

# Being Forced to Play and Ending the Game: Disengagement, Dissent, Revolt, Rebellion, and Revolution in *The Hunger Games*

JÉRÔME MELANÇON

## Introduction

Through the eyes, voice, and internal monologues of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist in the trilogy *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins presents a series of descriptions of political experiences under the totalitarian state of Panem, which forces teenagers to play to the death in the annual “Hunger Games.” Katniss becomes politically aware and engaged only once she is forced to play – that is, when she feels she has no choice but to leave the outskirts of the political world where she could live disengaged from it through avoidance, and enter that political world. There she finds herself confronted with a choice: to play the game – to learn and follow its rules, and later to become a mentor and continue her participation; or to end the game – to either let herself be killed, or to bring an end to the games themselves, along with the authority that underlies them<sup>1</sup>.

I will argue that Katniss Everdeen’s choice of the latter option casts *The Hunger Games* as a story of refusal and of radical opposition. She enacts different modes of opposition based on the manner in which she is

<sup>1</sup> Elements of this paper were first presented at the University of Alberta Augustana Campus 2015-16 Theme-Based Faculty Colloquium, “Time to Play,” I wish to thank the theme committee for their invitation to present these ideas, as well as Wilissa Reist for her assistance with research and revision for this paper, and the anonymous reviewers. *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1&2

Copyright © 2016

affected by the Capitol – that is, she acts in response to the ways in which she is forced to participate in a political life that is not her own, and always through her refusal to play the game imposed upon her. In doing so, she can serve as an example of a political actor whose reasons for choosing different kinds of opposition correspond to the kinds of radical opposition we find in political life. By arguing for this thesis, I will provide a philosophical reading of *The Hunger Games* trilogy that uses the novels as a mediation for an analysis of the political experiences of radical opposition, where political actors reject not only the policies of the government and the pursuit of political power to enact policies, but the political regime itself – the rules of the political game. Given that Katniss’s personal reflections are not present in the film adaptation, I will solely rely on the novels for this analysis.

Although the narrative of the novels suggests a logical succession where one attitude makes the next attitude possible, most political lives allow for jumps ahead and for movements backwards into past attitudes. As a result, I will be examining each of Katniss’ attitudes one by one, rather than as unfolding in a single, necessary direction. Nevertheless, I will follow the narrative of the novels in order to show how we can find the following attitudes that make up opposition in political life:

1. a refusal of the life in District 12 preceding the Games – disengagement;
2. a refusal of the rules and of her role within the Games – dissent;
3. a refusal of her new role in promoting the stability of the Games – revolt;
4. an acceptance of the new role against the Games based on her own rejection of the Games – rebellion;
5. a fight to end the old Games – revolution;
6. a refusal of all Games – disengagement.

Throughout this argument, my use of these words will strive to remain consistent with a larger theory of opposition that is at play in this analysis. This use goes against the uses of “dissent” (*Hunger Games* 24), “rebellion” (*Hunger Games* 79, *Hunger Games* 363), or “rebels” (*Mockingjay*, throughout) by Collins to mean more or less the same thing, that is, an active rejection of the political system.

### Reading Katniss: From Character to Experience

The interpretation of Katniss Everdeen’s actions and reflections along political and philosophical lines runs the risk of losing sight of her status as a character in a novel as well as Suzanne Collins’ status as an author of fiction: neither Katniss nor Collins develops a political theory, and there are no indications in the novels that Collins might have intended for her readers to find a political message, let alone a political theory, embedded within her story. However, the possible pedagogical uses of the books are quite clear to its readers. Pondiscio presents the heuristic and pedagogical potential of the *Hunger Games* in the context of civics education, where the novels allow students to reflect on their role as political actors, rather than as aligned with a party or an ideology (A17). Along similar lines, Simmons points out the ability of the books to foster both literacy and political literacy, specifically as the fictitious violence against children they depict can be tied to the violence children experience around them and elsewhere in the world (24). Drawing on Freire and Berhoff, Simmons explains how Katniss’s fictitious experiences can be used toward conscientization as development of a critical consciousness. More broadly, the novels present a series of “citizenship skills” that can be presented to students as alternatives to electoral politics: loyalty, love, caring, sacrifice, and critical understanding (Lucey et al. 192).

While such readings of *The Hunger Games* tend to use the books for pre-set purposes, I suggest a reading inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s notion

of non-philosophy: while most cultural products express dominant, already explicit systems of ideas and philosophies, some cultural products contain ideas that can be made explicit into a philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, *Notes des cours*). Consequently, it is possible to activate ideas that are latent in a work of fiction, such as *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and that serve the concerns of the author regarding the plot and linguistic innovation, but that also present a broader meaning that is yet to be developed, since the author had other goals in mind. As a result, this paper provides the basis of a broader theory of opposition that is latent in *The Hunger Games* – one that will need to be further developed in a different venue, in relation to other experiences of opposition provided for instance by survivors' testimonies, conceptualized by political philosophers, and studied in the context of democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes provided by political science.

Without developing a coherent theory of her own, Collins does criticize many aspects of contemporary North American societies and her character adopts attitudes that defy current norms as well as the norms of her own society. Politically and ethically oriented interpretations of *The Hunger Games* tend to develop such criticisms, rightly noting that the novels have the potential to help develop the political consciousness and critical thinking of young adult literature readers. Since Katniss regularly appears as defying gender norms and presents the figure of a strong young woman who is undoubtedly at the center of her own adventures, much of the literature focuses on aspects of gender. Mitchell indicates the fluidity of Katniss's gender identity as she displays traditionally masculine as well as feminine characteristics, relying on them depending on context and generally blurring gender boundaries (128-137). Rather than fluidity, Katniss's identity might also be tied to her capacities to wear masks or take on roles and to create relationships and community (Barnes 13-27), or from her attempts to free her self from the performances that are imposed on her (Muller 51-63). These capacities and attempts lead to the strength

of the myth of the Mockingjay; Hansen highlights Katniss's mythological status in her fictitious society as well as in North American popular culture, comparing her to ancient female mythological figures such as Artemis and Philomena, to contemporary interpretations of their stories, and to other works of fiction where female mythological figures are developed (161-178) – indicating notably that Suzanne Collins knowingly referenced Greek and Roman mythology (161) .

However, attempts have been made to be critical of the symbols attached to Katniss and to be wary of the norms she appears to be transgressing: Aitchison (who also compares Katniss to Spartacus) suggests that in *The Hunger Games* as in other similar novels and series, “The protagonists begin as self-assured young women who question their subordinate place in society, but the endings find them less active, less assertive, and reintegrated into society through marriage” (268). That criticism may be unfounded; in spite of Aitchison's claims, Collins gives no indication that Katniss and Peeta are married, and the epilogue to *Mockingjay* can easily be read as presenting a change in Katniss rather than as focusing on her role as a mother: through her willingness to have children, she embraces the world into which she had refused to bring children, a world which consequently offers meaning to human life beyond mere survival and reproduction.

Collins touches on many aspects of the reality that young people, and especially young women, face: Katniss's clothing throughout *The Hunger Games* trilogy shows how her capacity to act is defined and constrained by the garments that are chosen for her (Byrne 43-62). The Capitol uses hunger as a form of social control, and Katniss's early sense of self and awareness of her difference from others around her are tied to her rare ability to provide food for her family (Burke 544-567); it also uses the media, and part of Katniss's effectiveness is her capacity to read subtle messages sent to her and to use the media to her own advantage (Latham and Hollister 39, 42).

It is also possible to follow a different strand and present Katniss through the complex emotional narrative of the novel and the values of care and reciprocity. Focusing on motivations, Mallan mentions an “ethics of care” in Katniss’s actions that focuses on maintaining relationships (1-17), while Aitchinson sees her as embodying the values of care and protection (254-274). Similarly, Culver explores this same question by using the concept of reciprocity in terms of the debts she owes Rue and her family, as well as others to whose deaths she must give meaning (90-101). Torkelson rather turns toward Katniss’s relationship to her self (41-54), using a hermeneutic framework, and describes in more detail Katniss’s processes of self-interpretation in relation to her character, her roles, her circumstances, and the uses of the metaphor of the Mockingjay.

A reading of *The Hunger Games* as presenting a non-philosophy can take us in a direction that is complementary to literary criticism – one that can enlighten us on our own political experiences, or at least those of our contemporaries living under authoritarian states, experiences we might fear for ourselves. While the authors mentioned above focus on Katniss’s character and motivations, and while Cettl isolates and develops the critique of liberal democracy that is presented in *The Hunger Games* through its hypertrophic representation in the figure of Panem (139-146), I will turn toward the manner in which Katniss experiences political forms through her reflections, reactions, and actions.

### Radical Refusals: Katniss Everdeen’s Roles and her Struggle for Self-Determination

Throughout the *Hunger Games* novels, Katniss is confronted with situations she has not chosen and could not have chosen. As a result of her experiences, she loses control over who she is to the various political actors and structures that shape her life. The manners in which her political situation and role are imposed upon her shape the possibilities

and impossibilities for her acceptance or for her refusal of the identity and life that are imposed upon her, following the actions she is required to undertake or represent.

Yet Katniss continuously hides from herself her moments of action and of self-determination, including the moment during which she first defines herself, a moment which allows the entire story to unfold: whereas participation as tribute in the Hunger Games usually takes place through a draw, Katniss is not randomly selected. It is her younger sister, Prim, for whom she has cared for years, whose name is drawn, and Katniss steps forward to volunteer to replace her. From that moment on, her role and even her life are out of her hands – except for moments when she considers her duty to protect her sister and, as the story develops, her need to protect Peeta, the other tribute from her district. That first decision to place her relationships to those she holds dear above the demands of political life and of life itself define Katniss as a protagonist, an actor who creates conflict in an otherwise pre-defined and seamless Game, rather than a passive pawn in a Game she cannot understand or play. Arendt describes political action as a second birth for the political actor: going beyond *what* she is (all the determination she cannot escape or define and towards which she is passive), the actor defines *who* she is through her public words and deeds, thus creating herself actively as the person who accomplished *this* action at *this* time and place (175-181). We can consequently see the act of volunteering not simply as the moment where events are put in motion in the novel, but also as the moment when Katniss defines herself politically, rather than being defined by the regime under which she lives.

However, once Katniss enters the Games, the act of volunteering for her sister takes away her capacity to live in isolation from the Hunger Games and from the Capitol and makes hers a political life, which means she loses the positive agency that comes with disengagement. From this moment on, every minute of her life is planned; every space she inhabits is

prepared for her; every inch of her body is occupied by her stylists; every one of her actions is fixed by the gaze of the Capitol and of the other spectators of the Games – willing and unwilling.

### Disengagement: Disinterest and Defiance

Katniss' original attitude toward political life is one of disengagement – and in no way one of apathy, which would be the absence of emotions or caring about politics. As Kemper explains, apathy can result from a feeling of powerlessness, which dampens emotions (64). It is not that Katniss does not care about political life, about the actions and the laws of the Capitol; it is rather that her negative experiences have turned her away from them. She moves between contempt for all things political, disinterest, and defiance through small acts of transgression she knows are not likely to be punished. Her acts of defiance include petty crimes such as limited but repeated poaching, trading on the black market, and trespassing beyond the limits of the perimeter of her district. She explains that “Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties, more people would risk it if they had weapons” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 5). After all, the Peacekeepers (the police force) are the poachers' best customers, and so they turn a blind eye to their activities, as long as they do not distribute weapons or show them in the District: transgression is possible as a non-political act because a line is drawn between *which* rules are broken, and not between whether rules are broken or respected. In this context, instead of belonging to the political register, transgression is an act that belongs to bare life: Katniss prefers the possibility of a violent death to the reality of starvation for herself and for her family.

In her reflections, Katniss also unveils her contempt for the regime: her family members are safe, but they are starving. She explains the need to hide her contempt and to remain silent in order to keep her family out of



trouble, by keeping her sister from hearing and repeating her thoughts: “I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 6). Contempt is not the only emotion she unveils; on the day of the Reaping, when contestants in the Hunger Games are chosen, she masks her fears with jokes but thinks: “We have to joke about it because the alternative is to be scared out of your wits” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 8). She also displays for herself (and for the reader) her anger toward her mother, who neglected her and her sister after their father’s death; anger also at the unfairness of class divisions, with the poor feeling the need to enter their names in the Reaping in exchange for supplies (Collins, *Hunger Games* 13). The positive emotions made possible by this life of disengagement from politics are limited to care and concern for her family, or to gratefulness at the memory of Peeta having come to her help in a time of need; just how limited these emotions are – and so how limited is the role they can play to motivate her politically – is shown as Katniss places them side by side with the jealousy she feels for the girls who seek her friend and hunting partner Gale’s attention and with the loneliness she feels at school, where she finds herself without a group of friends (Collins, *Hunger Games* 12). Fleeting, these positive and negative emotions are overshadowed by contempt, fear, and anger<sup>2</sup>. Her indifference is only an appearance she maintains to protect herself and those around her. It is the opposite of the apathy that would leave her without strong feelings. This passionate disengagement will make her oppositional actions possible.

For such a vivid description of ordinary emotional life under a totalitarian regime, Collins’ choice of the metaphor of the fall to explain Katniss’s entrance into politics may seem surprising. When Prim’s name is drawn, Katniss does not think, reflect, or strategize. She experiences the feeling of falling, and then she simply describes her actions as if they were

<sup>2</sup> Such emotions are the focus of much of the literature on the political role of emotions. See notably Nussbaum for a discussion of negative emotions.

happening to her, as this fall continues: she calls out to her sister, she follows her, she volunteers. This metaphor is apt to show that her world will never be the same, that the life that seemed to be peaceful was already doomed to fall apart eventually, that she has lost something she will never regain, except at great cost. What she has lost is her capacity to turn away from the impossible choices of political life.

This fall is her own – it is not the result of chance, but rather has to do with her sense of self. Katniss separates her attitude from that of Peeta’s older brothers, who do not volunteer when his name is drawn: “This is standard. Family devotion only goes so far for most people on reaping day. What I did was the radical thing” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 26). She presents two orders here: the family and politics. The radical thing to do for one’s family is to risk one’s own sacrifice; the radical thing to do politically would be to risk a response from the peacekeepers, or retaliation against the district. The latter she does not risk: far from refusing the Games or their rules, she decides to play; far from consenting to them, she agrees to them to the fullest extent possible by accepting all their consequences for herself. Yet she does so for reasons that go beyond the Games: not for the political order, but for the order of her relationships to those who surround her. And it is this risk that leads the crowd to take a greater political risk: “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. All of this is wrong” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 24). Katniss is engaged because she could not bear to simply consent to the Games, while avoiding their consequences for herself; the crowd of her district is also engaged because it acts on the moral judgment that they cannot help but make, faced with the absurdity of their own consent.

Here we find the difficulties of freedom in a totalitarian regime, the difficulties of just actions in unjust circumstances. Katniss describes silence in the refusal of applause for the Hunger Games as the boldest

form of dissent that is possible for the crowd. No further action is necessary to show that their consent is coerced; while they remain free to rebel, here they can only affirm the parameters of their situation: their silence supports Katniss and echoes her own choice to join the Games in the name of her care for her family, their care for themselves and their families. Repression would bring an end to the effectiveness of this silence – and to the willingness of the crowd to act by remaining silent.

Yet silence cannot be dissent, not even in such conditions: while it is a refusal of consent, it does not affirm anything else. Silence can point to injustice, but only without naming it. Silence leaves others to decide on its meaning, barring only the hypothesis of active and willing support. It can be overlooked by the Capitol, even though it does not fit within the continuous affirmation of the regime that is demanded by the totalitarian state. The same goes for what Haymitch, Katniss's assigned mentor, terms "rebellion": two tributes from the same district holding hands during the opening ceremonies of the Hunger Games, rather than taking on an adversarial position can be felt as solidarity by Katniss and Peeta, and even by their spectators, but it is not expressed as such, and so it can safely be ignored (Collins, *Hunger Games* 79).

### Dissent: Refusing the Rules and the Role

Before the Games begin, Katniss is already ill at ease with her own role: "All I can think is how unjust the whole thing is, the Hunger Games. Why am I hopping around like some trained dog trying to please people I hate?" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 117). She cannot understand her own behavior, even though fear would suffice to explain it. And as she tries taking on different public personas to appeal to the public and receive their protection through gifts in the arena, she exhausts herself through these rehearsals and "By the end of the session, I am no one at all" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 118). As Cinna, her stylist, reminds her of how she is

around others, how she won them over, how they admire her spirit, she reacts with surprise at his perspective on her appearance and her self: “My spirit. This is a new thought. I’m not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I’m a fighter. In a sort of brave way. It’s not as if I’m never friendly. Okay, maybe I don’t go around loving everybody I meet, maybe my smiles are hard to come by, but I do care for some people” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 121-122). She discovers herself in his eyes, through his words, his trust in her, his attitude, rather than through the image he creates for her.

It is only through this discovery of herself through her appearance to others that Katniss is able to be concerned about what the Games will do to her – about what her action of volunteering as a tribute will make of her. The night before the Games, Peeta indicates that he does not want to be changed into a monster by the Games; Katniss finds herself immersed in strategies for survival and responds, to herself: “I bite my lip, feeling inferior. While I’ve been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 142). Yet Katniss does not change her own perspective on herself – not yet, at the very least. She continues to see herself only as a piece in the Capitol’s Games, as is shown in this exchange with Peeta: ““Okay, but within that framework, there’s still you, there’s still me,” he insists. ‘Don’t you see?’ ‘A little. Only... no offense, but who cares, Peeta?’ ‘I do. I mean, what else am I allowed to care about at this point?’ he asks angrily” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 142). Rather than staying true to herself, what she cares about is staying alive: Katniss continues to play by the rules.

After another act of transgression – at a time when she should impress the Gamemakers, who conceive the Hunger Games and decide on each tribute’s odds, instead of letting them be spectators and showing them her skills from a distance, she fires an arrow at them and brings them into the arena – Katniss feels she has let down others: her family, her district, her

stylists, those who are helping her and those for whose sake she feels she must win. Yet she does not consider having let herself down, or needing to win for her own sake. Her emotions are confused and too numerous to remain stable in the face of the act of transgression she accomplished without thinking<sup>3</sup>. As with her volunteering for her sister, these unthinking moments of action leave her confused and ill at ease. If Katniss is so eager to find her reasons for these actions, it is because she is no longer the same person afterwards: she transformed herself. And she must either reject this transformation and find forgiveness, or accept it and find its hidden meaning – that is, give it meaning retrospectively.

It is her concern for others that will be once again the source of her opposition, this time in the form of dissent, in the form of an Antigonic refusal of the rules of the Games. During the Games, her playing within the margins allowed by the rules and finding an ally gives her the chance to find something of ordinary life, something of the world she has lost. With Rue, a younger girl whom Katniss associates constantly with her sister, Prim, she quickly establishes trust by sharing personal details and information about the Games and by sharing a sleeping bag. They effectively live together for a short period: hunting, gathering, sleeping, learning, laughing. They make a plan for Katniss to destroy the supplies of the alliance made of the strongest tributes, they separate, and Katniss only sees her again once Rue is caught in a net – and Rue is immediately wounded in front of her. They both know that she is dying, and Katniss accompanies her death with a song.

Once Rue dies, Katniss' emotions change to hatred, and she steps out of her role in the Games. For a moment, her goal is no longer to survive or to kill others: "I can't stop looking at Rue, smaller than ever, a baby

<sup>3</sup> Berezin (87) explains this dynamic proper to emotions, because of which motivation to act might be absent because of weak, unclear, or contradictory emotions. In this case, although we do not see it in the narrative or in the reflection, Katniss seems to act on the basis of her love for Prim – the only unwavering, clear, strong emotion in the book until she develops hatred for the Hunger Games themselves.

animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can't bring myself to leave her like this. Past harm, but seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death [who killed Rue and whom she has just killed], seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 236). She does not move on to her next strategy in the Games; in fact, she suspends her participation in the Games. This refusal of survival *and* of death takes her outside the rules of the Games, to actions that allow her to affirm something else other than the inevitability of the deaths of the youth from the Districts, to enact something other than the might and the revenge of the Capitol against the past uprising of the Districts, a revenge that continues to be felt as the reason for being of the Hunger Games.

Because Katniss came to view Rue as a friend and as family, her death changes her situation: "The brief sense of home I had that one night with Rue has vanished" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 238). Past interactions take on a new meaning. Katniss recalls Gale's radical criticisms of the Capitol, but now she takes them seriously: "Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 236). She struggles with her powerlessness against the Capitol, but, as a result of her participation in the Hunger Games, she recalls Peeta's words about being more than a piece in the Games and discovers that she is now in a position where she can affect the Games and take revenge upon the Capitol, able "to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 236-237).

And so Katniss acts: she takes Rue's death away from the Capitol, makes it Rue's own death, hiding her wounds and decorating her with flowers, and makes toward her – and her spectators – the same sign with three fingers that the crowd had made in her direction when she volunteered as tribute and that is an expression of thanks and respect.

Katniss goes beyond the silence of the crowd and her past transgressions: this time, her goal is to reach and harm the Capitol, which is forced to understand the meaning of her action (and to keep the moment off the televised broadcast of the Games). In this moment, she has refused the domination of the Capitol and the truth it affirms about herself and Rue as tributes, as belonging to the Capitol, as expendable. Katniss affirms her own freedom by refusing the actions set for her – kill or be killed – in an act of dissent that serves no purpose within the rules of the Game, and instead serves to reject these rules and the very premise of the Games.

The moment is brief; she quickly moves on to target the tributes guilty of Rue's death, returning to the rules of the Games, yet with a newfound reason to play the Games. Revenge is not the object, nor is it a mean: it is dangerous and goes against preservation and against strategy. It is exactly because her motive stands outside of the rules of the Games that it gives Katniss the necessary resolve and energy to play: she plays the Games, but on her own terms, following her own reasons, which are tied to her sense of self – that is, her interactions and her relationships for those for whom she cares. She also goes beyond revenge: “Something happened when I was holding Rue's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to avenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 242). She has the awareness of a different role she could play. In refusing the murders of tributes and standing for that refusal, she gives herself a new role, a new way to define herself rather than to let the Games define her.

After the Games, Haymitch warns Katniss that the Capitol is looking for an excuse to retaliate against her to make up for the embarrassment she caused, the shame she brought on it (Collins, *Hunger Games* 356-357). Her defense will be to take up another role, that of being in love with Peeta. She realizes that the Hunger Games are much larger than the Games themselves, that they extend to the whole regime. Already, she had seen

that the Games were her future: as the other last tribute is being slowly killed by animals engineered to that end, she explains that “It goes on and on and on and eventually completely consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes of tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change. There will never be anything but cold and fear and the agonized sounds of the boy dying in the horn” (Collins, *Hunger Games* 339). It is Katniss and Peeta’s decision not to kill each other, and to suicide together by poison, that ends the Games, making them both victors by forcing the Gamemakers to stop them and change their rules.

Katniss and Peeta had refused the very premise of the Hunger Games: that the will to survive is stronger than the will to be true to oneself, that it is better to kill than to be killed. What they affirmed instead is the relationships and the bonds that make them who they are, their belonging to themselves, their belonging to each other – and not to the Capitol. What is more, since they established their relationship during the Games, as Katniss had with Rue, at a time when such relationships are supposed to be ruled out, what they affirmed was the *capacity* to make new relationships and to define themselves otherwise, in new ways, by taking on roles they define for themselves given their circumstances.

### From Dissent to Revolt: The Implications of Responsibility

However, the possibility for Katniss to define her own role is limited to the conditions offered to her in the arena of the Hunger Games: faced with almost certain death, the risks of dissent become smaller than they had been while living in her District, and are smaller than they will be once she leaves the arena. There, the role of dissident she created for herself competes with the new role created for her, that of victor of the Hunger Games, propagandist for the Capitol, representative of its might. Along with that role comes the realization that she killed other teenagers, that she



caused sorrow in their families and districts, as well as the realization that she deceived Peeta by acting as if she loved him in the same manner he loves her. These acts she undertook to survive add to the role of victor created for her, and make her especially vulnerable to the Capitol's demands, undermining her attempt to be true to herself and to those she loves.

*Catching Fire*, the second volume of the trilogy, opens with a scene of domestic life, which it presents as structured by politics and which is interrupted by politics, that is, by President Snow who erupts into Katniss' house. And here Snow, someone she has never seen – the embodiment of politics, a game she has never played – threatens domestic life:

If he's made the journey all the way from his city, it can only mean one thing. I'm in serious trouble. And if I am, so is my family. A shiver goes through me when I think of the proximity of my mother and sister to this man who despises me. Will always despise me. Because I outsmarted his sadistic Hunger Games, made the Capitol look foolish, and consequently undermined his control. (Collins, *Catching Fire* 18)

Katniss describes this irruption as he sits at a desk habitually used by her sister and mother: "Like our home, this is a place that he has no right, but ultimately every right, to occupy" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 20). Yet this irruption of political life into her family life is not arbitrary; it is due to her own actions.

Katniss is aware that her attempt at survival during the Hunger Games (preserving her life, as President Snow puts it) had political consequences, which she did not weigh and which didn't enter into her reasoning. She suggests that she did not mean to rebel: "Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 18). In the Marxist vocabulary, she

was not subjectively “rebellious,” but she did so objectively<sup>4</sup>. Its meaning for others – its objective meaning – was either defiance or love. Some districts perceived her actions as political; as acts of defiance, they sparked uprisings. President Snow also perceived her actions as political, since pure survival would have led her to kill Peeta and pure passion would have led her to sacrificing herself. He also knows that Katniss does not love Peeta, given that he is aware of her “warm” relationship with Gale. Ultimately Snow, unlike Katniss, is uninterested in her motives: “I believe you. It doesn’t matter” (Collins, *Catching Fire* 23). Nonetheless, in terms of her intentions, Katniss neither *meant* to defy the Capitol, nor was she ever in love with Peeta (Collins, *Catching Fire* 25). Having entered political life, Katniss discovers the gap that separates her intentions from the consequences of her actions.

Katniss feels the responsibility that accompanies her two contradictory roles – that of dissident, which she created for herself, and that of victor, which was created for her – since both rest and are developed on the basis of her actions:

Who else will I fail to save from the Capitol’s vengeance? Who else will be dead if I don’t satisfy President Snow? (Collins, *Catching Fire* 41)

I will never have a life with Gale, even if I want to. I will never be allowed to live alone. I will have to be forever in love with Peeta. The Capitol will insist on it. [...] there’s only one future, if I want to keep those I love alive and stay alive myself. I’ll have to marry Peeta. (Collins, *Catching Fire* 44)

<sup>4</sup> On the contradiction between objectivity and subjectivity, consequences and intentions, and meaning as it relates to the moment when action is being considered or when it is being evaluated after the fact, see the analysis of Nikolai Bukharin’s trial at the moment of Stalin’s purges in Merleau-Ponty (25-70).

This is not the time to be making wild escape plans. I must focus on the Victory Tour. Too many people's fates depend on my giving a good show. (Collins, *Catching Fire* 46)

In these three reflections, Katniss bears the weight of the survival of those for whom she cares. That weight extends to the memory of Rue and to her family, as well as to herself, leading to another contradiction in roles. Her responsibility means that she must be true to herself (or at least to her past actions, which have defined her) and satisfy her need to thank Rue's family, which arises from her gesture toward Rue and Rue's gestures toward her. Her relationship to Rue, she reflects, "will mean nothing if I don't support it now" and "I must say something. I owe too much. And even if I had pledged all my winnings to the families, it would not excuse my silence today" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 60). Here again, Katniss fails to predict the gap between her intentions and the consequences of her actions. She chooses her role because she understands the hope and comfort her dissent brings people – yet she fails to foresee that it will also inspire others to join in to her dissent and jeopardize their lives. It is only after she becomes aware of the explosive nature of the situation in the Districts, of the riots that follow her appearances, and of the possibility of uprisings that she fully understands the consequences of her actions, the implications of her role: "If my holding out those berries was an act of temporary insanity, then these people will embrace insanity, too" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 72).

She chooses not to run away from her role as victor as she begins to understand the political implications of her actions. The question of her moral identity is tied to her action during the Games and its motives – to her political identity: "The berries. I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 118). Unsure of the meaning of this act and of her intentions at the time, she comes to the conclusion that she must decide upon it. She discovers that it was an act of

revolt – a refusal of murder and of being murdered, a refusal of the very logic and reason for being of the Hunger Games.

She commits herself to revolt and accepts the consequences (arrest, torture, mutilation, death) because she understands that because of her actions during the Hunger Games, she is already a target, exposed to them, no matter what she does (Collins, *Catching Fire* 122). She also understands that the Capitol has already hurt those around her – killed her father in the mines, starved her district to death. In this manner, she also learns the limits of her responsibility and the impossibility of bearing that burden alone: it is one that is shared by those around her, through their actions, as well as by the Capitol, as President Snow may disregard all her efforts and make them vain. Her sense of injustice is the only motive that can outweigh her fear: “Prim... Rue... aren’t they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice? Because no one has the right to treat them as they have been treated?” (Collins, *Catching Fire* 123). To fight against the Capitol in their name is the only means Katniss possesses to help those around her, to truly care for them, given her position as victor of the Hunger Games and prey of the Capitol, but also given her past history of defiance of the Capitol, her “breaking the law, thwarting authority” (Collins, *Catching Fire* 130). Here again, she discovers herself in her relationships to others; she makes herself and those for whom she fight exist in her revolt against the logic of murder of the Capitol – echoing Camus’ foundational reasoning: “I revolt, therefore we are” (Camus 22)<sup>5</sup>.

And indeed, this revolt continues even when she must re-enter the Hunger Games arena for the Quarter Quell (a celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games where past victors compete), although without her

<sup>5</sup> While the translation reads “I rebel – therefore we exist” (Camus 22), the translation offered here is more faithful to the French text and its play on Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am.”

instigating it: she accepts the role given to her by Cinna and appears as a Mockingjay (a symbol that will be given meaning through later developments); she accepts the role given to her by Peeta and appears as pregnant; she accepts the role given to her by Haymitch and holds hands with the other tributes, all past victors like herself. Each time, although the appearances are calculated and planned, she is surprised by them – by her reflection in others, by the effect of her appearances – since they are not her own.

Before she says goodbye to Haymitch, he leaves her with a reminder to think about who her real enemy is in the arena. It is this reminder that will guide her interpretation of her fellow tribute Beetee's attempt at driving a knife through the force field that surrounds the arena and electrify it, that will inspire her to try to destroy the arena by shooting an arrow attached to a conductor for lightning into the force field (Collins, *Catching Fire* 379). This she calls her "final act of rebellion" (Collins, *Catching Fire* 380). Yet this act was anticipated by a revolutionary group notably constituted of her mentors (Cinna and Haymitch) as well as Beetee, and part of a plan that was kept hidden from Katniss all along. She can only guess Peeta's plan to sacrifice himself if needed save her. Saving Peeta is her only plan, the only thing she thinks of, outside of the moment when she short-circuits the force field, yet she grasps that something greater is at stake when she revolts and plays her role in the limited plan that was presented to her, if only blindly.

It is the contradiction between Katniss's roles that lead her to revolt. This revolt takes place through a refusal not only of the role assigned to her, but of the roots of her own actions, and so a refusal of the role she created for herself. As a dissident who rejects the rules of the Games, she continued to act within the framework of the Game. Instead, in rejecting the very framework of the Games – the murder of teenagers, the ownership of lives and relationships, *her* murders of other teenagers out of her desire to survive for the sake of others – she enters into revolt.

Katniss's revolt is, however, short lived *as* revolt: she quickly transforms it into rebellion.

### Rebellion as a Fight to End the Games

The logic of her actions lead Katniss to question and, at first, to refuse her new role of symbol of the rebellion and to revolt against it; the wider logic of these same actions, when taken together, will lead her to turn even this revolt into her own rebellion. While revolt is her refusal of murder, rebellion is her own, personally-motivated attempt at harming the regime and the institutions that justify and commit murder. Her revolt against murder will keep her at a distance from the revolution, in which her friend Gale and the revolutionaries who saved her in the midst of the destruction of the Hunger Games arena, and live in the until-then dissimulated District 13 take part.

The motives for her new revolt are clear: she likens the way she is treated by her mentors and her new protectors to the way in which she was treated in the Games; she does not trust District 13. She portrays herself as a pawn; she is labelled as mentally disoriented. She knowingly lets others decide what happens to her, without attempting to have a say. Her only motivation for working with District 13 is to find the means to save Peeta, who was taken and held by the Capitol following the destruction of the Hunger Games arena. Gale has the energy and the desire to rebel and wants to ally with District 13 because of the similarities between their lives and their opposition to the Capitol. In contrast, Katniss decides to rebel given her refusal of the Games and given her memories of the blood spilled by the Capitol: Rue during the first Games, Cinna before the second Games began, the uprisings she witnessed between them; given her memory of the solidarity of the victors at the Quarter Quell; and given her interpretation of her new actions: "How it was no accident, my shooting

that arrow into the force field in the arena. How badly I wanted it to lodge deep in the heart of my enemy” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 30).

But she also wants to rebel on her own terms. She demands that President Coin, the leader of the District 13 revolutionaries, announce that she will pardon Peeta and the other tributes, as well as her right to hunt, for Prim to keep her cat, and for Gale to stay by her side, and the possibility for her to kill President Snow. She also refuses District 13’s methods. As she and Gale are forbidden to take food from the dining hall, she reflects that “We know how to be hungry, but not how to be told how to handle what provisions we have. In some ways, District 13 is even more controlling than the Capitol” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 36). She is repulsed by their treatment of her prep team, saved from the Hunger Games, and by the standards of beauty she must continue to meet and the appearance that is created for her. She also questions the end goal of District 13. As Plutarch, one of the leaders of the revolution and the ex-head Gamemaker presents it, District 13 aims to create a government of which everyone will be a part: “We’re going to form a republic where the people of each district and the Capitol can elect their own representatives to be their voice in a centralized government. [...] if our ancestors could do it, then we can, too” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 83-84). Katniss’s secret reply highlights that her motives do not have to do with contesting or replacing power: “Frankly, our ancestors don’t seem much to brag about. I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn’t care about what would happen to the people who came after them. But this republic idea sounds like an improvement over our current government” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 84). On more than one occasion, she refuses to follow the orders coming from District 13. And she divorces her interest from the interests of District 13: “I’m sick of lying to me for my own good. Because really it’s mostly for their own good” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 118.) Theirs is only an alliance of convenience: the success of their revolution will entail the success of her rebellion.

Her motives are entirely different: Katniss is fighting solely because of the Games – and entirely against the Games, especially once Peeta is rescued. When the idea of a televised propaganda piece on the tributes from each of the districts is brought up, she replies: “‘That *is* brilliant, Fulvia,’ I say sincerely [to one of the leaders of the revolution]. ‘It’s the perfect way to remind people why they’re fighting’” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 109). As a result, when she becomes a soldier and does accept orders and assignments (Collins, *Mockingjay* 257), it is only because they coincide with her own objectives and will get her closer to having the chance to kill President Snow (Collins, *Mockingjay* 257).

### Revolution, Compromise, and Contradiction

When the revolutionaries attack District 2, the closest ally to the Capitol, by causing an avalanche that traps most of their fighting forces inside a mountain base, Katniss is reminded of the mining accident that killed her father, making her question the morality of the attack. She negotiates with herself, and finds a moral compromise: the Capitol is to blame for pitting District against District and for creating the dependence of the Districts, which allows it to control them and secure their allegiance. Likewise, Katniss hesitates when she is faced with the reasoning Gale uses to justify the means to be used to lead this attack through the future harm it may prevent. She rejects arguments that can be used for any reason, arguments as to what is prevented by killing a few that can be used “for killing anyone at any time. You could justify sending kids into the Hunger Games to prevent the districts...” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 222).

This hesitation toward the revolution and the means it entails continues until the very end, even as the revolution succeeds. Snow, imprisoned and condemned to death, tells Katniss that the rebels used the weapons that killed Prim and children of the Capitol, as a way to turn the population against him (Collins, *Mockingjay* 356-7). Confronted with this idea,



Katniss begins her first reflective effort after many chapters where strategy and survival dominated the narrative: she weighs every reason that might lead her to the truth of the event – whether it was Snow or Coin who killed her sister and the other medics – but she also tries to understand the meaning of the event. She realizes that she is isolated from others and that, without them, she cannot find the truth or the meaning of the event: “I badly need help working this out, only everyone I trust is dead” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 361). As for Gale, she cannot raise the issue with him without implying that he would have accepted to kill Prim, even though he may have designed the bombs that were used: once she sees Gale, she knows she will always associate him with Prim’s death.

In this isolation where Katniss cannot have her reality confirmed by others because of her isolation, we see at its clearest the logic of totalitarianism as Arendt describes it: “Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals. [...] loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friends, comrades, or even mere acquaintances” (323-4). Yet Katniss finds that she is not, indeed, alone, and her sense of the debt she owes to the disappeared family members and friends maintains her relation to them. She also lacks a sense of belonging to the totalitarian movement – be it that of the Capitol or of District 13 – that would create loyalty to such a movement. It is because of her relational context that she finds herself continually faced with the possibility of opposition to the regime in place.

Struggling with this lack of meaning, Katniss undertakes a reflection that is similar to her first attempt at understanding her actions in the Hunger Games arena. She turns to Haymitch, the sole person still alive and reachable, even if he is not trustworthy, to help her recover from this uncertainty – and from the attack that killed her sister and almost burned her alive. She finds herself reduced to her “patchwork of skin” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 364); before she is prepared to be presented to the public at

the execution, she expresses her surprise at the work of her prep team: “I can’t believe how normal they’ve made me look on the outside when inwardly I’m such a wasteland” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 366). *Who* she is has been destroyed – wasteland internally, patchwork externally – by the actions of others who killed those close to her; by her own actions, by those she killed; by her alliance with those who killed those close to her. This time, it is this alliance with the revolutionaries she seeks to understand, that is, her actions in giving a meaning to the revolution, and so giving it legitimacy, making her a revolutionary in spite of her intentions and desires.

### Disengagement and the Refusal of All Games

Once the armed phase of the revolution is over, Coin, now president of the entirety of Panem, presents an alternative to killing all the citizens of the Capitol, beyond those already tried for their direct participation in the Capitol’s rule: that a last installment of the Hunger Games take place among the children of those who had the most power. Coin takes ownership of the idea: “It seemed to balance the need for vengeance with the least loss of life” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 369). She then orders the seven surviving victors to vote for or against it, with the group collectively bearing responsibility for the decision. Katniss votes yes for Prim, reflecting to herself: “All those people I loved, dead, and we are discussing the next Hunger Games in an attempt to avoid wasting life. Nothing has changed. Nothing will ever change now” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 370). She takes on the position for which she criticized Gale, against Peeta’s principled refusal. Haymitch, the last to speak, breaks the tie by agreeing with Katniss – perhaps indicating that Katniss has hidden motives for acquiescing to the decision, or that he trusts that she will act for the best. Yet minutes after the decision, as she is sent to execute Snow, she kills Coin instead. Peeta stops her from ingesting the poison pill issued

to her earlier. Detained in a hospital, she remains bent on suicide: “The surveillance makes almost any suicide attempt impossible. Taking my life is the Capitol’s privilege. Again” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 375). She concludes that: “What I can do is give up” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 375). She stops eating, ingesting only the drugs to which she has become addicted.

Faced with the thought that her captors will try to use her again, she refuses to play any further role, to follow any further instructions: “they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using [their weapons]. I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despise being one myself. [...] Because something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children’s lives to settle its differences” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 377). She steps back from politics, unable to find common ground with anyone who takes part in it, and struggles to find meaning in everyday life. “Truth is,” she concludes, “it benefits no one to live in a world where these things happen” (Collins, *Mockingjay* 377). Yet she realizes that only some of “these things” continue to happen, and that the Hunger Games are over, once and for all. Without the Games to threaten those she loves, she lost her reason to engage in politics; given her experiences with those who are in power, she finds further reasons to engage in politics. Confined to living in District 12, she finds a transformed version of her old life, along with a transformed version of herself, now that she is cut off from everyone who was dear to her in the District, but also now that she realizes her love for Peeta – who, like her, was transformed into something other than human by the Capitol. She returns to an everyday life tortured by her loss and memories, but also full of the life of her own children, which will not be taken away.

### Conclusion: Who is Katniss Everdeen?

At critical points throughout the novels, Katniss is presented or presents herself as “the girl who was on fire” (until she very literally is set on fire),

that is, as playing a role that was pre-defined for her by the Capitol, with her full awareness; by the rebels close to her, without her knowledge; and by the revolutionaries, as a compromise she accepts reluctantly. Yet the manners in which she represents herself in her reflections are better (if less poetically) described as “the girl who is ending the Hunger Games,” that is, as a political actor seeking to achieve a specific political result for the sake of others, of humanity, and of future generations; as well as a focal point in her relationships that bind her to those she loves. Who Katniss Everdeen is then depends on the state of the contradictions between these roles and relationships.

### Works Cited

- Aitchison, David. “The Hunger Games, Spartacus, and Other Family Stories: Sentimental Revolution in Contemporary Young-Adult Fiction.” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39. 3 (2015): 254-274. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harvest, 1968. Print.
- Barnes, Jennifer Lynn. “Team Katniss.” *The Girl who was on Fire: Your Favorite Authors on Suzanne Collins Hunger Games Trilogy*. Ed. Leah Wilson, 13-27. Dallas: Benbella Books, 2011. Print.
- Berezin, Mabel. “Emotions and Political Identity: Mobilizing Affection for the Polity.” *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2001. 83-98. Print.

- Burke, Brianna. “‘Reaping’ Environmental Justice through Compassion in *The Hunger Games*.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 22.3 (2015): 544-567. Print.
- Byrne, Deirdre. “Dressed for the Part: An Analysis of Clothing in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* Trilogy.” *Journal of Literary Studies* 31.2 (2015): 43-62. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt*. New York: Vintage International, 1991.
- Cettl, Fani. “Revisiting Dystopia: the Reality Show Biopolitics of The *Hunger Games*.” *Культура/Culture* 12 (2015): 139-146. Print.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2008. Print.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2009. Print.
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2010. Print.
- Culver, Jennifer. “‘So Here I am in his Debt Again.’ Katniss, Gift, and Invisible Strings.” *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*. Ed. William Irwin. New Jersey: Wiley, 2012. 90-101. Print.
- Hansen, K. S. “The metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen: The *Hunger Games*, Myth, and Femininity.” *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 40.2 (2015): 161- 178. Print.
- Kemper, Theodore D. “A Structural Approach to Social Movement Emotions.” In *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*. Ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2001. 83-98. Print.

- Latham, D., and J. Hollister. "The Games People Play: Information and Media Literacies in the Hunger Games Trilogy." *Children's Literature in Education* 45.1 (2014): 33-46. Print.
- Linz, Juan J. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000. Print.
- Lucey, Thomas A., et al. "Dimensions of Citizenship through the Lens of The Hunger Games: Fiction and the Visual and Performing Arts as Springboards for Citizenship Education." *The Social Studies* 104.5 (2013): 190-199. Print.
- Mallan, Kerry. "Everything You Do: Young Adult Fiction and Surveillance in an Age of Security." *International Research in Children's Literature* 7.1 (2014): 1-17. Print.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Humanism and Terror*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. Print.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Notes des cours 1959-1961*. Ed. Stéphanie Ménasé. Paris : Gallimard, 1996. Print.
- Mitchell, Jennifer. "Of Queer Necessity: Panem's Hunger Games as Gender Game." *Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy*. Ed. Mary F. Pharr and Leisa A. Clark. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2012. 128-137. Print.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Political Emotions*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 2013. Print.
- Pondiscio, Robert. "'The Hunger Games' Is a Civics Lesson." *The Wall Street Journal* December 4 2013: A17. Print.

Simmons, A. M. "Class on Fire: Using the Hunger Games Trilogy to Encourage Social Action." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56.1 (2012): 22-34. Print.

Torkelson, Anne. "'Somewhere Between Hairbows and Rainbows' How Even the Shortest Song can Change the World." *The Hunger Games and Philosophy: A Critique of Pure Treason*. Ed. William Irwin. New Jersey: Wiley, 2012. 8-25. Print.