makes any attempt at survival in the wilderness unrealistic. Hence, her connection with nature and desire to connect with it can be both problematic and also the reason she manages to survive and fight back against these authoritarian powers.

The Capitol is the portrait of a totalitarian government that characterizes itself especially by exerting this nearly complete control over all its citizens. Not only do they control the physical borders surrounding each district, but they also control the production and distribution of food, education, and the divisions of labor across the districts, with the primary goals of exploiting their resources and preventing insurgence. In District 12, for

¹⁴ *THG*, 25.

example, “it all comes back to coal at school.” Although students are given lessons in basic reading, math, and sometimes even music, everything for the education of the poor is constructed to condition them to see the structure of their society as not only the norm but as matter-of-factly ideal. As District 12 is the primary coal producer for their country, the children are taught early on about work at the mines alongside the history of Panem that led them to where they are at. Katniss recalls it being “a lot of blather about what we owe the Capitol,” knowing there is definitely more they aren’t teaching them, but not caring much because “I don’t see how it will help me get food on the table.”¹⁵ Consequently, the reality that is presented inside the fences of Panem is everything district citizens know. From birth to death, they are all assigned specific roles in their industry to ensure plentiful resources for their government, while being taught that they not only owe this to them but also that it is not enough and that they must be endlessly punished.

While major leaders are aware of this control, other citizens of the Capitol are completely oblivious that their luxury comes at others’ harm. The perpetuation of this system for many decades, as Jennifer Harrison explains, has desensitized Capitol citizens from the suffering of the producers of the goods they consume as well as from the material reality of them, resulting in a long cycle of ignorance and indifference to people and nature. Nevertheless, Capitol citizens are also oppressed by their government as their entire identity surrounds the consumption of such goods, to which their relationship is superficial.¹⁶ They subjugate district people without understanding any of the reasons and consequences, and indulge in severe practices of consumerism designed to further perpetuate the system rather than provide any personal fulfillment. Thus, this behavior can be categorized as a form of slow violence, as coined by Rob Nixon. Nixon proposes that, in relation to our present world, companies and governments affect the environment and policies to gradually worsen the lives

¹⁵ *THG*, 42.

¹⁶ Harrison, 159.

of the lower classes while profiting from their endeavors; meanwhile, the privileged consumers often remain, at first, oblivious to the harm being done through their consumption.¹⁷

Collins's dystopian fiction imagines the progression of this idea: in a futuristic space, these gradual acts of violence have accumulated enough to become noticeable and, beyond unbearable, to those being subjugated. Whereas the past of Panem was a modern United States that sustained inequality by cultivating the fantasy that lower classes might someday achieve the American Dream of unlimited consumption and fulfillment, the futuristic world has fully created a gap where the poor are expected to stay poor and are completely stripped of the opportunity of acquiring resources on their own, while the rich indulge in resources. The idea that one may climb ranks to achieve comfort remains, but it is only applied to one person each year, the winner of the Hunger Games. Still, the Capitol's omnipresent oppression is so aggravated that the majority of its citizens do not perceive the Games as a viable path to comfort.

In fact, beyond reinforcing this harsh lifestyle in citizens' everyday routines, the Capitol mobilizes the Hunger Games as a mechanism through which this oppression is further made visible. Although only twenty-four children out of millions are eventually sent to compete each year, the process of selecting them is designed to incite fear and enforce submission for all, mainly through the weaponization of food. Participants are selected to take part in this event through a nationwide drawing called the Reaping. Each year, a child's name is entered once, but children may request to have their names entered more times in exchange for tesserae.¹⁸ Although this is something deemed voluntary, the Capitol's constant

¹⁷ Nixon, introduction.

¹⁸ Tesserae are each worth a year's supply of grain/flour and oil for one person. They are distributed to children ages 12-18 in the series in exchange for an extra entry of their names in the Reaping lottery. For example, at the age of 12, instead of only having her name once in the lottery, Katniss opted to enter it four times in order to receive 3 tesserae for her, her mother, and sister. The entries are cumulative so by the time Katniss is 16, her name is present in the games' lottery twenty times instead of the regular five (*THG*, 13).

hoarding of resources pushes many children into increasing their chance of becoming tributes for basic provisions, feeling the anxiety of the possibility of being sent to imminent death in exchange for satiating their hunger. This governmental control over food and foodways clearly demarks its power over citizens. Historically, not only does food account for survival, but it also has a social and cultural impact on people. It is by producing and sharing sustenance that people build strong, lasting connections not only to the land they live in but also with each other¹⁹. When the Capitol decides who eats what and when, it further separates people from each other, forcing them into a constant state of survival. That way, the chances of them uniting against the higher power are unlikely.

Their assertion of control reaches its extreme through the execution of the Hunger Games. The construction of the arena is idealized to encompass the struggles already faced in the districts, intensifying them to an unprecedented level. With that, the Capitol chooses to employ the modification of natural elements to trick and further harm participants. Yet, the arena was not always an environment of modified nature used for oppression. In the prequel to the main series, it is told that the original arena for the games was nothing more than a dilapidated space. It is described as being oval, empty, with brick walls, and bleachers: a former stadium for military demonstrations and the old local circus²⁰. In this setting, tributes were only given weapons and an empty space with no food, medicine, or any other supplies beyond orders to massacre each other.

Yet, some of the most significant moments where the government's absolute power can be felt come from the ways in which nature is portrayed. Originally, although the arena was bare, tributes' quarters were located at the monkey house at the Capitol's local zoo: a small ditch surrounded by bars separating them from the spectators outside.²¹ The message conveyed was that tributes were just like animals in cages, a lower species that can be used

¹⁹ Birkenstein, 151.

²⁰ *TBOSAS*, 135.

²¹ *TBOSAS*, 47.

for temporary entertainment. Although this treatment of lower-class people as inferior animals demarcated clear class divisions, the banality of the setting eventually reduced the Capitol elites' interest in the competition. They became repetitive, weakening the Capitol's intent to keep its audience unrelentingly engaged. As a result, the Capitol developed new strategies to reinstate dominance and increase alienation by creating enhanced arenas that combine spectacle, danger, and familiarity in order to renew engagement. Additionally, by allowing Capitol citizens to sponsor and bet on tributes, the regime effectively funds the Games, turning them into a self-sustaining counterinsurgency mechanism at no cost to the Capitol. In their own words, this works because "compassion is key to the Games."²² In other words, having audiences care about tributes while still viewing them as inferior is important to the success of the regime in keeping the wealthy satisfied and the poor powerless. Money and food are the two elements that fuel this regime. This method is established early on in the history of Panem. It is symbolically referenced in its name, a reference to *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses).

By the time of Katniss, over sixty-four years of this developing system have passed. The arena in its reality becomes an outdoor space that "can hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland,"²³ further instilling the sense that not only can natural elements be used as entertainment apparatuses but that their usage is fundamental to the Games' effectiveness. Whereas dystopian stories focus on the severe lack of nature in their world, which is the most common indicator that a place has become dystopian,²⁴ the arena appears as a contrast to the contained reality of Panem in a full display of nature. When first entering the arena, Katniss is surprised by the bright sunlight and the "hopeful smell of pinetrees."²⁵ The place is characterized as a forested temperate wilderness, at the surface not very different

²² *TBOSAS*, 93.

²³ *THG*, 18.

²⁴ Hughes, 23.

²⁵ *THG*, 147.

from what she's used to being around. The usage of the replication of nature as a stage for the Games' action works symbolically, in that, in every way, people are bound to fall under the control of their government.

Furthermore, the Capitol's culture of excess reveals that abundance, like scarcity, functions as a mechanism of control, producing a form of ideological entrapment that mirrors the physical violence imposed on the districts. During Katniss's visit to the Capitol for their victory tour, she is invited to a party at President Snow's house. The reality is completely different from what she's used to. The narrator states that "the real star is the food... Everything you can think of, and things that you have never dreamed of, lie in wait." The place has everything she could ever dream of eating. She gets full quickly, yet when she tells her styling team that she's full, they give her a drink to stimulate vomiting. "Of course [the drink induces vomiting], so you can keep eating... Everyone does it."²⁶ Jeff Birkenstein explains that "food scarcity in *The Hunger Games* is, fundamentally, a tool of oppression, manipulation, and subjugation, as its opposite, gluttony, can also be."²⁷ While districts starve to death, people in the Capitol lead wasteful lives as their usual routine. Their condition is normalized as they live in their own kind of arena. President Snow's home in this passage is a demonstration of their alienation. His place is decorated with fake elements that resemble natural components. The whole place is decorated with flowers, exotic fish, and the ceiling is modified to look like a starry night. The mansion is symbolically a mini arena that traps its visitors ideologically, as opposed to the physical entrapment of the tributes in the Games' arena. They think that they are free to go, but their vision of the world only exists inside the Capitol. They cannot, nor do they want, to leave; they are ideologically stuck, resulting in a physical entrapment that is felt as voluntary and does not need to be directly brutally enforced to incite fear into submission, as it is done to districts.

²⁶ CF, 76-80.

²⁷ Birkenstein, 158.

On top of this, Katniss's Mockingjay pin has become a fashion trend. Briefly before her departure, her friend Madge gifts her the pin, a symbol of her district to be worn in the Games.²⁸ Katniss does not think much of it at first, but as the series progresses, her image becomes directly associated with it, becoming the central symbol of the narrative.²⁹ Yet, people around the Capitol fail to grasp its real meaning, pinning it to their clothing, embroidering it directly under clothes, and tattooing it on their skin, with the only significance being to them that it is the winner's token³⁰. What was originally a symbol of resistance against the Capitol has its meaning stripped away and now serves citizens as a celebration of the regime; they wear Katniss's emblem to congratulate her for perpetuating the system, overlooking her final moments in the arena, in which she directly enacted rebellion.

The Capitol strips away any true, natural meaning of life to create its own rules and illusions that support the perpetuation of its control. They, in a way, create their own kind of cultural fantasy, one that is opposed to the pastoral and that emphasizes the faux and exaggerated. The Capitol's citizenry's embrace of this appreciation for what is false and excessive mirrors Buell's description of the Western pastoral, as they both serve as aesthetic tools to evade responsibility. While people like Katniss dream of a peaceful life in nature, the pastoral of Capitol citizens comes to seem like a dollhouse of indulgence. They think that they want to get close to a real, perfect world, but how can they when their reality has been completely modified? Their flowers are fake, and the things they deem important are not really. They modify their own bodies, at times, to feel more animalistic, which is deemed beautiful. Their ideology is skewed at a level much above the people in the districts. The series suggests that the more privilege and comfort you can give someone, the easier it is to control them. By this logic, the wealthy live in the Capitol and fund the exploitation of the

²⁸ *THG*, 38.

²⁹ This is fully elaborated in Part 2 of this thesis.

³⁰ *CF*, 78.

districts for resources for the price of a perpetuated illusion, while district people are taught only a fraction of that, not in the hopes of convincing them, but rather just ensuring they play a small role in continuing such an illusion for Capitol people. Their world is inspired by natural landscapes being modified into faux natural, but they do not know or realize it is an artificial construction because it is all they have ever known.

Together, these are some of the ways in which the dystopian government of Panem manipulates natural elements to exert control over its citizens, creating distinct societal divisions crafted to reinforce the system. While Katniss's outings into the woods momentarily gesture at a pastoral ideal, one which harbors meaningful connections with nature as a place for comfort and sustenance, the reality is that this place cannot exist outside the reach of the Capitol. Thus, the narrative briefly entertains the concept of pastoralism but ultimately rejects it as a way to demonstrate the advanced corruption of nature within a dystopian universe. The apparent dichotomy between nature and urban settings is nonexistent, since the government is able to extend its power beyond its borders. Also, through the control of foodways, manipulating both the scarcity and excess of food, the Capitol not only signals that such resources are expendable for some, but also consolidates control by reducing some populations to the project of basic subsistence while ideologically entrapping others within a culture of indulgence. This creates two apparent opposite realities that serve the same purpose: the maintenance of power. This way, both starvation and gluttony serve as tools of subjugation that prevent insurgency, reinforcing the Capitol's totalitarian control while also shaping the way people understand their relationship to resources, nature, and one another. Moreover, the usage of natural elements for entertainment in the arena further blurs the distinctions between the natural and what is false and exaggerated. By weaponizing these landscapes, the Capitol reformulates how nature is perceived. Whereas it is traditionally linked to ideals of freedom and peace, it is now reconfigured to mirror the broader

convictions of a regime that leaves nothing untouched. This chapter has shown that the Capitol's control through an absolute system extends across physical spaces, social structures, and ideological frameworks. Even symbols of resistance, such as Katniss's Mockingjay pin, risk being absorbed into this culture, being stripped of their rebellious meaning. The dystopian reality of Panem not only lies in different violent methods but also in its capacity to redefine natural concepts that could otherwise offer the possibility of insurgence, and consequently, escape.

PART 2- PEOPLE/ANIMALS AND NATURAL UNPREDICTABILITY

Placed on the front cover of every *Hunger Games* book,³¹ the figure of the Mockingjay consolidates itself as an important motif in the series without much effort. In the first book, the bird is portrayed with its head down, carrying an arrow in its beak, a reference to Katniss, who mainly hunts as an archer. The position of its head indicates a state of submission she is forced to comply with, as the surrounding ring serves as a representation of the government, demonstrating the entrapment she finds herself in. The predominant golden color throughout further consolidates a kind of uniformity that is expected in her universe, one in which the system functions and is expected to keep functioning as such. In book number two, the bird is now portrayed in a reddish-brown hue, surrounded by a black ring divided into twelve parts. It is followed by a red and yellow fade all around. The difference in colors begins to show a disruption of the pattern, a break in uniformity. The bird's head, this time, begins to look forward slightly, indicating a behavior change, one of defiance or determination. Lastly, in the final installment of the series, the Mockingjay is shown in white, a color for hope, the ring that once encapsulated it shatters into pieces, now that its wings are spread wide and its head faces up in a bright blue background, an indicator that a drastic change has occurred. On this account, as the covers progress, we gradually observe as they tell Katniss's journey from a regular citizen entrapped under the absolute control of her government to becoming the face of the revolution, which brings the system down.

As previously mentioned, Katniss possesses a Mockingjay pin, which she wears in the Games as a symbol of her district,³² which further strengthens her association with the figure. Her image being associated with the bird highlights a significant thematic occurrence in the series, in which animals and people share similar categories of purpose, often being portrayed in a similar kind and importance that shapes the narrative. Beyond the book covers, the figure

³¹ This is in reference to the original series book covers by Scholastic, 2008-2010.

³² *THG*, 38.

of the Mockingjay is the central symbol throughout the series. Alongside Katniss, they both represent a major failure of the Capitol's system, representing hope and the power behind nature's unpredictability. Katniss and the Mockingjay are thus paired as parallel figures, both functioning as unintended consequences of the Capitol's control, whose very existence exposes the limits of its power. The system that once showed itself to be nearly absolute has crumbled from within as a result of its own actions.

Although this government mostly succeeds at building its control to be absolute within its urban setting, it ultimately underestimates the force of unpredictability. Everything about the Capitol is fully projected to work in specific, desired ways. Their power comes from creating a solid culture with subjugation and indulgence to keep it running. It depends on citizens following specific tasks, living specific lives with set expectations. I characterize their philosophy as a kind of dystopian humanism, a set of values based on the corruption of what we can categorize as humanism. Whereas humanism is a broad philosophical field that at its core emphasizes human reason, scientific advancement, and a commitment to truth and morality, supporting the pursuit of human interest,³³ this dystopian context creates a limited and manipulated version of this concept. Instead of upholding the intellectual and moral integrity of these principles in their true form, the Capitol instrumentalizes them, creating its own sense of truth and morality, using technological advancements to uplift its power and suppress others' expressions. It puts a certain class of humans as superior holders of the truth, in this case, President Snow and his allies, leading others to follow their will without question. Framing the Capitol in this way helps navigate the understanding of Katniss as an opposition to the regime, as she embodies what I characterize as a posthuman persona, one that decenters the idea of man as superior, central, and absolute, blurring the boundaries

³³ Wolfe, xi.

created to distinguish people from other animals, and also questioning the roles of science and technology in the matter.³⁴

Taking this into account, Mockingjays are the products of this unpredictability that undermines the Capitol. In the narrative, Mockingjays are semi-bioengineered birds, a product of the union between genetically-modified Jabberjays and wild Mockingbirds. Over seventy-four years before the events of the series, all districts were at war against the Capitol. As a way to spy on rebels, the government created and deployed Jabberjays, all strictly male homing birds able to memorize and repeat complete human conversations. Once revolutionaries discovered this plot, they purposefully spread false information to the birds, which led the Capitol to cease its work and abandon the birds to die off in the wild, but they did not do so.³⁵ Little is known about Panem's universe before the establishment of the Capitol and districts, as we see in the series. Yet, given the nature of its restrictions on people, especially when it comes to isolating them from nature and punishing them with hunger, it can be speculated that the people mentioned above had connections with their environment, enough to be knowledgeable about the place that surrounds them. In a search for control, the Capitol underestimated the ability of people and their connections to nature, which led to the failure of their plans. In addition, as it released those birds in the wild, it also underestimated what nature can accomplish by itself. As Alice Curry poses, "these hybrid birds... are themselves symbols of counter-hegemonic resistance, joining human and nonhuman voices together in a demonstration of mutual agency,"³⁶ highlighting how their hybrid nature allows them to operate beyond the Capitol's intended design, embodying a form of resistance rooted in unpredictability. Eventually, the product of this mismanagement plays a crucial role in the dismantlement of the regime through how it has influenced Katniss.

³⁴ Guanio-Uluru, 57.

³⁵ *THG*, 43.

³⁶ Curry, 174.

Thus, in the same sense, Katniss is another product of the Capitol's mismanagement. The government focuses on directing most of its resources to the Capitol, leaving districts with barely anything. Without proper electricity, the fences of District 12 rarely work, permitting Katniss to slip right past them into the wilderness.³⁷ The lack of food distribution propels the creation of the black market, where she sells her game. With that, Katniss continues to acquire crucial knowledge beyond what the Capitol allows, as its greed lets Katniss slip through its control. This long-standing negligence led people like her father to also hold similar connections to nature, which were then passed on to her. Katniss notes that her father was also fond of Mockingjays, whistling a complicated song that they then would sing back to him; "... there's something comforting about the little bird. It's like having a piece of my father with me."³⁸ In the way that Panem's government inflicts a slow violence against its citizens, the few like Katniss and her father who manage to lead lives partially outside the government's parameters present a form of slow resistance, a countereffect that slowly disrupts the Capitol's establishment of total authority. Eventually, though Katniss's father dies due to a workplace incident, whose poor conditions also come through the Capitol's withholding of resources, his legacy lives on through her. This inheritance of knowledge and connection to nature becomes one of the very forces the Capitol fails to anticipate. Thus, while the government maintains its power for nearly a century, its inability to account for such forms of natural and human unpredictability ultimately contributes to its downfall.

Furthermore, Katniss's upbringing parallels the creation of the Mockingjay. Her district is divided into different social classes, somewhat similar to the major class division of Panem. Hence, while her father comes from the poorer outskirts, called the Seam, her mother comes from a better-off family living near the district's downtown. This exogamous union,

³⁷ *THG*, 4-5.

³⁸ *THG*, 43.

much like the one between the different birds, results in her as an unexpected type of citizen. Instead of fully falling to the Capitol's mercy, she recognizes her place within the world as a caretaker who uses her experience to provide for her family, consequently becoming even more of an anomaly by making the sacrifice of volunteering for her sister and entering the Games. Guanio-Uluru proposes that consequently, Katniss "gradually comes to identify with the genderless, cross-species of the Mockingjay," which I see as a reflection of her posthuman persona: she exists between categories, shaped by both social and natural forces that disrupt the framework through which power is maintained. Her portrayal in the series goes beyond one that follows traditional humanism, including gender expectations, allowing the influence of her character to be one beyond what is expected of someone in her universe.

Although Katniss's unpredictability is something that her government underestimated, they still attempted to suppress her persona to best fit their parameters, for instance, by changing her relationship with hunting. At the beginning of Katniss's journey, readers meet her primarily as a hunter. She finds herself deeply connected with the woods bordering her district as a relief from the Capitol's oppression. Yet, this relationship drastically changes the closer she gets to the Capitol's control, which becomes more evident in *Catching Fire*. After winning her first Games, Katniss no longer needs to hunt. She is wealthy enough that her family can afford to live by legally purchasing supplies within the limits permitted by their government. Although this brings them comfort, Katniss then finds herself embedded in a life further changed by the Capitol, partially losing one of the few places she considered home. Early in the novel, Katniss attempts her best to reclaim the woods by occasionally hunting. She views the activity as a "natural gift," regardless of its necessity arising from adversity. It is "the best day of the week," she reflects, as she skillfully captures several small animals.³⁹ Her upbringing in the woods shaped her self-perception in a way that she considers herself

³⁹ CF, 6.

integrated into the ecosystem surrounding her. Hunting is for her a disalienating⁴⁰ activity of sorts, which further integrates her divergent persona. She is a hunter and provider before anything else. However, she is stripped of this identity the moment she becomes closer to the Capitol. She expresses great dissatisfaction whenever returning from the woods, being forced to hide and exchange her tools and comfortable clothing for pricier goods deemed “appropriate for someone of [her] status.”⁴¹ The heirloom leather jacket and hunting boots are exchanged for an uncomfortable coat and machine-made shoes. Thus, by becoming interwoven with the Capitol, Katniss is forced to gradually let go of her hunter persona to become prey under the eyes of a government that despises her. Being an unknown citizen may have led her to a similar struggling fate as her neighbors, but it nevertheless allowed her a sense of freedom over her circumstances. Her posthuman self struggles to let go of such a crucial aspect of her character, one that allowed her to express freedom and resist the kind of control that now holds more power over her. The Capitol influences her every step like never before. Hence, her place in the world shifts from hunter to prey.

The fluidity of her character plays a crucial role in her fate during the Games. Katniss’s interactions with wildlife demonstrate the magnitude and complexity of the changes she undergoes following her approximation to the Capitol, ultimately leading her to become a failed experiment of the government herself, beyond just an anomaly of the natural world. This is best shown through her encounters with mutated animals inside the arena. During her second participation in the Games in *Catching Fire*, after being attacked with poisonous gas, Katniss finds herself lying on the ground when she notices a troop of monkeys observing her. “[T]here’s nothing like that in our woods at home. But I must have seen a picture... because when I see the creatures, the same word comes to my mind... For a while, we quietly observe

⁴⁰ Bland, 35.

⁴¹ *CF*, 7.

one another, humans and monkeys.”⁴² The sighting of wildlife brings her a brief sense of normalcy and safety, momentarily obscuring the artificiality of the environment, yet their presence quickly becomes “ominous,” and a slight movement triggers their attack.⁴³ Contrary to the animals of District 12, these mutations are faster, slicker, and more ruthless, their familiarity functioning as a reminder of the Capitol’s control. At the same time, Katniss herself bears the marks of that control. “In just the short time it takes to cross to the edge of the jungle, I become aware of the change... I sense the mass of warm bodies poised above us.”⁴⁴ Due to an explosion during her first Games, she became deaf in one ear, which was later repaired by the Capitol⁴⁵, and when she encounters the monkey mutts, she suspects that either her years of hunting or that her ear was reconstructed “better than intended” allows her to sense them before seeing them.⁴⁶ Her early detection is crucial for her survival, a contradiction of the Capitol’s intention to eliminate her, suggesting that she, like the mutts and the Mockingjay, has been reshaped into something beyond the Capitol’s design. What had once been a source of refuge becomes a weaponized environment engineered to break her, even as it inadvertently contributes to her survival, positioning her as both subject and failure of the Capitol’s experimentation.

It is precisely through this failed experimentation that Katniss’s place within her world is redefined. Her relationship with animals maps this shift, as her association with the Capitol inverts her reality from a comfortable hunter of wildlife to a distressed prey of mutations. The monkeys’ behavior makes this reversal explicit: “Fangs bared, hackles raised, claws shooting out like switchblades.”⁴⁷ The way they slowly surround her in silence and wait for the minimal reaction mirrors the very hunting strategies Katniss once employed in

⁴² *CF*, 303.

⁴³ *CF*, 303.

⁴⁴ *CF*, 307.

⁴⁵ *THG*, 223. *CF*, 41.

⁴⁶ *CF*, 307.

⁴⁷ *CF*, 309.

the woods. Once an attack is triggered, they extend their claws to catch their prey, placing Katniss in the very position she once occupied as predator. She is ultimately being fed to animals inside this big cage, a dystopian zoo. Through this reversal, the narrative continues to expose the extent of the Capitol's power, revealing its ability to corrupt the natural world to assert dominance, while also tracing Katniss's transformation from District 12 hunter to the face of the revolution.

There are also other ways in which Katniss's persona blurs with an animalistic portrayal, yet when in the hands of the Capitol, the association is rather negative. This transformation becomes evident at the end of her first Games. When Katniss and Peeta become part of the final three contestants for their game, another tribute accidentally dies from "nightlock" poisonous berries she stole from Peeta, assuming they were safe to eat. Katniss recognizes their nature, alerting her friend, who suggests they discard them, yet she keeps them, aiming to fool their final opponent into poisoning himself.⁴⁸ This is a moment in the novel where the Capitol's corruption of its people becomes evident as it is represented directly on the protagonist. Since the beginning, Katniss has shown herself to be a provider. She has a nurturing nature, which is exactly why she finds herself in the Games after volunteering for her sister. Even during the Games, she continues to take care of the few allies she makes. Her life's purpose up until that moment has surrounded ensuring her family and friends' survival. It has always been at the cost of the lives of animals and plants she found in the woods that she ensured that the people in her life survived. A few moments before Foxface's death, Katniss reflects to herself that even if she wins the Games, she is not sure of what her life might look like. She wonders if she might make it back home to "fame, to wealth..., a new kind of freedom," yet is not sure of what purpose her life may serve then as "most of [her life] has been consumed with the acquisition of food."⁴⁹ Her character is

⁴⁸ *THG*, 318.

⁴⁹ *THG*, 310-311.

shaped around exercising compassion. It is through her consideration for others that she stands out as a tribute like no other.⁵⁰ Her compassion is the ultimate motivator for her defiance against the Capitol, and without it, she herself admits her life loses purpose, with no fame and wealth being able to compensate for it. Yet, the Capitol has put her in a position where directly killing another person would come with the benefit of her survival. This government strips the natural aspects of an ecosystem and a persona that functions in harmony with others, and shifts the means for a purpose from collaborative to aggressive. Consequently, Katniss then acts with the irrationality that an animal fighting for survival would. This is a symbolic momentary shift in her perspective. Now, the lines between people and animals have begun to blur for her in a way she is not aware of yet. When Peeta shows Katniss the berries in his hands, she recalls her father's voice, instructing her that they are deadly. Her knowledge of these comes with the purpose to provide care, yet this time she plots to use it to murder another human being. She lets go of human morality to embrace a more animalistic self that functions by prioritizing survival. Still, although her compassionate self is threatened in this situation, a part of it remains when she protects her partner. The Capitol's power has been exerted on her in such a way that, in that moment, she is psychologically mutated to serve a similar purpose as mutts in the arena do. She partially turns into a more savage version of herself to guarantee her and Peeta's survival. She herself blurs the line between people and animals to serve a new purpose.

Nearing the end of the Games, Katniss and Peeta expect Cato, their final opponent, to come after them for their final conflict. However, over twenty-four hours have passed, and he has not yet made an attack. During that time, the two tributes of District 12 decide to enjoy a few moments of peace they encounter before their final conflict. Although injured and alert for threats, Katniss and Peeta also spare a brief moment to whistle a familiar song. Soon, the

⁵⁰ Burke, 561.

Mockingjay birds nearby join their chorus, forming a “lovely, unearthly harmony.”⁵¹ In that moment, they get to briefly experience a moment of peace. Even in moments of high tension, the sight of nature comforts Katniss in a way she is able to regroup herself. Yet soon after, she finds herself running away from what seems to be modified wolves. As she finds refuge, alongside Peeta and Cato atop a metal structure that the animals cannot climb, she notices something different about these mutations.

As they join together, they raise up again to stand easily on their back legs giving them an eerily human quality... [their fur colors] vary from jet black to what I can only describe as blond. There’s something else about them, something that makes the hair rise up on the back of my neck... and in that moment I realize what else unsettled me about the mutts... [Their eyes] are unmistakably human. And that revelation has barely registered when I notice the collar with the number 1 inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me. The blonde hair, the green eyes, the number... it’s Glimmer.⁵²

The other times Katniss has encountered mutations in her way often consisted of animals being enhanced with animalistic characteristics that were then weaponized. This time, the gaps separating people and animals blur in the literal sense, where the Capitol has managed to create mutations of deceased tributes with the same enhanced abilities for that purpose. Yet, it strategically kept just enough human characteristics to send a clear message to Katniss: that even in death, she is still bound to fall at the mercy of the Capitol’s power; that her body belongs to them in the same way other animals’ do, to be used to maintain the status quo. The symbolic way in which the narrative merges Katniss with the figure of the Mockingjay turns out to be positive because it relies on a harmonious natural power that seeks to find balance

⁵¹ *THG*, 329.

⁵² *THG*, 330-333.

in its whole. Yet, the blurring of humanity and animality in the context above ultimately serves the purpose of intimidating and justifying subjugation to ensure power for a few.

Later in the series, the Capitol once again manages to distort humanity and animality, this time directly in its urban setting. As Katniss navigates underground installations right beneath the Capitol, she comes into contact with lizard-like creatures. “A mix of human and lizard and who knows what else. White, tight reptilian skin smeared with gore, clawed hands and feet, their faces a mess of conflicting features.” These creations were designed to attack her specifically, her image being extremely evocative to them; she witnesses them “hissing, shrieking, [her name] as their bodies contort in rage.” At the sight of these creatures, Katniss reflects that

The true atrocities, the most frightening, incorporate a perverse psychological twist designed to terrify the victim... my heart [runs] wild, my skin turns to ice, my lungs unable to suck air... others are shouting at me, but I can't seem to respond... [someone orders me] to climb. My wooden, puppet limbs obey.⁵³

Similar to the wolf-mutts, these creatures were designed as an attempt to intimidate and diminish people like Katniss. Much of her compassion and character lie in her confidence to act in her and her loved ones' interests. Yet the sophisticated methods in which the Capitol induces her into fear momentarily weaken her character, reducing her to someone who reacts on instinct rather than a conscious actor. In that moment, Katniss briefly loses the aspects that define her. As she listens to others' commands, her movements are mechanical, involuntary, controlled, the effects of “puppet limbs.” The government's manipulation here goes beyond just a physical threat. It targets her psychologically, seeking to deteriorate her sense of self. By engineering these creatures, the Capitol further constructs a form of violence that attacks the concept of identity itself, their attacks going beyond just physical violence but ones that

⁵³ *MJ*, 311-312.

target perception, thinking, and emotions. In doing so, the Capitol reinforces its broader logic: that bodies, human and animal, are properties to be reshaped, repurposed, and deployed to maintain power.

While the distortion of lower-class human and animal bodies is deployed as a violent instrument of weaponization, parallel modifications among the upper classes are aestheticized, recast as fashion, and stripped of their association with brutality in the eyes of such citizens. Yet these practices introduce another form of bodily instability that the Capitol cannot fully regulate. During Katniss's first Games, she is assigned a prep team of Capitol citizens who are in charge of making her look presentable to the broader audience. They remove her body hair and deeply scrub her skin; partially satisfied with their work, one of these cosmeticians observes, "[she] almost looks human now." She is tossed around naked by these strange people, one "whose entire body has been dyed a pale shade of pea green," in their attempt to assimilate her; yet their actions are so inhuman that Katniss sees them as "so unlike people that I'm no more self-conscious than if a trio of oddly colored birds were pecking around my feet."⁵⁴ These Capitol citizens are not inherently malicious, but have been taught that people like Katniss are ultimately subhuman to them. Their sense of human identity revolves around the constant enhancement of their physical appearances, sometimes to be animal-like, as per what has been established as the norm by their government. There is a clear distortion of the human image applied by the government onto its citizens as another method to increase present class divides and further desensitize these upper-class citizens from the horrors imposed on the people of the lower class. The Capitol hence creates a new human truth, and an ideology that has distorted their citizen's sense of self, deeming non-human characteristics as the desired look for humanity. Alterations are viewed as something ideal and special: tattoos, unnatural skin tones, skin gem implants, decorative cuts,

⁵⁴ *THG*, 62.

curved talons, cat whiskers,⁵⁵ all are encouraged as part of the government's culture of self-indulgence. The wish of Capitol citizens for these modifications consequently aligns with posthuman aesthetics,⁵⁶ but their artificial aspects further emphasize the dystopian lenses of the narrative. Their version of posthuman is parallel to Katniss's, but with a different purpose and finality. Whereas Katniss's embodiment of a posthuman persona disalienates her from the influences of the Capitol through her association with the counter-hegemonic Mockingjay, their version serves the opposite purpose: to keep individuals contained in their ideology, even when they seek to acquire animal-like features.

Nevertheless, over an extended period of time, this culture fails to sustain itself. It is, in practice, an unstable process in which the body becomes increasingly difficult to regulate, exceeding the aesthetic ideals the Capitol imposes. Much like the unintended creation of the Mockingjay and Katniss as disruptive figures, the Capitol's culture of bodily modification produces outcomes that exceed its original intentions. During Katniss's invasion of the Capitol in the final acts of her journey, she meets an elderly Capitol citizen named Tigris. She is described as "an extreme example of surgical enhancement gone wrong" with facial features resulting in "a grotesque, semi-feline mask."⁵⁷ Tigris spent so much time adhering to the indulgent culture of constant improvement that she achieved embodied transformations that not even the Capitol deemed acceptable. Her body does not simply reflect adherence to the Capitol's standards, but also shows their degradation, as these modifications extend beyond what is desired into something the system can no longer categorize or control. As she morphed herself closer to looking like an animal, her worth became diminished. This shows further hypocrisy in the Capitol's ideology: while they celebrate animal-like features as decorative, aesthetic choices for the elite, they simultaneously discard the body once it can no

⁵⁵ *CF*, 49.

⁵⁶ Guanio-Uluru, 60.

⁵⁷ *MJ*, 318.

longer keep up with the ever-changing pace of fashion. Her situation represents the ultimate failure of this culture, a transition from active partaker to “grotesque” shadow, a consequence of following the standards set. With that, she resents the culture and becomes an ally to Katniss, assisting her to penetrate further beyond the Capitol’s borders and end their rule.⁵⁸ In this way, even at the center of power, where control appears most complete, nature’s unpredictability shows that it, in this case referring to the human body's reaction to constant artificial disruptions, is not confined to the outskirts of Panem, but is found at its core.

Eventually, joint forces across Panem manage to overthrow this government. Yet, similarly to Capitol powers, these rebellious forces also fail to account for nature’s unpredictability. At first, Katniss’s efforts to overthrow the Capitol were in favor of a new district leader, President Coin, to lead the country. Still, when she proposes to hold a symbolic Hunger Games with the children of Capitol leaders for revenge,⁵⁹ she fails to account for Katniss’s multifaceted persona. As a final act of rebellion against the injustices present in her world, Katniss assassinates Coin and causes district leaders to hold an emergency election, resulting in the welcoming of a new democratic government.⁶⁰ Throughout Katniss’s entire journey, she is depicted as an anomaly present in her world to serve a purpose beyond what would be expected of someone like herself. She rises as the face of the Capitol’s opposition and experiences change in her being as the story progresses, but she is still the nature-centered caretaker from the beginning of her journey who would not stand for an act of injustice and natural disruption such as the Hunger Games, regardless of its contestants. Coin’s government recognized that, yet it relied on Katniss’s resentment of the Capitol to influence her support, much as she had previously engaged in acts of violence in the arena, as mentioned earlier in this chapter; it relied on her character turning toward

⁵⁸ *MJ*, 332.

⁵⁹ *MJ*, 369.

⁶⁰ *MJ*, 378.

survival-driven violence. However, while the unpredictability of her character does allow for one last act of violence, it is one against the rebellion itself, further emphasizing the ultimate ineffectiveness of artificial governments relying on natural powers operating in expected ways.

Essentially, the Capitol's attempt to hold absolute control is ultimately destabilized by the same forces it seeks to subjugate. Through the parallel figures of the Mockingjay and Katniss, the narrative reveals how the boundaries between human and animal, and natural and artificial, are never as distinct as the Capitol imagines them to be. Instead, these boundaries remain blurred and constantly reshaped by interactions the government cannot fully anticipate or contain. What emerges from this permeability is a natural unpredictability, one that allows unexpected new forms of agency, resistance, and identity to emerge. The Capitol's dystopian humanism depends on the illusion that a government can be meticulously designed, that bodies can be fully categorized and controlled, and that nature itself can be manipulated into a stable instrument of power. Yet, as the creation of the Mockingjay shows, nature resists such closure. The unintended union between Jabberjays and Mockingbirds produces a being that goes beyond its original function. Similarly, Katniss's own upbringing positions her as an equally unintended consequence of the Capitol's design. In both cases, what was meant to reinforce authority instead exposes its fragility. Moreover, Katniss's shifting position between hunter and prey, and human and animal, emphasizes the instability of the categories in which the Capitol relies. Her encounters with mutts, her momentary embrace of survival-driven violence, and her psychological manipulation within the arena all reveal the extent to which the regime attempts to reconfigure life itself into predictable patterns. Even at its most invasive, the Capitol cannot fully architect the outcomes of its interventions. It is nature's unpredictability that becomes the catalyst of resistance. The woods beyond District 12, the echoing songs of Mockingjays, and the inherited knowledge passed from Katniss's father all

point to forms of life that persist outside and within systems of control. These elements operate through continuity, adaptation, and subtle disruption. In this sense, slow violence is met with a corresponding slow resistance, one that accumulates through time until the system can no longer sustain itself. The Capitol's greatest failure lies in its inability to account for this unpredictability. By attempting to dominate both human and nonhuman life, it unintentionally creates the conditions for its own undoing. Thus, the collapse of the Capitol is not simply the result of a political uprising but mainly of a systematic miscalculation. It is the outcome of a system confronted with the limits of its own logic, undone by the same unpredictability it sought to eliminate. In emphasizing the entanglement of people, animals, and environments, the narrative ultimately affirms that no government, regardless of how advanced and powerful, can fully contain the dynamic, evolving forces of the natural world.

CONCLUSION

Whereas dystopian works tend to work their stories surrounding the lack of natural environments, *The Hunger Games* centers itself in the middle of a flourishing world of unlimited possibilities. Although the series is not explicitly classified as climate fiction, its narrative invites readers to consider nature from a different perspective. It reveals that the relationship between people and nature is a method through which power is both exercised and resisted. Across Panem, nature is continuously reshaped materially, symbolically, and psychologically. For the people in the districts, this manifests mainly through the deprivation of resources, constant surveillance, and the execution of the Hunger Games, reducing both human and animal life to expendable instruments within a system for control. For the Capitol's citizens, however, similar processes of transformation are reframed as a spectacle of indulgence, masking violence beneath an aesthetics. Still, nature is portrayed as possessing an element of unpredictability that gradually acts as a force capable of dismantling the governments that attempt to perpetually subjugate it. Hence, the series ultimately highlights the power nature has over artificial forces, creating a narrative of hope in an ever-changing world.

The Hunger Games tells a story of a faraway future; however, its message is an account of the realities of our present. In our current society, where evolving technologies and governments increasingly threaten the well-being of our planet, there is a common sentiment that nothing can be done to lessen the harm these artificial powers cause to our natural environments. Yet, this narrative proposes that there is hope for change, suggesting that fostering close relationships with nature can benefit the preservation of one's self-identity and understanding of societal dynamics beyond what is dictated by artificial powers that often

shape public consensus on the state of the world, and that urban and natural settings are at last constantly interconnected, though often portrayed as distinct from one another.

Although I cannot make overarching assumptions about whether this series has the influence to effect change in a broader audience, it does invite readers to consider these themes, ultimately positioning itself as a cautionary tale for the Anthropocene. Personally, these works were a major introduction to environmentalism for me because of their consistent framing of nature as a conduit of hope through its connection to a young female protagonist, allowing me to see myself as a potential influential actor for change, similar to her. After all, Collins's work suggests that liberation from oppressive powers and a change in the anthropocentric world require not only a political revolution but also an ecological one.

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