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WHY KATNISS EVERDEEN IS OUR FAVORITE FEMINIST – AN ANALYSIS OF THE HEROINE OF THE HUNGER GAMES FILM SAGA AND HER RECEPTION BY YOUNG FEMALE SPECTATORS

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Why Katniss Everdeen is our Favorite Feminist: An Analysis of the Heroine of *The Hunger Games* Film Saga and her Reception by Young Female Spectators

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

WHY KATNISS EVERDEEN IS OUR FAVORITE FEMINIST – AN ANALYSIS OF THE HEROINE OF *THE HUNGER GAMES* FILM SAGA AND HER RECEPTION BY YOUNG FEMALE SPECTATORS

By Paula Talero Álvarez, MA

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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THROUGH THE FIGURE OF FICTIONAL CHARACTER KATNISS EVERDEEN, THIS DISSERTATION STUDIES HOW THE FILM INDUSTRY SIMULTANEOUSLY ENTRENCHES AND DISRUPTS GENDER, SEXUAL, AND RACIAL NORMATIVITIES. THE PROJECT USES TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND PARTICIPANT RESEARCH TO ANALYZE HOW THE FILMS AND NOVELS OF *THE HUNGER GAMES* SAGA ENCAPSULATE BOTH DOMINANT AND ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS RELATED TO

FEMININITY, MASCULINITY, WOMANHOOD, AND MOTHERHOOD. IT ALSO EXPLORES IF AND HOW THE FEMALE HEROINE CAN BE READ AS FEMINIST AND PRODUCES A SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT. I CONCLUDE THAT ALTHOUGH THE INDUSTRY IS PRODUCING NEW MODELS OF WOMANHOOD THAT CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES, IT STILL PERPETUATES ROMANTIC IDEALS AND IDEALIZES THE HETEROSEXUAL NUCLEAR FAMILY AS THE ULTIMATE PATH TO FULFILLMENT FOR WOMEN. THE RESULTS OF THE PARTICIPANT RESEARCH SHOW THAT WHILE YOUNG WOMEN ARE CRITICAL OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE SAGA, OVERALL THEY VALUE HAVING STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FICTION TO WHOM THEY CAN RELATE.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire[1].

Katniss Everdeen

Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of the dystopian fiction series *The Hunger Games*, was certainly right when she asserted that she would not be forgotten. Her words now sound premonitory: since 2008, "the girl who was on fire" has shaken up the realm of young adult dystopian fiction. She is the protagonist of three novels, stars in four film adaptations, and is responsible for a fan fiction world created around her persona and experiences. Katniss Everdeen has not been forgotten - she is here to stay.

The successful film series *The Hunger Games*, based on the young adult fiction trilogy by writer Suzanne Collins, has made a striking impact on the film industry over the last decade. *The Hunger Games*' first three films were produced by Lionsgate and Color Force, and the fourth was co-produced by Lionsgate, Color Force and Studio Babelsberg.[2] The four films have been distributed widely throughout the United States and around the world, grossing millions of dollars[3] and becoming an important part of our science fiction repertoire. The novels by Suzanne Collins built a remarkable anticipation: although the initial printing was modest -200.000 copies[4] were

[1] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 70.

[2] Information from Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Check http://www.imdb.com/ for more information.

[3] According to *Variety*, Lionsgate's films grossed $2.9 billion worldwide. See McNary, "Lionsgate Plans South Korean Theme Park with Hunger Games, Twilight Areas". See also the revenue according to box Office Mojo, an IMDb Company, at http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=hungergames.htm

[4] See "The Hunger Games': A Dark Horse Breaks Out".

first printed of the first book-, the saga soon became a bestseller. By January of 2012, the *Hunger Games* trilogy had taken the top three spots on both Amazon's physical top 10 and Kindle top 10.[5] Later that year, Scholastic Press announced that the publishing company had more than 50 million copies of the original three books in *The Hunger Games* trilogy in print and digital formats in the U.S. Up to that date, Scholastic Corporation had sold foreign publishing rights for the trilogy into 55 territories in 50 languages.[6] Such widely-read books, together with a substantial marketing campaign, guaranteed the great success of the first film adaptation. The latter, released in 2012, had the third-highest grossing opening weekend in U.S. history.[7] The trailer of this first film, launched on November 14, 2012, had 8 million views in the first 24 hours.[8]

These films have shown significant popularity among young adults, as we can verify on social media: the Facebook page "The Hunger Games" has more than 21 million of "likes". The striking influence of the saga has also reached the real world: the saga, for example, has greatly sparked girls' interest in the sport of archery[9][10], and Lionsgate is planning a South Korean theme park that will have areas devoted to *The Hunger Games*, among other attractions inspired in Lionsgate's franchises. Recently, Lionsgate announced the construction of similar theme parks in New York and Madrid.[11]

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[5] Data from Publishers Weekly. See "Tracking Amazon".

[6] See announcement by Scholastic Corporation, "Scholastic Announces Updates U.S. Figures".

[7] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 395.

[8] Data shared by Lionsgate Films president Joe Drake. See "9 Untold Secrets of the High Stakes 'Hunger Games'".

[9] Hood, Grace. "More Girls Target Archery, Inspired by 'The Hunger Games'".

[10] Rikard, Shannon. "'Hunger Games' Breaks Records, Archery Wins".

[11] See McNary, "Lionsgate Plans South Korean Theme Park with Hunger Games, Twilight Areas" and Vlessing, "Lionsgate to Bring 'Hunger Games,' 'Divergent' Attractions to Spain."

The Hunger Games: Argument

The story of *The Hunger Games* is based on the fictional dystopian world of Panem, a reimagined future North America. Panem is divided into thirteen districts and controlled by a totalitarian government called The Capitol and its ruler, President Snow. The citizens of the Capitol benefit from abundant and luxurious resources, which they obtain from the exploitation of the districts. The higher the number of the district, the more impoverished their inhabitants are. Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the saga, is a 16-year old girl from District 12, an underprivileged coal-mining district that seems to resemble the region of Appalachia.[12]

As a propaganda strategy and mechanism of control -in order to make sure that the districts do not rebel against the government- the Capitol forces each district to send two young tributes (a girl and a boy) to participate in a deadly televised game every year. This contest is known as *The Hunger Games*, in which contestants must kill their adversaries and struggle for survival; the tribute who survives at the end of the Hunger Games becomes the victor. The saga begins the year Primrose Everdeen -Katniss Everdeen's sister- is selected at the reaping, the ceremony during which the tributes are "recruited". Seeking to save her sister, Katniss Everdeen volunteers for the 74th edition of the Games. Peeta Mellark, the baker's son, is the male tribute from District 12 who is chosen to participate. Katniss will initially develop a certain animosity towards Peeta, although this animosity will later be replaced by friendship, compassion, and eventually, young love. Katniss's best friend Gale Hawthorne, also from District 12, will also "compete" for the attention and the love of Katniss, involving the heroine in a love triangle that she does not desire. Katniss will choose Peeta as a lifelong partner at the end of the saga (see figure 1).

[12] For a discussion on the similarities between Appalachia and District 12, read the insights of Headband, one of the participants of the project, in Chapter 2.

During the 74th edition of the Hunger Games -which unfolds in the first novel and the first film adaptation-, Katniss and Peeta receive mentorship and guidance from the members of their team: their stylist Cinna, their mentor Haymitch Abernathy and their escort Effie Trinket. Both Katniss and Peeta are proclaimed victors at the end of the competition. One year later, they are once again recruited to participate in the Quarter Quell, a special edition of *The Hunger Games* that commemorates the 75 years of the contest. The second novel and the second film adaptation, both named *Catching Fire*, narrate the events that take place at the Quarter Quell. In this installment, Cinna is killed and Peeta is captured by the Capitol while Katniss is rescued by the Revolution, an insurgent group led by President Alma Coin that plans to dismantle the government of the Capitol. Those who join the revolution hide in District 13, where the specifics of the mutiny are planned. The last novel, *Mockingjay*, details how Katniss Everdeen becomes the symbol of the Revolution, how Peeta is rescued and how both President Snow and Alma Coin are killed. An embryonic new sociopolitical system is formed, and Katniss Everdeen returns home with Peeta. The last novel was split into two film adaptations, *Mockingjay* Part I and *Mockingjay* Part II.[13]

The Hunger Games: A Dystopian Narrative

A dystopian society is corrupt at its core, featuring mass poverty, inequality, surveillance and control or oppression. In its modern definition, a dystopia "has to be anti-utopian, a utopia turned upside down, and a world in which people tried to build a republic of perfection only to find that they had created a republic of misery."[14] The genre of dystopia, as well as other genres of

[13] For a list of the production details of the films, please see Appendix 4.

[14] Lepore, "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction."

speculative fiction, fosters the critical analysis of social and political issues, practices, and structures.

The dystopian system imagined by Suzanne Collins in *The Hunger Games* was in clear opposition to the public opinion of North America at the time. During the time the novels were released (2008-2010), a renewed faith in American politics and social structures pervaded the public discourse. It was a time for optimism, for progress and open-mindedness. Barack Obama was elected the first African-American president in the history of the United States in 2009, a milestone that for many represented the beginning of a postracial society. This progress narrative also permeates *The Hunger Games*, as issues of race or gender are deemed irrelevant. The story takes place in an imagined future where racial mixing and hybrid gender roles are the norm, and although economic inequality is a major oppressive force, gender or racial inequality seem to be nonexistent. My project will show, however, that these gender and racial tropes still pervade -and are crucial to- the narrative.

Although in dystopian fashion, *The Hunger Games* presents a narrative of progress regarding gender, race, and sexuality. In appearance, it operates beyond politics of identity, providing a space for readers and viewers to take a break from national and international pressing issues. It presents a highly addictive story; a fantastic pathway to entertainment. It also features a violent scenario where children kill children -- a fictional narrative of violence for the sake of violence through which teenage boys and girls can find escape and relief from their daily struggles.

Although the story takes place in a seemingly postracial and postfeminist society, the novels and films of the saga include many underlying issues that are not directly addressed, but that leave the door open for contestation and critique. This project shows that the saga features a strong female protagonist but is not decisively feminist, it includes queer characters who are not

openly queer, and it presents a multiracial community that still recenters whiteness. Under a surface of social progress, there are warning signs, such as Katniss' resistance to be tamed and sexualized by the system of the Capitol or the riots of District 11 that echo the protests denouncing police brutality in the United States. *The Hunger Games*' products were distributed in the midst of the optimism of the Obama era, but seemed to predict the social instability that would follow in the second half of the 2010s.

Even more: *The Hunger Games* narrative has recently been taken back and it has served as a cultural foundation for contemporary revolution. The controversial tweets by writer Patrick S. Tomlinson in response to the teen-led movement #NeverAgain[15] circulated widely online, and exemplify how the dystopian narrative was reappropriated to contextualize the children's movement:

> "You watched a generation grow up on a diet of Harry Potter, Hunger Games, and Marvel movies, you stripped away their hope, their jobs, their futures, and then backed the most cartoonish super-villain in history for President, and you're shocked the children are fighting back?"[16]

Temporality transformed the intention of the saga. Although the novels by Suzanne Collins and their later film adaptations were created as a dystopian escape narrative, Tomlinson reclaimed them as a political weapon. The writer also added a follow-up tweet that continued the metaphor of *The Hunger Games*:

[15] The 'Never Again' movement started in social media with the hashtag #neveragain. It is now a gun control organization that seeks to prevent gun violence. The group was formed in response to the shooting in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018, in which seventeen students and staff members were killed by a former student.

[16] Tweet by Tomlinson on Feb. 20, 2018.

> "Really? You followed the damned script to a T. You pumped up millions of kids, for two decades, to believe they and their friends could make a difference. Then you thrust them all into a dystopian nightmare of violence and persecution. And NOW you're shocked they're all Katniss?"[17]

A few days later, writer Chris Taylor resumed Tomlinson's point, as he traced parallels between Katniss Everdeen and the kids of the Never Again movement. For Taylor, the kids resembled the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* in that they had been thrust into situations not of their choosing, and they were authentic and strong enough to be visibly vulnerable. They wore "their hearts on their sleeves", Taylor asserted. In an article for *The New Yorker* in 2017, American historian Jill Lepore posited that dystopia had become the fiction of submission, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness.[18] However, this was not the case of *The Hunger Games*. The novels by Suzanne Collins and their film adaptations were distributed in a time of optimism and faith in progress, and their primary purpose was to serve as entertainment and escape. Nevertheless, this dissertation shows that the *Hunger Games* products also turned into a place of resistance, of shelter and self-care, and opened up spaces of contestation and critique. The tweets by writer Patrick S. Tomlinson corroborate the great impact of the saga on the cultural sphere and on the collective imagination of young audiences, who were raised "on a diet of Harry Potter, Hunger Games, and Marvel movies."[19]

[17] Ibid.

[18] Lepore, "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction."

[19] Tweet by Tomlinson on Feb. 20, 2018.

1.2 Goals & Research Questions

As an international scholar I am well aware of the striking influence of American cultural products -including *The Hunger Games*- outside US borders. I study American film because it not only affects the American public, but all of us across the globe. Since I was a kid, I indirectly learned American culture through its cultural productions. American stories, but also American values and standards, are part of the cultural repository of consumers in and outside the US. American media shapes global values; it feeds global white supremacy and hegemony and consolidates heteropatriarchal family models and relationships. This dissertation explores, analyzes and critiques a story that belongs to the collective imagination[20] of young women, exploring how gender codification and ideas of femininity, womanhood, and motherhood are embedded in neoliberal cultural products. This dissertation also explores if and how the consumption of these novels and films and their female heroine, Katniss Everdeen, might be read as feminist or might foster empowerment. Although a comparison between the literary works and the film adaptations is incorporated, this dissertation especially focuses on the specific medium of film and how assumptions and conceptions related to gender, femininity, womanhood and motherhood pervade this medium. Specifically, this project tackles the problem of female representation in commercial blockbusters aimed at young adults.

The project joins the discussion about the non-neutrality of media technologies, and further exemplifies how these technologies have been used throughout history to codify, intentionally or not, different conceptions about gender, race, class, and sexuality, among other social identities.

[20] Scholar of popular culture George Lipsitz asserts that this collective imagination (what he refers to as "collective imaginary") is an archive that retains memories from the past and imagines hopes for the future. This archive is permeated with "commercialized leisure", i.e. cultural products created for consumption. See Lipsitz, "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow."

For film critics A. O. Scott and Mahnola Dargis, the dystopian world of Panem in the first film of *The Hunger Games* has its utopian moment "in that race and gender stereotypes have become seemingly irrelevant".[21] According to Scott and Dargis, this erasure of race and gender stereotypes may largely account for the film's popularity. While it is true that the saga has challenged archetypes by placing a heroine in the center of a blockbuster film's action,[22] the complete dismantling of race, gender and sexual normativities in the Hollywood industry is an unlikely occurrence. Thus, my project explores how gender, racial and sexual norms *are* incorporated in both the films and the novels and how they shape the character of the heroine. My concern specifically originates from the female roles in the media products associated with *The Hunger Games* phenomenon and how these models are influencing ideas of femininity and womanhood in young women in the United States and the world.

The analysis of the encoding of social norms in popular culture is relevant because both popular and media culture are primary ways in which we make sense of ourselves, our lives, and the world.[23] For feminist researchers, the deconstruction of cultural norms found in popular products can serve as a political weapon, since it can demonstrate the ways in which patriarchal society, whether consciously or not, structures the media messages that accompany our lives.[24] As film scholar Mary Ann Doane notes, understanding and theorizing the position of female spectatorship is crucial in order to then dislocate it.[25] Studying how gender norms pervade the texts

[21] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[22] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution".

[23] According to George Lipsitz in "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow", what he calls the *contemporary commercial electronic mass communications* dominate the discourse and impact our personal lives in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. See also Grossberg, "Mapping Popular Culture", 69.

[24] See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 57.

[25] Doane, "Film and the Masquerade", 143.

produced by Hollywood film industry and the neoliberal cultural landscape at large is essential in order to expose and challenge dominant narratives, images, ideas and stereotyped representations.[26] This study shows how these assumptions are codified, how they represent a hegemonic system of ideas, and how they affect the understanding, standards and expectations that different societies and individuals have in terms of womanhood and femininity.[27]

1.3 Literature Review

Given the interdisciplinary nature of this dissertation, my works engages with cultural studies, feminist and queer theory and girlhood studies, and critical media and film studies. My project is first aligned with the school of thought of the Birmingham School. Since its creation in 1964 by Richard Hoggart, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which houses the Birmingham School, inaugurated the classical period of British cultural studies (1960s to 1980s) and explored the ways in which audiences were affected by and reacted to cultural products. Their scholars (Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson) overcame the limitations of the Frankfurt School, providing the audience with a greater agency and capacity to resist the messages of cultural products.[28] They positioned youth cultures as potential new forms of opposition and social change, they started new analyses of gender, race, sexuality, and

[26] Leavy, "The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis", 224.

[27] These expectations are usually coded into our media in contradictory ways. As feminist media scholar Susan Douglas asserts, the media imagery that targets American Women is filled with contradictions about what a woman should do or be, which has produced an endless struggle for gender self-definition for both men and women. Mass media, she observes, "have been obsessed with defining codes of masculinity and femininity". See *Where the girls are*, 17.

[28] See Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* and "Literature and Society"; Williams, "Communications as Cultural Science" and "On High and Popular Culture" and Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* and *Customs in Common*.

developed new critical theories. As many of their members, I posit the audience has enough agency to resist the messages of cultural products, to (re)negotiate their meaning, and to even offer oppositional readings.

Stuart Hall, a prolific member of the CCCS, argues in his article "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'" that modern media fulfill three main functions. First, they are responsible for the provision and selective construction of social knowledge, through which we perceive our world and the world of others. The second function of media is, according to Hall, to reflect on this plurality of the world. Lastly, the third function involves bringing together which has been previously represented and classified. These functions are fulfilled through mechanisms of encoding and decoding.

Stuart Hall develops further the concepts of "encoding" and "decoding" in 1980. They refer to the processes of imbuing cultural products with meanings (encoding) and reading and deciphering those meanings by the audience (decoding). I agree with Stuart Hall when he reads the audience as having a certain agency: although he asserts that media tends to serve to classify the world within the discourses of dominant ideologies, he also notes that this is contradictory work, since counteracting tendencies are also manifested.

Hall's classic work *Representation* serves as an excellent introduction to the fields of media studies, cultural studies and semiotics. By drawing on the constructionist approach to representation, Hall explains how meaning is constructed in and through language. Chapter four, entitled "The spectacle of the Other", is especially relevant for this project, since it studies how the notions of "otherness" and "difference" (in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality and disability) play a significant role in the process and the result of representation. The notion of "otherness" has been a pillar of cultural studies and in the study of identity. Identity and otherness

(and identity understood as otherness, as subjectivity) have become significant factors in the continuity and integrity of the field, as Paul Gilroy explains.[29]

This dissertation confirms many of the premises of the Birmingham School. On the one hand, the participants I interviewed were savvy readers and informed consumers who engaged with the saga of *The Hunger Games* (both the novels and the films) in complex and critical ways. In particular, they criticized the casting of Jennifer Lawrence, the sexualization of Katniss Everdeen in the film adaptations, or the hegemonic masculinity that the character of Gale -Katniss's best friend- embodies. These complex and sharp readings confirm what many cultural studies scholars and myself argue: that (young) audiences are capable of renegotiating the meaning of the media products they consume, and of even offering oppositional readings. On the other hand, my research also corroborates Stuart Hall's previous cautious statement: according to Hall, media tends to serve the interests of dominant ideologies, and resisting those is not easy. Since *The Hunger Games* is a mainstream product created for consumption, the space to craft an elaborated critique, free of normative discourses, is slim. The non-neutrality[30] that affects media -film and books, in this case- and *The Hunger Games* novels and films themselves is a pervasive force, which determines specific readings and prevents others from emerging.

The inclusion of the participant research in my project also elucidates how cultural products can be effective sites of resistance and self-care. This affective component is often left undiscussed in analyses within cultural studies, but is a central part of the work of scholars in childhood and

[29] See Gilroy, "British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity".

[30] For a more detailed discussion on the non-neutrality of media, please see the literature review of the works by feminist media scholars Lita Gitelman, Rosie Cima, Sadie Plant and Simone Browne in this section. For an instance of how this non-neutrality affects the collective imagination of young women and their readings of the character of Peeta, please see the section "*Everlasting Love*: Mixed Reactions" in Chapter 4.

girlhood studies. As the participant research sections show, the affective factor is an integral part of young women's engagement with the products of *The Hunger Games*. My interdisciplinary theoretical framework, together with an innovative methodological approach, has been crucial in obtaining results that both draw on the theory and move it in new and exciting directions. While girlhood studies and participant research are useful to find small acts of rebellion in the consumption of cultural products, the framework of cultural studies is necessary in order to balance those interpretations with the force of normative neoliberal discourses.

Since its inceptions in the 1960s, the field of cultural studies has changed significantly. In the article "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies", Stuart Hall reviews the origins, development and commitments of the field. In order to explain its range, he draws on the Foucauldian concept of *discursive formations*: for Hall, cultural studies' origins are not simple and they comprise multiple discourses and histories. Among those discursive formations, the author insists on the importance of theories related to feminism and race, which became ruptures within the field and reorganized it in multiple ways. Feminism, specifically, was decisive due to the inclusion of the personal as political and the radical expansion of the notion of power. As Susan Lurie points out in "The Woman (In) Question: Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies", the relation of women's studies to cultural studies has a complex history. She explains how, "with its insistence on the social construction of the gendered subject, feminist criticism has both employed and further articulated the theories of subjectivity and power that underwrite contemporary cultural studies".[31] As a result, the category of "woman" becomes a category of shared oppression, a term that has been constantly reconceptualized, deconstructed and reconstructed in relation to other matrixes of power, such as race, class, sexuality, and nationality.

[31] Lurie, "The Woman (In) Question: Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies", 89.

The influence of feminism was not only felt within the realm of cultural studies, but across academia. In film studies, a handful of scholars started introducing a feminist lens into their analyses. The work of the pioneers of feminist film theory inspires this project, since they critiqued patriarchy's use of the concept of gender to promote an ideology of dominance, and they questioned the ways film represented and defined issues of difference and equality among women. These scholars acknowledged "film's power as an instrument whose audiovisual and narrative capabilities profoundly affect public attitudes and beliefs".[32] In her article from 1982, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator", Mary Anne Doane points out the rarity of theories of female spectatorship. Hers is a theory framed within psychoanalysis, one of the main theories and methodologies most widely embraced by film studies' scholars. She upholds the creation of a theory of female spectatorship in order to later dislocate it. Up to that point, Doane points out, the female spectator was only given two options: "the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way".[33]

Introducing an intersectional analysis, feminist scholar bell hooks draws on Stuart Hall's concept of negotiated and oppositional readings and explains in her article "The Oppositional Gaze, Black Female Spectators" how audiences –specifically, black female audiences- learn to look a certain way in order to resist hegemonic messages. I agree with hooks when she argues that there is power in looking, and when she provides spectators with agency through what she calls the "oppositional gaze." As she asserts in this germinal essay, "film theory as a critical "turf" in

[32] Carson, Dittmar and Welsch, *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism,* 3.

[33] Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade", 83.

the United States has been and continues to be influenced by and reflective of white racial domination."[34] In this arena, "one learns to look a certain way in order to resist."[35]

In "The Oppositional Gaze, Black Female Spectators" bell hooks is joining the discussion about the gaze that feminist film scholars such as Mary Ann Doane have started, a discussion that will be deeply influenced by Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema". Mulvey uses psychoanalysis in order to understand when and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existent patterns of fascination in the individual, highlighting how society has unconsciously framed film within a patriarchal structure. In the context of a complexity of looks within the cinematic experience, woman becomes "(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man."[36]

Considering the centrality of popular culture to third wave feminism in the neoliberal era, it is crucial to properly analyze the importance and impact of popular culture, studied within the field of cultural studies. Popular culture, as Lawrence Grossberg poses in "Mapping Popular Culture", helps us make sense of ourselves and the world, and is a significant part of the material reality of history. The term, however, does not respond to an easy definition. It exists within a complex series of terms (mass, elite, legitimate, dominant, folk, high, low, and midcult) and oppositions (civilized vs vulgar, dominant vs subordinate, authentic vs inauthentic, self *vs* other, same vs different) which are linked together in different ways. The term is always in flux, always shifting: it is "the site of an ongoing struggle",[37] since both its content and its audience vary from one historical period to another. In order to shed light on the term, Grossberg draws on conceptions

[34] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze", 114.

[35] Ibid, 108.

[36] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 64.

[37] Grossberg, "Mapping popular culture", 77.

about cultural formations, sensibilities and affect. Taking into consideration that different cultural formations operate on different planes of effects, he examines how particular cultural practices are articulated together to create new realities. Sensibilities, located on the plane of affect, also need to be articulated according to these different formations and populations.

Using references to the persona and performances of the musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk as a metaphor, George Lipsitz posits in his article "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow" the relevance of popular culture. I agree with Lipsitz when he asserts that "perhaps the most important facts about people and about societies have always been encoded within the ordinary and the commonplace".[38] This popular culture is created through what he calls *apparatuses of contemporary commercial electronic mass communications*, which dominate the discourse and impact our personal lives in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways. This commercialized leisure transcends time and space, and becomes an archive of our collective imaginary, retaining memories from the past and imagining hopes for the future. He reviews the historical emergence of this commercialized leisure, which is rooted in the capitalist system and its need of establishing commodity purchases as symbolic answers to the consumers' problems. He also tries to shed some light on the term and its oppositional relationship to high art and folklore: according to Lipsitz, popular culture is characterized by its absence of fixed forms and by its ability to engage audiences in active and familiar processes.

The article "Genre and gender: the case of soap opera", included in the last edition of the book *Representation*, by Stuart Hall, and written by Christine Gledhill and Vicky Ball, is an example of the ways popular fictions participate in the production and circulation of cultural meanings, especially in relation to gender. I agree with the writers when they uphold the centrality

[38] Lipsitz, "Popular Culture: This Ain't No Sideshow", 20.

of fiction to everyday life, and the interchange that takes place between fiction and the social world it references. In this sense, the social world enters the fictional discourse, but the fictional discourse enters the social world as well.[39]

The work of the feminist media scholars Lita Gitelman, Rosie Cima, Sadie Plant and Simone Browne is key in order to understand how gender constructions are embedded not only in media products, but in media themselves. These constructions exist even in those technologies that may appear "objective" at a first glance. As Lita Gitelman notes, gender and cultural differences were built into home phonographs from the start. For Gitelman, recorded sound is an exemplary instance of cultural production, since this medium was deeply defined by users and the changing condition of use.[40] In this context, man started to be constructed as creator and woman as user, and the concept of "consumer" shaped as feminine. Therefore, women were not the agents: they contributed to the narrative but did not participate in it. This is a constant in the history of media. As Sadie Plant recalls, "woman has never been the subject, the agent of this history, the autonomous being."[41] Moreover, the same way photography was optimized to highlight white skin color,[42] mediated sound was normalized in relation to women's voices, Gitelman asserts. For her, "modern forms of mediation are in part defined by normative constructions of difference, whether gender, racial or other versions of difference."[43] Simone Browne proves in her article "Digital Epidermalization: Race, Identity and Biometrics", how biometric technologies are also codifying

[39] The desire to dress up as Katniss Everdeen and to learn archery are examples of this interchange, as the fictional discourse of Katniss Everdeen and *The Hunger Games* enters the social world of the participants. See "*Why Katniss Everdeen is our Favorite Empowering Heroine"* in chapter 6.

[40] Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 83.

[41] Plant, "Weaving Women and Cybernetics", 58.

[42] See Cima, "How Photography Was Optimized for White Skin Color".

[43] Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 84.

gender, race, and citizenship. For her, technologies cannot be neutral since they are "designed and operated by real people to sort real people."[44]

My project is indebted to the aforementioned work in cultural studies, popular culture, and feminist film and media studies. Regarding its theoretical approach, it operates within the frameworks of both feminist theory and queer theory. I follow Judith Butler's reasoning in "Against Proper Objects", where she argues that the "objects" of both disciplines overlap and identifies how they both are indebted to the work of the other. She seeks to dismantle the idea that feminism only studies issues involving gender, while she also refuses to restrict sex and sexuality to be the jurisdiction of gay and lesbian studies. Like Butler, I understand queer theory as a successor to feminist theory, which builds upon feminism's foundational work and intersects with it in relevant ways. The theoretical apparatus derived from queer theory since the 1990s, used to study the creation and maintenance of normativities and deviances, are useful in order to understand the multiple codes related to womanhood, femininity, motherhood, sexuality and whiteness embedded in the character of Katniss Everdeen. For queer theorists, normativities are discourses that establish certain individuals, practices and behaviors as correct, normal, and moral, while displacing other practices that are considered immoral, indecent or abnormal. The latter, the practices and behaviors that challenge normativities, are constructed as "deviant". The intersectionality and interdisciplinarity of inquiry in queer studies, and its wide approach to social concerns are great assets for this project, since the field is able to encompass multiple objects of study and to study multiple axes of oppression. Reflecting on the state of the field in 2005, queer scholars Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz assert in "What's Queer About Queer Theory Now?" that the new queer studies needs to broaden its social concerns and take into consideration recent

[44] Browne, Digital Epidermalization", 114.

historical events, such as the triumph of neoliberalism and the collapse of the welfare state, the "war on terror", the rise of religious fundamentalisms and the return to moral and family values. At this historical juncture, queer studies must be able to provide a critique of race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, as well as sexuality. For this project, I study how conceptions and assumptions of gender, sexuality and race are imbued in the character of Katniss Everdeen, and how those aspects that could be considered "deviant" are normalized.

I work within the intersections of both feminist and queer theory. Following Cathy J. Cohen in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics", I believe a binary view of sexuality ignores intersecting systems of power that function through race, gender, and class to exert domination. Similarly, a narrow understanding of gender that ignores other elements in the power matrix is also problematic, and likely to produce biased, or incomplete, results. As Cohen reminds us, the lack of recognition of how individuals may have multiple marginalized identities results in ignorance about how different aspects of their multiple identities may serve to privilege or marginalize them. Lacking fluidity and intersectionality in queer analysis and politics creates the problem of keeping the systems of privilege in place. Thus, an intersectional approach in my research is key in order to obtain more productive, accurate, and fair results.

The work of feminist queer theorist Judith Butler has influenced my research in definitive ways. I understand gender categories as she does in *Gender Trouble,* where she asserts that the latter are not natural categories, but artificial social constructions which require constant work and performative actions in order to be maintained in place. In Burler's words, gender constitutes a "copy" with no "original", and needs to be expressed and performed through a series of decisions and actions which alter the way we communicate and present ourselves to the world. In her article

"Imitation and Gender insubordination", Butler continues challenging essentialist ideas of gender through the concept of drag in order to further iterate the performative nature of all gender and sexual identities.

Jack J Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* explores the ways in which female masculinities –tomboyism, butchness, and drag kings - have occurred both historically and in our contemporary times. Halberstam argues that while conceptions of "dominant" masculinity incorporate and naturalize the relation between maleness and power, and it is commonly embedded in the white male middle-class man, masculinity does not only reduce down to the white male dominance or the male body, but is constructed in both female-born and male-born individuals, who align with different and alternative forms of male masculinities - gay, bisexual, black, Asian, Latino- as well as female masculinities. I use this body of work to analyze how Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the saga, is not embodying a new type of female masculinity, but rather recenters hegemonic masculinity.

My project is influenced by Foucauldian theory, a theoretical framework often used by feminist and queer scholars, and its analysis of how power operates in society through a multiplicity of discourses. As Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality*, power is not a system by which one group dominates another, but a multiplicity of force relations, what he defines as the "polymorphous techniques of power". According to him, there is no binary opposition between dominant and dominated, given that power is everywhere. For Foucault, points of resistance and agency can be located within the power network. I am interested in studying what kind of discourses have been produced and distributed by the Hollywood film industry through *The Hunger Games* saga and what other discursivities young female audiences are producing as a result

of their consumption of the films.[45] Another key concept derived from Foucauldian theory is the concept of normalization, which he introduces in his lectures at the Collège de France from 1975 to 1976, called "Society Must Be Defended". Normalization stands as a place where discipline and sovereignty clash against one another, and it responds both to disciplinary power (power exerted over the individual bodies, who are forced to police themselves) and biopower (power exerted over the populations).

Foucauldian theory has been widely and productively used within feminist and queer theory. Scholar Cressida Heyes, for example, applies Foucault's concept of normalization to study the mechanisms of the televisual cosmetic surgical makeover in her article "Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover: A Foucauldian Feminist Reading". She asserts that these successful television programs define and "correct" populations in relation to their conformity or deviance from a norm. In this context, the body is understood as a vehicle for self-transformation: it can be modified to be more attractive and to truly reflect or embody the person someone believes herself to be. She specifically focuses on the television show "Extreme Makeover", and how it normalizes subjects according to a scale of heterosexual desirability, youthful appearance and an exaggerated binary gender system. The makeover presented also has the assumed capability of elevating class status.

Laurie Ouellette and James Hay have also studied the stakes of makeover television through a Foucauldian lens. In "Makeover television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen" they analyze the changing relationship between makeover television and social welfare. They assert

[45] Some scholars are using Foucault's concepts of *panopticism* and *surveillance* to examine the stakes of contemporary surveillance in *The Hunger Games*, one of the main critiques that crystallizes from the trilogy. See Part III, "Resistance, Surveillance, and Simulacra" in *Of bread, blood, and the Hunger Games*.

that the impulse to turn television consumers into active and healthy citizens speaks to the "reinvention" of government in neoliberal capitalist democracies. In this neoliberal context, cultural technologies such as television (also described as techniques of governmentality) become key means of self-achievement, encouraging citizens to care and govern themselves. Makeover television encourages its participants to care and take control of their bodies, their jobs and their lifestyle choices. These techniques of governmentality for self-achievement speak to the Foucauldian term of self-policing, derived from disciplinary power.

The articles by Cressida Heyes, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay point out the problematic repercussions of the neoliberal emphasis on identity and self-achievement. Their analysis align with one of the queer studies' main focuses of inquiry, i.e. the neoliberal system, and how it normalizes, regulates, and controls subjects. Neoliberalism is central to the creation and development of certain identities and cultural projects, as Lisa Duggan argues in *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. In her book, Duggan examines how neoliberalism's rise to hegemonic power also encompassed emergent multicultural and equality projects; in this context, identity and cultural projects were situated as central to neoliberalism. Alexandra Chasin provides an informative instance of these processes in her book *Selling Out. The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, in which she argues that capitalist consumption was key for the development of the modern gay and lesbian identity. As Chasin asserts, the increasing emphasis of identity within a neoliberal context needs to be matched by the growth of possibilities of establishing identity through consumption. For the author, "capitalism contributes to the formation of individual identity, which in turn contributes to the formation of identity-based social movements".[46]

[46] Chasin, *Selling Out, 16.*

The establishment of identity and the encouragement of empowerment through consumption is a contentious and generative debate at the heart of both queer and girlhood studies. While the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, Stuart Hall, and Michel Foucault encouraged readers to find those spaces and gaps within the dominant discourse where agency could be found, scholars who engage with feminism in the neoliberal context state that this empowerment through consumption leads to a depoliticized stance that minimizes the impact of larger political and cultural forces. Part of the originality of my standpoint is that I consider both sides of the debate, which are often deemed incompatible. Many scholars undertaking Foucauldian cultural and critical media studies question the agency of the subject to react and oppose the hegemonic cultural and political system, what Becky Francis has called a "postmodern reduction of agency apparent in Foucauldian thinking."[47] However, a different interpretation is also possible: one that understands Foucault as offering points of resistance. Foucault challenges the assumption by which power is a totalizing system of domination, and invites the critical thinker to locate those margins and gaps "on and through the body where agency can be found."[48] This reading is the preferred reading for black feminist scholar bell hooks, and it is mine as well. My research both draws on Foucauldian theory to find spaces for agency and engages with queer theory and the rise of postfeminism in the context of neoliberalism. These studies show how neoliberalism entitles girls to establish their identity ("girl power") through consumption.

The notion of "girl power" has been met with reluctance and even contempt by some feminist scholars and writers. Rachel Fudge's harsh critique of girl power in "Girl, Unreconstructed" leaves no doubts: for the writer, girl power "reduces the theoretical complexity

[47] Francis quoted in Ringrose, *Postfeminist education?*, 60.

[48] hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze", 308.

of feminism to a cheery slogan" and represents "the ultimate commodification of empowerment."[49] She worries that if girl power becomes young girls' primary understanding of gender, they will not have the tools to fight sexism when times gets rough or have an awareness of the power of collective activism. In other words, she assures, "they don't have feminism".[50] I am critical with Fudge's article. Although it raises legitimate concerns, it falls into the ideological notion that young girls are in need of protection.[51] However, representing young women as "victims" (of consumerism, of media influence, of oppressive systems) can lead to their disempowerment. Carol Dyhouse's historical account of moral panics regarding girlhood sheds light on this issue. As Dyhouse explains, the moral panic about white slavery coincided with the rise of the women's movement. This was no coincidence, she asserts: "At a time when women were undoubtedly get-ting stronger, and becoming more assertive politically, it suited a range of interest groups, for very diverse reasons, to represent girls as frightened, as oppressed, or as victims."[52] I agree with her assertion that too much emphasis on victimization can sometimes produce odd political results. For Dyhouse, forging a political identity out of victimhood is difficult, since victims call for protection, "and too much protection can easily begin to look like control."[53]

My work is also anchored in Robin Bernstein's seminal book *Racial Innocence: American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, published in 2011. Bernstein investigates the connection between childhood and innocence in the United States and traces its historical roots in the XIX century, when this innocence was raced white. The author concludes that in the second half of the

[49] Fudge. "Girl, Unreconstructed", 155.

[50] Fudge. "Girl, Unreconstructed", 160.

[51] For a discussion on the moral panic about children, see "The Necessity of the Epilogue: Children's Reassurance as Moral Imperative", in Chapter 5.

[52] Dyhouse, *Girl trouble*, 41.

[53] Ibid, 254.

nineteenth century, white childhood and white girlhood "became laminated to the idea of innocence; to invoke white childhood was to invoke innocence itself."[54] This prescriptive innocence was placed on some children -white children- and not others -black children-. In sharp contrast, she continues, images of black pickaninnies "emptied black childhood of innocence."[55] These arguments are remarkably useful for my analyses, especially those referring to Rue's innocence, Katniss' naivety, and the moral panic about children. Through two main archives of repertoires: the literary text *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and dolls such as Raggedy Ann, Bernstein shows how childhood has influenced U.S. racial formation and has served different political agendas. Her book is key in girlhood studies, since it makes a case for the centrality of girls and girlhood to US racial formation.

Research in girlhood studies has also highlighted and privileged young audiences' autonomy and critical insight. An example of children's capacity to negotiate and contest cultural products can be found in *Un/popular fictions*, written by Gemma Moss and published in 1989. Using her own experience as a sixth-grade teacher, Gemma Moss examines why and how the romance form is used in girls' writing. Moss seeks to find an explanation which validates the girls' actions rather than "casting them only as hapless victims of a sexist society,"[56] an approach that I also implemented in the focus groups I facilitated. Through the use of case studies, Moss shows how although working within constraints, girls are able to modify and adapt the formulas of popular fiction, using them to raise their own questions and to express their own purposes. The findings from the participant research of this project also confirm this thesis.[57]

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[54] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 63.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Moss, *Un/popular fictions*, 10.

[57] The focus groups show that although the participants did not challenge certain hegemonic tropes in *The Hunger Games* saga (such as the pervasive influence of hegemonic masculinity or the racial progress

Fifteen years later, Holly Blackford interviewed racially, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse American girls, ranging in age from eight to sixteen, about their experiences with books and other media. Blackford's goal was to find evidence "of girls' performance of and resistance to dominant discourses of growing up female"[58]. Her results were summarized in the book *Out of this world: Why literature matters to girls*, and showed that girls had sophisticated ways of engaging with literature, a premise that I share and that is validated in the findings of the focus groups.[59] Blackford discovered that instead of searching for narratives that represented female experience, they favored books that moved beyond the politics of identity. These findings went against the teachers' view on the matter, since readers were hitherto thought to be engaged by characters and social worlds that they could relate to themselves. However, for the girls interviewed by Blackford, fiction transcended both writer and reader. In Chapter 6, entitled "Film and Reelism", Blackford clarified that visual media allowed greater identification with female characters. Young girls considered films to be closer to the real world of referents than books were, and situated popular movies as key organizers of their social worlds. For the interviewees, the interpretation of books was personal, while interpretation of films was "both personal and social, reinterpreted by a social community".[60] If fiction transcended reality, visual media was intertwined with it.

narrative), they did identify problematic issues in the novels and the films and were able to use them for multiple purposes, namely an escape, a shelter, and a site of empowerment.

[58] Blackford, *Out of this world*, 5.

[59] The participants I interviewed were savvy and critical consumers of *The Hunger Games* saga, and interacted with it in complex and manifold ways. See the participant research sections in Chapters 2-5 and the conclusions in Chapter 6.

[60] Ibid, 109.

Young people are also capable of interpreting and negotiating what would be understood as *sensitive* content by parents and educators, such as sex content in the media. Rosalind Gill refers to the work of David Buckingham and Sara Bragg, who demonstrate that children are neither naive nor incompetent consumers. According to the media studies' scholars, young people are "highly critical" consumers and make active choices "about how to engage with sexualized culture".[61] In *The material child*, Buckingham acknowledges the capacity of children to read media messages critically, but he is also careful not to present children's testimony "at face value". I agree with Buckingham when he asserts that the interaction between children and consumer culture constitutes an arena for complex forms of "identity work".[62]

For young girls, this "identity work" takes place within a neoliberal system that shapes girls as perfect neoliberal subjects: empowered, independent, and more importantly, eager to consume. Girlhood studies show how the discourses of girl power associated to postfeminist culture have proliferated in the last two decades, and how these narratives have shaped girls as independent, empowered agents of change. Rosalind Gill explains this process in her book *Gender and the media*, where she argues that we inhabit a postfeminist media culture. Her understanding of media culture as the critical object is useful for my project, since it fosters critical analysis related to the sexualization of culture, individualism, choice and empowerment.

What it means to empower children or young people within the context of a neoliberal system is ideologically complex.[63] Many scholars have raised their concerns about this construction of empowerment in a neoliberal context. In "'The Revolution Will Be Led by a 12-

[61] Gill, "The sexualization of culture?" 489.

[62] Buckingham, *The material child*, 139-142.

[63] Banet-Weiser, "The Nickelodeon Brand", 70.

year-old Girl': Girl Power and Global Biopolitics.", for instance, Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill offer a study of the "Girl Effect", a narrative through which girls are presented as empowered agents of change, capable of ending world poverty and transforming health and life expectancy in the developing world. The discourse of "girl power" and "the Girl effect" presents several problems, according to the authors. First, it focuses upon individual agency instead of collective struggle, and disavows structural or systemic accounts of inequality. And second, this "effect" renders invisible those neoliberal features that produce the very injustices and inequalities that the Girl Effect tries to challenge.[64] Koffman and Gill identify the risks in positioning neoliberalism as "the liberating force through which patriarchy can be defeated"[65], and they problematize the construction of girls as the ideal neoliberal subjects (hardworking, entrepreneurial, independent, empowered, and with agency).

This and other sharp critiques elucidate the pitfalls of empowerment through consumption. In a later article entitled "Girl power and 'selfie humanitarianism'", Koffman, Organ and Gill argue that this "girl power" is connected to the depoliticization, corporatization, and neo-liberalization of both humanitarianism and girl power. According to the authors, girls have received an extraordinary visibility in contemporary humanitarian campaigns, have been presented as empowered, celebrated figures, and they are constructed as both ideal victims and ideal agents of change, as potential donors and beneficiaries of the "aid" provided. The scholars focus on the campaign *Girl up* to explain how an apparent appeal to international sisterhood is actually performed through consumption, self-broadcasting, self-branding and self-promotion. They assert

[64] Koffman and Gill. "'The Revolution Will Be Led by a 12-year-old Girl', 86.

[65] Ibid, 90.

that these practices work to mask, rather than highlight, the radical differences and inequalities between the Northern and the Southern girl in the world.

The empowerment of kids through consumption has also been studied by Sarah Banet-Weiser. In "The Nickelodeon Brand: Buying and Selling the Audience" she studies the creation and development of the brand Nickelodeon, advertised as transformative and empowering media for children. The network positions itself as a "rebellious entity"[66] that does not patronize or infantilize children, but respects and liberates them from the world of adults. Subtly, the brand adapts a rhetoric by which children are empowered through the consumption of television, and more specifically, the Nickelodeon channel.

The emerging field of girlhood studies is indebted to the work of Miriam Forman-Brunell, who has intensively written and edited works in the field. The two volumes of *Girlhood in America: An Encyclopedia*, provide a good foundation on girls' lives, their experiences, and their roles in the social, cultural, economic and political history of the United States. The entries include remarks related to body image, daughters and mothers, fairy tales, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy, among others. Ten years after the publication of the Encyclopedia, Forman-Brunell and Leslie Paris edited *The Girls' History and Culture Reader*, a more recent introduction to the field. Especially relevant are the articles dedicated to the twentieth century and to girls' relation to popular culture as subjects and agents, consumers and producers.

Ideas of "tween" and "tween culture" are further explored in the volume edited by Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*, from 2005. Their third section is especially relevant for this study, since it focuses on aspects related to marketing and consumerism of teen culture. A more recent monograph in

[66] Banet-Weiser, "The Nickelodeon Brand", 77.

girlhood studies is the book *'Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood*, from 2009. Dawn Currie, Deirdre M. Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz undertake a very productive approach, since they consider girls as active agents and seek to understand, in line with the scope of this project, how girls themselves construct girlhood (s). According to the "Mediated Youth" series editor, Sharon R. Mazzarella, *Girl Power* is "a theoretical grounded exploration of feminism ("girl power") as it is currently practiced by some girls and young women in North America".[67] Drawing on seventy-one interviews with girls between the ages of twelve and sixteen, they try to design a "very different picture of young female identity than is often reflected in consumer culture or in conventional psychology textbooks".[68]

As opposed to the framework that is critical about the idea of empowerment in a neoliberal setting, inquiry about fan culture tends to apply a more optimistic lens to the study of youth participation and engagement with cultural products. Both sides of the debate are considered in this project, since I acknowledge both the pervasive influence and control of the neoliberal state, as well as the possibilities this neoliberal system creates for participation, empowerment, and choice. Although I do not enthusiastically celebrate the power of media and consumption as a vehicle for empowerment and autonomy, I posit that young girls are not the incompetent and powerless consumers that some discourses have presented. The complex realities surrounding young girls cannot only be resolved by mature scholars, teachers and parents. In my project I try to avoid two problematic discourses: first, the old-fashioned feminism according to which women are always victimized within systems of male power[69] and second, the patronizing argument by

[67] Currie, Kelly and Pomweantz, *Girl Power*, XI.

[68] Ibid, XV.

[69] Halberstam, *Female masculinity*, 17.

which adults and adult scholars insist on knowing what is best for younger audiences. My research confirms that young girls are capable of producing various responses to the media objects they consume, including critical reactions. Their relation to popular culture as subjects and agents, consumers and producers is complex and multi-layered; and should not be dismissed as mere consumerism.

Whether neoliberal cultural products can be a site of resistance, as Lawrence Grossberg wonders in "Is There a Fan in the House?" is one of the questions I interrogate throughout my research. I conclude they can be.[70] Grossberg insists on the idea that both audiences and texts are continuously being remade by relocating their place within different contexts: the fact that audiences relate to cultural products' appeals does not guarantee the audiences' subjugation to the interests of the commercial sector. Active sites of resistance (and not only passive sites of evasion) are also possible. The participant research included in my project confirms this premise, as the participants highlight how they used *The Hunger Games* products to find shelter and comfort.

Another example is the interactive website *Rookie*, used by Laurie Ouellette and Jacquelyn Arcy as a case study for theorizing the possibilities for self-care as warfare in the digital realm. Even though they acknowledge the value of the studies that focus on the cultural dimension and pervasiveness of neoliberalism, they want to highlight the potential of digital technologies not only for neoliberal self-branding, but for feminist self-making and care. According to the authors, the platform has a critical, self-conscious attitude, and it falls outside the dominant context for self-making. It allows "smalls acts of rebellion"[71], and it teaches young women how to challenge gender norms and how to resist dominant expectations for them. The column "Live through This",

[70] See the section "Why Katniss Everdeen is our Favorite Empowering Heroine", in Chapter 6.

[71] Ouellette, "Live Through This", 103.

specifically, offers a set of survival strategies for its young feminist readers. These active, proactive alternatives are also studied by Henry Jenkins in his research regarding audiences and fan culture. In his short article "Participatory Culture: From Co-Creating Brand Meaning to Changing the World" he explores how fans are applying their skills not only to making fan videos, writing fan fiction, engaging in cosplay, or debating interpretations, but also to promoting social justice. These groups (such as the Harry Potter Alliance or the Nerdfighters) are well organized and use their brands and their fictional franchises as resources for their activist efforts.

The Scholarship on *The Hunger Games* - A Fast-Growing Field

In 2012, film critic A. O. Scott anticipated the vast interest that the world of *The Hunger Games* would spark in graduate students and scholars: "I see the outlines of a future American Studies dissertation emerging in the mist".[72] He was not wrong. In the last few years, many doctoral students have chosen *The Hunger Games* as a case study. Sarah Colonna, from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, used Katniss Everdeen's epic story to write a qualitative case study dissertation in 2016. Her work is entitled "There's more to it than just girl power: A case study exploring a women's and gender studies class taught with "The Hunger Games". One year later, Mary Miller from Ohio State University defended her dissertation, "Restorying Dystopia: Exploring The Hunger Games Series Through U.S. Cultural Geographies, Identities, and Fan Response". These are only two examples, but dozens of dissertations and theses have been written since the publication of the books by Suzanne Collins and the release of the film adaptations. Due to the novelty of *The Hunger Games*, the inquiry about the saga is growing rapidly.

[72]A. O. Scott, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

One of the first collections of essays on the literary saga was edited by Mary Pharr and Leisa Clark and published in 2012. For the editors of "Of Bread, Blood and The Hunger Games: Critical Essays on the Suzanne Collins Trilogy", the success of their extensive call for papers illustrates that academics "want to talk about The Hunger Games."[73] There is a myriad of ways to analyze *The Hunger Games*; some of the first scholars in the field have focused on implications of race (Ellen Moore and Catherine Coleman, Rachel Dubrofsky and Emily Ryalls) and have compared the narrative of the character to the traits of heroines from Greek myth (Kathryn Strong Hansen). The literary saga has been studied in terms of its relationship to history, politics, and economics (Bill Clemente, Anthony Pavlik, Gretchen Koenig, Valerie Estelle Frankel, Tina L. Hanlon, Max Despain), and reviewed according to ethics, aesthetics and identity (Guy Andre Risko, Tammy L. Gant, Katheryn Wright, Sharon D. King). Other lines of research include the saga's relationship with surveillance and simulacra (Amy Montz, Kelley Wezner, Shannon Mortimore-Smith, Helen Day) and its comparison to other literary traditions, such as Shakespeare's Second *Henriad* (Catherine R. Eskin), *Podkayne of Mars* (Rodney M. DeaVault), *Ender's Game* (Sarah Outterson Murphy), *Twilight* (Amanda Firestone), and *Harry Potter* (Mary F. Pharr). The novels and films can be read, for instance, as a as a dystopian imagined future for North America, a political allegory, a satire of late capitalism, a feminist revision on the sci-fi action blockbuster, or a bloody satire of reality television.[74] Given the multiple layers of analyses the dystopian world of Panem offers, scholars from different fields have used the films or novels

[73] Pharr and Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games, 2.

[74] Pollitt and Suderman offer multiple paths for interpretation, some of which are included above. See Pollitt, "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism" and Suderman, 'The Hunger Games' offers a feast for sci-fi fans".

as object of analysis. As Peter Suderman predicted in 2012, "there's enough "relevance" here to power every cultural studies department in the country for a decade."[75]

Although the scholarship about *The Hunger Games* is growing rapidly, the analyses produced by researchers, journalists and critics are often disconnected. Film critics and journalists' pieces have the immediacy of the press and carry the excitement of witnessing how a female heroine becomes the protagonist of a successful blockbuster saga. However, because of time constraints, these articles often lack depth. Meanwhile, scholars choose to either carry out focus groups that focus on readers' input or undertake textual analyses that often disregard audiences' interpretation. There is a gap between the literature that focuses on readers and viewers' response and the scholarship in cultural and media studies that considers the text in itself, in isolation from its social context and/or its reception. By including two methodological traditions, i.e. textual analysis and participant research, my project fills that gap.

My dissertation project specifically examines how gender, racial and sexual normativities are problematized and/or entrenched in the saga, a task undertaken by scholars such as Holly Hassel or Jennifer Mitchell. As A. O. Scott asserts, attempts to decode the -what he calls- "nongender" politics of *The Hunger Games* have been "all over the map".[76] For some film critics, the creation and development of the character of Katniss Everdeen is considered a step forward in feminist representations in mass media: Katha Pollitt,[77] Sarah Seltzer and A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis are some of the voices that consider Katniss as a true female teenage feminist icon. Seltzer sees in Katniss and Peeta's gender roles reversal a true revolution, and situates Katniss's

[75] Suderman, 'The Hunger Games' offers a feast for sci-fi fans".

[76] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[77] Katha Pollitt maintains the legitimacy of Katniss Everdeen as a feminist icon in "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism".

engagement with her surroundings and her decision to stand up for others as valuable feminist attributes.[78] For A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis, she is "one of the most radical female characters to appear in American movies".[79]

Some scholarly work follows film critics' interpretation: for researchers Isabel Menéndez and Marta Fernández Morales, for instance, the film adaptations of *The Hunger Games* novels subvert media's hegemonic pattern and the patriarchal order of mainstream narratives.[80] Other scholars, however, are often in opposition to this interpretation. Critics such as Kate Heartfield, for instance, believe there is nothing in the books "to challenge orthodoxy or give patriarchal parents the slightest bit of discomfort at finding it on their kids' reading tables".[81] Many scholars assert that Katniss's representation is not necessarily a feminist one, and that the saga provides mixed messages regarding gender representation.[82] They acknowledge the creation of the character as a step forward in women's representation in mass culture, but believe that the saga still lingers in conventional and heteronormative standards. Rachel Dubrofsky, Emily Ryalls, Vera Woloshyn, Nancy Taber, and Laura Lane are some of the scholars who question Katniss's legitimacy as a feminist icon. For scholars Dubrofsky and Ryalls, for instance, "age-old racialized and gender tropes" endure even in the dystopian world of Panem.[83] This chapter draws upon these two

[78] She considers her and Peeta "gender revolutionaries" in "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution". See also "Hunger Pangs. Hunting for the Perfect Heroine", 40, where Seltzer asserts that Katniss Everdeen has value as a feminist heroine.

[79] The critics believe Katniss is not reduced to a type in the films, but embodies one of the "truest feeling, most complex female characters to hit American movies in a while". See "A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia".

[80] Menéndez Menéndez and Fernández Morales, "(Re) definición de los Roles de Género en la Cultura Popular" ("(Re) definition of Gender Roles in Popular Culture", my translation), 195.

[81] Heartfield, "Hardly revolutionary".

[82] Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane. "'She's More like a Guy' and 'he's More like a Teddy Bear', 1022.

[83] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 407.

significantly polarized analyses. Although I align with most cultural studies scholars who question the reinforcement of certain racial, gender and sexual normativities in the saga, I also highlight the ways the films and novels try to offer an updated representation of a female hero. Once again, I compile and put in conversation theories and analyses that are often deemed incompatible, refusing to situate my research in either of two poles. By bringing these pieces of scholarship together, I offer a project that builds a bridge between troubled disciplinary waters, contentious discussions, and polarized interpretations.

1.4 Bringing women in - A feminist project

My research is deeply influenced by feminist theory and methodology. I rely on black feminist bell hook's general understanding of feminism, given the wide scope of her approach. She describes it as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression".[84] Having bell hooks' general understanding of feminism as one of the bedrocks of my project, I then frame my work within the practice of feminist textual analysis. As Patricia Lina Leavy points out, "many feminist researchers perform textual analysis from a deconstructive perspective in which a text is analyzed to see not only what is there but also what is missing, silenced, or absent".[85] Like Leavy, I believe that pop culture often offers hegemonic definitions of women and men. The influence that mass media and other cultural artifacts have in the collective thinking is overwhelming. I argue that feminist research based on content analysis is crucial for three main reasons: first, to understand what meanings are embedded into our cultural products, second, to carry out a critique that explores the problematic aspects of those meanings; and third, to open the door to social

[84] Hooks, *Feminism is for everybody*, 1.

[85] Leavy, "The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis", 228.

change. For feminist researchers, the deconstruction of cultural norms found in popular products can serve as a political weapon, since it can demonstrate the ways in which patriarchal society, whether consciously or not, structures the media messages that accompany our lives[86]. Following Michelle M. Lazar's explanation of feminist critical discourse analysis, I assert that the goal is "to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities".[87]

The overarching aspect of this dissertation is the commitment to the specific value of gender justice[88]. The project is committed to three feminist goals, as outlined by Frances Montell:[89]

1. To bring women in, finding what has been ignored, censored, and suppressed in the standard focus on men's concerns,
2. To minimize harm, control, and exploitation in the research project,
3. And to conduct research that will be valuable to women and will lead to social change or action beneficial to women.

I also draw on Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's analysis of intersectionality. My analysis is intersectional since it encompasses the ways in which hegemonic ideas of gender, but also race and sexuality, are embedded into the cultural product of *The Hunger Games*. The debate about intersectional feminism has recently received great attention, especially following the Women's

[86] See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 57.

[87] Lazar, "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis", 142.

[88] Jaggar, Alison M. *Just Methods: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Reader*.

[89] Montel, Frances. "Focus Groups Interviews: A New Feminist Method", 67.

March in Washington, DC on January 21, 2017.[90] The term "intersectional" has also become a buzzword in feminist popular and online culture, fostering heated conversations in social media platforms and online sites that favor or oppose intersectionality.[91]

I engage with intersectionality in two different ways. First, I depart from a theoretical approach that acknowledges that the lens of gender is insufficient to examine the complex realities of women, since other axes of oppression and marginalization (such as race, religion, sexuality, class, and ability) also affect their experiences. Second, my project considers three main axes of normalization in the character of Katniss Everdeen and others: gender, race, and sexuality. These three intersecting axes are explored throughout the project.

By engaging with intersectionality I do not favor the location of women as hapless victims of multiple oppressive forces. Quite the opposite: as I stated previously, my analysis of Katniss Everdeen makes an effort to avoid two problematic discourses: first, the old-fashioned feminism that views women as "endlessly victimized within systems of male power"[92] and second, the patronizing argument by which adults assert that they know what is best for young audiences. I seek to understand young women's relationships with the texts, and avoid "othering" them.[93] My project tries to listen to the girls "instead of lecturing them."[94]

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[90] See Desmond-Harris, "To Understand the Women's March on Washington".

[91] For a few examples of the controversy see smith, "Push(back) at the Intersections"; Wilhelm, "Women's March Morphs into Intersectional Torture Chamber"; and Stockman, "Women's March on Washington Opens Contentious Dialogues About Race".

[92] Halberstam, *Female masculinity*, 17.

[93] As David Buckingham and Holly Blackford note, young audiences are usually 'othered' in the debate around market *versus* consumers, since the market is controlled by layers of adults and adult institutions and young audiences are rarely heard or consulted. See Buckingham, *The material child*, 26 and Blackford, *Out of this world*, 3.

[94] With regards to a girls' movement, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards assert that it is only genuine if we listen to the girls: "We need to listen to girls instead of lecturing them". See Baumgardner and Richards in *Manifesta*, 185.

Terms such as “feminism” and “feminist representation”, included throughout in my research, are subject to intense debate and to constant reevaluation and reinterpretation. This reevaluation is necessary for two main reasons. On the one hand, not all feminists want the same things or share the same feminist politics, and on the other hand this self-examination and resignification of the terms is necessary in order to avoid creating new orthodoxies that could be exclusionary.[95] As Lila Abu-Lughod points out, feminist projects and interventions can be conceived and executed in terms that not only serve to empower but also “to limit, discipline, and divide”.[96] For these reasons feminism is as plural and diverse as its followers are, and it constitutes an ongoing process that is constantly being reinvented through determination and compromise.[97]

By using the term “feminist representation” in my project I refer to a representation that provides the heroine with choice and portrays her with complexity and without condescension. It avoids one-dimensional descriptions with minimal depth, and it lets the character speak in her own terms, and not through the voices of others or the filming of a male gaze. It entitles her to make her own choices without forcing her to perpetuate traditional western depictions of romance, family life, and relationships.

1.5 Methodology

The project includes textual analysis of the films as well as participant research (focus groups) exploring young women’s reactions and engagement with the films. The primary focus of the study is the development of and engagement with the main character of the saga, Katniss

[95] See Grewal and Kaplan. *Scattered Hegemonies*, 18.

[96] Abu-Lughod also notes that it is not easy to talk about patriarchy or to simply explain how power works. See Abu-Lughod. "Introduction: The Politics of Feminist Politics.", 5-7, and “Introduction: Rights and Lives”, 6.

[97] Douglas, *Where the girls are*, 273.

Everdeen. From my perspective as a feminist cultural studies scholar, Katniss Everdeen's promise as a feminist fiction icon eventually vanishes into neoliberal heteropatriarchal standards. I articulate this argument through feminist textual analysis, the driving method for my project. Additionally, this analysis is strengthened through spectators' input on their engagement with the films and character. This dissertation blurs the methodological frontiers between the humanities and the social sciences in order to find answers to the questions it asks. It is important for scholars to not force our own views onto young readers' understandings of the films and novels; thus my project seeks to balance questions about the encoding of social and cultural codes through fiction while also recognizing that young audiences possess the capabilities to critically engage with texts. This perspective calls for connecting the textual analysis with focus groups with students at Virginia Commonwealth University who identify as women or identified as women when they were teenagers: the purpose is to gather data about young women's understanding and perspective with the cultural product *The Hunger Games*.

The analysis of young women's interpretations of the heroine is crucial to understand how they experience Katniss Everdeen's persona, how the heroine affects their understanding of womanhood, and how their reads match or differ from a critical academic study. The feminist discourse of *The Hunger Games* might be superficial for adult women, but we should not forget that the saga is a product targeting a teenage audience.[98] This project needs to rely, consequently, on both textual analysis and participant research. This unique methodological approach has fostered exciting findings: while these two modes of analysis corroborate many of the premises of the Birmingham School regarding the consumption of media, they also crystallize the affective

[98] Menéndez Menéndez, Isabel, and Fernández Morales, Marta. "(Re) definición De Los Roles De Género En La Cultura Popular", 208.

dimension of the saga, an aspect that was not taken into account in the theory. The participant research has been crucial in grasping the importance of the affective dimension of the products of *The Hunger Games*, which become shelters and sites of resistance for participants who are looking for comfort and fiction characters to whom they can relate. Besides, this dual mode of analysis has also evidenced the temporality of consumption. The participants' readings of *The Hunger Games* products changed with time, as it did the intention of the saga, which transformed from an escape narrative into a rhetorical weapon to advance a political agenda.[99] Temporality also influenced the participants' interpretation of the casting of Jennifer Lawrence, which I study in chapter 2. Textual analysis alone could not have accounted for these decisive factors.[100]

I am aware of the difficulties and challenges of mixed-methods research: combining methods from both the humanities and the social sciences requires a deep understanding of not one, but two methodological apparatus that belong to different fields, with different histories and *modus operandi*. This legitimate concern has been raised by peers and professors. Purists in the humanities and the social sciences are often skeptical about a mixed-methods approach, since some fear a lack of professionalism, trustworthiness and/or accuracy in the results of the research.

I offer two responses. First, my academic career has been spent in the frontier between the social sciences and the humanities, the reason why I am familiar with both fields and the nexuses they maintain; and second, a mixed-method research is necessary in order to find answers to the questions my dissertation asks. Interdisciplinarity may come with pitfalls and challenges, but it also enables strategic thinking to give creative responses to the problems that arise. It provides the research with a multiplicity of lenses, theoretical and methodological apparatuses that can be

[99] See "*The Hunger Games*: A Dystopian Narrative", in this chapter.

[100] See "Why Katniss Everdeen is our Favorite Empowering Heroine", in Chapter 6.

applied to the objects of study and it fosters conversations between scholars in different fields, contributing to a greater collaboration among dissimilar areas. To my understanding, academia should not be isolated from the wider economic, political, social and cultural context in which it resides, since those power structures and the production of knowledge are always interrelated in complex ways. As Alison Jaggar notes, the tradition of feminist research with which I engage[101] "is uniquely distinguished by its dedication to promoting gender justice *both* in knowledge and in the social world."[102] Accordingly, the scholarly textual analysis and the audience reception study should be put in conversation for a more productive and accurate analysis of the dystopian heroine.

Textual Analysis

For the critical content analysis, this project embraces the feminist practice of content analysis, as defined by Patricia Lina Leavy in her article from 2007.[103] My analysis does not seek to discredit the work of Suzanne Collins or the work of the production and casting crew of the film adaptations. The opposite is true: I write from a position of a deep appreciation of the work under consideration and its complexity and richness. Studying the entrenchment and contestation of dominant conceptions related to gender, race, and sexuality in the saga aims to elucidate the difficulties in creating media products that do not perpetuate those mere conceptions. This case study exemplifies gender, racial, and sexual normativities that are in place in our society at large, and that manifest through the media products we consume in our everyday lives.

[101] I detail how my project engages with feminist theory and methodology in section 1.4, "Bringing Women In - A Feminist Project"

[102] Jaggar, *Just Methods*, x.

[103] Leavy, "The Feminist Practice of Content Analysis".

The main object of study is the narrative of the character of Katniss Everdeen. Rather than a film analysis that explains how the narrative is produced through film techniques, the focus is located on the narrative of the protagonist in both the films and the novels. Although my research focuses on the analysis of Katniss Everdeen in the movies, it is crucial for my project to note that the understanding of the protagonist may differ between those who have read the novels and those who have only watched the movies. For this reason, I also carry out a feminist textual analysis of Katniss's narrative in the three novels of the saga: *The Hunger Games*, published in 2008, *Catching Fire*, published in 2009, and *Mockingjay*, published in 2010. Mine is also an adaptation analysis, since I situate the study of Katniss' narrative in the novels in comparison with the narrative created in the film adaptations of the books: four movies released in 2012 (*The Hunger Games*), 2013 (*Catching Fire*), 2014 (*Mockingjay - Part I*) and 2015 (*Mockingjay - Part II*). The analysis of the narrative considers how the portrayal of Katniss in the novels is different from the representation in the films. I study several formal and thematic changes that result from the adaptation process, and the consequences of the latter in the understanding of the character by readers and film spectators. My study is not a comprehensive film analysis, but it occasionally adopts film analysis' terms to clarify the narrative. Although the inner thoughts of the protagonists in the novels are translated visually -like a common trope of rain on windows to express inner turmoil, grief, or depression-, these shots often do not capture the complexity of the written descriptions. Moreover, the participants in the focus groups did not describe Katniss and other characters in terms of camera angles, lighting, or other film elements. In those instances when the cinematography, casting, lighting, camera movement, or mise-en-scène have a significant effect in the narrative of Katniss, it is specified as such. Ultimately, I elucidate whether Katniss Everdeen's potential as a feminist icon is stronger in the novels than in the movies. The purpose of the textual analysis is not an

analysis of the totality of the three novels and the four films, but specifically a study of the narrative of the main female character and her male counterparts.

Each thematic chapter connects the two main questions that this project asks: one, how culture creates the heroines portrayed in film; and two, how young people -- specifically, young women -- then consume that heroine (critically or otherwise). It puts in conversation the readings from the intellectual practice and the findings of the focus groups, exploring the consumption of the product. First, the textual analysis engages with theory and academic discourse, and second, this analysis is compared with the participants' engagement and input. This structure facilitates the exploration and comparison of both the encoding and decoding processes, allowing for a comparative analysis of the results from the two methods deployed.

Focus Groups

The idea of examining representations in *The Hunger Games* through the voices of young readers has been previously implemented. Nancy Taber, Vera Woloshyn and Laura Lane's article "'She's More like a Guy' and 'He's More like a Teddy Bear'" examines the complex ways in which four girls with reading difficulties view characters and plot lines in the novels. For the scholars, facilitating critical discussions about various popular culture artifacts has a crucial importance, since it assists youth in engaging in critical literacy that can lead to a sociocultural critique.[104] The scholars' goal was to help the four preadolescent girls participating in the book club to become aware of gender norms in order to critique them. My research applies similar methods, with a few modifications. In this project, the objects of study are multiple: I include the films of the saga and

[104] Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane. "'She's More like a Guy' and 'he's More like a Teddy Bear', 1022.

the three novels instead of the first novel only. The interviewees are older: young adults between the ages 18-20, and the participatory research is structured in focus group sessions.

A focus group consists of a group discussion in which "participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher and presented to them in the form of a film […], or simply a particular set of questions".[105] This method is especially productive to explore issues relevant to the person in a context, it allows interactivity (the interviewees can also raise questions, agree or disagree with their peers, challenge them or the interviewer, modify their opinions through the process), it provides a comfort zone for the interviewees, and fosters a greater diversity of demographics and opinions. The intersections of gender, race and identity given in a focus group can facilitate better, more accurate and inclusive results. My approach to focus groups with young audiences is scaffolded by the body of work of scholars in girlhood and childhood studies. David Buckingham was one of the first scholars in childhood studies to advocate for the agency of children, suggesting that scholars should let young consumers tell how and why they accept or reject a product. This premise informs my method, as I step back to let the participants interact with *The Hunger Games* products in their own ways. Another advantage of focus groups is the emphasis on the process, reinforcing the idea that meaning is socially constructed. As Frances Montell asserts, "focus groups can be both consciousness-raising and empowering for the research subjects and for the researcher herself, and allow a more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamic than other methods".[106] Focus groups have enjoyed a great popularity in the fields of media and communication, and have often been used to investigate audience reception. Furthermore, Critical

[105] Wilkinson, "Focus Groups in Feminist Research", 112.

[106] Montel, "Focus Groups Interviews: A New Feminist Method", 44.

Theory and feminist scholarship has adopted focus group methodology to forward their objectives of providing voice to those otherwise denied it.[107]

Timeline and Recruiting Strategy: "Go Where the Students Are"

I received approval for the project from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on August 30th. The recruitment for the focus groups took place during the fall semester 2017, from early October to early November. I sought advice regarding focus groups recruitment from Dr. bethany Coston, a sociologically-trained activist scholar who currently works as an Assistant Professor for the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. They recommended the use of social media for recruiting purposes, since these are spaces which commonly enjoy great popularity among students.

Dr. Coston's advice was grounded in reality. Social media encompasses the platforms that young adults prefer to connect with others and be informed. According to the Pew Research Center' study, which analyzes social media usage from 2005 to 2015, young adults between the ages 18 to 29 are the most likely to use social media, and fully 90% do.[108] Regarding higher education specifically, researchers from the Bowling Green State University recently found out that email use among their students (12.1 percent) ranked behind social media (35.2 percent) and texting (50.2 percent).[109] Data seems to point to a clear conclusion: students are likely to spend more time on social media than checking their email accounts. These facts make social media "a potentially valuable resource for promoting studies and collaborator recruitment [...]. It can

[107] Tadajewski, "Focus groups: history, epistemology and nonindividualistic consumer research", 336.

[108] Perrin, "Social Media Usage: 2005-2015".

[109] Straumsheim. "Read and Unread".

potentially reach large, targeted populations rapidly, providing recruitment opportunities to interested but unknown individuals who may not otherwise be engaged within standard professional or institutional contact networks".[110] As a result, social media are transforming "the very nature of collegiate life", and higher education institutions must change their strategies accordingly[111]. Virginia Commonwealth University has an important online presence, and most of its departments have made Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, among other platforms, available to students[112].

Given that my study was an individual project and was not funded by my institution, it did not qualify for university sanctioned advertising. In order to publicize the focus groups, I sought collaboration through email and social media with different departments at Virginia Commonwealth University. I asked them to disseminate information about my research and the need for focus group participants through their different platforms. These departments could choose between sending an email to their students, and publishing a post about the study in their social media pages, increasing awareness and eventual participation of the students in the research process. Collaborating departments include:

- Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies
- Department of English
- Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture

[110] Khatri *et. al*. "Social Media and Internet Driven Study Recruitment, 2.

[111] The book *Higher Education Administration with Social Media,* edited by Laura A. Wankel and Charles Wankel, offers a fantastic overview about the multiple uses of social media in Higher Education, such as students' social integration, social research, enrollment management, advising, mentoring, fostering student support and development, fostering collaboration, career management, public relations, connecting fans and sports, engaging alumni, etc. See Wankel and Wankel, xi.

[112] For a complete list of VCU's social media platforms, please visit http://www.socialmedia.vcu.edu/

- The Globe [113]

My plan for recruitment also incorporated traditional face-to-face methods, which provided the human interaction that social media techniques sometimes lack. I asked professors for their authorization to come to class and make an announcement about the research. I made announcements in classes connected with the department of English, Photography and Film, Art, Focused Inquiry, World Studies, and Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. I also left informative flyers at VCU Recreational Sports facilities and the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA).

Undergraduate students who identified as women or identified as women when they were teenagers and were interested in participating in the study filled out a Google form to register for the focus group. Many of the students received a link to the Google form directly in the informative email from the collaborating departments; others, who had heard about the recruiting process in class or read about it in a flyer, contacted me through email. They all were encouraged to contact me personally through email to address any questions or concerns they could have, although no significant issues arose. Some of the students had an interest in science-fiction sagas, young adult literature, feminist theory, film studies, and other related fields. After exchanging emails about the scheduling of the focus groups, the participants attended the meetings.

Participants

The initial goal was conducting four focus groups of five participants each, a total of twenty. After exhausting all my recruiting strategies, 24 students expressed interest in participating. From them,

[113] The Globe is a living-learning program that prepares Virginia Commonwealth University students to live and work in a global environment. More information can be found at https://global.vcu.edu/vcuglobe/

only nine eventually attended the meetings. At the end, I conducted three focus groups of three, four, and two participants respectively; a total of nine participants were interviewed. During the focus groups, the focus groups members were invited to choose their own pseudonyms, and they chose Wolfe, Robin, Catwoman, Batman, Annie, Siena, Headband, Queenie, and Piggy. I will refer to these participants by the pseudonyms they provided. Considering the inclusive and diverse demographics of the Virginia Commonwealth University's population, I expected to obtain a diverse, multicultural and heterogeneous sample. Indeed, some demographic variables obtained very heterogeneous responses; others, however, were more homogenous.

	Focus group 1 Oct 9th, 2017	Focus group 2 Oct 11th, 2017	Focus group 3 Nov 13th, 2017
Participants	Annie Siena Headband	Wolfe Robin Catwoman Batman	Queenie Piggy

Table 1: Pseudonyms of participants in each focus group.

According to the information provided in the demographics surveys, the totality of the participants had been born in the United States, were single and did not have any children. They were between 18 years old (4 participants) and 19 years old (5 participants). The vast majority identified as female, although two of them identified as nonbinary and transgender or genderfluid, respectively. Most of them were unemployed: only two worked part time. Two thirds were white, the rest were Somali (one participant) or mixed-race (two participants). The greater diversity was found in their sexuality and religious affiliations. Six out of three did not identify with the "straight-heterosexual" category: they chose bisexual (3), bisexual/asexual (1), asexual (1), and lesbian (1). Religious affiliations were very diverse, encompassing no religious affiliations (1), Christian (1),

raised Christian (1), Raised Christian, intends to convert to Judaism (1), Catholic (1), Raised Catholic, self-atheist / agnostic atheist (2), Muslim (1), and agnostic (1).

All of the focus groups members had a great familiarity with the saga: all of them had read the three novels, and six out of nine had watched the four film adaptations. The totality of the participants interviewed also identified as feminist, mostly because they believed in equality among genders (7). When asked to identify what type of feminism they relate the most to, they offered a myriad of responses. Intersectional feminism was the most cited (4).

Sessions

I held a total of three focus groups on October 9th, October 11th, and November 13th. Recruited participants attended a focus group in a room in the VCU Cabell Library, previously booked for that purpose. The total time of the meetings did not exceed 60 minutes. The meetings started with a brief introduction about the research project and a note on confidentiality and compliance with IRB. The participants, who received an exempt information sheet at the beginning of the meeting, then proceeded to fill out the demographics survey (see Appendix 3). During the focus groups, the participants watched and discussed short video clips and images related to *The Hunger Games* shown by the interviewer in order to refresh the participants' memories and spark discussion. The participants interacted with each other, and unplanned discussions arose. This is one of the main advantages of the method, as it allows participants to agree with each other, challenge others' opinions and modify their responses during the discussion. However, I followed a tentative questionnaire (see Appendix 2) to prompt the focus groups members to engage in discussion.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the meetings, I kept the following documents and records, primary sources for data collection:

K. Demographic surveys

L. Notes from the discussion

M. Recordings. The focus groups were recorded with a digital voice recorder. Participants were asked to give authorization for the use of this recorder. The recordings are kept confidential.

Results

I acknowledge that the findings of these focus groups are limited to the reading and film viewing experiences of the nine young participants interviewed. Their opinions may not be reflective of the interpretation of other young women who have read the novels or watched the films, and the results obtained are not generalizable to the entire "young women" population that has consumed media products linked to *The Hunger Games*. Demographic variables such as age, gender identity, ethnicity or class might have influenced their interpretation of the text; while young women with different backgrounds may read the material differently. Their responses, although not generalizable, do provide insight about the ways individual interpretations confirm or contest the readings of the cultural product by film critics, and media and cultural scholars.

1.6 Chapter by Chapter Description

My dissertation is structured into six chapters. After the introduction, four thematic chapters follow. They explore the complex narrative of the main character of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen (chapter 2), the portrayal of dominant and alternative masculinities in the saga (chapter 3), the representation of romantic love and young female sexuality in the books and novels (chapter 4) and the pervasive idealization of motherhood in the neoliberal cultural landscape, also visible in *The Hunger Games* (chapter 5). The final chapter summarizes the analysis in chapters 2 through 5, and explores the feminist potential of Katniss Everdeen as an empowering young fiction figure.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2, entitled '*The Beautiful Hunter*: How Essentialist White Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity Shape Katniss Everdeen', examines how film produces different forms of masculinity and femininity through the study of the multi-layered, complex character of Katniss Everdeen. Drawing on the theory developed by Jack J Halberstam in the book *Female Masculinities*, and using textual excerpts from the novels and textual and visual examples from the films, this chapter shows how Katniss Everdeen is not offering a new alternative form of masculinity, but recentering hegemonic masculinity. She is not a masculine female, and her initial tomboyism is not celebrated, but tamed and normalized by the dystopian society to which she belongs. Katniss exemplifies what often occurs in popular cinema, where a narrative of tomboyism is only tolerated "within a narrative of blossoming womanhood".[114] Instead of presenting a new form of female masculinity, she is aligned with those forms of hegemonic masculinity that are privileged in contemporary western society through the neoliberal discourse, such as toughness,

[114] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 2.

strength, independence, and individualism. Katniss Everdeen is not a character who provides the spectators with a provocative new understanding of female masculinity, but rather one who incarnates the western stereotypes of the male hero.

The Hunger Games films illustrate the difficulties in challenging some normative representations of women in media without reinforcing others. The myths related to femininity "have the capacity to both change hue and yet to survive".[115] Overall, the saga tries to dismantle stereotypical ideas related to femininity. Katniss is forced to perpetuate ideas about her femininity in order to survive, but those are "stereotypically feminine associations" that she does not choose.[116] Given that Katniss Everdeen is already engaging with stereotypical traits of hegemonic masculinity, the narrative of her character necessarily needs to discard stereotypical western conceptions of femininity, such as dependence, passivity, and submissiveness, embedded in the figure of her mother.[117] I argue that Katniss' lack of emotional depth in the films is highly problematic, since it perpetuates the idea that showing emotions is a weakness. Katniss is presented, however, as "naturally" pretty and feminine, a discourse that further entrenches essentialist notions of women as innately beautiful. As Dubrofsky and Ryalls point out, "despite herself, Katniss is always already beautiful" and her appearance "operates according to conventional standards of white feminine beauty, and she naturally –effortlessly – embodies these."[118]

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[115] Macdonald, *Representing Women*, 1.

[116] Strong Hansen, Kathryn. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

[117] In-depth analyses on women's representation in media can be found in Joanne Hollows' *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*.

[118] Dubrofsky and Ryalls. "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 400-405. In fact, the casting call for the film sought to find a girl who was "naturally pretty underneath her tomboyishness." See John Hurgensen quoted in Moore, Ellen E., and Catherine Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 959.

This chapter also explores how *The Hunger Games* introduces a postracial progress narrative in which race is configured as irrelevant, yet it adheres to typical casting patterns in Hollywood. Whiteness and white femininity are naturalized in the films, as the casting of Jennifer Lawrence exemplifies. Katniss Everdeen's physical description in the novels is sufficiently vague (black hair, olive skin, gray eyes, thin and strong) to suggest a multiracial identity. However, the white actress Jennifer Lawrence was cast for the role; a decision that highlights how normative forms of femininity and whiteness are still pervasive in the Hollywood industry. This casting decision was contested by many readers.[119]

Chapter 3

As this dissertation shows, the multiple narratives created through the story of *The Hunger Games* are complex: at times, they reinforce normative ideas about gender, race and sexuality. In other occasions, however, the saga finds spaces to problematize and disrupt those conceptions. My project is concerned with both of these processes. Drawing on masculinities' studies developed by R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, Chapter 3: '*Katniss Through the Men who Loved and Hated Her*: Dominant and Alternative Masculinities in the Male Characters of The Hunger Games Saga', analyzes how different forms of masculinity are constructed in mainstream film. If sex, gender, and sexuality are conceptualized in terms of power relations, then studying not only the powerless -women and their media representation- but also the powerful -men and their media representation- becomes necessary.[120] *The Hunger Games'* narrative subtly introduces alternative masculinities that contrast with the hegemonic masculine traits that Katniss embodies. In fact, the

[119] Bryan Alexander quoted in Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 959.

[120] Messerschmidt, *Masculinities in the making,* 1.

protagonists Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen are attempting to reverse gender roles, as it has been pointed out in film criticism and scholarly research.[121]

In order to study how masculinity is shifting, this chapter focuses on the construction of the female heroine's male counterparts: lovers, friends, allies, fellow contestants, and enemies. Specifically, this chapter examines the construction of dominant masculinities through the characters of Gale -one of Katniss's romantic interests- and three male tributes: Cato, a ruthless white tribute in the first film, Thresh, a powerful black tribute who saves Katniss from being killed in the arena, and Finnick O' Dair, a tribute who embodies the traits of the white sex symbol. Alternative masculinities are elucidated through the characters of Peeta, Katniss's partner; Caesar Flickerman, host of the televised Games; and Cinna, Katniss's stylist.

The relationship between Katniss and her stylist, *Cinna*, is especially complex in nature. The ambiguity in the representation of Cinna's sexuality has sparked great discussion among blogs and fan sites, where readers and film spectators constantly discuss his queerness. Lenny Kravitz, cast for the role, admitted finding inspiration in a bisexual friend, but the actor as well as the narrative of the saga have failed to situate Cinna under the "gay" category[122]. The ambivalence of Cinna's sexuality, the representation of his subversive masculinity and his relationship with Katniss are studied in this chapter, as well his support by the focus groups members. Cinna avoided all criticism; his alternative masculinity was unchallenged -- an interpretation that suggests that young audiences welcome representations of new and alternative models of masculinity, including black and queer masculinities. As opposed to Cinna's general appraisal, Peeta's character was met

[121] Taber, Woloshyn and Lane, 'She's more like a guy' and 'he's more like a teddy bear'.

[122] To the question: "Is Cinna gay?" Kravitz has responded: "I have no idea. I have no idea. I played him right in the middle". See Yamato, "Lenny Kravitz on His Hunger Games Call, Jennifer Lawrence, and Cinna's Sexuality".

with mixed reviews, showcasing how entrenched ideals of hegemonic masculinity are in popular culture.

Chapter 4

As Mary-Lou Galician and Debra L. Merskin assert in the preface to their anthology, *Critical thinking about love, sex and romance in the mass media,* little scholarship has focused on how romantic coupleship is represented in different media.[123]Through the analysis of Katniss Everdeen's romantic and sexual innocence and potential purity and her relationships with Peeta Mellark and Gale Hawthorne, this chapter, entitled '*The Naive Virgin and the Love Triangle*: The Promises of Everlasting Love Creep into Dystopian Fiction', contributes to the discussion by exploring how neoliberal cultural products -and specifically, Hollywood films- reinforce normative conceptions about romantic love, desire and sexuality. Adrienne Rich asserted that "fully illuminating the mechanisms that uphold gender inequality, however, requires a more thorough analysis of the interplay between gender and sexuality—what some feminists have termed the connection between patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality."[124] This chapter explores the way that this "compulsory heterosexuality" is predominant in Hollywood mainstream film, and how it reproduces common tropes related to romantic love and sexuality. The chapter is divided into three sections: *The Naive Virgin*, *The Love Triangle*, and *Everlasting Love*.

The naive virgin: Katniss's Innocence and Young Female Sexuality. Virginity has historically been a hotly contested topic, and it remains "one of perpetual currency within popular

[123] Galician and Merskin. *Critical Thinking about Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media*, xiii.

[124] Rich, "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence", 631-60.

culture and the various cinemas that serve it."[125] Nevertheless, its critical and academic study within the fields of media and film studies has not been exhaustive. I join the discussion initiated in Tamar Jeffers McDonald's collection of essays, *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film* in 2010, and continue to explore the myth of the naive virgin in film, specifically in *The Hunger Games*. This chapter shows that discourses that engage with teenage sexuality in film still fall into conservative patterns, and that the neoliberal rhetoric of choice fosters sexual repression for women and promotes disempowered models of female sexuality. Katniss's purity responds to a rise of conservative sexual ideologies in popular culture, and the heroine is presented as being uncomfortable with romance and uninterested in physical intimacy with any of the male characters (first her friend Gale and later her opponent Peeta) who manifest a clear interest in her, especially in the film adaptations. Her "distaste for the role of desirable woman"[126] is also shown throughout the novels and films.

The Love Triangle: An Attempt to Dismantle the Myth of Romance. This section studies the difficulties mainstream film has with presenting a narrative for young audiences that challenges heteronormativity and the myths associated to romance. I exemplify how throughout the novels and the films of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss refuses to circumscribe her life to a romantic scenario, and is uncomfortable when others try to do so. Several external forces (such as her mentor, Haymitch; Caesar Flickerman, the host of the televised *Games*; and the citizens of the Capitol) try to involve Katniss in a love narrative, but she prefers to focus on the survival of her family, the injustice of the *Games* or the success of the revolution of Panem. Although her powerful claims in

[125] Kathryn Schwartz, quoted in Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, 1.

[126] Strong Hansen. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

the novels -and to a lesser extent, in the films- speak to her independent spirit and her rejection of stereotypical expectations for young women, the story of Katniss Everdeen still entrenches the myth of romance. Despite the multiple attempts of the novels and the films to discard idealized conceptions of romantic love through Katniss's explicit statements, the saga drags Katniss into a love triangle that resolves in a long-term relationship with one of the male characters involved. Much has been said about the inclusion of this love triangle in the novels, and rumors point out that Suzanne Collins had never intended to include this three-sided love story within the dystopian narrative. My research, however, has not being able to confirm or discard these claims (figure 1).

Everlasting Love: A Safe Return to the Status Quo. Katniss's relationships with the two male characters are normalized through her life-long relationship with Peeta, a normalization that conforms the pattern in young adult literature, which tends to valorize monogamy over multiple sexual partners. The story of the *star-crossed lovers* of the Hunger Games exemplifies the mythic narrative of living "happily ever after with the one," and further perpetuate romantic ideals, such as the myth of finding a partner that "completes you," and the myth that a romantic long-term commitment (together with motherhood, which will be explored in the following chapter) is the only path to happiness and fulfillment for women.

Chapter 5

Drawing on critical scholarship that studies the relationship between motherhood and the media[127], this chapter, '*Katniss Falls Back into Heteropatriarchy*: The Necessity of Motherhood

[127] The collection of essays *Representations of motherhood,* edited by Donna Bassin, Donna, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan in 1994 has been followed by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels' *The Mommy Myth,* a book published in 2004 that explores the idealization of motherhood through the "new momism", a phenomenon that they define as "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a

and the Happy-Ending Epilogue', elucidates how neoliberal media continues to idealize and glamorize motherhood as a woman's singular path to fulfillment[128]. Like the narrative of Katniss Everdeen exemplifies, despite the multiple opportunities for more diverse depictions of women, the predominant cultural stories told by American media still glorify the institution of motherhood, and expect women "to be loving and kind and to embrace without reservation their designated cultural role of supreme nurturer".[129] At the end of the saga Katniss returns to a "safe" life that is supportive of a heteronormative status quo, reinforcing the idea that being a perfect mother is the most important thing a woman can do.

Throughout the saga, Katniss Everdeen is presented as both caregiver and protector/ provider, embedding traits of both the mother and the father figure. Her behavior is instinctively maternal as she takes care of her sister Prim, providing for her and taking her place at the "Reaping" ceremony (see figure 2). Because their mother, lost in a deep depression after her husband's death, is unable to be a caregiver for her family, Katniss assumes the role. This chapter analyzes Katniss's tenderness and devotion to others as they are shown through her relationships with her sister and her opponent Rue, from District 11. It also reviews how these maternal instincts, however, do not respond to any explicit motivations of the character, and how the epilogue both resolves the underlying maternal connotations and is at odds with the narrative of the character and her explicitly-stated motives. The heroine's relationship towards motherhood radically changes at the end of the saga – in the final three minutes in the fourth movie and the two-page epilogue in the

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remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children" (4). More recent works include the collections *Mommy angst: motherhood in American popular culture* (2009), *Mediating moms: mothers in popular culture* (2012) *Mediated Moms: Contemporary Challenges to the Motherhood Myth* (2016).

[128] Kinnick, Katherine, "Media Morality Tales and the Politics of Motherhood", 3.

[129] Barnett, Barbara. *Motherhood in the Media*, 3.

third book – which surprisingly culminates in a happy ending involving Katniss becoming a mother of two (figure 3). The character had been shaped as a heroine, a hunter, a revolutionary symbol, and a justice seeker, but never as a mother or spouse. In addition, it is implied that the heroine only took the decision after being persuaded by her partner. I argue that the turn of Katniss into mother shows how film and television industries are still prompted to impose motherhood on women at all costs, making motherhood compulsory and the postfeminist right choice. These discourses also privilege the biological nuclear family.

Chapter 6

This chapter includes a summary of the research and the conclusions that have emerged. The content analysis shows how Katniss Everdeen, despite being presented as a revolutionary idol, still lingers in patriarchal and heteronormative standards, and how her feminist potential, higher in the books, suffers a loss in the adaptation to film. My project proves that societal standards and expectations for men and women are still deeply entrenched in the media products we consume, even within a neoliberal system that presents women as empowered agents of change.

This chapter also summarizes the findings from the focus groups, and how the results obtained from young women's engagement with the films and character matches or differs from an academic point of view. The participants showed a highly critical engagement with the films and novels, and used the saga as an escape narrative but also as an empowering story and a comforting shelter. Although the saga reproduces a neoliberal ideology and consolidates heteropatriarchal narratives, the participants were able to interpret it as feminist and/or empowering, using them to raise their own questions and to express their own purposes. Future research may entail a comparison of Katniss Everdeen with other contemporary science fiction,

fantasy and dystopian heroines, such as Beatrice "Tris" Prior, from the *Divergent* series, Clarke Griffin, from the television show *The 100*, or Bella Swan, from the series *Twilight*. Overall, I am interested in investigating the ways dominant media discourses are presented, and how audiences, readers, and film spectators engage with them.

Chapter 2. *The Beautiful Hunter*: How Essentialist White Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity Shape Katniss Everdeen

2.1 Textual Analysis

Introduction

"Katniss doesn't shift between masculinity and femininity; she inhabits both, which may mean that neither really fits"[130]

Katniss Everdeen stands as a strong female representation in mainstream cinema. She is presented through the films and novels as a complex, well-developed character; an epic heroine who defies the systems of oppression that threaten her community, seeks and achieves justice and becomes a revolutionary symbol. Although empowered girls could be found in young adult literature throughout the twentieth century, the figure of Katniss has enjoyed a striking popularity in both the literary product and the film adaptations.[131] The multi-layered, complex, and sometimes contradictory character of Katniss Everdeen easily grabs the reader or film viewer's attention[132]. Her representation fits the current state of Hollywood's film industry and the neoliberal cultural landscape at large, in which young audiences demand empowering young female heroines. Consider, for example, the remarkable anticipation and success of films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017), *Atomic Blonde* (dir.

[130] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[131] Joanne Brown's study, *Declarations of independence*, traces the presence of empowered girls and heroines in young adult literature along the twentieth century. Realizing that writers and publishers had started to incorporate strong female protagonists in their novels, Brown seeks examples of empowered figures in historical fiction, the contemporary world, the fantastic, and memoir, among others.

[132] Pharr and Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games, 12.

David Leitch, 2017), *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (Ava DuVernay, 2018).[133]

The variety of gender roles that converge in the figure of Katniss Everdeen[134] renders her a figure worthy of attention and analysis. The confusion of gender identities has been exploited in film for several decades, and it has recently increased: current mainstream cinema female protagonists commonly absorb different and contradictory gender codes. Film critic A. O. Scott points out that Katniss Everdeen "is carrying the burden of multiple symbolic identities. She's an athlete, a media celebrity and a warrior as well as a sister, a daughter, a loyal friend and (potential) girlfriend. In genre terms she is a western hero, an action hero, a romantic heroine and a tween idol".[135] Throughout the Games, Katniss adopts various gender roles that suit her situational needs.[136] As Scott explains, Suzanne Collins' novels fuse all of these meanings into "a credible character embedded in an exciting and complex story".[137] Critic Manohla Dargis highlights how female characters are still often reducible to a type in American cinema - thus Katniss's novelty lies in the multiplicity of roles that she embodies.[138] As Jennifer Mitchell notes, the hermaphroditic nature of the Katniss plant[139] itself speaks directly to the configuration of Katniss as a character who blurs and complicates gender representation in the series.[140] For some scholars, the embodiment of both codes -masculinity and femininity- bridges the gap between boys' and girls'

[133] See also Klawans, "Young Adults".

[134] Mitchell, "Of Queer Necessity", 129.

[135]Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[136] Mitchell, "Of Queer Necessity", 128.

[137] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[138] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia".

[139] The Katniss plant (*Sagittaria*) has monoecious flowers, that is, both sexes -male and female- can be found on the same plant. See "Sagittaria sagittifolia".

[140] Mitchell, "Of Queer Necessity", 129.

literature.[141] Nevertheless, I posit that these roles also lead to a series of contradictions that sometimes challenge heteropatriarchal norms and others reinforce those very norms. In this chapter I examine how film produces different forms of masculinity and femininity through the study of the character of Katniss Everdeen, and assert that a close textual analysis of the films shows how the narrative of the character as shaped by hegemonic masculinity and "natural" femininity[142] is problematic. The participant research shows that the juxtaposition of gender codes is welcomed by young audiences, who celebrate the mockery of stereotypical femininity and the introduction of traditionally-masculine traits such as the display of anger or a stoic attitude. I believe that representations that problematize gender roles and traits are an asset, since they picture new ways of understanding womanhood and manhood. Yet, I am more cautious than the participants of the study. I argue that although the narrative of Katniss Everdeen has value in that it problematizes gender codes, it nonetheless reinscribes Katniss in essentialist notions of white femininity. Besides, the masculine traits she embodies do not offer a new representation of female masculinity, but serve to recenter hegemonic masculinity.

Feminine and Masculine Normativities: The Theory

The dichotomy in which our Western and contemporary construction of gender has been created is based on supposedly biological differences between two sexes, and presupposes different behaviors and aptitudes for women and men. Femininity has been traditionally identified

[141] See Lem and Hassel, "Killer Katniss and Lover Boy Peeta".

[142] Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls assert in "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness" that Katniss's femininity and whiteness are constructed as "natural" and unaltered. Refer to the section on femininity in this chapter for a deeper analysis, and see Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 395-409.

with qualities such as "passivity, nurturance, adornment, and virtue" whereas masculinity has been associated to "agonistic activity, ritualistic combat, overt sexuality, and possessive individualism."[143] The descriptors at each side of this binaristic narrative are neither absolute nor immutable, as they allow exceptions and variations. For instance, killing is not exclusively masculine, as nurturing is not exclusively feminine.[144] *The Hunger Games* films are an illustrative example of how an activity that has been traditionally associated with masculinity (hunting) is reshaped, stylized, and romanticized to fit the conventions of femininity.[145] However, as Canadian scholar Nancy Taber asserts, "despite the multitude of ways in which men and women enact gender, […] and the growing number of women represented as active heroines in popular culture, stereotypes of men and women still abound."[146]

As Nancy Taber *et al*. assert, young adult fiction often presents heteronormative ideals of tough males and submissive beautiful females. In this context, boys are typically presented as active main characters and girls as passive peripheral ones. Even when girls and women are presented as strong and capable main characters, they are often tied to traditional feminine norms and eventually confined to domestic roles,[147] like it is in the case of Katniss Everdeen. In order to highlight how specific forms of masculinity and femininity are privileged over others, Taber refers

[143] Descriptions used by Rachel T. Hare-Mustin and Jeanne Marecek in *Making a Difference*, 43.

[144] See Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia"

[145] The camerawork and artistic choices of the films present hunting as a very feminine experience; using candid lighting and soft cinematography, turning the sound of the wind into a soothing breeze, and portraying Katniss in stylized poses.

[146] Nancy Taber's analysis on the Disney figure of Mulan parallels my analysis of Katniss Everdeen. For Taber, "a closer analysis suggests that, instead of demonstrating women's equality with men, their representations and experiences exhibit a complex relationship in that they are each still constrained by societal expectations of gender norms" (95). I argue that this is the case of Katniss Everdeen as well. See "Mulan and Western Military Mothers".

[147] Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane. "'She's More like a Guy' and 'he's More like a Teddy Bear', 1022.

to the work of Australian scholar Raewyn Connell and her book *Masculinities*.[148] Connell suggests in her book that these forms are temporal, cultural, and geospatial; and consequently variable, complex and adaptive. However, Connell continues, "the forms of hegemonic masculinity that are privileged in contemporary western society most often prescribe that men be tough, strong, and independent, while those of emphasized femininity, in concomitant contrast, most often prescribe that women be sweet, vulnerable, and dependent". She also emphasizes that these are not the forms that men and women necessarily enact, but they usually constitute societal standards and expectations.[149] These standards and expectations are deeply entrenched in the media products we consume, and they must "recognized, problematized, and challenged in ongoing ways."[150] Masculinities in *The Hunger Games* saga is further studied in chapter 3.

Female Masculinity and the Hunting Tomboy

"If masculinity is not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness, then what is it?"[151]

As Jack J Halberstam points out in *Female Masculinity*, conceptions of "dominant" masculinity incorporate and naturalize the relation between maleness and power, and it is commonly embedded in the white male middle-class man.[152] Halberstam asserts, however, that masculinity does not

[148] The work of Connell, as well as the work of other scholars in Masculinities Studies, is further analyzed in chapter 3.

[149] Nancy Taber paraphrasing Raewyn Connell, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers" 96-97. See also Connell, *Masculinities*.

[150] Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers", 95.

[151] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity.*

[152] Ibid, 2.

only reduce down to the white male dominance or the male body, but is constructed in both female-born and male-born individuals. This derives into the creation of different forms of male and female masculinities.

One of the most common forms of female masculinity is tomboyism. The term "tomboy" usually refers to a girl who shows characteristics or engages with behaviors typically associated to boys. Tomboyism, slightly present in the teenage image of Katniss Everdeen, is usually associated to a desire for greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys, according to Halberstam. Like tomboys, Katniss dislikes domesticity and favors being outside, hunting in the forest with her friend Gale. Not only she prefers hunting to providing other help – Katniss's mother and sister, for example, treat those who are wounded or sick in the district-, but she is strikingly skilled, a mastery that will be crucial for her survival in the Games. The films and novels also portray her at ease when she is close to nature. For instance, in one of the scenes of the first film, when Katniss is recruited as a tribute, she chooses a moving and sounding image of a forest as the decoration of her window. This gesture shows how the presence of nature (even if it is only imagined) can soothe her.

Tomboys usually wear functional and comfortable clothing that allow for greater mobility. This is also Katniss's case, who wears straight pants, a hunting jacket and boots in neutral colors; the heroine is not interested in her physical attributes or her looks.[153] Very often, Halberstam says, tomboyism is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, attributes that fit Katniss Everdeen's narrative. Katniss is motivated by her own self-interest and the interest of her family; she seeks to provide for them and to guarantee their safety. Throughout the saga she has limited

[153] For a more detailed analysis, see the section on "Femininity" in this chapter.

room for agency: she is forced to comply with the rules of the Games in order to survive, and with the demands of the rebels in order to facilitate the success of the revolution in Panem. However, she tries to remain true to herself and her values, regaining control with every little act of defiance.

Tomboyism is not often seen as a lifelong identity: as professor and scholar Michelle Anne Abate asserts in her comprehensive study about tomboys, "although the nation may value strength, independence and assertiveness in young girls, it does not esteem such qualities in adult women."[154] According to Abate, young women usually abandon tomboyish behavior due to the pressure to get married and become a mother; similarly, many tomboy narratives eventually capitulate to traditional gender roles. As a result, tomboyism is often tolerated in popular cinema only "within a narrative of blossoming womanhood",[155] as it occurs in *The Hunger Games*. Katniss Everdeen was shaped as a heroine and a revolutionary symbol, but was sent back to domesticity and the nuclear family -with Peeta as long-life partner and two children- at the end of the saga.[156]

In this context, Katniss Everdeen is not offering a new alternative form of masculinity. She is not a masculine female, and her initial tomboyism is not celebrated, but tamed and normalized by the dystopian society to which she belongs and the stylists in the Capitol. As a matter of fact, the casting call for the film sought to find a girl who was "naturally pretty underneath her tomboyishness."[157] "Naturally pretty" Katniss is aligned with the forms of hegemonic masculinity that are privileged in contemporary western society, such as toughness, strength, and independence. For Rodney M. DeaVault in "The Masks of Femininity", Katniss is neither entirely

[154] See Abate, *Tomboys*, xix.

[155] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity,* 2.

[156] This is the focus of my analysis in Chapter 5, "Katniss Falls Back Intro Heteropatriarchy".

[157] John Hurgensen quoted in Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 959.

masculine nor feminine: "she is a new, "othered" category, a blank slate upon which a gendered identity can be crafted."[158] However, I argue that if we take into account Halberstam's theory, we realize Katniss Everdeen is not a character that provides the spectators with a provocative new understanding of female masculinity, but rather one who incarnates the western stereotypes of the male hero. In fact, Suzanne Collins found inspiration for the character in the figure of Spartacus, "a man who is a slave who is then turned into a gladiator who broke out of the gladiator school and led a rebellion and then became the face of the war". Spartacus is the historical precedent for Katniss Everdeen's character arc.[159]

As part of her stereotypically-constructed masculinity Katniss has a certain tendency to make decisions based on her own self-interest or the interest of her family, the reason why her interest in politics is circumscribed, especially at the beginning, to a personal vendetta. Her views are pragmatic and immediate: she's consumed with feeding her family and keeping them safe.[160] The main villain of the saga, President Snow, reinforces this idea in the second film with the following assertion: "She is not who they think she is. She's not a leader. She just wants to save her own skin. It's as simple as that".[161] After her father's death, she is presented as the family provider and protector, roles that are usually relegated to male family members. Katniss reflects on this experience in the first novel, a responsibility that she acquired early in her life: "At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family. There was no choice".[162]

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[158] DeaVault, "The Masks of Femininity", 193.

[159] Grossman, "I Was Destined to Write a Gladiator Game".

[160] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 163. See also Heartfield, "Hardly Revolutionary" and Gant, "Hungering for Righteousness", 91.

[161] *The Hunger Games. Catching Fire*.

[162] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 27.

Katniss provides for her sister Prim and her mother by hunting in the forest of District 12, a practice that forms the core of her identity and set her apart from the rest of her society,[163] and that she acquired learning from her father: "My father knew and he taught me some before he was blown to bits in a mine explosion", she asserts in the first novel.[164] Thus Katniss joins the team of young female hunters that Hollywood has produced in the last few years, featured in films such as *Hanna, Winter's Bone, and Twilight: Breaking Dawn II*.[165] Hunting is a mode for existence in Katniss's world, since she and her companion Gale must hunt in tandem to obtain sufficient food for their families in their district.[166] The presentation of Katniss as a hunter differs between the films and the novels. In the films, while she is taking a masculine role, she is only doing it as a result of an exceptional circumstance that involves the absence of the father figure, perpetuating the notion that this behavior is not normative.[167] However, the books situate hunting as a familiar activity for both Katniss and her father. The books specify that the heroine's father taught her how to hunt before his death, an activity they both shared and enjoyed. Nature became a safe space for Katniss, where she felt at home. Her father also taught her how to find the edible roots of the katniss plant, for which she is named. Scholar Kathryn Strong Hansen highlights how her father teaches her that her namesake (and by extension, her identity) can save her: "As long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve".[168]

[163] See Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 163 and Tan "Burn with Us", 57.

[164] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 5.

[165] Oliver, "Hunting Girls".

[166] King, "(In) Mutable Natures", 111.

[167] See Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane. "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games", 154.

[168] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 163.

Katniss is always shown as calm, quiet, reserved, introverted, and reflective. She prefers practical over emotional reasoning: "I'm not the forgiving type", she asserts early in the first novel,[169] and she has a tendency to mask her emotions and feelings. The first film provides multiple examples of her reluctance to open herself up to others and to manifest her true feelings. Peeta Mellark, male tribute of her district and future partner, asks her to communicate with him, but she refuses:

Peeta: "Say something"

Katniss: "I'm not good at saying something"[170]

There are radically different interpretations that derive from Katniss's masking of emotions in the novels and the films. In the novels, Katniss hides her emotions out of fear. Her closeness responds to the need of protecting herself from the violence of the Capitol. In Panem, any gesture can be understood as defiance by the totalitarian regime, and cause a subsequent punishment. As a result, coldness and stoicism are the safest bet for Katniss and the citizens of Panem. Several times in the novels Katniss reflects on her silence as a means of survival, on the necessity of hiding her emotions to avoid the punishments from the Capitol: "So I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could even read my thoughts", "Crying is not an option"; "I've had a lot of practice at wiping my face clean of emotions and I do this now".[171] Despite Katniss's strategy, the readers are nonetheless allowed into Katniss's emotional world and coming-of-age struggles. Since the novel is told in first person, they get a clear sense of her thoughts, her emotions, her fears, and her confusion. In the films, however, Katniss's inner voice

[169] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 8.

[170] *The Hunger Games*.

[171] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 6, 34, 40.

is lost, for which her masking of emotion is aligned with the traits of stereotypical masculinity, as opposed to being understood as a survival strategy.

Katniss also embodies the traditionally masculine traits of stubbornness, arrogance and aggressiveness (see figure 4). In the novels, she subtly presents herself as a deadly human device. Oftentimes, violent thoughts cross her mind: "How badly I wanted it to lodge deep in the heart of my enemy",[172] or she finds herself reflecting on the possibility of being considered a violent person by her peers: "All those months of taking it for granted that Peeta thought I was wonderful are over. Finally, he can see me for who I really am. Violent. Distrustful. Manipulative. Deadly".[173] Nevertheless, Katniss only kills for her own defense. In opposition to the character's thoughts, her bravery is exalted and admired throughout the films and the novels. Katniss and Gale are presented as resourceful and rebellious as they hunt, fish, and gather plants illegally to help their families.[174] Katniss's courage is first shown when she volunteers to save her sister Prim at the Reaping, and is insisted upon in the first movie (see figure 2). She is not intimidated by the burning costume she must wear during her presentation as a tribute, and she does not hesitate to throw an arrow to the Games' sponsors during her physical evaluation in order to capture their attention, when she demonstrates striking archery skills. Katniss obtains a very high score at her physical evaluations, a surprising result to her. The heroine feared that her act of defiance would have aggravated the sponsors; however, as her mentor Haymitch points out, they applauded Katniss's courage.

Katniss, referring to the sponsors: "I thought they hated me."

[172] Collins, *Mockingjay*, 30.

[173] Ibid, 232.

[174] Hanlon, "Coal Dust and Ballads", 61.

Haymitch: "They must have liked your guts."[175]

This scene is followed by an important emotional meltdown in the first novel that finds no equivalent in the first movie. After performing her physical evaluation, where she was ignored and dismissed by the sponsors until she provoked them, a feeling of anxiety and worry overwhelms her. She voices her concerns regarding her act of defiance in the novel, but this scene is suppressed in the film. This is a common pattern in the adaptation from the novels to the movies. Katniss collapses and shows her weaknesses a handful of times throughout the novels, as her thoughts reveal: "I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes", [176]"I allow myself to feel young for a moment and rest my head on [my mother's] shoulder".[177] Katniss's inner voice is used in the novels to manifest Katniss's vulnerability. This complexity is lost in the films, in which Katniss's fears and doubts are less clear, as she does not voice out these concerns. The result is a definitive loss in the depth of the character in the films, and a problematic entrenchment of the notion that locates vulnerability as weakness. Meanwhile, in the novels she's not described as invincible, but as a brave teenager who faces her fears.

The masculine traits embedded in the character of Katniss Everdeen illustrate the difficulties in creating a strong female character that does not fall into the "phallic woman" pattern.[178] Oftentimes, the attempts of the film industry to empower women result in a discardment of feminine characteristics, masculinizing women and turning them into men. A clear example is

[175] *The Hunger Games.*

[176] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 293.

[177] Collins, *Mockingjay*, 147.

[178] In psychoanalysis, the term "phallic woman" refers to a woman who holds the symbolic characteristics of the phallus. In film criticism, it usually refers to a female character who is empowered through masculine or hyper-masculine traits, and who usually discards or mocks feminine attributes.

found in *G.I. Jane* (1997), where Demi Moore's character refuses "women's" standards and tests and separate barracks and latrines. For masculinities' scholar Michael Kimmel, in this film Moore "possesses the phallus, not a penis, the signifier if not the thing signified."[179] For Katniss, the context is slightly different. Her innate feminine attributes such as tenderness and compassion "save" her from turning into a man.

Femininity

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"[180]

Hegemonic masculinity and traditional femininity are mutually exclusive. As Lidia Rainford points out, femininity is characterized by qualities which oppose masculinity;[181] the two cannot be reconciled. In order to avoid contradictions, and given that Katniss Everdeen is already engaging with stereotypical traits of hegemonic masculinity, the narrative of her character necessarily needs to discard stereotypical western conceptions of femininity, such as dependence, passivity, and submissiveness.[182] As the participant research shows, this dismissal of traditional feminine associations is an asset for young audiences, who celebrate the mockery of stereotypical femininity.[183] Overall, the saga tries to dismantle stereotypical ideas related to femininity. Katniss

[179] Kimmel, *Misframing Men*, 42.

[180] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

[181] See Rainford, *She Changes by Intrigue*, 11.

[182] For an in-depth analysis on how these conceptions materialize in media representations of women, see Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity, and Popular Culture*.

[183] See the participant research section in this chapter.

is forced to perpetuate ideas about her femininity in order to survive, but those are "stereotypically feminine associations" that she does not choose.[184]

Katniss's femininity is built in opposition to the traditional femininity of her mother and the fetishized femininity of her escort, Effie Trinket. Effie Trinket is presented as superficial, "overly concerned with appearances and manners".[185] While arriving to a party thrown in Katniss and Peeta's honor as victors of the Games, Effie advises Katniss to smile and have an open, receptive body language. "Eyes bright. Chins up. Smiles on. I'm talking to you, Katniss", she advises.[186] Effie represents a "grotesque performance of femininity", with an exacerbated and caricatured gender performance that includes "full makeup, coordinating outfits, and ornate clothing".[187] During the "reaping" ceremony in the first film, she wears a strong fuchsia outfit with matching hat, high heels, makeup and nail polish; she is happy and excited about the excess and the luxury of the Capitol.[188]

Katniss also constructs herself as separate from her mother, rejecting traits such as weakness and gentleness. Her mother knows folk medicine and treats the sick and wounded who have no doctors,[189] while Katniss prefers to align herself with the traits inherited from her father.

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[184] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

[185] Dubrofsky and Ryalls. *"The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing "*, 397.

[186] *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*.

[187] Dubrofsky and Ryalls. *"The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing "*, 405.

[188] This sign of decadence will paradoxically become a yearning for freedom in the strict and austere District 13. Abandoned District 13 hosts the rebels from Panem who are organizing the revolution against the Capitol. The camp is austere, cold, and grey; and a strict discipline is imposed over all. Effie Trinket is captured by the Resistance, and she struggles to adapt to such a strict environment. Effie's frustration during her time in District 13 represents a critique of the homogenizing tendencies of totalitarian communist regimes. In this context, Effie's decadent femininity represents a desire for creativity and freedom in opposition to the grey uniforms of the rebels.

[189] Hanlon, "Coal Dust and Ballads", 63.

This responds to a survival instinct: for Katniss, feminine vulnerability increases her likelihood of dying.[190] By the second novel, however, Katniss tries to mend the relationship with her mother and to understand the reasons that caused that passivity that she had hitherto despised: "I needed to stop punishing her for [...] the crushing depression she fell into after my father's death. Because sometimes things happen to people and they are not equipped to deal with them".[191]

The Hunger Games exemplifies Hollywood's attempts to discard and problematize gender stereotypes. Katniss refuses, through the saga, to "perform"[192] her own gender in traditionally feminine ways: she is not interested in her physical attributes or in looking more *ladylike*, she does not wear any makeup and her outfits are usually in neutral colors. She is not interested in her looks, "her clothes, her weight, her popularity, gossip, drama or boys".[193] Upon her arrival to the Capitol she goes through a complete makeover that includes waxing and exfoliation.[194] The Capitol demands that the tributes' bodies "be turned into signs of its own superiority", embellished for "Capitol ingestion."[195] She is complicit only because there is no other choice, but all of this effort put into making her appealing is incomprehensible to her.[196] However, she is happy to wear minimal makeup in the opening ceremony of the Games, and when her sister Prim expresses that she looks very beautiful in her dress the day of the Reaping, she responds that she looks nothing like herself.[197] Boggs, President Alma Coin's second in command, also supports Katniss's "natural"

[190] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 165.

[191] Collins, *Catching Fire*, 31-32.

[192] Butler, *Gender Trouble.*

[193] Pollitt, "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism"

[194] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 404.

[195] Koenig, "Communal Spectacle", 43.

[196] Frankel, "Reflection in a Plastic Mirror", 51.

[197] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 15.

look and opposes the use of makeup in the third film, asserting that makeup "makes her look like 35."[198]

Although this femininity does not come naturally to her, Katniss navigates the complex world of fashion and beauty standards of the Capitol because she understands they can be used as powerful weapons and guarantee her survival: she needs spectators and sponsors to like her in order to win the Games.[199] As Amy L. Montz explains, fashion and dress "are the most common visual representation thought to embody individual expression, social conformity, economic status, and national recognition, as well as other, even more complicated factors specific to women, such as morality and sexual availability or invitation."[200] The heroine, initially reluctant to engage with the worlds of fashion and beauty, begins to understand that her success or failure in the Games depends upon her image, her ability to shape public perception, and starts to be complicit, making herself desirable.[201] For example, she wears a fluffy yellow dress -a choice she would have never made previously- to the ceremony after winning the Games. Not only the Capitol tries to tame, normalize and control Katniss's body. It is later used by the Revolution in Panem as "the visual and public site of resistance through consistent, stylized use of spectacle."[202]

Unlike other fellow tributes, performance never comes naturally to Katniss. In the first film, Katniss confesses to her stylist, Cinna, her difficulties in selling herself to the public; in gaining the admiration of the spectators and sponsors. During her first interview with Caesar Flickerman, she is shown as uncomfortable and awkward in front of the camera, as unable to

[198] Mockingjay, Part I.

[199] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 166-168.

[200] Montz, "Costuming the Resistance", 141.

[201] Koenig, "Communal Spectacle", 41.

[202] Montz, "Costuming the Resistance", 140.

perform in front of a big live audience, uneasy at being the object of the Capitol's gaze.[203] She seems to be unaware of her beauty, clear to everyone else,[204] as this conversation with Cinna exemplifies:

> Cinna: "Amazing"
>
> Katniss: "I don't feel amazing"
>
> Cinna: "Don't you know how beautiful you look?"
>
> Katniss: "No, and I don't know how to make people like me"[205]

Katniss Everdeen is, on the other hand, presented as "naturally" beautiful and feminine, partly as a result of her close connection with nature. Nature is one of Katniss's tools: the heroine is described as in sync with it, appreciating and understanding it, and even using it to defy the Capitol. Katniss's femininity is associated to nature as the Capitol is associated to culture and technology.[206] The dystopian narrative of *The Hunger Games* acts here as a cautionary tale, and reflects on the dangers of the misuse of technology. Katniss and the citizens from the oppressed districts represent an unaltered, noble community that coexists with nature, while the bodies of the citizens of the Capitol represent the immorality and decadence that have resulted from a life of luxury and excess. *The Hunger Games*' dystopia, like other young-adult dystopian narratives such as *Feed* (M. T. Anderson, 2002) or *Divergent* (Veronica Roth, 2014), studies the tech threat by picturing a society

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[203] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 398. See also Wezner, "Perhaps I am Watching You Now", 154.

[204] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 404.

[205] *The Hunger Games.*

[206] American author and scholar Sarah Margaret Kniesler has analyzed *The Hunger Games* from the lens of ecofeminist theory. To her, the text of the saga favors feminist readings, and the complex relations between nature and culture that permeate the series' development need to be read "tangentially" with ecofeminist theory. See Kniesler, "We Both Know They Have to Have a Victor", 17, 21.

in which technology is used to discipline, control and oppress its citizens. For instance, the digital surveillance used by the Capitol in Panem raises questions about our own surveillance apparatus and their disciplinary power. The saga's relationship with surveillance and simulacra has been studied by scholars such as Amy Montz, Kelley Wezner, Shannon Mortimore-Smith, and Helen Day.[207]

In the polarized world of Panem (nature *versus* technology), Katniss belongs to the unaltered, natural setting; consequently she is described as "naturally" beautiful. As Dubrofsky and Ryalls point out, "despite herself, Katniss is always already beautiful" and her appearance "operates according to conventional standards of white feminine beauty, and she naturally – effortlessly- embodies these."[208] For Woloshyn *et al*, while her actions reflect a certain hegemonic masculinity, her body crystallizes elements of "emphasized" femininity.[209] Paradoxically, Katniss is very critical about the feminine beauty ideal[210] and the concept "beauty base zero" in the novels, which she describes as "what a person would look like if they stepped out of bed looking flawless but natural".[211] She points to the irony of the concept, which calls for a beauty that does not necessitate any adornments while demanding that certain standards are met (shaved body, flushed cheeks, lustrous hair…).

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[207] The Capitol's surveillance network also anticipated China's controversial Social Credit System, a monitoring system in development that will implement a citizen score to incentivize good behavior. While many Chinese welcome this potential system -that is scheduled to be mandatory by 2020, - others have argued that this form of government surveillance poses a threat to freedom of expression. See Mitchell and Diamond, "China's Surveillance State Should Scare Everyone."

[208] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 400-405.

[209] Woloshyn *et al*, "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in *The Hunger Games*", 152.

[210] Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz define the feminine beauty ideal as "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain." See "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal", 711.

[211] Collins, *Mockingjay*, 60.

Resorting to the term "natural" when discussing gender normativities is always problematic, given the essentialist subtext of the term "natural". Dubrofsky and Ryalls make a distinction between Katniss's "natural beauty", which does not require artificial gender performances, and the conceptions of beauty in the Capitol, which involve performative, exaggerated ways of expressing gender identity through make-up, attire, and body language (see figure 5). The textual analysis of this project shows that the saga does a good job in dismantling stereotypical conceptions related to femininity, yet inadvertently reproduces an essentialist notion: that women are innately beautiful. Katniss's "natural beauty" perpetuates the idea that beauty is a necessary attribute in a female hero. The heroine also rejects traditional conceptions of femininity associated to weakness and tenderness. Nevertheless, her *natural* tenderness is revealed when she is shown taking care of her sister and honoring her opponent Rue during the games. For some scholars, the embodiment of feminine traits is a positive asset for Katniss: since she is not completely turned into a man, she does fit the category of the filmic phallic woman.[212] However, I argue that Katniss's tenderness and "devotion to children"[213] do not suffice to disrupt the hegemonic masculinity she embodies. Although Katniss is not turned into the archetype of the phallic woman, she does embody traits that stem from hegemonic masculinity. Rather than disrupting it and offering a new depiction of female masculinity, the masculine side of Katniss recenters hegemonic masculinity. Her feminine side is nothing revolutionary either – this

[212] Menéndez Menéndez and Fernández Morales, "(Re) definición De Los Roles De Género En La Cultura Popular", 200.

[213] Hansen. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 164.

tenderness and devotion to children are linked to the maternal instincts that surround and define Katniss's persona, and will eventually be used to justify Katniss' return to domesticity.[214]

Overall, the juxtaposition of codes of masculinity and femininity is better achieved, with higher complexity and less problematic tropes, in the novels than the films. While the novels situate hunting as a family activity that Katniss and her father enjoyed, in the films Katniss hunts only as a result of an exceptional circumstance that involves the absence of her father, perpetuating the notion that this behavior is not normative. Katniss's tomboyism is also tamed in the films, where she is pictured with a stylized hunting jacket that was supposed to be inherited from her father. In my view, the lack of Katniss's emotional depth in the films is the most problematic aspect. While in the novels Katniss's decision to mask her emotions as a survival strategy to avoid punishment from the Capitol, in the films her inner voice is lost. As a result, this masking of emotion is aligned with the traits of stereotypical masculinity, and it perpetuates the idea that emotions (and specifically, women's emotions) equal weaknesses. However, opposite is true for the character of Katniss Everdeen. Her strength stemmed precisely from her vulnerability, and not from the stereotypically-masculine traits she embodies. It did not need to be suppressed -- in fact, keeping those signs of vulnerability was paramount to increase the complexity of the character and her feminist potential. The pervasive trope that aligns emotional intelligence, empathy and vulnerability with weaknesses even creeps into cultural products that are meant to problematize gender roles, like *The Hunger Games*. The film industry is responding to the demand of strong female main characters, and is providing more diverse representations of women in film. However, these new female roles should not be emotionless puppets; their internal battles, desires, and

[214] See Chapter 5, "*Katniss Falls Back into Heteropatriarchy:* The Necessity of Motherhood and the Happy- Ending Epilogue."

anxieties hold part of their strength and make them more accessible. Strong female characters should not be used to recenter hegemonic masculinity or perpetuate essentialist notions about feminine beauty or maternal instincts, but to offer new ways of understanding womanhood and manhood.

White Femininity: The Politics of Casting

Numerous studies show that for years our commercial media system has failed in many ways to represent minorities "adequately, proportionately and diversely".[215] As Moore and Coleman note, "although progress is evident in both the inclusion and visibility of African Americans (e.g. *Karate Kid, I Am Legend, Red Tails*, and *Think Like a Man*), much of that progress is superficial".[216] The literary story of *The Hunger Games,* for instance, takes place in a seemingly postracial society, far from evaluative considerations of skin tone and ethnic identity.[217] This standpoint echoes the postracial leading ideology at that time, according to which American culture and society were moving beyond the politics of race.[218] The first book of the trilogy of *The Hunger Games* suggests characters "that are not white but instead could resemble Native Americans, Latinos, South Asians, and Arabs, among others."[219] However, the racial ambiguity in Collins's book changed in the conversion to the screen, and actors of color never filled central roles.[220] In casting white actors as leads for the first and subsequent films, Suzanne Collins and

[215] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 953.

[216] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 954.

[217] See Moore and Coleman quoting Thornton in "Starving for Diversity", 948.

[218] See next section: "The Postracial Fantasy."

[219] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 959.

[220] Ibid.

Gary Ross adhere to typical patterns in Hollywood, particularly for films made for teen and young adult audiences. The central characters are white, while people of color are limited to supporting roles.[221]

The whiteness of the character of Katniss Everdeen has been contested. As I have previously stated, Katniss Everdeen's physical description in the novels is sufficiently vague (black hair, olive skin, gray eyes, thin and strong) to suggest a multiracial identity. However, white actress Jennifer Lawrence, now a feminist icon in popular culture, was cast for the role; a decision that was contested by many readers.[222] Similarly to Katniss's "natural" femininity, built in opposition to the femininities embedded by Effie Trinket and her mother, the heroine's whiteness is framed in contrast to the "inauthentic, excessive whiteness" of other white characters, particularly Effie and the white tributes from the affluent districts.[223] Suzanne Collins has responded to the controversy surrounding the casting decisions by stating that characters such as Katniss and Gale "were not particularly intended to be biracial." In line with a postracial ideology, she has argued that the novels take place in a time period where hundreds of years have passed from now, and there has been a lot of ethnic mixing. However, she clarifies that some characters in the book were more specifically described, like Rue and Thresh."[224] Gary Ross backs up her argument: "There are certain things that are very clear in the book. Rue is African-American. Thresh is African-American. Suzanne had no issues with Jen playing the role. And she thought there was a tremendous amount of flexibility. It wasn't doctrine to her."[225]

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[221] Ibid, 951, 959.

[222] Bryan Alexander quoted in Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 959.

[223] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, *"The Hunger Games:* Performing Not-performing *"*, 402.

[224] Valby, "Team 'Hunger Games' talks".

[225] Valby, Karen. "'Hunger Games' director Gary Ross talks casting Jennifer Lawrence".

The politics of casting is one of the mechanisms by which whiteness is naturalized and celebrated, as Dubrofsky and Ryalls explain. They continue: "Whiteness provides symbolic and material benefits, including the attainment of power through its lack of defined boundaries and its invisibility".[226] For the scholars, Katniss's natural whiteness contributes to cultural assumptions of whiteness "as associated with virtue and innocence, suggesting that her race and goodness can be read off her body".[227] Casting a white actor in a role that might have been played by a person of color has been a common trend in film for decades, and it responds to what Projansky and Ono define as "strategic whiteness", which consists on "recentering whiteness without calling explicit attention to this fact".[228]

There is diversity in *The Hunger Games* films, as many African American actors are cast. However, the inclusion of characters of color on the screen does not resolve the issues at hand regarding the representation of minorities, but centers the dominant ideology while "blackness becomes controlled, contextual, and flexible sets of representations that reinforce the postracial ideology".[229] This is applicable to the character of Rue, Katniss's ally during the first Games, whose tragic death serves to bring more support for Katniss. Rue follows a familiar pattern in mainstream media, helping to frame the narrative of the white heroine. As Moore and Coleman suggest, this casting pattern "is easily explained when profit is the bottom line for major film studios." They conclude that if Collins envisioned a broad spectrum of color when she wrote her book, "it was the conversion to commercial film that fundamentally altered the more egalitarian

[226] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, *"The Hunger Games:* Performing Not-performing *"*, 397.

[227] Ibid, 401.

[228] Dubrofsky and Ryalls quoting Projasky and Ono, *"The Hunger Games:* Performing Not-performing *"*, 400.

[229] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 955.

representations of race by creating black and white binaries that did not exist in the book."[230] In the novels, Suzanne Collins uses vague physical descriptors -instead of specific racial terms- to depict her characters, which opens the door to multiple ethnic configurations. Katniss Everdeen, for example, has "olive skin" in the novels, which can be read as a description of a mixed-race character. This ambiguity is not resolved in the films by incorporating characters of diverse ethnic backgrounds; mostly white and black actors (or mixed-race black and white) are cast. Interestingly enough, the citizens of District 11 (presented as violent men, many of them of color) revolt after Rue's death in the first film, a scene that does not exist in the book.[231] The hand sign that triggers the revolt, which Katniss directs to the camera that is filming her in the arena, is directed only to Rue in the novel (see figure 6). This scene takes a step further the oppression of District 11 presented in the book, and it intensifies the tension between its citizens and the police forces. The scene seems to echo the protests and riots denouncing police brutality and systemic racism that have taken place in the United States in the last few years, and that would lead to the creation of the "Black Lives Matter" movement in 2013, one year after the first film of *The Hunger Games* saga was released. The community organizing and political engagement of the citizens of the districts also anticipates global and local movements such as the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street in 2011, and the Anti-Austerity Movements throughout Europe in response to the economic crisis of 2008 (including Greece in 2010, and Spain and Portugal in 2011).

The "miscasting" of Jennifer Lawrence has also been criticized for different reasons. For film critic Manohla Dargis, for instance, Lawrence looks like the woman she is instead of the

[230] Ibid, 960.

[231] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 402.

teenager she is supposed to be.[232] Gary Ross has declared that, in conversation with Suzanne Collins, they decided an actress of a certain maturity and power to be Katniss: "This is a girl who needs to incite a revolution. We can't have an insubstantial person play her, and we can't have someone who's too young to play this [...]. In Suzanne's mind, and in mine, Katniss is not a young girl. It's important for her to be a young woman. She's a maternal figure in her family. She's had to take care of Prim, and in many ways her mother, since her father's death. She's had to grow up pretty quickly."[233] Other voices have pointed out that Jennifer Lawrence does not look like the supposedly famished Katniss. In the novels, Katniss is underfed as a result of the poverty in her district. However, Lawrence's physique does not show signs of malnourishment. Instead, it presents a smooth skin free of blemishes, and a healthy and strong body. Jennifer Lawrence provides Katniss with naturally-red and full lips, cheekbones high and flushed, "hair lustrous and shiny, teeth white and straight".[234] This does not seem to be, however, a major problem for most critics.[235]

The Postracial Fantasy

The distribution of the novels and films of *The Hunger Games* coincided with a postracial ethos that pervaded American cultural production. Barack Obama had been elected president in 2008, and many interpreted his presidency as the ultimate sign that race had been transcended. Obama's presidency not only fostered an ideology of colorblindness, but also altered the understanding of

[232] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia"

[233] Valby, Karen. "'Hunger Games' director Gary Ross talks casting Jennifer Lawrence".

[234] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, *"The Hunger Games:* Performing Not-performing *"*, 400.

[235] See Klawans, "Young Adults" and Pollitt, "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism"

American masculinity, changing conceptions of the black male, men in general, and the professional male body, among other aspects of masculine identity.[236]

During Obama's first presidential term the notion of the ''post-racial'', used to measure progress, was everywhere, as Anna Holmes notes: "in thousands of newspaper articles and op-ed essays and on the lips of political pundits like Chris Matthews of MSNBC, who proudly said that he forgot, for a moment, that Obama was black. Books were published on subjects like 'postracial cinema,' the 'postracial church' and 'postracial black leadership.'" [237] The fast growth of multiracial and biracial groups was also seen as a sign for optimism. According to the Census Bureau, from 2000 until 2011 the mixed-race population has grown by roughly 35 percent.[238] This greater percentage of fluid racial or ethnic identities and higher racial mixing was read by many as a sign of progress, suggesting that race could be transcended. This optimism regarding racial and social progress found its epitome in the figure of Barack Obama. However, as Lauren M Jackson argues, racial hybridity is often used "to avoid reflection and recollection on how white supremacy works"[239]. The postracial ethos fulfills that intent as well.

A postracial ideology situates race as irrelevant, and posits that race relations do not matter. The imagined dystopian future of *The Hunger Games* saga parallels the postracial ideology of that time, since race politics are left undiscussed and characters are described with vague physical descriptors rather than racial terms. Although framed as dystopia, the saga introduces a progress narrative that celebrates racial mixing and the transcendence of race (as well as gender). A postracial ethos permeates the films, as Dubrofsky and Ryalls assert in their analysis of the first

[236] Shaw and Watson, "Obama's Masculinities", 135.

[237] Holmes, "America's 'Postracial' Fantasy."

[238] Saulny, "Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Choose All of the Above."

[239] Jackson, "*National Geographic* Replaces Racist Fictions With postracial Fantasies."

movie, which configures race as irrelevant.[240] The participants of the study also argued that the saga was not about race, but was centered on inequality and class struggle. The next section shows how the interviewees engaged with race in complex ways: although they asserted the saga was not, and did not need to be, about race, they were also very vocal about their discontent regard racialized politics of casting. The postracial ethos does not only configure race as irrelevant; it also centers whiteness. As the discussion on casting shows, white actress Jennifer Lawrence was chosen to play the character of Katniss Everdeen, although the vague physical description in the books could have encouraged casting a person of color.

The postracial ideology perfectly suits the essence of dystopian fiction. While the genre of dystopia is used to explore social and political structures, it often fails to address race relations. In her article "The Future is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels", Mary Couzelis highlights the lack of attention that futuristic novels pay to racial tensions. Although young adult dystopian fiction authors often seek to address contemporary fears and cultural concerns, they often dismiss ideologies of race, doing very little to question today's racial hierarchies. As Couzelis notes, these novels frequently reinscribe current social and racial hierarchies as a result, including character portrayals that often privilege the dominant race.[241] *The Hunger Games* does not escape this paradox.

The illusion of a postracial fantasy did not last. Certainly, America needed more than a black president to terminate centuries of oppression and racism. The multiple instances of police brutality against African-American citizens proved that the postracial ideology was only an illusion, as did the fatal shootings of nine African--Americans in Charleston, S.C. in 2015. "It was

[240] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, *"The Hunger Games:* Performing Not-performing *"*, 400.

[241] Couzelis, "The Future is Pale", 131-132.

a stark reminder that the past half decade has provided little evidence of reckoning or repair", argued Anna Holmes.[242] The social and political context of the last few years has demonstrated that postracial fantasy was, indeed, a fantasy.

2.2 Participant Research

	Focus group 1 Oct 9th, 2017	Focus group 2 Oct 11th, 2017	Focus group 3 Nov 13th, 2017
Participants	Annie Siena Headband	Wolfe Robin Catwoman Batman	Queenie Piggy

Table 1: Pseudonyms of participants in each focus group.

The Characterization of the Heroine

During the focus groups, two main interpretations crystallized regarding the creation and development of the character of Katniss Everdeen. For some, Katniss was "flat and dull"; for others, she was a strong survivor. On the one hand, Wolfe and Catwoman read the character as "dull", "flat" and "not dynamic at all". Wolfe even compared Katniss to "one of those Mary Jane type characters", a protagonist who is the main character "for the sake of being a main character". On the other hand, Batman defended Katniss throughout the interview, and asserted that after

[242] Holmes, "America's 'Postracial' Fantasy."

switching directors from the second film on, the movies "help bring her to light a bit more". Although Batman admitted that Katniss had been "really flat", Batman argued that was "the whole point", and that Katniss "showed all of that emotion and shut down" after the death of her sister Prim. "I think that spoke a lot for her character, even if her character wasn't very vocal", Batman asserts. "I almost wished that would have happened way earlier in the series", added Wolfe, "she could have been that kind of crazy unhinged person throughout the series".

Other interviewees praised Katniss's authenticity, and admired that she remained true to her character in spite of the multiple pressures she had to bear. "I loved that she never loses who she is", highlights Siena. They point out that although Katniss has gone through a variety of painful and traumatizing experiences, the heroine always remembers that she volunteered to save her sister, and she refuses to engage with the Capitol's plans for her. "She [Katniss] knows what she wants throughout the entire time, her mind never shifts considering what people want her to do, she's like 'that's not me'; 'I'm not gonna play into that'" (Siena). The participants valued Katniss as a "strong" character (Batman and Queenie) and a "survivor" (Piggy).

Very clearly, the participants associated Katniss's behavioral changes after the first *Hunger Games* with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They automatically associated the heroine's nightmares and episodes of terror with PTSD, although they were never described as such in the novels or the films. Participants like Wolfe appreciated the inclusion of these symptoms in the narrative. "I think it was realistic how they gave her all of that PTSD [...], because anyone would have that reaction after going through all that", Wolfe noted. After the horrific experiences the heroine faced, Katniss was "delusional" (Robin) and traumatized. Although some participants liked that novels and films showed Katniss's PTSD symptoms, they found them "really limiting" (Batman), since they turned Katniss into a very unreliable narrator. For Batman, the use of only

Katniss's point of view in *Mockingjay* is one of the reasons why, in her opinion, the third novel "is so weak".

> Wolfe: "I just wished they would fast forward a little bit… or [show it] from another character's point of view."
>
> Robin: "We want to see what's around her, even though she can't."
>
> Catwoman: "I want more character development, I want to know what she actually thinks, instead of being a puppet of everybody."

The participants were very interested in the character of Katniss Everdeen as a person, as a young girl to whom they could relate when they read the novels. They cared about her inner battles, and valued how she tried to resist the external pressures thrown upon her. Their insights regarding the juxtaposition of feminine and masculine codes is explored next.

The Codes of Masculinity and Femininity

Overall, the participants of the study appreciated Katniss's role as a hunter. They noticed it was really distinct to who the heroine was, and one of the reasons why she could survive the first Hunger Games (Siena and Piggy). They highlighted Katniss's skills, and how she uses the resources around her "to get what she needs to get to survive and help her family survive" (Queenie). As Siena notes, these skills do not necessarily make the killing easier, because Katniss is "severely damaged from doing that". However, they allow her to survive, "what she's always being taught to do". Annie also praised Katniss's job as a hunter, and highlighted Katniss's command of a traditionally male skill.

> Annie: “It’s just something special to me I guess. Just having this woman in this male-occupied, male-stereotyped role, and exceeding at it, and being better at it than anyone else. It was very…
>
> Siena: “Empowering?”
>
> Annie: “Yeah. Especially like a young girl”.

As Piggy reminds us, Katniss has no choice but to become the family provider after her father’s death and the incapability of her mother to function. “She [Katniss] ended up resenting her mother for being weak”, Piggy points out. “Maybe in part because of that she tried to be like her dad and not be weak like her mother, I guess”, she adds. Wolfe, among other participants, enjoyed seeing a girl as the family provider. For some of the participants, it is still rare to see a girl portrayed as such. “That was refreshing for me to see”, expressed Wolfe. As Headband asserts, many of Katniss's personality traits were traditionally male as a result of a traditional male role. Other participants notice this fact too:

> Catwoman: “She wasn’t like, I’m gonna go clean the dishes, like my mom there, I’m gonna go hunt”
>
> Wolfe: “And she never helped her mom and her sister with healing. She took her bow and then went and killed”.

Nevertheless, some of the participants noticed these were not Katniss’s only attributes, and were not oblivious to the multiplicity of gender codes that the heroine embodies. As Headband highlights, Katniss’s nurturing side is equally important. This juxtaposition of codes does not seem to bother participants such as Headband, Batman or Annie. On the contrary, Annie stated that

Katniss was both the mother and the father, having to step up and provide both roles after the death of her father and the depression of her mother. The heroine never loses that side of her, Annie notes, and "she's always gonna be a nurturer". As Annie asserts, Katniss even becomes a mother at the end, and does not sacrifice that part of her life. Siena added that Wonder Woman followed a similar path, since she never covered or lost her femininity, was not a "steroid-enthused" female and was still "super powerful". "Seeing that, on the screen [...], it would be really cool if a woman did this. To see it happen... it almost would bring me to tears", she said.

As Headband points out, the film industry sometimes fails to depict a strong woman as such because in that attempt it transforms her into the stereotyped character who "messes around with the guys and like acts like a dude". On that path to be a strong woman, Headband says, this type of woman "throws all other women under the bus". Instead, Katniss Everdeen is embodying a traditional male role (hunting and providing for her family) while at the same time nurturing her sister and the people she cares about. Headband argued that Katniss did not try to abandon all traits of femininity just to be a strong woman, but had "two complementary sides to her, and she navigated both of them". During a different focus group, Batman shared a similar view, stating that Katniss did not negate the importance of having a nurturing side or the value of her mother and sister's occupation (healing). Batman explained that "a lot of people who want women to be stronger they often put down traditional roles of women, which aren't always a bad thing". For Batman, the *Hunger Games* did a good job at showing that it is equally as important to provide for your family by hunting as by healing. "I thought it was a very good balance", she said.

The majority of the participants of the study celebrated how *The Hunger Games*, and Katniss, discarded or mocked some rituals and behaviors that are associated with traditional or stereotypical femininity. For Piggy, given the circumstances Katniss had to face the heroine could

not worry about her looks, and she was not really concerned "with the glitz and the glamour". In Piggy's opinion, Katniss cares more "about what's underneath it, and what's genuine". For Piggy, this makes her "pretty different from a lot of ideas we have about womanhood in our culture". Other participants, more feisty, were enthusiastic about the scenes in which Katniss shows anger (see figure 4), yelling a lot or throwing an arrow to the sponsors, given that it disrupts the idea according to which "girls aren't supposed to really get angry, they're supposed to be quiet…" (Catwoman). For Batman, showing Katniss's anger "humanized her", since "girls get really angry too." Some participants also noticed (and mocked) how the films romanticized hunting and tried to make it more feminine. They highlighted that the films showed Katniss in a perfectly stylized hunting jacket, a jacket that was supposed to be inherited from her father.

> Catwoman: And when they wax her, she's like "why do I have to do this?"
>
> Robin: I loved that. I was like… me!

However, in spite of the juxtaposition of codes and disruption of stereotypical ideas about femininity, Headband notices how the industry sends Katniss back to femininity. "Because she has all of these masculine traits", Headband asserts, the industry needs to make sure femininity is "restored". Sarcastically, Headband jokes: "Oh no, no, too far. We have to remind [people] she's a woman".

Jennifer Lawrence and the Politics of Casting

The casting decisions made by the production crew of *The Hunger Games* films sparked a noteworthy discussion, especially during the first two focus groups. While Wolfe criticized

Jennifer Lawrence's "terrible acting", others focused on general trends regarding the cast in the film adaptations that they disliked. These participants voiced two main concerns: the first refers to the race or ethnicity of the actors, the second alludes to their age. Some focus groups members rightfully noticed that Katniss's physical description in the novels involved "olive skin". Although the descriptor is fairly vague, some of them had associated Katniss with a character who is not white; others had gone a bit further and had interpreted Katniss as an Appalachian or Native American woman. This interpretation is not surprising: Suzanne Collins specifies in the first book that District 12 was built in a region previously known as Appalachia, and continues to be home to a coal-mining community.[243] Katniss Everdeen is born and raised in this mountainous District 12, one of the most impoverished districts in Panem. Headband was particularly vocal about the differences between Katniss's ethnic descriptors in the books and the casting of actress Jennifer Lawrence. Being Appalachian, they expressed that they had loved that District 12 "was supposed to be in Appalachia", that was "incredible" and "unique". For Headband, the citizens of District 12 are ambiguously described as Native American. Siena, who claimed to care a lot about casting "because it shapes who they are as people" shared this view, since she admitted that she had picture Katniss as a Native American-looking woman. For Headband, casting a white woman to play Katniss's character turned it all on its head, "and not in a good way". Siena and Headband both agreed that Katniss's ethnicity and background was crucial to her identity, the reason why they disliked the casting of Jennifer Lawrence. Catwoman argued, in a different focus group, that this is not the films' fault, but the casting. "They try to always make things more white, just because that's what will sell", Catwoman asserted.

[243] "District 12 was in a region known as Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here. Which is why our miners have to dig so deep". See Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 41.

Although Headband and Siena were critical with the casting of Jennifer Lawrence as an Appalachian young woman, the casting crew of *The Hunger Games* was not the first to choose Lawrence to represent such an identity. In independent drama *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), Lawrence also epitomized a person from Appalachia: Ree Dolly, an Ozark teenager who embarks on a dangerous quest to find her lost father. This character serves as a basis for Katniss, as Katniss and Ree share several traits: they are both Appalachian teenagers who must take care of their siblings, they both have a deceased father and a depressed mother, and they both struggle with poverty and hunger. Whether Headband and Siena were familiar with the casting in *Winter's Bone*, and whether they approved it or not, I do not know. Nevertheless, I predict the participants would have endorsed the casting of Jennifer Lawrence as an Appalachian teenager in *Winter's Bone*. Although Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games*) and Ree Dolly (*Winter's Bone*) share a similar background -an impoverished home in the Appalachian region, and the responsibility of taking care of the household-, there are striking representational differences between the two protagonists. While Ree's appearance is clearly tomboyish (she wears baggy and worn-out jeans, a big green jacket, lumberjack flannel shirts and casual, loose T-shirts), Katniss' tomboyism is tamed in *The Hunger Games* films. As the participants of the focus groups noted,[244] the films showed Katniss in a perfectly stylized hunting jacket, a jacket that was supposed to be inherited from her father. Ree does not wear makeup, and her shabby appearance reveals the effect that poverty and her dysfunctional family have on her: she has eye bags and messy hair, which she often covers with a winter hat. In *The Hunger Games*, Jennifer Lawrence also represents a heroine from an impoverished place, where food is scarce. However, the actress does not show any signs

[244] See previous section, "The Codes of Masculinity and Femininity."

of malnourishment. As I stated previously, Lawrence presents a smooth skin and a healthy and strong body, with full lips, flushed cheeks and lustrous hair.

Temporality also influences the representations of Ree Dolly and Katniss Everdeen. *Winter's Bone* fostered the breakthrough of Jennifer Lawrence, who had not been widely discovered until then. By the time she was hired for *The Hunger Games*, she had been cast as *Mystique in X-Men: First Class* (Matthew Vaughn, 2011), and was a promising young actress well-known to all. Lawrence could not resemble a person from Appalachia in *The Hunger Games* because by 2012 she was a symbol of normative white femininity in Hollywood. Lawrence was also closer to Ree Dolly's age (17) than to Katniss' age (16): the actress was 19 when *Winter's Bone* was released, and 22 by the time the first film of *The Hunger Games* was distributed.

The focus groups' participants did indeed identify age as a second casting problem in *The Hunger Games*. Annie, for example, expressed that the casting of an actress in her twenties meant that she could no longer relate to the character in the same way, since Jennifer Lawrence was not the teenager Katniss was supposed to be in the books. "Well, it's not me anymore", Annie said. Overall, some focus groups members criticized the casting of older characters, since it reduced the brutality of the storyline, based on children fighting children. Catwoman, however, argued that the kids of Panem "mature faster", since "at the age of 12, you have to kill". In the dystopian world of Panem, the contest of the Hunger Games structures, determines and threatens children's lives. Children are raised knowing that every year they are subject to be recruited for this deadly televised game; a contingency that affects the way they grow and mature. Some children in the most affluent districts even receive training to fight in the Games. Batman notices that it is precisely in this context where Katniss denounces that they are still children, "shouldn't be put through all of this and shouldn't be expected to react like a fully-grown person." Katniss shows her opposition to the

murderous contest when she kills president Alma Coin, the leader of the revolution, who had previously suggested the celebration of a new revengeful edition of The Hunger Games with the children of the citizens of the Capitol.

2.3 Conclusions

The textual analysis shows how *The Hunger Games* saga tries to dismantle stereotypical conceptions about womanhood and femininity; oftentimes Katniss refuses to embody these stereotypical feminine associations, and questions the importance of beauty rituals and gender performances in order to succeed. The majority of the participants I interviewed celebrated how *The Hunger Games* and Katniss herself discarded or mocked some of these rituals and behaviors. Their comments suggest that for many readers and spectators these models of exacerbated femininity are outdated, and new ways of understanding womanhood are needed. The character of Katniss Everdeen fits the current climate of Hollywood's film industry, in which young audiences demand empowering young female heroines.

Problematizing gender, racial, or sexual normativities usually implies the maintenance of others, and here lies the main difficulty in critiquing normative discourses. Despite the myriad of ways in which men and women can enact gender, dismantling the stereotypes and expectations that are often held in popular culture is complex.[245] Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane have stated that although female protagonists have started to engage in active roles, their femininity continues to define them, and heteronormative gendered norms usually are upheld for both girls and boys.[246] In *The Hunger Games*, gendered behavior and compulsory heterosexuality are forced upon Katniss

[245] See Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers".

[246] Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane, ""Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games", 150.

as a means of survival, and she needs to modify her actions accordingly -making herself desirable and pretending to love a boy- in order to survive.[247] Overall, the trilogy challenges gender and racial stereotypes while perpetuating others, a common trend in Hollywood.[248] The novels and films of the saga utilize essentialist conceptions of gender, and provide Katniss with a set of attributes which are presented as "natural" to her identity as a woman: tenderness, maternal instincts, and beauty. Nevertheless, some scholars find the embodiment of feminine traits positive: since Katniss is not completely turned into a man, she does fit the category of the filmic phallic woman.[249] Many of the participants interviewed shared this view. The juxtaposition of codes of masculinity and femininity did not bother them. On the contrary, they liked that Katniss embodied both masculine and feminine traits, and they appreciated her "nurturing" side. Although the textual analysis shows that the beautiful promise of Katniss Everdeen as a feminist fiction icon eventually vanishes into a reinforcement of essentialist notions, the participant research demonstrates that readers and spectators are open to women's representations that include both feminine and masculine characteristics. The participants admired Katniss's determination and strength, her stoicism and complex morality.

Like many of the participants I interviewed, I believe that women's representations that include both feminine and masculine characteristics are an asset, since they problematize gender roles and traits and picture new ways of understanding womanhood and manhood. These new female heroines are long-desired representations, as the success of films such as *The Hunger*

[247] Blackford, "The Games people play", 39.

[248] The *Harry Potter* books by J.K. Rowling and their film adaptations, for example, are also a series that challenges stereotypes in some instances and reinforces them in others. See Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane. "'She's More like a Guy' and 'he's More like a Teddy Bear', 1024.

[249] Menéndez Menéndez and Fernández Morales, "(Re) definición De Los Roles De Género En La Cultura Popular", 200.

Games or *Wonder Woman* can attest. However, I am more cautious than the participants of the study. Although Katniss is not turned into the archetype of the phallic woman, her embodiment of masculine covertly operates to recenter hegemonic masculinity. The lack of emotional depth in the films is highly problematic, since it perpetuates the idea that showing emotions is a weakness. On another hand, Katniss' appearance matches current standards of white feminine beauty, and her initial tomboy narrative eventually capitulates to a traditional gender role.

The Hunger Games also introduces a progress narrative in which race is configured as irrelevant, yet it adheres to typical casting patterns in Hollywood. The participants also perceived these patterns by which white actors are usually cast for main roles, while actors of color are usually relegated to secondary roles. The cast of *The Hunger Games* parallels this typical trend in Hollywood, which is particularly common in films made for teen and young adult audiences. "They try to always make things more white, just because that's what will sell", a student noted. They put the blame on the Hollywood industry, and not on the books themselves. As another participant noted, "the directors and the casting" were trying to show they were not racist "by casting a couple of black people every once in a while". However, this participant added that was just how Hollywood worked: "It's not really the books' fault". Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki assert that "media images still contain traces of long-standing cultural presumptions not only of essential race difference but of the hierarchy that idealizes 'whiteness.'"[250] My research confirms that these cultural presumptions are difficult to challenge and change, even in the postracial dystopian society of Panem.

[250] Entman and Rojecki quoted in Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957.

Chapter 3. *Katniss through the Men Who Loved and Hated Her*: Dominant and Alternative Masculinities in the Male Characters of *The Hunger Games* Saga

3.1 Textual Analysis

Introduction

Much has been written on how Hollywood shores up, reinforces, or shapes American culture's perception of what it is to be a man.[251] As masculinities' scholar and gender studies professor Thomas Keith asserts, media can serve as a good mirror "against which to approximate the multiplicity of masculine styles on display in America". According to Keith, the styles that are commonly privileged in contemporary popular culture include affluent, powerful men who range from the "hyper-aggressive tough guys of action-adventure films" to "wealthy playboys who wield great power over others". However, as he notes, there is also a myriad of media depictions of men that diverge from the hypermasculine archetype. These depictions could even be considered antithetical to the prototype of the "tough-guy" found in most action-adventure films, usually targeted to teen audiences during summertime. As we will see in the next section, many boys and men do not necessarily connect to nor embody hegemonic representations of masculinity such as these prototypical media tough guys. For these boys and young men, Keith says, "alternate and sometimes nonconforming versions of masculinity feel more comfortable."[252]

In their article "Fiction in Generalist American Television", for instance, Zurian Hernández *et al*. offer a tour through different representations of male characters in American television that go beyond stereotypical representations of men as "strong characters, courageous and *machos*."

[251] Hunter, "Fathers, Sons, and Business", 76.

[252] Keith, *Masculinities in Contemporary American Culture*, x.

They consider the great expansion of American television internationally, and posit that these new and alternative representations could have a great impact in the public order, building "new identitarian points of reference of the masculine, masculinity and virility." Their article highlights how masculinity was already shifting at the turn of the century, as it provides examples from sitcoms like *Frasier*, *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Mad about You*, and *Will & Grace*.[253] Meanwhile, *The Hunger Games* films are a clear example of the ongoing juxtaposition of dominant and alternative masculinities in the cinematographic medium. The progress narrative of the saga subtly introduces alternative and non-traditional masculinities in opposition to the hegemonic masculine traits that Katniss and some male characters embody. This chapter analyzes the construction of the female heroine through her relationships with her male counterparts in the films and novels, showing that although dominant masculinities still pervade mainstream film, the latter also include alternative and even subversive masculinities, proving how varied, open, relative, contradictory, and fluid masculinities can be.[254] I argue that the multiplicity of models of masculinity that the saga offers is a powerful step toward more comprehensive, diverse and egalitarian representations of manhood. They demonstrate that masculinity is shifting, and that both industry and audiences are embracing alternative masculinities as well as new depictions of relationships between women and men. Nevertheless, my research also confirms that white hegemonic masculinity is still a pervasive force, so naturalized and taken for granted that it often remains unnoticed, and consequently, unchallenged.

[253] Zurian Hernández *et al*., "Fiction in Generalist American Television", 54.

[254] Watson and Shaw, *Performing American Masculinities*, 1.

Masculinities: The Theory

The work of R. W. Connell, James W. Messerschmidt and Michael Kimmel revolutionized the study of masculinities as an academic endeavor during the 1990s.[255] This chapter draws on the theory developed by Connell and Messerschmidt in order to analyze the different masculinities presented in *The Hunger Games* saga. Although sex differences have been proved to be either non-existent or fairly small on almost every psychological trait measured,[256] presupposed gender differences are deeply entrenched in our societies. Concepts such as "masculinity" and "femininity" are elusive; they defy a concise and definitive definition. As I have discussed in chapter two, they are relational concepts and have meaning in relation to each other, "as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition"[257], in words of Connell. Femininity is usually linked to conceptions of dependence, passivity, and submissiveness; while masculinity is associated with activity, ritualistic combat, overt sexuality, and individualism. These definitions of masculinity -and femininity- are deeply enmeshed in the history of institutions and of economic structures.[258] As professor of marketing James Gentry *et al.* note, in the western world and especially in the United States masculinity has been largely constructed around the virtues, values, and roles of a self-made man, such as self-determination, autonomy, and individualism. Thus there are many things men have to do to associate themselves with masculinity, i.e. "we have to perform, we have

[255] Ibid.

[256] Connell, Masculinities, 21.

[257] Connell, *Masculinities*, 44.

[258] Ibid, 29.

to provide, and —we have to be in control."[259] Connell and Messerschmidt[260] describe five types of masculinity, linked by relations of alliance, dominance and subordination:

1. Hegemonic: hegemonic masculinities legitimate unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities. It demands a binary, hierarchical view of gender "in which masculinity is equated with power, action, dominance, and so on, and femininity with their binary opposites."[261] Ultimately, hegemonic masculinities form a legitimating justification for gender inequality.[262] Although they are often unreachable and most men do not embody them, they still support them and are regulated by them. Hegemonic masculinities have social authority, and they are not easy to challenge openly. Although for Connell society constructs an ideal masculinity to which most men aspire, for other scholars the masculinity that men embody and demonstrate is largely based on their unique experiences, background, and values.[263] Hegemony, however, does not mean total control for Connell: it is not automatic, and may be disrupted, "even disrupt itself."[264] For Isabel Menéndez, for example, the male characters in *The Hunger Games* are clear examples of ruptures of hegemonic masculinities in film.[265] This chapter will explore if and how *The Hunger Games* saga truly disrupts that hegemony.

[259] Gentry *et al*., "Masculinity Globally", 72.

[260] Connell, *Masculinities*. Specifically, see pages 37 and 136. See also Messerschmidt, *Masculinities in the Making*, 33-34, and Messerschmidt, *Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence*, 30-31.

[261] Ervin, "The Might of the Metrosexual", 72.

[262] Messerschmidt, *Masculinities in the Making*, 19.

[263] Frank cited in Chaney and Gyimah, "Who's bad?" 28.

[264] Connell, *Masculinities*, 37.

[265] See Menéndez, "Postmodern Heroes in Audiovisual Fiction".

- Dominant: this refers to the most powerful or the most widespread types of masculinities. They are usually the most common, the most celebrated, or current forms of masculinity in a specific social setting. In this chapter, I analyze the characters of Gale and the tributes Cato, Thresh, and Finnick O'Dair as examples of dominant masculinity.[266]
- Dominating: these masculinities involve commanding and controlling specific interactions and exercising power and control over people and events. The tyrannical character of President Snow, briefly analyzed in the discussion on the Queerness of the Capitol, is an example of dominating masculinity.[267]
- Subordinate: these are constructed as lesser than or aberrant and deviant to hegemonic masculinity as well as to dominant/dominating masculinities. Depending upon the context such subordination can be conceptualized in terms of race, class, age, sexualities, or body display/behavior. According to Messerschmitt, some of the most significant forms of subordination include gay boys and men and lesbian girls and women, and girls and women perceived as female who construct bodily practices defined as masculine, such as expressing sexual desire for girls, acting sexually promiscuous, presenting as authoritarian, physically aggressive, or taking charge. Similarly, individuals perceived as male but who construct practices defined as feminine, such as sexually desiring boys or simply practicing celibacy, being passive,

[266] See the section "Dominant Masculinities: Gale and the Male Tributes."

[267] See page 118.

compliant, or shy, and/or being physically weak or unadventurous, are considered subordinate masculinities.[268]

- Equality masculinities: these legitimate an egalitarian relationship between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men and women. Peeta Mellark, Katniss's fellow competitor in the Games and later romantic partner, is an example of equality masculinity. I analyze the narrative of his character in the section "The Equality Masculinity of Peeta."

These types of masculinity are not fixed categories. As it has been stated, masculinity is not a "solid, immovable construction".[269] It is always in flux and subject to change, as different masculinities come into existence at particular times and places.[270] *The Hunger Games* saga exemplifies how multiple masculinities coexist in the media products we consume; sometimes, the narrative of male characters celebrate the most current forms of masculinity: others, they produce alternative understandings of what a man should be. However, the masculinities embedded in the male characters of *The Hunger Games* saga are not based in a hierarchical, binary view of gender, hence they cannot be classified as "hegemonic" or "subordinate". The different forms of masculinity that the novels and films include are juxtaposed and varied, but they are not used to legitimate gender inequality.

Some of these forms fall into the most common or most celebrated forms of masculinities; thus drawing on the theory by Connell and Messerschmidt I refer to them as "dominant". This term is also used by Jack J Halberstam in his study about masculinities.[271] In this chapter, I analyze

[268] Messerschmidt, *Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence*, 30-31.

[269] Watson and Shaw, "Performing American Masculinities", 1.

[270] Connell, *Masculinities*, 186.

[271] See Halberstam, *Female masculinity*.

dominant masculinities through the characters of Gale and three male tributes: Cato, Thresh and Finnick O' Dair. Borrowing Halberstam's term, I refer to those forms of masculinity that separate themselves from dominant forms as "alternative". *The Hunger Games* saga includes three characters that represent alternative masculinities: Peeta Mellark, Caesar Flickerman and Cinna. I study their narratives in the section "Alternative or Non-Normative Masculinities: Peeta, Caesar Flickerman and Cinna."

Dominant Masculinities: Gale and the Male Tributes

The dominant masculinities presented in *The Hunger Games* are global, i.e., they have a large impact on an international scale, and apply to different contexts in different regions. Specifically, this section explores dominant masculinities through the character of Gale and three male tributes: Cato, Thresh and Finnick O' Dair.

Gale: Fitting the Romantic Mainstream Pattern

Gale is Katniss Everdeen's lifetime friend, also a citizen of District Twelve. Gale embodies traits of traditional masculinity and falls into essentialist gender notions: he is tall and strong, and performs physical labor: he works in the mines of the district and hunts, providing for his and Katniss's family. Gale is also willing "to engage in violence when required",[272] and to even sacrifice human lives for the greater good. When he expresses his feelings toward Katniss, he showcases a dominating behavior: he grabs her and kisses her because, in words of Linda Holmes, "he simply must." Although he is a very appealing literary archetype ("the tall, dark, and handsome, aloof and mysterious boy who really connects with you even though all the ladies want

[272] Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane. ""Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in *The Hunger Games*", 153.

him"[273]), the focus groups participants disliked the character. Overall, they mocked his hegemonic masculinity, showcasing that these literary archetypes might be outdated models of manhood for younger audiences.[274]

As Holmes notes, the actor cast for the character of Gale is Chris Hemsworth's brother, the Australian actor known for the role of Thor in the Marvel Cinematic Universe."[275] Both siblings incarnate normative conceptions of masculinity; they are tall and have a remarkable muscular shape. In this sense, Gale's dominant masculinity[276] follows the romantic mainstream pattern. His role has a lesser importance in the films and novels than Peeta, as he mostly provides tension to the story. As Menéndez asserts, his role is dispensable, but not irrelevant.[277] Interestingly enough, Katniss favors Peeta at the end of the saga, choosing a non-traditionally masculine character as her life partner. Against Peeta, Gale "never stands a chance—muscular and charmingly revolutionary though he is."[278]

Cato: Masculinity and Competition

Cato is a ruthless, arrogant white tribute who competes in the 74th Hunger Games, featured in the first novel and film. Cato and his allies are presented as having no compassion or empathy for others: they revel in the killings of their fellow contestants, dwell in the details of the massacre

[273] Brennan. "Why So Hungry for the Hunger Games?" 7.

[274] See the section "Gale: The Dominant Masculinity of the Romantic Contender" in this chapter.

[275] Holmes, "What Really Makes Katniss Stand Out?"

[276] In their analysis of masculinities and femininities in *The Hunger Games*, Woloshyn, Taber and Lane also align Gale with a dominant masculinity, while positioning Peeta at a marginalized masculinity. For the scholars, Katniss embodies traits of both, while at the same time draws on emphasized femininity. See "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games", 150.

[277] Menéndez, "Postmodern Heroes in Audiovisual Fiction", 94.

[278] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution"

and enjoy their victims' suffering.[279] Cato defies Katniss when he first sees her, and tries to kill her during the first Games. His masculinity is complicit with the hegemonic type often presented in Hollywood, involving filmic depictions of strong and well-tuned male bodies in action through "chivalrous deeds, sports, combat and violence, with an emphasis on competition."[280] Like professional athletes in competitive sports, Cato's masculinity is deeply marked by the hierarchical, competitive structure of the institutional setting that surrounds him.[281] In this case, the "institution" of the *Hunger Games* makes competition key to survival, since only one of the tributes -the one who survives- is declared victor at the end. In spite of his cruelty, Katniss sympathizes with Cato at the end of the Games. Cato is being attacked by a pack of wild dogs, and Katniss kills him out of compassion to spare him unnecessary suffering. As Dubrofsky and Ryalls note, this is poignant, "since Cato has been a ruthless villain throughout. Nonetheless, as is her nature, Katniss kills him out of Mercy".[282]

Thresh: Marked Black Masculinity

The narrative of *The Hunger Games* is situated in a seemingly postracial society, supposedly free of racial tensions, and it does not directly address critical aspects of racial theory. It configures race as irrelevant while at the same recenters whiteness. My analysis explores the depictions of African American characters such as Rue, Thresh, and Cinna, in order to shed light on the way race plays an -almost invisible- role in the saga.

[279] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 403.

[280] Kirkham and Thumim, *You Tarzan*, 15.

[281] For a larger discussion on the construction of masculinity in sport, see Connell drawing on Michael Messner's interview study on professional athletes, Power at Play. Connell, *Masculinities*, 35-36.

[282] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 406.

White male masculinities are constructed not only in relation to white women but also in relation to black men,[283] hence my analysis includes tributes played by white and black actors. Thresh, played by Nigerian-born actor Dayo Okeniyi, is a powerful black tribute who saves Katniss from being killed in the arena. He fits normative images of black masculinity: he is physically dominant - "probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox"[284] - and dangerous. He also fits some of the behavioral expressions examined by scholars Harris, Palmer, and Struve among black men. The scholars researched the foundational traits for the masculinities of 22 black men enrolled at a private research university. Traits such as toughness, aggressiveness, and restrictive emotionality were found to be foundational to the masculinities demonstrated by these young black men. They are also foundational for Thresh.[285]

Thresh does not partner with others to form alliances in the Games, but instead isolates himself. He is shown as rarely speaking, and hostile.[286] He possesses traits that Katniss admires and desires for herself, but she cannot publicly portray as a female contestant. As professor and scholar Kathryn S. Hansen notes, Katniss wishes she could be like Thresh, "but her advisors disallow it because it is not acceptably feminine".[287] Katniss is aware of this double standard and complains about it: "Of only I was his size, I could get away with sullen and hostile and it would be just fine! I bet half the sponsors are at least considering him".[288] Katniss' discontent about this

[283] Connell, *Masculinities*, 75.

[284] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957-958.

[285] Other behavioral expressions such as material wealth and responsibility were also found to be foundational for the 22 black men studied. See Harris, Palmer, and Struve cited in Chaney and Gyimah, "Who's bad?" 27.

[286] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 402, and Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957-958.

[287] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

[288] Hansen quoting Collins, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

gendered double standard is anecdotal, but nonetheless it holds a great significance. Not only does she deem these gendered evaluations unfair, but she is vocal about it. Her critique is delivered to those around her, but also to the readers of the novels and spectators of the films. These objections to perform gender-appropriate behavior transcend the dystopian world of Panem, the realm of fiction, and find an echo in our current sociocultural structures. As this project showcases, gender tropes endure even in dystopian narratives. Thresh's performance during the training prior to the Games awakens Katniss to the gendered nature of social and cultural institutions, and she rebels against it. Katniss and Thresh interact in one single occasion: during a fight, when Thresh decides to let Katniss go. His alliance with Rue, also a black tribute from District 11, drives him to show compassion for Katniss. "Just this time, 12. For Rue", he says.[289]

While Katniss problematizes gender normativities, the character of Thresh entrenches racial ones. For scholars Moore and Coleman, Thresh's description conforms to the Brute archetype for African Americans: "Identification of Thresh as a wild animal is reinforced when he conceals himself in tall grasses during the Games, attacking and killing others who enter his territory."[290] For the scholars, his representation differs from Cinna's and Rue's -also African American characters- in that the tribute is *marked* by his ethnicity. His body "has been 'assigned social meaning' to be marked as an 'Other'".[291] Shaw and Watson identify two extremes in the construction of black masculinities in America: "at one end, the stereotypically big, bad, violent, menacing, oversexed black buck and, at the other end, the docile, accommodating, subdued, nonthreatening, sexually emasculated black man."[292] The first end would be represented by

[289] *The Hunger Games*.

[290] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957-958.

[291] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957-958.

[292] Shaw and Watson, "Obama's Masculinities", 136-137.

Thresh. Later on in this chapter, the section on the alternative masculinity of Cinna elucidates whether the stylist is located at the other end of the spectrum.[293]

Finnick Odair: Between the Hypermasculine and the Feminine Type

Finnick Odair, played by English actor Sam Claflin, is a tribute who embodies the traits of the white sex symbol, handsome and in great shape. He won the 65th Games at age 14, the youngest tribute to ever be proclaimed victor. He also participates in the 75th Hunger Games, the edition of the Quarter Quell, where former victors competed against each other and where he performed as Katniss's ally. Francis Lawrence, director of the second film, discussed the casting difficulties for Finnick -he defined it as a "really tricky casting process"- given the character's popularity in the saga and the different conceptions regarding hegemonic white masculinity that different readers have. As he asserted, finding an actor who embedded the traits of Finnick was difficult, since "everybody had their idea of what this god-like man was going to look like. You know to some, it's somebody the size of Chris Hemsworth in Thor; and to others, Sam Claflin is perfect."[294] Sam Claflin was eventually chosen for the emotional side he could convey.[295] The Capitol instrumentalized Finnick's ideal body image, forcing him -together with female tribute Johanna Mason- into prostitution after his participation in the Games.

The construction of the character of Finnick parallels media's attempts to portray new kinds of masculinity. Gentry *et al*. mention the movie *The Pacifier* as an instance, in which superstar

[293] See the section "Cinna: A Queer Masculinity"

[294] Grossman, "Come for the Love Story, Stay for the War".

[295] Finnick and Johanna, as well as Katniss, are forced to adapt particular personae that fit the interests of the Capitol. In Finnick's case, he must be charming and flirtatious. However, their inner self is more complex than their charismatic masks. Underneath, Suzanne Collins explains, "they're sort of onion characters, and as you peel back the layers you find more and more about what they've experienced." See Grossman, "Katniss is 'A Wreck'".

Vin Diesel embodies the duality that is expected in a new man: he is strong and determined yet soft and caring. This "reincarnated" masculinity responds to a new, increasingly feminized hegemonic masculinity that adapts to societal changes, and that demands that men get in touch with their emotions. Patterson and Elliott further assert that male identity is negotiated in a way such that male bodies are becoming objects of display, that is, "the young man must look at himself with narcissistic obsession, as much as he looks outside to seek approval for his appearance and his expressions of the new standards of masculinity."[296]

Finnick occupies an intermediate position between the hyper-masculine and the feminine type. Although today the term sounds dated, Finnick embodies the traits of what has been known as *metrosexual*, which denotes a straight man with some stereotypically feminine traits, such as taste in grooming and culture.[297] This trend sought to replace the hard-working, tough masculinity with a "good-looking" masculinity that would foster consumption. According to Mark Simpson, "the stoic, self-denying, modest straight male didn't shop enough (his role was to earn money for his wife to spend), and so he had to be replaced by a new kind of man, one less certain of his identity and much more interested in his image — that's to say, one who was much more interested in being looked at".[298] Metrosexuality has been encountered with multiple and sometimes contradictory reactions. For some scholars, this new body ethic keeps perpetuating capitalism and masculinity as dominant forces: they only do so by giving both a more attractive appearance.[299] Other scholars -myself included- are more optimistic, and assert that what began as a fashion and marketing phenomenon became an "oddly powerful and subversive force" that may translate in a

[296] Gentry *et al*., "Masculinity Globally", 73.

[297] Ervin, "The Might of the Metrosexual", 58.

[298] Buerkle, "Masters of Their Domain", 25-26.

[299] Buerkle, "Masters of Their Domain", 26.

permanent change in the way we treat and view male sexuality and identity.[300] Welcomed or repudiated, metrosexuality is now a common practice. British cultural commentator Sarah Boumphrey already noted in 2007 that an important change in male behavior had already taken place, such that the behavior classified in the past as metrosexual was likely, for today‘s male teens and tweens, to become normal when they matured.[301]

White heterosexuality and everlasting romance are also entrenched into the character of Finnick: he gets married to Annie, perpetuating the myth of romance under the cover of a flirtatious young man. In spite of this, Sarah Seltzer points to a scene in the second film *Catching Fire* that involves Finnick and Peeta and that she understands as a queer gesture. In this scene, Katniss, Peeta and Finnick O'Dair have been recruited for the Quarter Quell, the 75th edition of the Hunger Games, and are struggling to survive. There is a force field hidden in the Quell, and Peeta is electrocuted by accidentally hitting it with a machete. To Katniss's surprise, Finnick leans over the laying body of Peeta to perform CPR (see figure 10). After a few seconds, Peeta starts breathing again.

Sarah Seltzer argues that although the movie seems to target heterosexual male viewers and it is paced like it is for them, it also contains "these lingering shots that are obviously not for them". For Seltzer, Finnick and Peeta CPR scene "seems like a deliberate nod to a sexually complex audience."[302] If that were the case, the scene would be disrupting the common trope according to which erotic attention directed to male bodies is "allowable only in terms of the demonstration of its qualities of skill and endurance."[303] As I have explained in the analysis of the

[300] Ervin, "The Might of the Metrosexual", 61.

[301] Gentry *et al*., "Masculinity Globally", 74.

[302] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution".

[303] Kirkham and Thumim, *You Tarzan*, 13.

dominant masculinity of Cato, filmic depictions of strong and well-tuned male bodies are often justified within the context of sports, combat and violence that emphasize competition. The male-on-male CPR scene in which Finnick saves Peeta's life is not an obvious instance of queer representation. However, it seems to foster an oppositional read of a scene that is not meant to have subtext, showing how spectators are capable of formulating new interpretations that may problematize, oppose, or reinvent the messages of the media products they consume.

Alternative or Non-Normative Masculinities: Peeta, Caesar Flickerman and Cinna

As we have seen, under the norms of hegemonic masculinity men are under pressure to conform to expectations that "they be powerful, handsome, muscular, capable, and unemotional". The male gender performances that develop in alternative ways and do not fit into these conceptions are referred to as "marginalized masculinities" or "equality masculinities" by Connell and Messerschmidt.[304] *The Hunger Games* saga advances the agenda of diversity in film, and exemplifies the multiple ways in which mainstream film industries can incorporate non-normative masculinities. These are explored through the characters of Peeta, Caesar Flickerman, and Cinna.

The Equality Masculinity of Peeta

One of the great accomplishments of *The Hunger Games* trilogy is the inclusion of a non-normative masculinity in Katniss's romantic partner. Peeta embeds a non-stereotypical masculinity, constructed around his work as a baker -work that will guarantee his survival through the Games- and his artistic ability. These attributes complement Katniss's nontraditional

[304] Taber, Woloshyn, and Lane. "'She's More like a Guy' and 'he's More like a Teddy Bear', 1025.

femininity,[305] and Katniss settles for him because she needs "his calming presence."[306] Although Peeta is physically tough, Katniss is stronger. His qualities -kindness, patience, and care- complement Katniss's introspection, protectiveness, and anger. Peeta disrupts the familiar theme in patriarchal ideology by which men are rational while women are emotional[307]: he is soft, "like the sunset"[308], he expresses his emotions openly and encourages Katniss to do so too. Peeta embeds what Messerschmidt defines as "equality masculinity", since it legitimates an egalitarian relationship between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men and women.

As Sarah Seltzer notes in "The Hunger Games' Role Revolution", Peeta is even more a departure from the masculine standard in the books, where he is presented as being maimed after having lost a leg in the arena. As some disability studies scholars have noted, disabled men have frequently been feminized within mainstream media, including film. For them, this gendered position is a disempowered one, mainly created through the use of gendered stereotypes.[309] For Seltzer, Peeta's representation in the novels and films is not only representative of a simple role reversal, "but an important feminist statement in and of itself."[310] Seltzer extensively praises the character of Peeta, highlighting his multiple acts of "gentleness and sacrifice" in the midst of a dystopian violent future:

[305] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 175.

[306] Oliver, "Hunting Girls".

[307] Connell, *Masculinities*, 164.

[308] Katniss's description of Peeta in *Mockingjay*, Part II.

[309] Cheu and Tyjewski, "The Male Rapunzel in Film", 153.

[310] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution".

> "He paints a picture of the deceased young tribute, Rue, to inspire Katniss. He tries to save her life and lay his own down repeatedly, usually getting hurt himself in the process. He warns her away from conflict and isolation, encouraging her to make friends and alliances while she glowers and fumes with mistrust. He holds her when she can't sleep. He's also clever, witty, observant, and even sardonic when he needs to be."[311]

Importantly enough, this feminist strategy in the creation of the character does not involve the disempowerment or mockery of Peeta - the transgression occurs within the story without conflict or argument, which normalizes his non-hegemonic profile.[312]Another writer, Linda Holmes, also seconds the representation of Peeta as defying typical Hollywood versions of gender roles for boyfriends, and equates Peeta to the role of the "movie girlfriend".[313] Menéndez also situates Peeta as the "helper": he helps Katniss achieve her purpose and is willing to sacrifice himself if necessary,[314] a supportive role that is usually relegated to women in mainstream film and that in this case is played by Katniss's male counterpart.

Other voices are not as optimistic. Katherine R. Broad, for example, sees the inclusion of this gender reversal as superficial rather than substantive, and questions the potential disruption of traditional gender roles in the text: "That Peeta is associated with utopian gentleness and Katniss with dystopian violence, upsetting stereotypical gender associations, should not lead us to think that their gender roles are truly reversed or that the text offers more open examples of gender

[311] Ibid.

[312] Menéndez, "Postmodern Heroes in Audiovisual Fiction", 93.

[313] Holmes, "What Really Makes Katniss Stand Out?"

[314] Menéndez, "Postmodern Heroes in Audiovisual Fiction", 93.

possibilities", she asserts. "After all, the good girl is supposed to help others, not be helped herself."[315] Unlike Katherine Road, I do believe there is value in Katniss and Peeta's role reversal. Their transgression of gender norms offers critical commentary and problematizes long-held assumptions about women's and men's appropriate behaviors, as well as normalizing Peeta's equality masculinity. In my view, these are subtle but powerful attempts to disrupt gender normativities.

To my surprise, the members of the focus groups either showed indifference or disapproved the character of Peeta, a reading that demonstrates the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity. When presented with an equality masculinity that featured a supportive, kind, and gentle male character, the participants remained unenthusiastic. Their reactions prove that traditionally masculine traits are deeply valued, and that the hegemony of these tropes is difficult to challenge. Besides, in spite of the gender reversal and its positive inclusion in a blockbuster saga like *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta will eventually reinforce romantic myths related to long-life commitment and everlasting love. I study these myths as well as the participants' readings of the character of Peeta in chapter 4.

Caesar Flickerman and the Queerness of the Capitol

Queer studies' notions of normativity and deviance are useful in the analysis of the aesthetics of the citizens in the Capitol as opposed to the appearance of the citizens of the districts. District inhabitants, especially those from the less affluent ones, are constructed as unmarked: Katniss Everdeen, for example, is embedding a "natural", unaltered, white femininity. Citizens in the

[315] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 126.

Capitol, however, are marked as altered bodies: they have surgically altered faces and bodies, or have been adorned with excessive makeup and ornate clothing, as figure 5 shows.[316] Many of these citizens showcase very high eyebrows and "overly plump lips".[317] Hairstyles look remarkably artificial, in vibrant colors. Caesar Flickerman, the charismatic host of the televised show of the Game, embeds the attributes -excessive whiteness, makeup and artificiality-, associated to the citizens of the Capitol. He is "the quintessential representation of the Capitol's ideal of style and popularity, and the necessary bodily alterations therein."[318] He sports "outrageous blue hair"[319] during the first Games, and changes his color -to pink and then purple- in the third and fourth films.

In strong opposition to the oppressed districts, the corrupt Capitol rises as "the epitome of multicolored decadence, extravagance, and self-indulgence", hosting frivolous residents who manifest their excess in their clothing, makeup, and hairstyles.[320] The ultimate example is the final banquet after the Victory Tour in *Catching Fire*, where Capitol citizens indulge in "culinary delights beyond imagination,"[321] falling into bulimic practices in order to continue eating and trying new foods. These scenes satirize late capitalism and offer critical commentary on current social asymmetries. As this project demonstrates, the narrative of *The Hunger Games* is more than a passive site of evasion, as the fictional discourse and the real world intersect in complex ways. The outrageous social inequality of the world of Panem, for instance, is a window through which we can reflect on the injustices of the real world. The distribution of *The Hunger Games* novels

[316] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 395.

[317] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 403.

[318] Mitchell, "Of Queer Necessity", 135.

[319] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 397.

[320] Pavlik, "Absolute Power Games", 31.

[321] Despain, "The Fine Reality of Hunger Satisfied", 73.

coincided with the economic global crisis of 2008, which increased social disparity and poverty in the successive years. The effects of the debt crisis were especially felt in Europe, where austerity policies and the high rate of unemployment led to greater social asymmetry and distrust of governments, public institutions, and their regulation capabilities. The first volume of *The Hunger Games* was published in 2009, following the hit of the financial crisis in 2008, and seems to have anticipated the effects of the political global economy at the time. The real world and the dystopian world of *The Hunger Games* shared common phenomena such as concentration of wealth, social disparity, and increased poverty; as well as a growing social and political awareness that resulted in generalized protests to demand effective change. I have discussed how the riots of District 11 mirror contemporary protests in Chapter 2.[322]

Although the dualism between the Capitol and the districts provides informative commentary on the social inequality of the real world, the radically different gender representations of the two groups (districts *versus* Capitol citizens) are rather problematic. As Sara Seltzer notes, the world of Panem is hardly a gender utopia, and the pairing of the Capitol residents' decadence and their sexual nonconformity is a problematic trope. Queerness is only allowable in the Capitol, a decadent and self-indulgent society, and not within the "noble" oppressed districts. The districts' citizens act in traditional gender roles while "their partying oppressors dress in drag and wild makeup." The films would have been more progressive, Seltzer adds -and I agree-, if the Capitol as well as the different districts had shown a range of sexual expression.[323] Race is also an important component of representation of deviant bodies in *The Hunger Games* films: the residents of the Capitol appear to have "ghostly white foundation, appearing hyper-white, almost

[322] See section on "White Femininity and the Politics of Casting."

[323] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution."

grotesque".[324] For scholars Dubrofsky and Ryalls those constructed as "inauthentically white" caricature the privileges associated with whiteness; they are a critique of a life of leisure and excess, in which they have lost their humanity or are "utterly depraved and without appropriate moral values".[325] In this context, ruler of Panem President Snow is also portrayed as excessively white, and white roses are chosen to constitute the symbolic trace of his tyrannical power. His very name, Snow, reinforces this idea. President Snow, "the bodily representation of oppression, violence, and fear,"[326] uses white roses to convey his presidential persona[327] and to communicate his violent plans to Katniss. After the attack on District 13 in the third film, for example, Snow leaves thousands of white roses for Katniss. Katniss immediately understands the message: "He's gonna kill Peeta… he's punishing Peeta to punish me".[328]

Cinna: A Queer Masculinity

Cinna is Katniss Everdeen's stylist, an important ally. The representation of Cinna's character is unmarked: his skin is not discussed in the book, but in the films he appears to be mixed race Black and white, although his ethnicity is never used as a defining element of his character.[329] The relationship between Katniss and Cinna is especially complex in nature. He is represented as a kind and caring ally for Katniss, an older brother or father figure to the heroine[330] who supports

[324] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 402.

[325] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 404.

[326] Koenig, "Communal Spectacle", 44.

[327] Clemente, "Panem in America", 23.

[328] *Mockingjay*, Part I.

[329] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 397, and Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957.

[330] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957.

her throughout the Games. Cinna is a great connoisseur of the complex codes of fashion and personal image. Cinna's role is to turn Katniss into a symbol of revolution in Panem, and he uses clothing as an oppositional statement against the tyranny of the Capitol. His designs are feminine, but include powerful elements meant to provide Katniss with symbolic strength and power. In his first work as Katniss's stylist, for instance, he adds artificial flames to Katniss's attire, aligning her with the coal-mining activities of her district.[331] The narrative of Cinna's character is created around his morality, intelligence, and trustworthiness. As Moore and Coleman note, in many ways "he is presented more favorably than the white citizens of the Capitol, as he avoids the typical overindulgences of food and dress and shuns the violent entertainment of the "Games."[332] After being killed by the Capitol, Cinna's role is occupied by Boggs, right-hand man to President Alma Coin, chief of the revolution. In the absence of Cinna, Boggs becomes Katniss's older brother/father figure in the third film. The politics of casting change for the character of Boggs: while in the book he is presented as a man in his mid-forties, with close cropped gray hair and blue eyes, in the film he is played by black actor Mahershala Ali, who is bald and has brown eyes.

Gay masculinities represent a stable alternative to hegemonic masculinity that reconfigures the politics of masculinity as a whole, "making gender dissidence a permanent possibility."[333] The inclusion of a gay masculinity could have been a very progressive casting decision for a mainstream teenage cultural product; however, Cinna is not portrayed as gay. The ambiguity in the representation of his sexuality has sparked great discussion among blogs and fan sites, where readers and film spectators constantly discuss his queerness. Lenny Kravitz, cast for the role,

[331] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 167.

[332] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957.

[333] Connell, *Masculinities,* 219.

admitted finding inspiration in a bisexual friend, but has refused to situate Cinna under the "gay" category. To the question: "Is Cinna gay?" Kravitz has responded: "I have no idea. I have no idea. I played him right in the middle".[334] Although movie depictions of queer male characters has become increasingly common in recent decades,[335] *The Hunger Games* fails to situate Cinna as openly gay. The inclusion of a seemingly queer character is an asset of the saga, but this appearance of diversity does not correlate with a clear and definitive statement. As Heartfield notes, "if any of the characters is gay, it is never mentioned."[336] The decision of including a "seemingly queer" character who is, however, not openly gay parallels the trend in many contemporary media products. Queer characters are often desexualized; and any efforts that give a nod to queer sexuality are often met with considerable resistance. In addition, the primary relationships of most queer characters is with heterosexuals, like it is in the case of Cinna and Katniss.[337] Moreover, Cinna's potential subversive masculinity and sexuality are situated only within the decadent and elitist society of the Capitol, where queerness and pansexuality are celebrated.[338]

In spite of these limitations -not positioning Cinna as openly gay, and situating him only in the decadent society of the Capitol-, the inclusion of the character of Cinna is a powerful asset in the saga. Cinna is the site where the new possibilities for the representation of alternative masculinities (black and queer) reside. It encapsulates a rupture with normative conceptions of masculinity, and it illustrates how small rebellious acts can be executed within the constraints of an oppressive system. Cinna is highly respected in his community because he *seems* harmless: the

[334] See Yamato, "Lenny Kravitz on His Hunger Games Call, Jennifer Lawrence, and Cinna's Sexuality"

[335] Shary, *Millennial Masculinity*, 4. See also Slagle and Yep, "Taming Brian", 189.

[336] Heartfield, "Hardly Revolutionary".

[337] Slagle and Yep, "Taming Brian", 190.

[338] See Donnelly, "'Hunger Games': Lenny Kravitz had bisexual inspiration for Cinna"

frivolous and elitist citizens of the Capitol are appreciative of Cinna's creative designs and of his work as a stylist for the Games. To the eyes of the Capitol, Cinna occupies the position of the "docile, accommodating, subdued, nonthreatening, sexually emasculated black man,"[339] as opposed to the stereotype of threatening oversexed black buck that Thresh (the tribute from District 11) represents. However, in the two first novels and films Cinna overturns this misconception, as he takes a powerful stance against the oppressive forces of Panem. The stylist, seemingly complicit with the totalitarian government of the Capitol and the spectacle of the Games, uses his designs for revolutionary purposes. After meeting Katniss, he creates impactful burning costumes for her presentation alongside Peeta, making them stand out among the other tributes. As a result, Katniss and Peeta gain the approval and the sympathy of the audience, a key factor to succeed in the Games. Cinna's design also facilitates a catchphrase for Katniss, "the girl who was on fire."

In the second novel and film, *Catching Fire*, Cinna designs a wedding dress for Katniss that turns into a Mockingjay, Katniss's symbol and later on, the symbol of the revolution (see figures 7-9). The symbolic power of Cinna's designs and their influence on the public is remarkable, and does not escape the repressive forces of the Capitol. Cinna's act of defiance cost him his life, as he is killed in front of Katniss at the beginning of the Quarter Quell. Before his death, Cinna had also crafted Katniss's uniform for the revolution, showing that his support for Katniss throughout the Games and as the symbol of the revolution was unequivocal. As one of the heroine's main allies, he also helps Katniss to gain confidence and to perform in front of a large audience. Cinna's character conveys a symbolic message of hope, and it imagines a future where gender, sexual, and racial tropes shift. His relationship with Katniss also functions as a compelling metaphor of the alliances that can be formed among marginalized or oppressed groups.

[339] Shaw and Watson, "Obama's Masculinities", 136-137.

3.2 Participant research

Introduction

	Focus group 1 Oct 9th, 2017	Focus group 2 Oct 11th, 2017	Focus group 3 Nov 13th, 2017
Participants	Annie Siena Headband	Wolfe Robin Catwoman Batman	Queenie Piggy

Table 1: Pseudonyms of participants in each focus group.

In general, the participants I interviewed seemed more interested in the character of Katniss *per se* -as a heroine, or a revolutionary symbol- than in her relationships with other characters, especially with male characters. The love triangle, explored in chapter 4, did indeed spark great discussion, but Katniss's relationships with other male characters in general seemed to be less relevant for the interviewees. In fact, what some participants did pay attention to was Katniss's relationship with other women: they considered the latter more relevant to the character, and praised the importance they had in the narrative. They even expressed their wish of seeing Effie, a female character who embodies the excessive femininity that Katniss discards, as a friend. Headband affirmed that "her most deep and emotional and important relationships in her life were with women", and noted that Katniss's relationships with her mother, her sister, and Rue were "really central" to the protagonist.

Headband: “She had her love interests, but they weren’t nearly as important to her [...] She got all of her support and comfort from other women, and that was… so good to see.”

Siena also highlighted Katniss's alliance with Johanna, who was “ultimately always on [Katniss's] side”.

Siena: “It was cute. I liked that. Most influential relationships were with women.”

I argue that these findings provide reasons for optimism. Rather than mocking the fetishized femininity of Effie or the passivity of Katniss’s mother, the participants focused on the relationships of alliance and support among them, implying that multiple ways of embodying femininity can coexist together. The participants’ insight about the centrality of female relationships in the saga is another indicator of the relevance of sisterhood for young women. During the years following the release of *The Hunger Games* novels and films, women’s rights and campaigns gained momentum, and many citizens in the United States and abroad increasingly embraced the principles of feminism and became politically active. Hillary Clinton’s Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 is the epitome of the change toward gender equality, as she became the first U.S. female presidential candidate nominated by a major party. Online sites and social media have facilitated activist efforts, becoming effective networks of communication and organization. The impact of the Slutwalk campaign of 2011, for instance, was only possible thanks to new media, as it was with the movement Ni Una Menos in 2015[340] or the Women’s March in

[340] The movement Ni Una Menos fights gender-based violence. It originated in 2015 in Argentina and soon spread to other Spanish-speaking countries.

Washington on January 21, 2017. Women are also coming forward and reporting cases of sexual harassment and assault, and they have largely participated in the 2017 campaign #metoo to make sexual harassment and assault visible. The heroism of Katniss Everdeen has become part of the collective imagination of a young generation of women and girls who are speaking up against sexism and oppression and mobilizing to demand social change.

The women's movement has left the margins and become a central piece of the mainstream discourse, and as such has been commodified and instrumentalized by the neoliberal system.[341] The inclusion of a strong female character like Katniss at the center of a blockbuster saga exemplifies how ideas related to girl power materialize through Hollywood film. The industry does not provide these new strong female characters with the purpose of posing a fundamental challenge to patriarchal structures, but to foster consumption and increase revenue. As Angela McRobbie notes in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, feminism has been instrumentalized, displaced as a political movement, and shown to no longer be necessary. Using examples of films and television shows such as *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones's Diaries* and *Ally McBeal*, she analyzes how elements of popular culture are undoing feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. This new "faux feminism" embedded in popular culture re-regulates young women through the language of personal choice, and locks them "into 'new-old' dependences and anxieties". While McRobbie rightfully pointed out in 2009 the commodification of feminism by the neoliberal system, I argue that the social and political climate of the last decade has proved that the effects of the commodification of feminism have not been totalizing. The instrumentalization of feminism has not been enough to desensitize women

[341] See Sarah Banet-Weiser discussion of "commodity feminism" in "Girls Rule!: Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon" and Angela McRobbie's study of the postfeminist masquerade in *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

against the causes they care about. Quite the opposite -- as my research shows, women are taking up representations of strong heroines to find comfort, shelter, and empowerment. Women are speaking up and fighting for change, bringing long-ignored or diminished issues to the surface. Feminism might have been instrumentalized by the system, but it has not lost its relevance or power. The insight from the focus groups participants is indicative of feminism's significance for the lives of young women.

Gale: The Dominant Masculinity of the Romantic Contender

During the second focus group, its members exhaustively discussed the love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale (please see chapter 4 for a detailed analysis). Gale was not favored at the end of the conversation: most participants were very vocal about how much they disliked his character. The participants' harsh critique and mockery of the dominant masculinity of Gale is proof that young audiences are capable of identifying and problematizing dominant representations of masculinity. It also suggests that these models are outdated for younger audiences.

During the second focus group, the participants laughed when one of them suggested Gale was "such a frat boy." They pointed out that he had killed Katniss's sister, and they expressed their profound discontent ("I hate Gale", said Batman multiple times). Batman continued that the character of Gale was "irrelevant", and that he provided nothing except his support and help in providing for Katniss's family. "If he had just stayed a friend", said Batman, "I think it'd have been so much better." Another student even was of the opinion that his character should have died (Catwoman). Barring one of the participants, who asserted she liked the character, the rest of the participants were very critical about the dominant masculinity that Gale embedded, including his

remarks about the women he had met in a visit to the Capitol. For Robin, these comments undermine the relevance of the character to the heroine, and they "negate" his role to Katniss.

Non-Sexualized Relationships: Katniss's Alliances with Haymitch and Finnick

Some of the participants pointed out and celebrated the fact that, barring her romantic interests Peeta and Gale, Katniss's relationships with other men were not sexualized (Wolfe, Siena). The participants' approval of these non-sexualized relationships points to a certain exhaustion of the hypersexualized media context by which young audiences are surrounded. Against a postfeminist neoliberal setting that encourages young women to display a certain sexual knowledge and practice,[342] some focus groups members celebrated the non-sexual nature of Katniss's relationships with other male characters. This non-sexualization is also a representational advantage in that it expands the possibilities for female-male relationships besides the romantic and/or sexual rapport. Katniss's relationships with men are networks of support and alliance, and they disregard romantic or sexual overtones.

The character of Haymitch was praised as a "brutally honest" (Catwoman) mentor and a friend, as an "uncle" figure (Wolfe) who understood Katniss at a deeper level. As Batman pointed out, in other examples this type of relationships between an older male character and a younger female character "can get creepy". However, Batman suggested that in Haymitch's case "it was never creepy [...] he just genuinely cared for her as a 16-year-old girl". Piggy added that in their "complicated relationship" not only does Haymitch care about Katniss, but she also takes care of him "when he's drinking". Other participants noted that mentor and mentee bonded on their shared

[342] Please see the conclusions in Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the neoliberal "technology of sexiness."

experiences as tributes in the Games, and on the fact that others were making generalizations about them.

> Siena: "I really liked Haymitch throughout the entire books. I just thought he was just funny sometimes, he just didn't care, but then he was very sensitive with Katniss, and I think he understood her more than a lot of other people did".
>
> Headband: "Everyone assumed that Haymitch was this drunken fool, but he was an *alcoholic* because he got tortured by the time he was 14. And he was from District 12, the coal mining district."

Catwoman pointed out that Finnick's relationship with Katniss was not sexualized either. In spite of being presented as a sex symbol, Finnick's focus was not to seduce Katniss, but to establish an alliance with the heroine. Batman added that Katniss acknowledged that he was attractive and that he had a lot of admirers in the Capitol, but only as "a characteristic of him". Siena, for instance, saw other qualities as well and described him as "good" and "kind hearted". Finnick had been sexually exploited by the Capitol, but as Headband notes, "that it is not voluntary". For Headband, all characters had "different levels of power and oppression in all their identities".

The Male Characters in the Queer Capitol: Caesar and Cinna

Little discussion arose about the character of Caesar Flickerman in the saga. According to Robin's interpretation of the character, Caesar initially helped Katniss during her interviews, given how uncomfortable she was in front of the cameras. For Robin, Caesar was forced into "this position of awfulness". However, Batman disagreed and replied that towards the end "he was definitely on the Capitol's side".

Cinna was met with general consensus: the majority of participants said to have loved the character. The participants praised him for being "real" (Siena), "fierce" and not oblivious to the injustice of the totalitarian regime that ruled Panem. They praised his sense of style, and the fact that he did not give in and defied the Capitol's terror, which resulted in his assassination.

> Robin: "They basically killed all the black people. I'm not gonna lie: they killed Rue, they killed Cinna, they killed the guy… [Thresh]. Everybody who is black."
>
> Siena: "I just love everything about Cinna. [...] I loved how his clothes were a form of art and made such a huge statement. [Katniss] is the girl on fire because of his fashion, and I loved that so much. And it shows the importance of art also in politics."
>
> Piggy: "[Katniss] saw the rest of them pretty much as aliens and as spectators in this horrible game. But Cinna, Cinna had an understanding and he helped her."

The participants' overall approval of Cinna suggests their longing for new and alternative models of masculinity, including queer, gay, and black masculinities. Their support of Cinna was unequivocal, as he was the only character in the saga who avoided all criticism. While his alternative masculinity was unchallenged, I wish the participants would have expanded on the specific qualities that make Cinna so appealing. Future research might entail an analysis of alternative forms of masculinity in Hollywood film and the traits that are specifically valued by young consumers. This data would give us a better idea about young audiences' expectations and preferences for new models of masculinity.

The (Un) Marked Black Characters: Thresh and Cinna

As I previously mentioned, *The Hunger Games*' narrative is situated in a seemingly postracial society, and does directly address ideologies of race. The participants interviewed noted this aspect - for them, race was not the most prevalent issue in the saga. "It definitely didn't touch on that at all", said Catwoman. For Piggy, "the author and the film don't directly speak to race". Batman agreed, saying that they were not "really overt about it." Paradoxically, the participants both addressed race and claimed that it was not integral to the saga. Although they did not extensively analyze the race of the characters, the participants did discuss Katniss's ambiguous ethnicity and provided a few remarks on Rue as a young black girl. However, they did not interpret the black male characters of Cinna and Thresh according to their ethnicity.

> Batman: "Peeta is supposed to be white, he's white and blond, has blue eyes, and she [Katniss] is supposed to be [have a] darker tone, and dark eyes, and dark hair… I think they did touch on it a little more in the books, but definitely it's still not a major issue."

For many participants, the fact that the discussion about race was not imperative in the narrative of *The Hunger Games* did not represent a major problem. They primarily saw a narrative that dealt with class and inequality. This is an interesting viewpoint for Catwoman, who identifies as Somali: "It was fine because they touched on other important aspects, you don't always need to talk about race", asserted Catwoman. Other white participants agreed: Although Wolfe acknowledged race could have been "an interesting aspect", she also thought "it could have been too much". These interpretations reflect a certain exhaustion regarding politics of identity and the racial tensions that

have materialized in the United States in the last few years. In this sense, the saga acts like an escape narrative, where latent social issues do not need to be directly addressed. While Robin said she wished there was a greater representation of disabilities -"I just loved the representation of a deaf character, and I wished there was more", she said-, others would have welcomed a discussion about race.

> Siena: "I wished there had been more representation like there were in the books, because it would have meant more as a racial theme in the books, whereas they kind of glazed over in the movies. Nobody really talks about it."

As I analyzed in chapter 2, the casting of *The Hunger Games* films includes some black characters to provide the impression of a postracial society. For Catwoman, "the directors and the casting" were trying to show they were not racist "by casting a couple of black people every once in a while". "I think that's just Hollywood", Catwoman added, "It's not really the books' fault". Batman pointed out that in the books all the black characters were the ones that Katniss respected, which she really liked. Batman argued that the saga did not include any "terrible stereotypes", and mentioned the characters of Beete, "who is really smart, she [Katniss] really respects him"; Thresh, whom she respected "for showing Katniss compassion and saving her life", Rue, and Cinna. "There's no background black characters either", asserted Batman, "at least only background." Although Batman rightfully points out Katniss's respect for Thresh, she dismisses Thresh's stereotyped representation as physically dominant, dangerous, aggressive, and emotionality restricted. Thresh is marked as "Other", although the participants did not analyze his portrayal in detail. For Queenie, Katniss's good relationship with the community "can go multiple ways", and

in their opinion the films "make it seem like they are basically helping her, a white woman, go further in life." However, Queenie also acknowledges that race was not a pressing issue in the books or the movies, reason why it is not something they have "really focused on."

Most of the focus groups members shared the opinion that District 11 was portrayed as mostly black, maybe a way of talking about race indirectly (Piggy). "Maybe that's their way of segregating", said Catwoman, "but at the same time, they're not like: 'Don't talk to the black people'". Headband compared the descriptions of districts 11 and 12 in detail, arguing that while District 12 "was very distinctively Appalachian", District 11 was "basically a police state":

> Headband: "They had no freedom whatsoever, they were under surveillance at all times. Having that relation between the enforcers and black citizens, that was exactly right. She [Suzanne Collins] got that very correct. That only hinged on the racial identity of these people. And them making that explicit was really important to the novel as a whole."

3.3 Conclusions

The participant research shows the striking interest that the character of Katniss Everdeen herself sparks in young audiences: the participants I interviewed were more interested in the heroine than in any of her relationships with the male characters of the saga. What some participants did highlight was Katniss's relationship with other women, such as her sister Prim and her ally Rue, which are studied in chapter 5. As scholar Holly Blackford notes, Katniss is more attached to women and younger girls, but must "perform the simulation of lover".[343] Some of the

[343] Blackford, "The Games People Play", 48.

participants also noted her stronger rapport with women, and celebrated her alliance with Effie and Johanna, implying that multiple ways of embodying femininity can coexist together. Regarding the representation of masculinities, *The Hunger Games* films are a clear example of the ongoing juxtaposition of dominant and alternative masculinities in the cinematographic medium. While most participants mocked the dominant masculinity of Gale, comparing him to a "frat boy", they praised the seemingly queer and mixed-race character of Cinna, Katniss's stylist. While they questioned and were critical with most of the characters (including Katniss, the protagonist), their support of Cinna was unequivocal: they "loved him". Cinna avoided all criticism; his alternative masculinity was unchallenged. He stands as a character who holds categorical perfection, a powerful figure that resists the critique from the consuming audience. These interpretations suggest that young audiences welcome representations of new and alternative models of masculinity, including black and queer masculinities. I argue that both queer and gay masculinities should be incorporated in mainstream film aimed to teenage consumption. Characters who are specifically portrayed as openly gay (unlike Cinna) are also needed in order to contribute to the normalization of queer representations in young adult literature and film.

As opposed to Cinna's general appraisal, Peeta's character was met with mixed reviews, showcasing how entrenched ideals of hegemonic masculinity are in popular culture. Some participants welcomed the character of Peeta as the gender reversal of Katniss Everdeen; while others disliked him for being "too nice". Masculinity is shifting, as the statements by director Francis Lawrence regarding the casting for Finnick suggest.[344] However, the pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity still endures. Against this pervasiveness, I posit that the film industry needs

[344] As Lawrence asserted, the casting for Finnick was a challenge because of different ideas of what a "god-like" man is. See Grossman, "Come for the Love Story, Stay for the War".

to keep moving in the direction it has already taken. It needs to keep offering characters like Peeta, who challenge normative conceptions about masculinity and promote equality between and among genders; and Cinna, who imagines alternative and subversive forms of masculinity. If we continue paving this way, hopefully a wider acceptance will follow.

The racial tensions of the saga did not spark significant discussion. As I stated in the textual analysis, young dystopian fiction often fails to address racial tensions or dismisses ideologies of race, creating postracial fantasies that recenter whiteness. *The Hunger Games* is not an exception -- the textual analysis shows the multiple mechanisms (such as casting or the hyper-white caricature of Capitol citizens) by which the films naturalize whiteness. However, the postracial fantasy did not constitute a major problem for the participants of the focus groups. As insightful as they were in some aspects, and even though they identified racial casting patterns, many of the participants insisted that the narrative was not about race – for them, the saga offers an escape dystopian narrative in which these issues do not need to be discussed openly. Many aligned the narrative of *The Hunger Games* to class struggles and inequality, and expressed that, although they would have welcomed a discussion, "you don't always need to talk about race".

Chapter 4. *The Naive Virgin and the Love Triangle*:

The Promises of Everlasting Love Creep into Dystopian Fiction

4.1 Textual Analysis

Introduction

As Mary Pharr and Lisa Clark have stated, the epic story of *The Hunger Games* saga contains multiple and sometimes contradictory narrative genres, i.e. "a war story that is as well an antiwar treatise, a romance that is never unreservedly romantic, a science fiction adventure that also serves as grim social satire, an identity novel that is compellingly ambivalent about gender roles, and - like other great epics- a tragedy depicting the desperate human need for heroes and the terrible cost of heroism."[345] This multiplicity of layers allows the novels and their film adaptations to offer complex commentary on critical issues, and moves the research on *The Hunger Games* in exciting and manifold ways. By examining how gender, racial and sexual normativities are problematized and/or entrenched in *The Hunger Games* saga, my dissertation specifically elucidates how the neoliberal cultural landscape creates postfeminist and postracial products for consumption and how audiences then engage with them. However, the saga fosters reflection on a variety of other critical issues taken up by other scholars, namely neoliberal globalization, governmental and media power, social asymmetry, horror as spectacle, audience manipulation, the impact of reality television and the hegemony of totalitarian governments.[346] For Gretchen Koenig, the cultural context that is Katniss's daily life even matches significant moments in recent real-world military history, such as the draft "and other voyeuristic elements of the Vietnam War" and the national

[345] Pharr and Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games, 9.

[346] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 949.

rhetoric of the Israeli response to the Holocaust.[347] This reading of the saga fits writer Suzanne Collins's approach: for the writer, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is a war story. She expressed during an interview that the trilogy is part of a larger goal, which is to write a war-appropriate story for every age of kids. However, she welcomes different interpretations: "You know, for me it was always first and foremost a war story, but whatever brings you into the story is fine with me."[348]

Although Suzanne Collins's intention was first and foremost the creation of a war story, the novels also incorporate other angles, as the research of many scholars has evidenced.[349] The love story between Katniss and her fellow tribute Peeta is secondary to the main war story. Notwithstanding, it is strung along from beginning to end. In spite of its many attempts to discredit, problematize, or discard normativities about romantic love, desire and sexuality; the *The Hunger Games* saga -novels and later on, films- often reproduces those very normative conceptions. These hegemonic ideas about romantic young love, desire -or lack thereof- and sexuality are reinforced especially through the films, namely through Katniss Everdeen's romantic and sexual innocence and potential purity and her relationships with Peeta Mellark and Gale Hawthorne. This chapter explores the predominance of compulsory heterosexuality in Hollywood mainstream film, and how it reproduces common tropes related to romantic love and sexuality. The chapter is divided

[347] Koenig, "Communal Spectacle", 39.

[348] Grossman, "Writing 'War-Appropriate' Stories for Kids" and "Come for the Love Story, Stay for the War".

[349] Given the multiple layers of analyses the dystopian world of Panem offers, scholars from different fields have used the films or novels as object of analysis. The literary saga has been studied in terms of its relationship to history, politics, and economics, and reviewed according to ethics, aesthetics and identity. Other lines of research include the saga's relationship with surveillance and simulacra and its comparison to other literary traditions. See "The Scholarship on *The Hunger Games* - A Fast-Growing Field", in Chapter 1.

into three different sections. In the first section, *The Naive Virgin*, I demonstrate how sexual discourses that engage with teenage sexuality in film still fall into conservative patterns. I use Katniss' innocence in the saga to exemplify how tales of virginity operate through film and other media. In the second part, *The Love Triangle*, I explore how the love story introduced in the saga simultaneously dismantles and perpetuates romantic ideals regarding young relationships. Finally, in *Everlasting love* I analyze the normalization of Katniss's behavior through her lifelong commitment to her partner Peeta.

The Naive Virgin: Katniss's Innocence and Young Female Sexuality

Despite superficial assumptions about permissiveness and open-mindedness in our current socio cultural context, virginity is still an important social trope today. While a trend of hypersexualization pervades our media with highly sexualized images of women and men, another movement leans toward the celebration of innocence and lack of sexual experience as virtue, as the analysis of Katniss' innocence demonstrates. Virginity and sexual chastity may seem old-fashion topics today, yet they still enjoy currency within popular culture and the various cinemas that serve it.[350] As professor of medieval English literature Anke Bernau asserts, some would argue that the sexual revolution of the 1960s dismantled the notion of virginity and its social and cultural relevance. However, the idea and ideals regarding virginity -especially female virginity- still fascinate: "Why otherwise are plastic surgeons offering women "rehymenisation" or "vaginal rejuvenation" procedures?" she asks. "Then there are the celebrities who make virginity a central

[350] McDonald, *Virgin Territory*, 1.

aspect of their brand. And this week[351] a British schoolgirl lost her high court challenge to be allowed to wear the ring that signaled her membership of the pro-chastity organization, the Silver Ring Thing, to school."[352]

The treatment of young sexuality in *The Hunger Games* follows conservative patterns, hence it locates the saga within the cultural trend that celebrates virginity and innocence. Neither the novels nor the films explicitly reference Katniss's sexual agency, and very little talk about sex is included in the saga overall. This approach echoes what professor of Rhetoric and Public Culture Casey R. Kelly calls "abstinence cinema", a conglomerate of films that transform virginity into a progressive and feminist ideal, and represent the historical convergence of conservative sexual ideologies and contemporary postfeminist culture through the discourse of choice. I posit that this transformation of virginity into a feminist and empowering ideal is a distortion of feminism, and in this section I elucidate the mechanisms by which this distortion of feminist values occurs. Promoted through neoliberal cultural products that locate sexual innocence as a virtue, the trend that equates sexual naivety with virtue facilitates young women's adhesion to neoconservative values, and tries to prevent them from engaging with their sexual agency. I agree with Kelly when he asserts that films that celebrate conservative sexual ideologies provide a disempowering model of young femininity, since they reduce the individual morality of adolescents to whether or not they have sex before marriage. These films, he continues, sell audience members the new traditionalism, "inviting them to believe that chastity and sexual repression are the newest form of personal empowerment."[353]

[351] Bernau refers to the week of July 17, 2017.

[352] Bernau, "Eternally Virginal".

[353] Kelly, *Abstinence Cinema*, 7, 14, 23.

The *Twilight* franchise, based on the novels written by Stephenie Meyer and a best-selling literary phenomenon before *The Hunger Games*, is exemplary of this new attitude toward sex displayed in film and other media in popular culture. Since our Western culture fears that the young will be sexually corrupted, desire has been recently understood and reinterpreted as assaultive. As professor of English and American Studies Carol Siegel explains, this trend has extensively pervaded popular media, changing story lines so that the pursuit of sexual pleasure outside marriage is often portrayed as "indicative of emotional illness or predictive of physical illness".[354] The romantic hero and vampire Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* franchise is the ultimate embodiment of "abstinence cinema"; as he prides himself on his strict sexual abstinence until marriage, distancing himself from the "bad" promiscuous vampires. His choice exemplifies the long-held association between virginity and self-discipline. In this context, virginity turns into the ultimate expression of self-control and assertion of the will, a commonsense choice in societies that promote aspirational striving.[355]

The Hunger Games, often studied in opposition to the *Twilight* franchise, shares with the vampires' fantasy saga several elements, namely a love triangle, "lethal teens and heroines accustomed to the sight of human blood".[356] Katniss has enjoyed greater appreciation from feminist readers and writers, who oftentimes consider her a modern feminist heroine. Bella, on the other hand, has been derided as the traditionally-feminine antithesis to Katniss Everdeen.[357] Both sagas present their heroines as virginal, inexperienced girls and situate chastity -as abstinence

[354] Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema*, 10, 34.

[355] See Bernau, "Eternally Virginal".

[356] Bowles, "'Hunger Games' and 'Twilight' stoke passions among fans".

[357] Firestone, "Apples to Oranges", 209.

before forming a long-term relationship and monogamy thereafter- as a virtue.[358] Although in *The Hunger Games* this abstinence is not "glorified"[359] like in *Twilight*, there is still no sexual activity that involves the main heroine, no references to the protagonist's sexual agency, and very little talk regarding premarital or extra-marital sex.[360] In fact, scholars and film critics have positioned Katniss along the tradition of the virginal goddess Artemis, "protectress of the young and huntress with a silver bow and arrows".[361]

Although *The Hunger Games* films do not glorify the idea of abstinence, they use a handful of resources to idealize sexual innocence and purity, and to represent Katniss as an inexperienced virginal hero. Virginity -or the lack thereof- is often held as a private, sometimes secret aspect of a person's history, hence *The Hunger Games* films need to render visible what has not been disclosed; they need to offer visible signs for the invisible state of Katniss's virginity. In order to show what cannot be seen, a common technique in the film industry has been to displace virginity from overt dialogue onto the bodies of the actors or the mise-en-scène, or both.[362] In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss's virginity and innocence is rendered visible to audiences through a multiplicity of strategies. First, she is characterized by her romantic and sexual innocence and potential purity. She is an innocent and virtuous *white* virgin, like most virgins in contemporary cinema. Innocence

[358] Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema*, 10.

[359] Seltzer, "Hunger Pangs", 39. See also Heartfield, "Hardly Revolutionary".

[360] Heartfield, "Hardly Revolutionary".

[361] See Pollitt, "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism" and Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen".

[362] See McDonald, Virgin *Territory*, 2-3. McDonald's edited collection of essays *Virgin Territory* illustrates how film attempts to represent externally the internal state of virginity, and examines how it can be made visible to audiences. As the editor of the collection explains, *Virgin Territory* questions how virginity can be performed, externalized, and rendered visible across a range of periods, genres, and performances.

has been historically linked to the qualities of whiteness and obliviousness,[363] an ongoing cultural association that reaffirms the reading of Katniss as the innocent virgin.[364] Second, she is presented as being uncomfortable with romance and uninterested in physical intimacy with any of the boys -first her friend Gale and later her opponent Peeta- who manifest a clear interest in her. And third, she is clearly uncomfortable with expressions of sexuality overall. During the Quarter Quell Games, for instance, she admits her discomfort with Finnick's closeness, "especially since he's got so much bare skin exposed."[365]

Her "distaste for the role of desirable woman"[366] is also consistently shown through the films and novels, crystallizing once again her lack of sexual experience. For example, let's consider her thoughts before she meets Cinna, her stylist: "My stylist will dictate my look for the opening ceremonies tonight anyway. I just hope I get one who doesn't think nudity is the last word in fashion".[367] The heroine is unaware of how to please and amuse, and how to present herself as desirable. She confesses this concern to Cinna, as she says: "I don't know how to make people like me".[368] Sexual desirability can increase her chances of survival, but her naivety makes her unaware of this fact. We find multiple examples of Katniss's naivety through the saga. In the first movie, for instance, she gets infuriated when Peeta professes his love for her in a televised interview

[363] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 241.

[364] Kelly, *Abstinence Cinema*, 130. See also Blank's discussion of gender, sexuality and race in the concept of virginity. *Virgin*, 9-11.

[365] Hansen. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 163.

[366] Hansen. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

[367] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 55.

[368] *The Hunger Games*.

before the Games. Her mentor, Haymitch, explains how love can be exploited to her benefit, how it can be marketable, and eventually save her life.

> Haymitch: "He made you a favor"
>
> Katniss: "He made me look weak"
>
> Haymitch: "He made you look desirable, which in your case, can't hurt, sweetheart".[369]

Katniss's opponent and later romantic partner Peeta notices, and praises, Katniss's innocence as well: "It's like when you wouldn't look at me naked in the arena even though I was half dead. You're so...pure".[370] Peeta's expression of surprise and awe elevate her innocence to a noble status that resembles a goddess' trait.[371] It further entrenches the myth of the naive virgin in film, perpetuating the religious notion that women's virginity is linked to their virtue. Peeta's statement perpetuates the ongoing association of virginity with qualities such as purity, innocence, and naturalness; a centuries-old pairing that still pervades our media and popular culture today.[372] As Bernau notes, these ideals associated with virginity in Western culture in the past eight hundred years remain "surprisingly constant". For the author, this ongoing trend does not negate shifts in meaning regarding the ideal of virginity, and it does not mean that genres or contexts don't change, or that audiences did not interpret virgin narratives differently. It means, however, that a range of

[369] *The Hunger Games*.

[370] Collins, *Catching Fire*, 216.

[371] Hansen. "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 163.

[372] Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, xiii. See also McDonald, *Virgin Territory*, 2.

virginities has always been present in writing at any given moment. While these are not static, neither do they change so radically "as to become unrecognizable or seem new."[373]

In *The Hunger Games*, ideals of virginity as linked to purity and innocence are not explicit, but located in the subtext: Peeta's suggestive statement helps to invoke them. Through the aforementioned techniques, Katniss's body is constructed as pure and virginal and naivety and innocence are idealized, constructed as the right choice, or deemed heroic. The saga features a strong female protagonist who is sexually incompetent, naive or uninterested in sex. This representation perpetuates the idea that sexual naivety (and, by extension, lack of sexual agency) is a virtue in young women, and that the moral choice is not to have (or even think) about sex. Just like a postracial standpoint recenters whiteness without calling attention to it, a dismissal of female sexuality surreptitiously centers virginity as virtue. As a result, young women are encouraged to be virginal and innocent, and are contrived to remain oblivious to, or uninterested in, the agency of their own bodies.

The tales of virginity told through film and other media manifest the ideological struggles that are active in society at a particular moment in time.[374] Following American philosopher Kelly Oliver's interpretation, for instance, Katniss's sexual innocence and sweetness towards her sister Prim represent a certain nostalgia for natural innocence.[375] The blend of sexual power and innocence of young heroines, continues Oliver, makes them fascinating. The author rightfully notices that young heroines are not sex objects in the way their adult women counterparts are, but they are appealing, strong, and carry weapons. "There is still something open-ended about their

[373] See Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History*, 72.

[374] Kelly, *Abstinence Cinema*, 5.

[375] Oliver, "Hunting Girls".

power and their innocence as they make their way into womanhood", Oliver asserts. "There is a still a question of whether or not they will follow the traditional path circumscribed for women, namely marriage and family. And this in-between space is exciting, even titillating, a space full of promise. It is also a dangerous space given that what happens here determines whether or not girls will break free of patriarchal stereotypes and restrictions and go their own ways."[376] In Katniss Everdeen's case, this space full of promise capitulates as the heroine follows the traditional path for women: lifelong romantic partnership and family.

In a different article, "The Window and the Door", Andrea Sabbadini explores some of the transformations that the discourse about virginity has experienced in the last several decades. On the one hand, he asserts that virginity has lost much of that religious high ground of sanctity, purity, and innocence. This is the result of the gradual dissolution of Victorian morality, the rise of psychoanalysis, and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. On the other hand, however, Sabbadini also notes how virginity has attracted the attention of new fundamentalist groups, such as the American pro-chastity organization Silver Ring Thing. These groups maintain that their abstinent adherents enjoy a healthier mental life, as well as social and spiritual advantages. Following Sabbadini's analysis, virginity might be understood in a myriad of ways: as a form of self-discipline, as an expression of individual freedom, as the evidence of sexual repression, or even as a sign of neurotic psychopathology: "In our postfeminist era, a girl may well feel that she does own her body, but that still leaves her with the problem of whether that means renouncing her sexual innocence or holding on to it, a personal dilemma that, in the past, tended to be resolved for the individual within the social community to which he or she belonged and who shared similar

[376] Oliver, "Hunting Girls".

moral values", he asserts. [377] Katniss indirectly resolves this dilemma by holding on to her sexual innocence.

In spite of Katniss's representation as a naive young woman, *The Hunger Games* trilogy appears as one of the most frequently challenged young adult books in the American Library Association's list for being "sexually explicit". Other reasons to challenge the novels include their supposed unsuitability to age group and the violence contained in the plot.[378] Although it is true that the series is violent (the plot is centered on children killing other children), the claim that *The Hunger Games* is sexually explicit is a gendered reading that understands female violence as sexual. Here, the female protagonist metaphorically penetrates (with arrows), which constitutes a subversion of traditional tropes involving male violence. This figurative and gendered reading does not match, however, the factual absence of the discourse of sex in *The Hunger Games*. In spite of their inclusion in the ALA's "Frequently Challenged Books" list, the *Twilight* and -to a lesser extent- *The Hunger Games* franchises ultimately reaffirm the conservative message that nice girls do not feel sexual arousal, "unless they are in love with their one true mate, whom they will soon marry."[379] This message is entrenched in a culture with a long history of punishing girls who lose virginity under the "wrong" circumstances and praising those who retain in until the "right" person arrives.[380] I explore the representation of "the one" in the third section of this chapter, entitled "Everlasting love".

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[377] Sabbadini, "The Window and the Door", 224-225.

[378] Pharr and Clark, *Of Bread, Blood and* The Hunger Games, 11. See also ALA's "Frequently Challenged Young Adult Books" list, http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/YAbooks.

[379] Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema*, 56.

[380] Blank, *Virgin*, 22.

Using *The Hunger Games* as a representative example, my analysis in this section has shown how discourses that engage with teenage sexuality in film still fall into conservative patterns. Many scholars share a similar view. For Siegel, the industry offers a "near hysterical view of youthful sexuality" in most films made about white people for predominantly white (or unmarked) audiences.[381] Film scholar Timothy Shary agrees, highlighting that teenage sex in American cinema tends to be either unenlightened or somber. For Shary, films have not been irresponsible in showing young people that sometimes negative consequences arise from the loss of virginity, but he believes films could be more progressive if they suggested to young people the joys and obligations of sexual experience as well. As he poses, despite what seemed to be cautious maturation in the sexual initiation of teens in films from the late 1990s, the majority of youth sex in American cinema remains "woefully afflicted" well into the twenty-first century:

> In many cases, teenage sex is confusing and often dangerous for those who do it, leading to death in *The Virgin Suicides* (2000), social mayhem in *Cherry Falls* (2000), drug abuse in *Thirteen* (2003), religious trauma in *Saved!* (2004), and, most consistently, family disintegration in all of these films as well as in *The Door in the Floor* (2004) and *The Ballad of Jack and Rose* (2005). Nonetheless, the film industry clearly maintains its interest in the adolescent deflowering ritual, producing no fewer than a dozen films about teens losing their virginity since 2000, four of which actually had the word virgin in their title, including *Virgin* (2003), *As Virgins Fall* (2003), and *Virgin Territory* (2007)."[382]

These films, as well as more recent titles such as *Taken* (2008) and *The Possession* (2012), contribute to promoting a neoconservative ideology that seeks to reestablish abstinence until

[381] Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema*, 38.

[382] Shary, "Virgin Springs", 65-67.

marriage as a social and political imperative. Although *The Hunger Games* films do not feature Katniss's "adolescent deflowering ritual" as part of her coming of age experiences, they present her as naive, inexperienced and uninterested in sex throughout the entire saga, a representation that fits the current neoconservative pushback against the liberalization of sexual attitudes. Kelly notes in *Abstinence cinema* that filmmakers have recently been preoccupied with both the dangers of sex out of wedlock and the virtues of virginity in a sex-saturated culture. Films that elevate virginity as a postfeminist choice or show the disastrous consequences of teenage sexual experiences establish an ideological outpost for sexual conservatism within the terrain of popular culture. While sex remains prominent in Hollywood film and television, a strong challenge to the liberalization of sexual attitudes -especially for women- has also been observable in the last few decades.[383] This trend is also noticeable outside the Hollywood industry. Against the hypersexualization of women in different media, some cultural products promote neoconservative values linked to innocence and purity. Our films and other media products therefore adopt one of these two positions: either they sexualize (or hypersexualize) women, or they locate them as innocent, virginal creatures. Neither of these poles offers a satisfactory view of female sensuality and sexuality, since they continue to locate women in polar opposites that have oppressed women for centuries. These two opposite poles echo biblical notions of the good versus the bad woman: the Virgin Mary *versus* Eve.

Katniss is closer to the ideal of the Virgin Mary. Her naivety does not only match the push-back against the liberalization of sexual attitudes, but also fits the conventions of the genre, as science fiction is oftentimes synonymous with lack of eroticism. In her article "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film," Vivian Sobchack explores the subject of virginity

[383] Kelly, *Abstinence Cinema,* 5-6.

in science fiction, pointing out that its heroes are fairly often represented as virginal. In a way, virginity seems to be an unspoken ideal for science-fiction heroes, who are often represented as chaste or simply not that interested in sex, like it is the case of Katniss Everdeen.[384] Libido and sexual activity are a major absence in the genre, which denies human sexuality a traditional narrative representation and expression. While there are numerous relationships and encounters that take place across the genre, they tend to be chaste and safe in their dramatization: they are "more obligatory than steamy".[385] These encounters are also peripheral to narrative concerns. The nature and function of sexuality are either muted or transformed. In words of Sobchack, "science fiction films are full of sexually empty relations and empty of sexually full ones."[386] The de-emphasis on human female sexuality in the science fiction film, she adds, is not limited to a particular period. It is particular to the genre, and still present in more recent films which feature central and narratively active female characters. For Sobchack, women are sexually defuse and made safe and unthreatening by various strategies involving "costume, occupation, social position, and attitude - or they are sexually confused with their male counterparts and narratively substituted for them."[387]

Whether Katniss's purity responds to genre conventions or a rise of conservative sexual ideologies in popular culture, it serves to disallow the heroine's sexual agency. The *Hunger Games*, like *Twilight*, domesticate illicit sexuality by making what was old new again.[388] Katniss's inexperience is presented as a progressive and feminist ideal: the *Mockingjay*, busy in her fight

[384] Sjö, "Saviours and Sexuality", 295-297.

[385] Sobchack, "The Virginity of Astronauts", 41- 42.

[386] Ibid, 43.

[387] Ibid, 45.

[388] Kelly, *Abstinence Cinema,* 25.

against the Capitol, does not have time to engage in sexual discourse or activities. Part of her strength is located within her naivety: her personal empowerment comes, precisely, from her chastity. She violently reacts when Peeta introduces a romance narrative as part of their strategy in the Games, she refuses to discuss her romantic feelings with her friend Gale, and she rejects the reduction of her life to a romantic scenario. Katniss is also visibly uncomfortable with expressions of sexuality, as her initial interactions with tributes Finnick O'Dair and Johanna Mason in *Catching Fire*, the second film of the series, show. It is important to note, however, that Katniss's characterization does not discredit or ridicule other options. Johanna Mason, a female tribute from District 7 who fully embraces her sexuality, strongly contrasts with Katniss's representation. Cynical and outspoken, Johanna shows a rebellious attitude and a clear ownership of her body, and does not hesitate to strip off her costume in the elevator in the company of Katniss, Peeta and Haymitch.[389] While Peeta and Haymitch are entertained by Johanna's subversive gesture, Katniss is clearly displeased. Nevertheless, Katniss and Johanna eventually become allies, learning to respect and support each other in spite of their differences. Johanna also helps the forces of the revolution to save Katniss from the Quarter Quell.

Although Katniss and Johanna's alliance and mutual respect suggests a potential coexistence of multiple attitudes regarding young sexuality - a myriad of options that Katniss and Johanna represent-, the saga chooses for the female protagonist the innocence and naiveté of Katniss, and not the sexual agency of Johanna. This is a pervasive trend in Hollywood and television, where female friends are allowed to have sexual agency, but only because they are relegated to secondary characters. These characters add the "spice" the female protagonist does not have, and they introduce an element of comedy. Women who possess sexual agency are often

[389] *Catching fire.*

respected by other characters and the female protagonist herself, but they are not at the center of the narrative. Actress Judy Green, for instance, has played the archetype of the sexually-driven female friend in romantic comedies such as *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher, 2008), and *13 Going on 30* (Gary Winick, 2004). This trend supports conservative ways of dealing with youth sexuality and entrenches the postfeminist notion of the "right choice", equating (sexual) innocence with virtue.

The character of Johanna Mason also fits a second common trope in the film industry, one that catalogues sexual agency as erratic behavior. Hollywood often depicts women who are in charge of their bodies as mentally unstable, or justifies their choices as a result of a traumatic experience. Amy, from the comedy *Trainwreck* (Judd Apatow, 2015), is a recent representative example of the surreptitious operation of these normativities. Amy, the protagonist of the film, is sexually involved with multiple partners because her father taught her not to believe in monogamy and true love. Besides, Amy accompanies this sexual activity with heavy drinking and erratic behavior, which she abandons after finding true (heterosexual) love. The film is a refreshing update on outdated rom-com clichés, yet it serves to situate multiple partnership as problematic and erratic. Johanna's defiant attitude and ownership of her body are also justified as the result of trauma: she is not ruthless and subversive because she decides to be, but only because the Capitol has murdered all of her loved ones; Johanna is rebellious only because she has nothing to lose.

Katniss's representation as a virginal heroine and Johanna's depiction as a reckless fighter continue to locate women in the two polar opposites (Mary, Eve) that have oppressed women for centuries. They entrench tropes about innocence as virtue and sexual agency as erratic, and do not provide satisfactory accounts of female sensuality and sexuality. Young women do not need neoconservative depictions of sexuality that encourage them to suppress their sexual agency. The

opposite is true -- in order to foster healthy attitudes regarding sex, representations that feature female protagonists who engage with their own sensuality and sexuality in a multiplicity of ways are necessary. The film industry neither needs to sexualize female heroines nor to remove all traces of sensuality from them. It needs to give its female heroines sexual agency, and to put them in charge of their own bodies. The first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was printed in 1971. We still struggle to take ownership of our bodies, in cultural products and elsewhere.

The Love Triangle: An Attempt to Dismantle the Myth of Romance

As I state in the introduction to this chapter, the *Hunger Games* saga offers complex commentary in critical political and cultural issues and seems to be less preoccupied with the characters' relationships. As many film critics point out, the romantic plot is a more "diffuse" interest.[390] Film critic Manohla Dargis explains that it did not occur to her to think very much about who Katniss's boyfriend should be, since "she seemed to have more important things to worry about."[391] Katha Pollitt agrees; for Pollitt, Katniss is so focused on the Games and romantically uninterested in Peeta that she does not realize he is in love with her. "When she's not convinced he's trying to kill her, she believes he's pretending to be smitten with her to gain sympathy (and help) from the invisible TV audience."[392] Many critics point out the non-centrality of the romantic plot - however, as Heartfield notes, "it is strung along from beginning to end".[393] Literary works have explored and celebrated the powers of love for centuries. *The Hunger Games*

[390] Menéndez Menéndez and Fernández Morales," (Re) definición De Los Roles De Género En La Cultura Popular", 200.

[391] Scott and Dargis, "A Radical Female Hero from Dystopia"

[392] Pollitt, "The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism"

[393] Heartfield, "Hardly Revolutionary".

is no exception, and romance "a perennial subject of literature,"[394] is unequivocally woven into the war story. I agree with Heartfield when she argues that there is nothing wrong with the romantic plot, but there is nothing challenging about it either. A sharp tweet published on September 11, 2017 illustrates Heartfield's point:

> "Hunger Games Synopsis
>
> Katniss: I'm in over my head, the govt wants me dead, I'm scared
>
> Both Male Leads: Ok but do you LIKE like me"[395]

Katniss herself refuses to circumscribe her life to a romantic scenario, and is uncomfortable when others try to do so. She manifests this discomfort multiple times throughout the novels, as these excerpts exemplify: "I really can't think about kissing when I've got a rebellion to incite", she asserts in the second novel.[396] "The very notion that I'm devoting any thought to who I want presented as my lover, given our current circumstances, is demeaning", she says later in the third volume.[397] To Gale's suggestion that she will pick whoever she thinks she can't survive without, she responds that "at the moment, the choice would be simple. I can survive just fine without either of them".[398] Katniss's powerful claims speak to her independent spirit, to her rejection of heteronormative expectations for young women and her desire of being a strong, self-sufficient individual without the need of completing her life with a romantic partner. Nonetheless, heteronormativity imposes itself over Katniss's stated desires.

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[394] Weisser, Women and Romance, 265. See also Gornick, "The End of the Novel of Love", 293.

[395] Tweet by feminist user "regal trash bitch".

[396] Collins. *Catching Fire*, 125-126.

[397] Collins. *Mockingjay*, 40.

[398] Collins. *Mockingjay*, 329-330.

Messerschmidt defines heteronormativity as "the legal, cultural, organizational, and interpersonal practices that derive from and reinforce taken-for-granted assumptions that there are two and only two naturally opposite and complementary sexes (male and female), that gender is a natural manifestation of sex (masculinity and femininity), and that it is natural for the two opposite and complementary sexes to be sexually attracted to each other (heterosexuality)".[399] According to these assumptions, men's and women's bodies are naturally compatible and "made for each other", and heterosexuality is seen as a taken-for-granted and natural phenomenon. This natural, unproblematic phenomenon is difficult to challenge in mainstream media, as *The Hunger Games* exemplifies. Heteronormativity is reinforced throughout the saga in subtle ways. A clear example is found in the cave scene of the first film, where Katniss is looking after Peeta following an injury. Hoping to obtain medicine in exchange for a televised romantic moment, Katniss kisses Peeta. Her mentor Haymitch only sends soup, along with a note that questions the chastity of the kiss: "You call that a kiss?" Despite the multiple attempts of the films to discard idealized conceptions of romantic love through Katniss's explicit statements, the saga still drags Katniss into a love triangle that resolves in a long-term relationship with one of the male characters involved. This resolution exemplifies the difficulties mainstream film has with presenting a narrative for young audiences that challenges heteronormativity and the myths associated with romance. It is necessary to insist, however, on the non-centrality of the romance in the novels and the films. *The Hunger Games* offers a complex and multi-layered narrative; the romance is only one of those layers. As Seltzer

[399] In a heteronormative setting, gender hegemony and sexual hegemony intersect so that both masculinity and heterosexuality are deemed superior and femininity and homosexuality (and alternative sexualities) are judged to be inferior. See Messerschmidt, *Gender, Heterosexuality, and Youth Violence*, 29. See also Messerschmidt, *Masculinities in the Making*, 52-54.

posits, although the saga "still caters to the young female gaze", it is a mainstream adventure for all audiences, and cannot be simply dismissed as a "chick flick" or a "cheesy aberration".[400]

The "young female gaze" is invited to accompany Katniss through the creation and resolution of a love triangle (figure 1). The ambiguity about Katniss's feelings regarding her two contenders -her friend Gale and her fellow tribute Peeta- is maintained through the entire saga, as this thought exemplifies: "There had been times when I didn't honestly know how I felt about him. I still don't, really".[401] Katniss and Gale's strong rapport is undeniable, but this connection is not necessarily romantic. Yet, at times Katniss seems inclined to choose a life with her lifelong best friend: "I have chosen Gale and the rebellion, and a future with Peeta is the Capitol's design, not mine"[402], "Gale is mine. I am his. Anything else is unthinkable"[403]. The familiar but also challenging relationship that Gale and Katniss maintained is developed in greater depth in the novels than the films. In the novels, their disagreements are constant, as Gale exemplifies: "Fine. We know how to disagree [...]. We always have. Maybe it's good".[404] Gale also expects Katniss to navigate her feelings and choose one contender over the other, accusing her of showing love for him only when he is in pain. In the second film, for example, Katniss needs to explain to Gale that the interactions with her opponent Peeta were merely a strategy to survive the games. According to her, it was only "an act".[405] However, she refuses to romantically engage with him:

Gale: "Do you love me?"

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[400] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Gender Role Revolution"

[401] Collins. *Catching Fire*, 51.

[402] Ibid, 121.

[403] Ibid, 117.

[404] Ibid, 222.

[405] Katniss, in the film *Catching Fire*: "Are you gonna do this again? Gale, it was an act".

Katniss: "Gale, you know how I feel about you. But I can't think about anyone that way right now."[406]

Regarding Peeta, Katniss repeatedly informs the readers that she cannot tell if her feelings for him are real or simulated: whether she acts out of anger or decency, for survival, or because she really cares.[407] Her initial indifference and animosity toward Peeta is replaced by attachment by the end of the first novel. The false romance that they are forced to perform starts to have a halo of truth for both of the "star-crossed" lovers, especially for Peeta, as Katniss notices in the second novel of the series: "Our romance became a key strategy for our survival in the arena. Only it wasn't just a strategy for Peeta. I'm not sure what it was for me. But I know now it was nothing but painful for Gale".[408] During the second film, she shows signs of jealousy when Johanna Mason, the female tribute from District Seven, openly flirts with Peeta. During the third and fourth films these feelings are normalized through a conventional romantic relationship, which is explored in the following section.

The novels repeatedly make clear that both Gale and Peeta are important to the heroine: she puts Peeta's life before her own and she is shown as visibly upset when any of them is in danger or in pain, but the nature of these feelings is not revealed to the spectators until the very end of the saga, when Katniss chooses Peeta over Gale. This is a rushed resolution that Broad understands as passive, since "there is no moment of decision, no expression of desire, and no evidence of Katniss exhibiting agency or control over her life."[409] While it is true that there is

[406] *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*.

[407] Day, "Simulacra, Sacrifice and Survival", 173.

[408] Collins. *Catching fire*, 9.

[409] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 124.

neither expression of desire nor a sufficient exhibition of agency, Katniss specifies in the novels that she chooses Peeta over Gale because Peeta's tenderness complements her fierce personality. The ambiguity built up through the three literary volumes responds to two main purposes: first, to the fact that Katniss Everdeen is presented as an innocent teenager who is experiencing romantic love for the first time; and second, to the necessity of keeping the spectators hooked until the end of the story. The love triangle has excellently worked to market and publicize the story, sparking great discussion online: Katniss's fans soon rushed to position themselves in either of two poles: "Team Peeta" or "Team Gale".

As Broad notes, for all its attention to Katniss's rebellion, *The Hunger Games* trilogy is, significantly, a love story. It traces Katniss's "fluctuating desires for two boys who fight alongside her". The love triangle plays a significant role not only in illustrating Katniss's coming of age and awakening to romantic love for the first time, but also in fueling the narrative progression toward a better world. As Broad asserts, each boy represents a different path out of dystopia, making the outcome of the romantic choice nothing less than what the future society will be: Gale wants to face the totalitarian regime of the Capitol and supports the revolution; Peeta hopes to have a quiet life back home with a family. I agree with Broad in her assertion that the courtship narrative therefore says a great deal about Katniss's revolutionary potential and, in turn, "raises significant questions about her revered status as a feminist icon for readers of all ages."[410] The dystopian narrative of *The Hunger Games* offers complex commentary about governmental and media power, social movements, and neoliberal globalization, among other critical issues, yet it is compelled to introduce a love triangle that perpetuates tropes about romantic young love. The protagonist is thrown into a romance that she does not desire, and in spite of her attempts to escape

[410] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 117-18.

the courtship narrative she sees herself involved in it from beginning to end. The participant research shows that young audiences resist and problematize this discourse, and yearn for new stories that do not perpetuate myths about romantic heterosexual love. Nevertheless, the textual analysis demonstrates that mainstream neoliberal media struggle to discard these tropes and to present narratives for young audiences that challenge heteronormativity and the myths associated with romance.

Everlasting Love: A Safe Return to the Status Quo

Katniss's relationships with the two male characters are normalized through her lifelong relationship with Peeta. After being involved in a love triangle throughout the three novels, Katniss is capable of discerning her feelings and choosing one over the other: the heroine chooses Peeta. This normalization is a well-established pattern in young adult literature, which tends to valorize monogamy over multiple sexual partners. This insistence on monogamy reinforces social constraints on sexual freedom.[411] The story of the *star-crossed lovers* of the Hunger Games starts as a made-up narrative that will eventually save their lives and start a revolution.[412] Two major achievements that disrupt the myth of romance must be recognized: the gender politics of Katniss and Peeta, and the questioning of the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, I argue that these accomplishments are not enough to disrupt the mythic narrative of living happily ever after with the one, given that the saga perpetuates romantic ideals, such as the myth of finding a partner that "completes you," and the myth that a romantic long-term commitment (together with motherhood,

[411] Younger, "Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin", 50.

[412] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

which will be explored in the following chapter) is the ultimate path to happiness and fulfillment for women.

Peeta's centrality to the story and eventually, his precedence over the more traditionally masculine Gale, are crucial factors in the gender reversal that takes place in *The Hunger Games*.[413] Katniss is Peeta's protector; Peeta is Katniss's supporter.[414] The emotional bond that links Peeta and Katniss is richer and better developed in the novels, where they experience a greater intimacy and communicate and connect with each more often and more effectively. The films, however, also try to elucidate the complexity of their rapport. Peeta shows his compassion early in the saga, when he risks punishment in order to give a starving girl -Katniss- bread from his family's bakery. For Tina L. Hanlon, this is the encounter that ignited Peeta's love for Katniss, and even reads like a scene from Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo."[415] Peeta reassures Katniss when she has nightmares, and encourages her to talk about her feelings and to share herself with others. Peeta maintains his kindness through the saga until the very end, when he brings primroses to plant in Katniss sister's memory by Katniss's house.[416] The ending of *The Hunger Games* reinforces the idea that romance facilitates healing, since Peeta's love for Katniss is deemed to be a great help to heal Katniss's literal and figurative wounds after the atrocities she has witnessed and committed in the Games. His love leads Katniss to maturity and generosity, affirming her worth and value as an individual.[417]

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[413] Seltzer, "The Hunger Games' Role Revolution"

[414] See Chapter 3 for a detailed analysis of Peeta's representation.

[415] Hanlon, "Coal Dust and Ballads", 60.

[416] Hanlon, "Coal Dust and Ballads", 64.

[417] Roach, *Happily Ever after,* 25.

Both Katniss and Peeta worry for each other's safety, given their deep-rooted instinct for survival. Katniss puts Peeta's life before her own,[418] helps him and saves him in multiple occasions. During the training period for the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss encourages him to show his strength in order to gain the respect of the other contestants, and treats his wounds when he is hurt in the arena. When she first hears about the revolution in Panem, all she worries about is that the revolutionaries left Peeta behind. She also lets others know -especially her mentor Haymitch- that he should be saved because of his goodness.[419] Although Katniss and Peeta's strong rapport is clear in the novels and films, its romantic angle is not revealed until the very end of the saga. Up to that point, they show affection for each other, but their relationship is not decisively romantic. The love story created around them during the Games is fraught, meant to pander viewers and sponsors as a means of survival. As Sharon D. King notes, their contrived romance creates the ultimate adolescent confusion: "Katniss cannot sort out her own feelings, cannot parse whether she is truly in love or just playacting."[420] Tribute Finnick Odair helps Katniss navigate her feelings, asserting that her concern for Peeta when his heart stopped speaks of the love she is experiencing.[421]

The resolution of the saga in a romantic happy ending fits Hollywood's traditional pattern. The trend in the industry is to fulfill the "perceived need" for this type of resolution, even if the ending is severely limiting to the female characters involved.[422] As we have previously seen, the

[418] Katniss: "Peeta lives. Not me. Promise me", in *Catching Fire*.

[419] Holmes, "What Really Makes Katniss Stand Out?"

[420] King, "(Im) Mutable Natures", 115.

[421] In the film *Catching Fire*, Katniss is shown as genuinely fearing for Peeta's life. Tribute Finnick Odair saves Peeta's life with CPR. "You love him", Finnick says. See *Mockingjay, Part I.*

[422] Natharius, "Gender Equity Stereotypes or Prescriptions?"

romantic angle introduced in *The Hunger Games* is not problematic *per se*, but it does very little to challenge romanticized attitudes about intimate relationships. These assumptions are held by many as a result, in part, of a wide circulation of romantic myths in the media.[423] The everlasting love story of Katniss and Peeta does not challenge, but rather reinforces what mass media researcher Mary-Lou Galician identifies as her myth number 10: that "the right mate 'completes you', filling your needs and making your dreams come true."[424] According to this myth, the soulmate is worthy of our love, and this love is what gives value and depth to life.[425] In spite of the gender role reversal presented by the two main characters, a close reading of the ending of the saga reveals a normative message, "one that tells girls the importance of growing up to find satisfaction in heterosexual love and the nuclear family."[426]

Different media products have endlessly entrenched the myth of everlasting love with "the one", making sure society continues to abide by the belief that without a romantic partner a woman is incomplete. Furthermore, the woman's counterpart is usually heterosexual, which perpetuates the idea that to be fulfilled in life, "one must be involved in an opposite-sexed romantic relationship."[427] In her book *Happily ever after* professor of cultural studies and gender studies Catherine M. Roach explains how this heteronormative narrative has been used throughout history to determine how men and women should relate to each other.

> "The romance narrative is a central storyline of human culture. Pushing the thesis further: The story of romance is the guiding text offered by contemporary American

[423] Werder, "Brewing Romance", 50.

[424] Galician, *Critical thinking,* 4.

[425] Roach, *Happily Ever after,* 4.

[426] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 117-18.

[427] McClanahan, "Must Marry TV", 303.

> culture and the culture of the modern West on the subject of how women and men (should) relate. Find your one true love— Your One and Only— and live happily ever after. To the ancient and perennial question of how to define and live the good life, how to achieve happiness and fulfillment, American pop culture's resounding answer is through the narrative of romance, sex, and love."[428]

As Roach highlights, within our cultural context the romance story is not only a narrative, but becomes an imperative. Given their endless insistence on the romance story, the happy (heterosexual) couple is made into a near mandatory norm by the media and popular culture. The myth is taught and replayed in a multiplicity of cultural sites, such as Disney princess movies, the wedding industry, fairytales, Hollywood movies, pop music lyrics, advertising, the diamond jewelry industry, and more.[429] In Katniss's case, compulsory heterosexuality "is literally thrust upon her as a means of survival".[430] This sort of resolution reinforces heteronormative ideals, according to which it is natural for the two opposite and complementary sexes to be sexually attracted to each other. Katniss is another example of an epic heroine defaulting to a safe, stable, and highly insular heterosexual reproductive union that conforms to our social and sexual status quo. I agree with Broad when she argues that the series' conclusion raises questions about what has really been transformed by Katniss's harrowing fight.[431] No matter how intelligent, brave, or revolutionary she has been, her ultimate happiness is found "in being loved and taken care of by a man".[432]

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[428] Roach, *Happily Ever after,* 3.

[429] Roach, *Happily Ever after,* 4.

[430] Hansen quoting Blackford, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 168.

[431] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 125.

[432] Natharius, "Gender Equity Stereotypes or Prescriptions?" 179-80.

The myth of romance is closely associated with the institution of marriage: they both go hand in hand. In our cultural context, weddings serve as a "natural, unquestioned, common-sense component of love between men and women", a component that gives legitimacy to a relationship.[433] Hence, it is worth noting that the institution of marriage is taunted and discarded in *The Hunger Games* saga, since Katniss and Peeta's attempted marriage during the Games is a fraud whose main purpose is to distract the public opinion from the revolts happening in Panem: "I only got engaged to save people's lives", Katniss says.[434] In the second novel and film, Peeta and Katniss's fake engagement and secret wedding are announced. Katniss is forced to wear a wedding dress for a television show, which produces Katniss's discontent. However, the dress designed by Cinna transforms into a Mockingjay, symbolic of her refusal to become a wife and establishing her identity as a heroine (see figures 7-9). The strength of this political statement gets her stylist, Cinna, killed. The conversation that Katniss has with Johanna Mason before entering the set of Caesar Flickerman's show, is also subversive:

> Johanna: "Really? A wedding dress?"
>
> Katniss: "Snow made me wear it"
>
> Johanna Mason: "Make him pay for it"[435]

The updated gender politics of Katniss and Peeta and the questioning of the institution of marriage are great assets of *The Hunger Games* saga, which disrupts normative gender roles within a heterosexual relationship and questions the importance of the ritual of marriage, opening up the

[433] Engstrom, "Reality Television Wedding Programs", 350-51.

[434] Collins. *Catching Fire*, 185.

[435] *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*.

door to discussion and reinterpretation of long-entrenched myths about romantic love. However, it is disappointing that the narrative of the saga does not escape the imperative of the romance love story. Even when gender roles have been inverted, the normative message that encourages young women to find happiness in everlasting love and family still pervades novels and films. The dystopian fantasy of Panem could have been used to critique or discard gendered behaviors and expectations, and instead it portrayed Katniss as another revolutionary heroine defaulting to a safe and stable relationship and family setting that conforms to our social and sexual status quo. As I argued in the introduction, the beautiful promise of Katniss Everdeen did not resist Hollywood's patriarchal standards.

4.2 Participant Research

Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel note that Suzanne Collins both uses tropes of classic romance and challenges them simultaneously; thus, it is difficult to determine how the author's use of conventions of the romance genre influences readers.[436] The results of the focus groups I facilitated revealed the following: first, that participants interpreted Katniss's innocence not as a disavowal of her sexual agency, but as a lack of sexualization that they appreciated; second, that the interviewees were very critical of the introduction of the love triangle; and third, that Peeta and Katniss's long-life relationship received a myriad of different reactions.

[436] Lem and Hassel, "Gender-Genred Reading", 126.

	Focus group 1 Oct 9th, 2017	Focus group 2 Oct 11th, 2017	Focus group 3 Nov 13th, 2017
Participants	Annie Siena Headband	Wolfe Robin Catwoman Batman	Queenie Piggy

Table 1: Pseudonyms of participants in each focus group.

The Naive Virgin: Not-Sexualized Katniss

Chapter 3 shows that the participants interviewed were glad to find that Katniss's relationships with most male characters were not sexualized. Her relationships with her ally Finnick, her stylist Cinna, or her mentor Haymitch were mentioned as examples. Similarly, the participants were happy to see a female protagonist that was not sexualized herself, especially in the books.

> Robin: She's not sexualized.
>
> Catwoman: They tried to make her sexualized.
>
> Robin: They tried to, but they didn't, and I really liked that.

Headband points out that Katniss was not sexualized "in any way": like her father, Katniss devoted herself to hunting and did not worry or care about "what she wore". The heroine was just trying to survive, leaving no time to worry about her appearance (Batman). Batman also notes that the books "never described her [Katniss] in a sexual way", never as sexy. However, Katniss is described as someone who is strong, to which many participants said to have reacted positively. The

participants highlighted some scenes and passages that show how Katniss was not being sexualized. An instance can be found in the work of Katniss's stylist, Cinna, who tries to portray an image of a strong tribute, and not a sexy one, particularly with his design for Katniss in *Catching Fire.* "He [Cinna] made a comment I think in the second novel… the first one [costume] we made her look innocent, now we're gonna make her look strong" (Robin). On a different scene in the third film, Boggs also suggests removing Katniss's makeup, since she is a girl and makeup makes her look as a 30-year old woman. "I liked it in Mockingjay when they had her up for the promo, and one of them, Boggs? he was like: 'Wipe her face, she's a girl, you made her look like she's 30'. And I was like, true" (Batman). Last, Headband points to an episode in which Katniss is trying on personalities for the interview with her mentor Haymitch. The heroine asserted that she could not be sexy, that it was not going to happen. "That was also really empowering as a young girl, that you didn't have to be that", said Headband.

However, as some members of the focus groups noted, this non-sexualization of the character did not resist to the pressures of the Hollywood industry, and somehow was lost in the film adaptations. As I analyze throughout the dissertation, the films make the politics of identity more specific and they crystalize certain issues regarding race, gender, and sexuality that were neither specific nor problematic in the novels. As some participants noted, the movies needed to reinforce Katniss's femininity and remind the audience that she was still a woman (Headband).

> Headband: With the whole "empowered woman", in the film she's empowered in a sexy way [...]. You literally are still catering what men want to see."

> Annie: “They still cast 20-something Jennifer Lawrence who is People's magazine like sexiest woman. It was definitely catering to something.”

The Love Triangle: Undesired Romance

As some participants pointed out, Katniss is thrown into romance, which “she doesn’t want or need” (Piggy). As Piggy highlights, the love interest is not “central to who she [Katniss] is, or her story, like it is in so many other stories about young girls / young adult women”.

> Wolfe: “Her relationship with her sister, and her whole “activist” lifestyle. That was one of the most compelling traits of her character. Not the way she felt about Peeta, you know?”

Peggy said they liked the non-centrality of the love story. However, other participants were more critical, and they disliked the introduction of the romance all along.

> Wolfe: “If all of these Katniss's relationships problems [...] was just written about more, I feel like I would have liked it. Because the way it was written, it felt thrown in there.”
>
> Robin: “Honestly, I loved every other relationship besides the main trio.”
>
> Siena: “I will never be not upset about this love story that they created. There’s a specific part in the book where she says that she would be just fine without either, and I am like: “that’s what I’m looking for”, you know? In the movies, they kind of missed the mark on that.”

> Robin: "I think [Katniss] started off really strong but then the struggle for a relationship at the end of it, especially that stupid love triangle at the end of *Mockingjay*…"
>
> Catwoman: "I don't feel like every story needs a love triangle. You could still keep Peeta and Gale in the movie as friends, but you don't need to have them [involved in the love triangle]. It would have been a better book if it was just about the struggles between the society and what they go through."

As some focus groups members noted, eliminating the love triangle would have left more space to explore other issues, which they deemed to be more important.

> Catwoman: "I feel like they could have done more, could have done better without the relationship, they could have done so much more about the class issues…"
>
> Batman: "And expand on her relationship with her sister. I think that's the most important relationship."

Many focus groups members made clear that they disliked the love triangle; one of them even considered it "the most annoying thing" she had ever read. However, the love triangle was also extremely successful among *Hunger Games* fans, and they soon started to take sides in fan blogs and discussions about the two contestants. Whether Katniss was going to choose Peeta or Gale became a "great debacle" (Piggy), and fans had to decide if they were "team Peeta" or "team Gale".

> Quennie: "Oh, I remember that. The teams. And I was like, what?"

The participant research shows that the non-neutrality of media did not only determine the participants' unfavorable reception of Peeta, but it also affected how participants read the love triangle and Katniss's involvement in it. Overall, the participants disliked the introduction of the love triangle, but put on the blame on different factors. For some, the industry threw the love story in the narrative and forced Katniss into a romance she did not choose; for others, Katniss's indecisiveness made these "troubled" relationships (Piggy) even worse. Catwoman, for example, was very critical about Katniss's involvement in the love triangle. Her comments reveals how normative ideas about moral and responsible female behavior are entrenched in our culture. According to Catwoman, Katniss should have focused on the revolution, and should have not put the contenders through the love triangle. The following excerpts illustrate Catwoman's point.

> Catwoman: [Katniss] spends the whole time worrying about what the boys think of her. She's in a fight [to] the death and she's like: 'Oh my god, Peeta is mad at me'. Who cares?"
>
> Catwoman: "In *Mockingjay* [...], when she's taken by the Capitol, and then she gets mad and says: 'No, I won't do anything until he's here'... OK, who cares? I can see it as a friends' point of view, but at the same time, girl, there's thousands of people counting on you. Get over it."

While Catwoman highly criticized Katniss's behavior, Batman tried to defend her, asserting that Katniss did not have time to choose because she was focused on the atrocities of *The Hunger Games* and the revolution. They had a passionate debate about whether Katniss was to blame, illustrating polarized positions about the engagement of cultural products. While Catwoman's

interpretation is aligned with the patriarchal standpoint that pervades our media -she chooses to blame the female protagonist and absolves the two male contestants-, Batman resists and challenges this narrative, advocating for Katniss. I reproduce some extracts below to illustrate both points.

> Catwoman: "She put them through that."
>
> Batman: "She put them through that because she was in the middle of a revolution, and she really didn't have time to be like, 'Who do I like more?'. They were like: 'Which one of us do you like more?', and she was like 'I don't know'."
>
> Catwoman: "See, I would be like, 'I don't like any of you guys right now, I'm trying to not die… Let me not die!'"
>
> Batman: "I think honestly that was [...] why she didn't choose. She was like 'I can't worry about this now.'"
>
> Catwoman: "I would have said it. I would have been like, 'I'm trying not to die. I really don't wanna die.'"
>
> Batman: "She did say that! In *Catching Fire*, in the beginning. Gale was like, 'Do you love me?', and she was like, 'Gale, all I can think of now is how President Snow is trying to kill me'. And he was like [sighs]."

***Everlasting Love*: Mixed Reactions**

The participants' interpretations of the rapport between Peeta and Katniss were mixed. For some, although the heroine seems "content" with Peeta (Peggy), their relationship is far from the ideal romantic story.

> Peggy: “The romance in it isn’t like a great romance. [In] the Capitol’s media it’s very much portrayed as this tragic love story. But that’s the opposite of what it really is. It’s more like settling down, and supporting each other.”

For Queenie, it is “really ambiguous”: it started as a strategy to survive the Games, and at the end Queenie was unsure whether or not there was a romantic interest in both of them: “Are they or aren’t they? [....] Because she didn’t really seem to want it.” For some focus groups members (Robin, Wolfe, Catwoman), if Peeta had died, it would have made the character of Katniss stronger, a “better Mockingjay”, turning her into a catalyst the same way her sister made her. Batman, on the other hand, said to have liked Katniss’s love for Peeta, and she thought that toward the end Katniss’s love for him was “definitely more genuine”. Catwoman, however, disagreed. I have included a summarized version of the discussion.

> Catwoman: “So Peeta gave her a bread once? That doesn’t mean…”
>
> Batman: “She was starving! She was literally starving, and her family. She might have died without that. She could have.”
>
> Catwoman: “At the same time, she never talked to him after that until they both got chosen.”
>
> Batman: “He was more well-off, and she was just this dirty girl [...]. She wasn’t a really outgoing person to begin with.”
>
> Catwoman: “They didn’t talk that much so she could be like, ‘I’m in love with Peeta.’”
>
> Batman: “She didn’t say she was in love with him until literally the very end.”

> Catwoman: “I feel like at the most they had conversations in the train once or twice [...]. That’s too much to be like, ‘I’m in love with him’ at the end of it.”
>
> Batman: “There were a lot of interactions that they just didn’t talk about. Their whole Victor tour, that was like a few weeks, and they spent that entire time together. I think that comes more about to the writing.”
>
> Catwoman: “And when you’re actually reading, or actually watching the movie, the fact that didn’t show it was very weird.”

For Batman, Katniss started appreciating Peeta’s “good qualities”, and eventually she had genuine feelings for him. Another student had also described Peeta as a “good” character, “pure at heart” (Siena). Catwoman and Batman disagreed once again: for Catwoman, the character of Peeta was “too nice”. Batman, on the other hand, stood by Peeta’s dignity and compassion and his refusal to give in to the atrocities of the Games. She praised these traits as strong attributes, instead of interpreting them as weaknesses. Catwoman and Batman advocate for different models of masculinity, and their discussion epitomizes the tension between these two forces: hegemonic masculinity, still pervasive in our media products (Catwoman) and equality masculinity, struggling to find a space in the cultural realm (Batman).

> Batman: “I think that was the point: not everybody is a cold-blooded killer when it comes down to it. [...]. I think that actually really shows he’s really strong for not conforming to that. He’d rather be a good person than survive. I don’t think there’s anything weak about that.”

> Batman: "In the books she made the whole point on why she chose Peeta over Gale. It was because Gale was too much like her [...], but Peeta was the one that brought up the compassion inside of her. I really liked that, and I think that's why I'm OK with them ending up together. I think it still could have been good if she didn't end up with any of them, I would have fully supported that, but I still like this."

As I discussed in chapter 3, the participants were very receptive of the character of Cinna, which proved their willingness to welcome alternative depictions of masculinity on the big screen. Paradoxically, they were unenthusiastic about Peeta, a character who disrupts gender roles and acts as a supportive and nurturing partner to Katniss throughout the saga. The participants' hesitation to advocate for Peeta as a rightful companion speaks of the non-neutrality of media and the underlying normativities that influence young women's' imagination. Hegemonic normativity is entrenched in our cultural products to the point of being unnoticed, and its pervasive influence is hard to challenge. The participants were savvy consumers and devoted to the texts, and as such they questioned and critiqued dominant ideals about masculinity in the character of Gale. Nevertheless, and as American literary critic Lee Edelman observes, we must be wary of our constructions even when they attempt to contest dominant representations, since "no matter the explicit ideology they serve, they will carry within them the virulent germ of the dominant cultural discourse."[437] There is no discourse that operates outside the dominant cultural discourse. Consequently, the same normativities the interviewees identified and problematized in the narrative of other male characters, later determined their interpretation of the character of Peeta. The non-neutrality of media furtively operates to perpetuate hegemonic tropes around masculinity,

[437] Edelman, "The Plague of Discourse", 91.

and a male character who upsets those narratives -such as Peeta- is not well received. These readings confirm the premises of the Birmingham School that serve as a bedrock of my project. On the one hand, negotiated or even oppositional readings of media products are possible: participant Robin is a clear representative of this fact, as she is a firm supporter of the equality masculinity of Peeta. On the other hand, producing these oppositional readings is far from easy, as media are not neutral: they tend to serve the interests of the dominant ideology. This ideology often pervades our cultural products unnoticed and unchallenged.

Katniss and Peeta not ending up together was one of the outcomes the participants would have desired. Many said they would have liked the story better if Katniss had not ended up with anyone, or if the heroine had not been involved in a love triangle in the first place. However, during the second focus group the participants also had a great time imagining different scenarios regarding Katniss's love interests. Robin, for instance, wished she was asexual. Catwoman and others would have liked her better if she was gay.

Catwoman: "I think Jennifer Lawrence would be good at playing asexual."

Catwoman: "I would have loved it if she was like 'I'm gay'".

Batman: "Yeah, that would have been funny."

4.3 Conclusions

As *The Hunger Games* exemplifies, discourses that engage with teenage sexuality in film still fall into conservative patterns. Against a sex-saturated media setting, they promote a neoconservative ideology that establishes sexual repression as the newest form of personal

empowerment. In young adult dystopian fiction sex remains problematic,[438] the reason why it is often left undiscussed. In *The Hunger Games*, there is no sexual activity involving the main heroine, no references to the protagonist's sexual agency, and very little talk regarding premarital or extra-marital sex. As the textual analysis shows, leaving sexuality undiscussed deprives the heroine from sexual agency. The participants I interviewed provided a different assessment. They did not read the absence of teenage sexuality as a glorification of virginity, but an asset for Katniss Everdeen: they praised the novels for having a main character who was not sexualized by the publishing or film industries. As I stated, science fiction is oftentimes synonymous with lack of eroticism, and the participants of the study valued that as opposed to the prevalence of sex and sexualized characters in Hollywood film, television, and overall media. This overtly sexualized media setting has been explored by scholars such as Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie. According to Gill, our postfeminist neoliberal setting encourages young women to display a certain sexual knowledge and practice. In this context, sexual agency has become normative, and a "technology of sexiness" has replaced "innocence" and "virtue" as the commodity that young women are required to provide "in the heterosexual marketplace".[439] McRobbie shares a similar view, and asserts that women must now perform a 'post-feminist masquerade' "where they are subject to more intensified technologies of bodily perfection and visual display as 'feminine subjects' in a current 'fashion and beauty' system that privileges oppressive forms of idealized white femininity."[440]

[438] Shary, "Virgin Springs", 54.

[439] Rosalind Gill quoted in Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, Weems' "Rethinking Agency and Resistance", 2-3.

[440] McRobbie quoted in Ringrose and Renold, "Teen girls, working-class femininity and resistance", 461.

Although the analysis of my academic reading and the findings from the focus groups do not align, they are not incompatible. The participants I interviewed reacted positively to the non-sexualization of Katniss Everdeen because it opposes common ways of representing women as sexual objects to be desired, admired, and ultimately possessed by men. Although Katniss's purity responds to a rise of conservative sexual ideologies in popular culture, it was not understood as such by the participants of my study. They did not interpret it as a disallowance of the heroine's sexual agency, but a reaction against a sex-saturated culture and an overtly-sexualized media setting, against the "technology of sexiness" and the "postfeminist masquerade" that Gill and McRobbie reference. However, they also noted that this non-sexualization of the character did not resist to the pressures of the Hollywood industry, and as a result Katniss is more sexualized in the films than in the novels. The participants valued the non-sexualization of Katniss by the industry, but they never mentioned they would oppose a female protagonist who is provided sexual agency *in her own terms* -- in fact, they valued that female heroines such as Katniss or Wonder Woman never lost their femininity.

The love triangle in which Katniss is involved was not received positively. The participants would have eliminated it to leave more space to explore other issues in the saga. The romance overall is something that Katniss "doesn't want or need", and although it is not the most prevalent issue, it is still strung along from beginning to end. Although resistant readings do not necessarily correspond with political action that prompts change,[441] it is important to value these reactions: readings that question the importance of romance in the stories that target a young audience, and are critical with an imposed heteronormative narrative. The love triangle is later simplified and normalized through her stable, long-term relationship with her partner Peeta, a normalization that

[441] Johnson, "Consuming Desires", 70.

conforms to the pattern in young adult literature, which tends to valorize monogamy over multiple sexual partners. There is nothing wrong with this romantic plot, yet there is nothing challenging about it either. As Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane rightfully assert, the ways in which the characters of Katniss, Gale, and Peeta are represented through the voice of Katniss in the literary trilogy demonstrates the gendered nature of the series as well as of children's and young adult literature and Western society. Men and women continue to be portrayed "as engaging in heteronormative relationships regardless of the setting, with the nuclear family and domesticity being the desired ending".[442] Heteronormative is taken as a natural, unproblematic phenomenon, and it is difficult to challenge in mainstream media. The resolution of *The Hunger Games*, aligned with this heteronormative ending, does very little to challenge current romantic ideals and to open up the conversation about new models of family and companionship. As Catherine Roach notes, "even with the possibility of new and more open twenty-first-century norms for gender equality and sexual experimentation, the romance narrative continues to thrive."[443] I strongly agree with Roach when she asserts that more counter-narratives to romance are needed, "not to cancel out that storyline but to add alternatives to it."[444]

[442] Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane, "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in *The Hunger Games*", 157.

[443] See Roach, *Happily Ever after*, 7.

[444]Ibid, 193.

Chapter 5. *Katniss Falls Back Into Heteropatriarchy:*

The Necessity of Motherhood and the Happy-Ending Epilogue

5.1 Textual Analysis

Introduction

In the fall of 2015, I enthusiastically went to the cinema to watch the last film of *The Hunger Games* series. At that point I had not read the novels by Suzanne Collins, so I was thrilled to finally know how the story of the revolutionary heroine Katniss Everdeen would end. To my surprise, the final scene of the movie showed that Katniss Everdeen had become a mother; she looked complacent and settled, and nothing like the ruthless fighter I had seen on the screen up to that point. She was holding a baby; while her romantic partner Peeta was playing with their other son. I was perplexed. Katniss's performance was at odds with the narrative of the character and her stated desires. The character had been shaped as a heroine, a hunter, a revolutionary symbol, and a justice seeker, but never as a mother or spouse. This short, final scene constituted a rupture with the story, and it did not respond to any explicit motivations of the main character. I stood up from my seat before the film was over, and passionately pointing to the screen I said to the friend who accompanied me: "This ending makes a great doctoral dissertation". He promised to never go back to the movies with me. I promised to unpack this problematic epilogue.

My analysis of the epilogue of *The Hunger Games* draws on the work of professor of English Mike Cadden, who is also the Director of Childhood Studies at Missouri Western State University. This chapter expands Caddens' article, entitled "All Is Well: The Epilogue in Children's Fantasy Fiction", regarding the functions of the epilogue in children and young adult fantasy fiction to elucidate the inclusion of the epilogue in *The Hunger Games* saga. The epilogue

of the series, which corresponds with the last few minutes of the film, can be read as a sign of hopefulness that provides emotional comfort to readers. It can also be read, however, as a conservative statement that takes Katniss back to heteropatriarchal ideals regarding womanhood. Throughout the chapter, I showcase how the second reading overshadows the first interpretation, reinforcing heterosexual lifelong relationships and motherhood as key components of women's path to fulfillment. I review Katniss's innate maternal instincts as shown through her devotion to others, specifically with her sister Prim (see figure 2) and her ally Rue, and how this innate devotion to vulnerable others resolves in a "happy ending" in which Katniss becomes a mother of two. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section explores the presentation of Katniss's innate maternal instincts and devotion to others. I study how these instincts do not have a correspondence to Katniss's explicit desires, but are imposed upon her at the end of the narrative. The second section focuses on the functions of the epilogue in young adult literature and *The Hunger Games* specifically, and highlights how reassuring epilogues are deemed to be necessary for young readers. Last, I explore the two main interpretations of the epilogue of the saga: the first, as a sign of hope for the future; the second, as a return to heteropatriarchal values that set Katniss back to normative conceptions related to womanhood and motherhood. My textual analysis determines that the heteropatriarchal message prevails over the hopefulness of the epilogue.

Katniss's Innate Maternal Instincts: Tenderness and Devotion to Others through her Relationships with Prim and Rue

As scholar Kathryn Strong Hansen notes, Katniss shows a devotion to children that resembles the traits of the goddess Artemis.[445] Given the absence of her father, deceased when she

[445] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 164.

was young; and the inability of her mother, lost in a deep depression after her husband's death; the heroine assumes two family roles: the protector and the caregiver. From the beginning of the saga Katniss establishes herself as her sister Prim's protector and nurturer (figure 2). The very first scene of *The Hunger Games* film shows her comforting Prim after Prim has a nightmare, singing to her and "rocking her gently, rubbing her hair assuring her everything will be fine and enacting the role of good mother".[446] As Dubrofsky and Ryalls point out, this scene is not in the book, which suggests that specific efforts were made in the film to characterize Katniss as instinctively maternal.[447] We can also see Katniss tucking in Prim's clothes before the Reaping ceremony, just like a mother would do,[448] and giving her the mockingjay pin to protect her.

This necessity of protecting Prim serves as the initial plot catalyst:[449] Katniss volunteers for Prim at the Reaping ceremony, where tributes are chosen to participate in the Games. Her sister's safety is one of Katniss's main concerns, and this will act as a constant motivation for Katniss throughout the narrative.[450] Prim is a character who exists primarily off-screen; nonetheless "she's instrumental in nearly everything Katniss does".[451] Films and novels insist upon Katniss's instinctive maternal behavior with Prim, as exemplified in this paragraph:

> "Despite the disagreeable conditions, I'm glad to have time with my sister. My extreme preoccupation since I came here -no, since the first Games, really- has left

[446] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 405.

[447] Ibid, 406.

[448] The Hunger Games, minute 9:40.

[449] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 164.

[450] In *Catching fire*, for example, Katniss suffers strong hallucinations that involve Prim. The saga reinforces, over and over, Katniss's essential role as the protector and nurturer of her younger sister.

[451] Barnes, "Team Katniss", 24.

little attention to her. I haven't been watching over her the way I should, the way I used to [...]. Something to make up for".[452]

Katniss's maternal instincts are not only manifest through her relationship with her sister Prim. Her devotion to others, especially those who are vulnerable, is also showcased in the films and the novels through her relationships with her friend Gale, her fellow tribute and future partner Peeta, and especially with her opponent Rue, from District Eleven. Rue's young age and tenderness remind Katniss of her sister Prim, which triggers her protective instincts.[453] Rue is African American, although her ethnicity does not define her character: she is presented simply as a girl too young and kind to be able to survive the Games.[454] Rue is small and intelligent, and her kind actions toward Katniss showcase her as angelic. During the training period in the first Games, Rue shows her cleverness by stealing a knife from Cato and climbing to the ceiling to hide. During the Games, she also displays "a keen grasp of strategy"[455], and helps Katniss outwit her captors by suggesting that she release a wasps' nest into the competitors' camp. Rue also heals Katniss's wounds following an injury, changing the healing leaves twice while Katniss is asleep.[456] Katniss becomes Rue's protector, a "mother/big sister" figure to her.[457]

Rue is eventually killed by another tribute. Katniss stays with her, singing to her as she dies, closing her eyes, and honoring her body with a bed of flowers. Katniss prioritizes honoring her friend over her own protection and safety, showcasing once again her inner instincts as

[452] Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*, 149.

[453] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 169.

[454] Moore and Coleman, "Starving for Diversity", 957.

[455] Ibid.

[456] Dubrofsky and Ryalls: "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 401.

[457] Ibid, 397.

caregiver and protector. She is positioned as someone with "uncommon integrity and humanity, risking her life for those she loves".[458] Katniss's compassion and solidarity toward Rue will become one of the catalysts of the revolution in Panem, as Rue becomes a martyr for the cause.[459] In the second film, during the victory tour, Katniss assures citizens in District 11 that she "sees her and remembers her", and apologizes for her failure to save her: "She was too young. Too gentle. And I couldn't save her. I'm sorry."[460]

Rue's character sparked an enormous controversy when the first novel was adapted into film: many young readers of the book were shocked to find a black actress playing the supporting character of Rue. As many scholars and readers noted, Suzanne Collins had described the physiology of the different characters of *The Hunger Games* by using skin tone descriptors instead of conventional racial terms, leaving the door open for audience interpretation.[461] However, Rue's skin and eyes were clearly described as "dark" in the first novel. Young readers who strongly reacted to Rue's blackness took Twitter to express "a range of emotions, including surprise, disappointment, and enmity."[462] According to Brittany Lewis, these reactions exemplify how innocence is racialized in our public imagination.[463] Writer Robin Bernstein has brilliantly argued that the idea of childhood innocence is deeply racialized, and its historical origins can be located in the XIX century. Innocence was raced white, while the allegation that black children did not experience pain "excluded them from claims of innocence and ultimately defined them out of

[458] Ibid, 402.

[459] Gant, "Hungering for Righteousness", 95.

[460] *Catching Fire*.

[461] Lewis, "The Black Shadow", 108.

[462] Moore and Coleman. "Starving for Diversity", 948.

[463] Lewis, "The Black Shadow", 108.

childhood itself."[464] Our culture's association of whiteness with innocence, together with the lack of attention paid by readers to Rue's character and racial descriptions in the book explain why many readers had identified Rue with a white character. Deborah Pope, the executive director of the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation, which encourages diversity in kids' books, thinks that "some of these young people just didn't really read the book." As she observes, "the white default" in different forms of mass media is learned and internalized early, including by children of color. "It takes vigilance—and self-awareness—to overcome."[465]

For some, Rue's martyrdom works to further consolidate Katniss' role as the white savior and to humanize the heroine. As Queenie asserted during the third focus group, the films implied that the black characters were helping Katniss, "a white woman, go further in life."[466] Online, bloggers and fans have also discussed the problematic nature of Katniss and Rue's relationship. For online blogger Violet Friudenberg, Rue's martyrdom is "particularly troubling" because although she is portrayed as a capable survivalist, she still heavily relies on Katniss. It is particularly telling that this reliance is an emotional one. While Rue has basic survival skills, she needs Katniss as an emotional caregiver. This is a subtle, yet, important manifestation of the white savior syndrome, especially between white women and women of color. According to Friudenberg, Rue's death is "what catapults both the revolution and the glorification of the strength and resilience of the white hero narrative."[467] In a different online site Ashley Truong notices how, had Katniss been played by an actress of color, the outcome of the relationship would have been

[464] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 196.

[465] Holmes, "White until Proven Black".

[466] See the participant research section in Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion about race in *The Hunger Games*.

[467] Friudenberg, "Whiteness & Femininity in Dystopia."

remarkably different. “The dynamic between the two would have been unprecedented in Hollywood films”, she says. “Two women of color working together in an oppressive system that aims for the opposite of that. Instead, their partnership, and Katniss’ subsequent act of defiance by covering Rue’s body with flowers, takes on an uncomfortable connotation of the white savior.”[468]

Katniss’s desire to help the powerless and vulnerable is repeatedly evidenced throughout the saga. Nevertheless, hers is a complex character, and her moral compass shifts. “As a young woman coming out of adolescence and entering legal adulthood, her subject position “is always already in flux.”[469] Suzanne Collins explains how the protagonist’s moral compass “isn’t always pointing to the right and moral choice. Deep down, she has a good heart, but you know that she’s capable of making the choices that nobody should have to make.”[470] The first novel, for instance, exemplifies Katniss’s desire for vengeance. She asserts that “[without a Hunger Games’ victor] the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country”.[471] In *Mockingjay*, this desire for vengeance seems to be stronger than her compassion. Katniss votes to approve the establishment of a *Hunger Games* that enlists the Capitol’s children.[472] In appearance, this decision seems to disrupt Katniss's representation as a caring, compassionate heroine. However, if readers and spectators read more closely, this is only a strategy that allows her to kill the leader of the revolution, President Alma Coin.

[468] Truong, “The Hunger Games’ Casting.”

[469] Risko, “Katniss Everdeen’s Liminal Choices”, 81.

[470] Grossman, “I’m More like Plutarch than Katniss”.

[471] Hansen, “The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen”, 172.

[472] Ibid, 166.

The political binary opposites represented in the figures of President Snow and Alma Coin epitomize two models of totalitarian control: a tyrannical capitalist regime characterized by inequality, and an oppressive communist system characterized by homogenization. Both sides of the spectrum are illustrative of the radical consequences of political polarization, a recent increasing trend in the United States and in Europe. Alma Coin's politics are also highly populist -- a depiction that anticipates the rise of populisms in the following years. Revolutionary leader "President" Alma Coin plans to overthrow the government of the Capitol and its president, Snow. Katniss initially cooperates with Coin, but soon realizes that new leader and the political system she offers are as tyrannical as Snow and the Capitol. The new system is set to reproduce the oppressive and immoral structures of the old Panem, including the celebration of the *Hunger Games*. In these circumstances, Katniss votes for the new Games with the Capitol's children in exchange for an opportunity to kill Snow herself, but uses this chance to kill President Alma Coin instead. As Sarah O. Murphy explains, her vote "may startle and even successfully fool many readers, but it actually provides Katniss with a chance to have weapons in President Coin's presence, the last opportunity to avert a repeat of the dictatorial regime of the Capitol"[473]

Implicit Tenderness vs Explicit Desires: Katniss's Coming of Age

Katniss's transition from adolescence to adulthood coincides with the celebration of the last two 'Hunger Games' and the later overthrow of the totalitarian regime of the Capitol. The character arc of the heroine is multi-layered: first, it needs to account for the coming-of-age experiences that are common in a teenager; and second, it needs to consider the striking conditions the heroine

[473] Murphy, "The Child Soldier and the Self", 205-206.

faces. Definitive changes can be observed from the first to the second film. The extreme events she has lived through during the first volume of the saga bring with them an intense emotional trauma. She has endured "combat and violent assault; she's suffered through man-made "natural" disasters in the arena [...]; worst of all, she has watched family, friends, and strangers suffer brutal deaths, and she has killed several people herself."[474] As a result, Katniss suffers post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, including recurring nightmares and flashbacks, social avoidance and self-loathing.[475] The very first scene of the second film makes the symptoms of post-traumatic syndrome very clear to the spectators, where she is shown as visibly scared while hunting. As director Francis Lawrence points out, these images show "the kind of effects that the games have on people, the effects that violence has on people [...] She's still disturbed by things, and can't get certain thoughts and images out of her head."[476]

As the textual analysis of the films and novels shows, Katniss's depiction as a brave and compassionate individual - "I have so little ability to watch suffering", she admits[477] - is consistent throughout the saga. However, her character also experiences a handful of changes as a result of her evolution through the Games and her maturing from adolescence to adulthood. Among these changes, we appreciate a better ability to open herself to others and communicate more effectively, especially visible in the last film. Her fellow contestant and later romantic partner Peeta was in large part responsible for this change. Her feelings towards her friend Gale and towards Peeta are also normalized, as I explored in chapter 4.

[474] Gant, "Hungering for Righteousness", 95.

[475] Ibid.

[476] Grossman, "Katniss is 'A Wreck'".

[477] Collins, *Catching Fire*, 113.

Although the former changes in behavior and personality are certainly noticeable, the main change that operates through Katniss Everdeen's arc is related to her position regarding motherhood. As I have explored in the previous section, through the saga the heroine "enacts conventional feminine maternal behavior, behavior presented as essential to her construction as heroic. She is instinctively maternal."[478] She takes care of her sister Prim as if she was her own daughter; she provides for her and volunteers for her at the reaping. During the Games, she protects and honors Rue and comforts and helps Peeta. She also takes care and treats her friend Gale's wounds after he is attacked by the Capitol's police, the Peacekeepers. These maternal instincts, strung along in the representation of the character from beginning to end, do not respond to any explicit motivations from the character. The nurturing traits Katniss exhibits do not correspond with Katniss's explicit desires, as she discards motherhood until the very end of the saga. In the first film, she clearly states the absence her of desire to have kids: "I never want to have kids", she says at the beginning of the story.[479] "I'll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children", she adds at the end of the first novel. [480] She insists on this idea in the second novel: "That's never been part of my plan".[481] This standpoint, however, changes at the end of the saga, which surprisingly culminates in a happy ending epilogue in which "all is well"[482] and in which Katniss becomes a mother of two (figure 3). This ending parallels traditional ways of dealing with gender in children and young adult literature: although writers traditionally give children greater leeway with gender; when girls grow up they usually lose their independent agency and

[478] Dubrofsky and Ryalls. "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing to Authenticate Femininity and Whiteness", 405.

[479] Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 9.

[480] Ibid, 373.

[481] Collins, *Catching Fire*, 354.

[482] Cadden. "All Is Well".

adopt properly gendered behavior.[483] This is Katniss's case as well: her coming of age and entrance into adulthood resolves in domestic stability as a heterosexual romantic partner and mother. The normalization of her behavior is necessary in order for her to bear children, since conforming to traditional gender roles is central to the media construction of the good mother.[484] Katniss's final image of complacent adulthood with husband and children suggests that her instances of rebellion were permissible as a girl, not as a woman. Katniss's participation in the revolution was justified insofar she was saving the children of Panem and protecting Rue and Prim. Once this objective was met, Katniss's rebellious attitude was no longer needed, and consequently, it was suppressed.

The Necessity of the Epilogue: Children's Reassurance as Moral Imperative

Mike Cadden's article "All is Well: The Epilogue in Children's Fantasy Fiction" provides crucial theoretical insight into the functions of the epilogue in children and young adult fiction. As he explains, different eras have different preferences regarding endings in fiction novels and today, indeterminate endings are preferred over closed and definitive resolutions. The main purpose of the epilogue consists in providing emotional satisfaction to the readers. It is a literary fashion of comfort and clarity, a strategy that is considered to be effective "for being affective".[485] However, it is has never been defended for its artistic merits, given its awkward structure and clumsy aesthetics.[486] The inclusion of the epilogue sacrifices the aesthetics and structure of the text: it is an anti-climatic and artificial device that distances the reader from the story. Moreover, by

[483] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 126-27.

[484] Kinnick, "Media Morality Tales", 12.

[485] Cadden, "All is Well", 345.

[486] Cadden, "All is Well", 345.

providing a definitive ending the epilogue limits the interpretative agency of the readers. As a consequence, the "awkward convention" of the epilogue has been out of the literary fashion for a while.

Nevertheless, this is not the case in children's fantasy fiction. The epilogue is not the only conservative convention that has been maintained in children's books; as Cadden explains, these books are usually examples of structural conservatism and familiar story arcs. The epilogue is present here not because of the narrative closure it provides, but for the completion and reassurance it provides. This audience of young readers is deemed to need or desire that satisfaction and reassurance, he explains.[487]

> The epilogue isn't about the hero or any one character, then. This structural addition is not really even a structural concern; it's about the implied reader. For this reason, the epilogue is the perfect structural device for the children's novel, especially one within the fantastic, a genre that challenges a young reader's sense of the possible regarding not only an unfamiliar world but an altogether new one [...]. It isn't enough that we provide happy endings for children, these writers imply; we need to reassure them that happiness "sticks," and that gets handled in a variety of ways.[488]

In spite of its multiple pitfalls, the epilogue in children's fiction deems to be the lesser of two evils. Although it limits the interpretative agency of the readers and distances them from the story, it gives them reassurance about the happiness of the characters. The writer of children's literature

[487] Cadden, "All is Well", 344.

[488] Cadden, "All is Well", 344.

feels prompted to include an epilogue, as if there was a moral compulsion that seized her or him.[489] The child reader seems to be thought to need this conclusion, which is different than saying that children actually do need it.[490] It is the adult who desires that the young reader is comforted "at all literary cost".[491] This belief taps into the ideological notion that children and young people are innocent and need to be protected, a powerful notion that still lingers even among feminist scholars.[492]

The belief that children were inherently innocent proliferated in the late XVIII century and early XIX, after Calvinism and the doctrine of original sin declined in the United States.[493] Since then, the use of abstract -innocent- childhood has been to hide political and social agendas, and to justify granting or withholding the rights of living adults and children.[494] If a harmful influence in society can be proven to specifically impact children, then the argument for controlling those influences is much stronger. Childhood has acquired great affective weight, to the extent that the exhortation to "protect the children" adds persuasive power to almost any argument.[495] As Sarah Banet-Weiser notes, children have been used in the current media context as a powerful symbol, "as both metaphors and literal figures" who represent a handful of moral agendas. According to Banet-Weiser, these agendas involve the past, the future, hopes, fears, and anxieties, and

[489] Ibid, 345.

[490] Ibid, 346.

[491]Ibid, 355.

[492] As Banet-Weiser explains, children are considered to reside in the highest moral category, and their supposed powerlessness and innocence continue to determine definitions of morality. See "Girls Rule!" 73-74.

[493] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 37.

[494] Ibid, 3.

[495] Buckingham, *The material child*, 8, and Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 2.

sometimes they even involve national identity.[496] The moral panic regarding young audiences has been challenged by scholars such as David Buckingham, who maintains that young audiences are not the incompetent and powerless consumers that some discourses have presented. For Buckingham, whose view I share, young audiences are capable of producing various responses to the media objects they consume, including critical reactions to the books they read. As Robin Bernstein also notes, children do not passively receive culture.[497] Their relation to popular culture as subjects and agents, consumers and producers is complex and multi-layered, and the necessity of the reassurance of the epilogue is debatable.

The Hunger Games' Epilogue: Comforting Heteronormativity

Toward the end of the last book, *Mockingjay*, Katniss narrates the return to normality in her life, back home in District Twelve, a normality that includes romantic love and security with Peeta. As Cadden observes, at this point the plot is completed and sufficient character happiness is offered.[498] Nevertheless, following the end, an epilogue appears. This short two-page epilogue finds it correlation in the final scene of the fourth movie -that consists of two minutes-, and it resolves the underlying maternal connotation that had hitherto been exploited as one of the main personality traits of the heroine. Katniss is holding a baby; while Peeta is playing with their other son. This performance is at odds with the narrative of the character and her stated desires. The character had been shaped as a heroine, a hunter, a revolutionary symbol, and a justice seeker, but never as a mother or spouse. This short, final scene comes as a surprise for readers and spectators and does

[496] Banet-Weiser, "The Nickelodeon Brand", 70.

[497] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 29.

[498] Cadden, "All is Well", 353-354.

not fit Katniss's description or stated desires. In addition, it seems to be a decision that only comes after being persuaded by her partner: "It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly".[499] Scholars and film critics have provided two main interpretations of this epilogue, explored next.

The Hunger Games' Epilogue, Option 1: The Reassurance that (Almost) All is Well

As Hansen notes, Katniss spends almost the entirety of the saga being someone she does not want to be.[500] It is worth wondering then, if this happy ending involving motherhood and domestic stability is what the protagonist most desired all along. The dystopian society of Panem - and especially the Capitol- is against the nuclear family, the social unit that will be idealized in the novels and films as the antithesis to all the dystopia represents.[501] For Hansen, who examined the novels and not the films, Collins expresses hopefulness for the future in her epilogue. According to the scholar, the last few pages of the trilogy provide emotional satisfaction to readers and indicates a true difference in the Panem of the future: Since Katniss has decided to have children, readers can be certain that Panem has truly changed. This interpretation fits a common trend in young adult fiction, as I have stated before: young-adult authors are expected to offer readers hope, "an expectation that is seldom applied to canonical works of literature".[502] Although Hansen acknowledges that the epilogue could be read as a conservative reaffirmation of traditional femininity, she opts for a different interpretation: one in which Katniss believes "the world has

[499] Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*, 389.

[500] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 170.

[501] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 120.

[502] Connors and Shepard, "Who's Betting on The Hunger Games?" 53.

changed enough to be a safe place for children".[503] Tammy L. Gant shares this interpretation, as he asserts that the closing image of Katniss's children playing in the Meadow suggests she finally believes in a brighter future for the next generations: "Sending life forward into the unknowable future is a supreme act of faith in the potential for humanity to transcend its violent instincts and nurture its spiritual essence."[504]

Cadden, who also analyzed the epilogue in the book, specifies that the reader is shown that this happiness is always relative, especially when the person involved has been through great physical and psychological trauma. As he notes, after twenty years we see Katniss with her two children and continued domestic stability, but the heroine admits to never losing the nightmares of the *Hunger Games* and their aftermath, or the fear for her children's lives: "on bad mornings, it feels impossible to take pleasure in anything because I'm afraid it could be taken away".[505] For Cadden, the epilogue differs from the generic form of reassurance in that it denies readers a simple, thoughtless happily-ever-after. Even with security and love, Katniss is understood to be the product of her experiences, and so happiness has to be constructed continuously, maintained rather than just experienced by her. Collins makes Katniss live with the effects of trauma, showing that a life can be had following such horror. For Cadden, "perhaps given the state Katniss is in at the end of the book, we might not believe that she can be happy; the epilogue makes a case for how she can be happy over and through time . . . as happy as she can be."[506] Bill Clemente puts an even greater emphasis on the literal and figural scars that the *Hunger Games* have left in Katniss, highlighting

[503] Hansen, "The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen", 176.

[504] Gant, "Hungering for Righteousness", 97.

[505] Cadden, "All is Well", 353-354.

[506] Cadden, "All is Well", 354.

how they burden her happiness and make the future uncertain. For Clemente, the world's future remains uncertain at the end of the trilogy, as Collins avoids the pitfall of trying to reconcile Katniss's horrific experiences with the impulse in young adult fiction to provide a hopeful outcome.[507]

The Hunger Games' Epilogue, Option 2: Katniss Falls Back into Heteropatriarchy

In opposition to the aforementioned readings, I posit that the epilogue can also be read as supportive of a heteronormative status quo. The destiny of Katniss and her return to a heteropatriarchal setting is commonly seen in fictional narratives about military women. As Canadian scholar Nancy Taber asserts in her analysis of Mulan, "in order to be accepted back into a life of emphasized femininity, [Mulan] had to first excel at a complex form of hegemonic masculinity (brave, yet through cleverness, as opposed to brute strength, sometimes drawing on her own womanhood)."[508] This is the scenario for Katniss, who embeds traits of hegemonic masculinity throughout the saga and is portrayed as a sweet, caring mother by the end of the story (see figure 3). Although involved in adventures that demonstrate their agency and ability, military heroines are often returned to a domestic role in the home, a plot that is quite common in children's literature and popular culture, "revealing the transformational and yet deeply conservative nature of American [and western] ideals of feminine strength, sexuality, and agency".[509] It follows that,

[507] Clemente, "Panem in America", 21.

[508] Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers", 104.

[509] Ibid, 103.

according to media and popular culture products, being a perfect mother is the most important thing a woman can do, "a prerequisite for being thought of as admirable and noble."[510]

To a certain extent, the ending of *The Hunger Games* saga betrays the journey initiated by the heroine, perpetuating traditional ideas of womanhood and equating happiness to heterosexual everlasting love and motherhood. As Katherine R. Broad asserts, the short epilogue at the end reframes the way we read the rest of the novels. It redirects the energies of the narrative "from social upheaval to the maintenance of a reproductive status quo and ensures that Katniss's rebellion serves to keep her an appropriately gendered, reproductive, and ultimately docile subject". For Broad, even with the trilogy's seeming gender equality, Katniss "is hardly a feminist figurehead."[511] The biggest problematic regarding *The Hunger Games*' epilogue is the reinforcement of myths regarding motherhood and everlasting love with a romantic partner. The myth of everlasting love "with the one" was explored in chapter 4. This last section focuses on the ways popular culture products continue to idealize intensive mothering, promoting a pronatalist viewpoint.[512]

Across time and space, discourses involving motherhood have functioned variously to ensure that women stay in their place.[513] Even today, the film and television industries are still

[510] Douglas and Michaels, *The mommy myth*, 22.

[511] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 125.

[512] Over the last few decades the topic of motherhood, and specifically the topic of motherhood in the media, has emerged as a central and significant topic of scholarly inquiry across a wide range of academic disciplines. Within the field the term 'motherhood' is used to signify the patriarchal institution of motherhood, while 'mothering' refers to women's lived experiences of childrearing. These lived experiences may both conform to and/or resist the patriarchal institution of motherhood and its oppressive ideology. See Hatfield, "Motherhood and Mental Health", 33; O'Reilly, *21st-Century Motherhood,* 1-2; and Rich, *Of woman born,* 13.

[513] Palmer-Mehta and Shuler, "Devil Mamas", 221.

prompted to impose motherhood on women at all costs. The American cultural imagination continues to produce new images of women who choose to fulfill themselves through bearing children and living in a traditional nuclear family.[514] This common television scenario is defined in the website TVTropes.com as a situation in which "a character who, while fertile, very much does not want children. But society, or the law, or destiny, will not let her get away that easily".[515] Instead, it is assumed that women will transform into mothers. Their identities will also shift, as the mother identity becomes dominant.[516] In this context, the value of a woman's life would appear to be contingent on becoming a mother. Women who refuse to do so are not "merely emotionally suspect, but they are dangerous."[517]

Compulsory motherhood is often constructed in film and television as a final aspiration, as an endpoint for the narrative of the female characters. Latham Hunter explores this recurrent trend in shows like *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Rather than a subject deserving of ongoing attention and development, motherhood is treated in these shows as a "kind beatific end point for the characters".[518] Ally from Ally McBeal and Rachel from Friends, for instance, chose the wellbeing of their respective children over the advancement of their careers by the series' end. In *Sex and the City*, two of the four female leads end up married with babies by the last episode, the other two having finally secured respective romantic partners. For Hunter and other scholars, this kind of inevitable gravitation towards motherhood signals a

[514] Kaplan, "Sex, Work, and Motherhood", 259.

[515] Hatfield, "Motherhood and Mental Health", 38.

[516] Hatfield, "Motherhood and Mental Health", 38.

[517] Rich, *Of woman born*, 169.

[518] Hunter, "Motherhood, Prime-Time TV, and Grey's Anatomy", 321-22.

trend in popular culture to construct a "woman=mother" equation.[519] This tendency has been consistent especially since the nineteenth century, as motherhood has been socially acknowledged as the primary identity for most adult women in Western culture.[520] An example from the decade of the 1990s can be found in the American sitcom *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), when Murphy surrenders to women's supposed biological imperative. For professor of communication studies Bonnie Dow, this is the ultimate postfeminist moment in the television series, and it gives credence to the claims about "biological clocks, about the emptiness of childless career women, and women's "natural" destiny to mother".[521] As Dow asserts, considering Murphy's personality and lifestyle, her decision to bear a child hardly seems rational: "It makes sense only as a reflection of the sexist adage that all women have a deep and irrepressible desire (duty?) to reproduce that is merely waiting to be triggered."[522]

Media products do not only perpetuate the idea of compulsory motherhood and portray and reinforce romanticized notions about it, but also offer little diversity in their representations of mothers. Contemporary media accounts of motherhood have changed very little in the last few decades. They remain grounded in Victorian notions of femininity and 1950s television sitcoms that show mothers as calm, well groomed, and patient.[523] As Ann Hall and Mardia Bishop assert, despite the evidence to the contrary, the American media and culture long for a singular definition and representation of motherhood "as deeply as they long for a time when mothers stayed at home

[519] Hunter quoting Bonnie Dow, "Motherhood, Prime-Time TV, and Grey's Anatomy", 321-22.

[520] Perry-Samaniego, "Other Mothers", 359-360.

[521] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 151-152.

[522] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 151-152.

[523] Barnett, *Motherhood in the media*, 2.

and baked apple pies."[524] The "ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother"[525] is also white. Both myths, the myth of mothering and the myth of whiteness, rely on their naturalness and superiority, and consequently on their natural superiority. However, like all mythical constructions, they must be relentlessly produced, and produced as natural.[526]

In recent popular culture products we find many examples of maternal transgressions and alternative depictions that transcend the good/bad mother dualism. For instance, in the television shows *Weeds* or *Nurse Jackie*, or in the films *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Kill Bill I* and *II*. Like Samantha Caine in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill*, Katniss Everdeen is a warrior -and eventually- mom, incorporating social roles -the violent professional killer and the nurturing mother- that are culturally and ideologically incompatible. Beatrix and Samantha Caine, as well as Katniss, behave like male action heroes, but repeatedly return to favored emotional themes in the woman's film including self-sacrifice, domesticity, and choice. For lecturer Angela Dancey, through this exaggerated incongruity the films *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Kill Bill* attempt to negotiate the cultural anxiety surrounding motherhood and career through the typically masculinized framework of the action genre.[527] In Katniss's case, the transformation into mother responds to the necessity of normalizing her gender behavior. It seems clear that despite the efforts put into the reinvention of motherhood discourses contemporary expectations for mothers continue

[524] Hall and Bishop, *Mommy angst*, x.

[525] Bassin *et al*, *Representations of Motherhood*, 2.

[526] Guillem and Flores drawing on Barthes, "Material Transgressions, Racial Regressions", 94-95.

[527] Dancey, "Killer Instincts", 81.

to expand,[528] and media products often depict mothers according to religious stories of women as both the bane and salvation of humankind (Eve, Mary).[529]

Katniss's return to domesticity is slightly different from the return of military heroine Mulan, analyzed by Nancy Taber. For Mulan, this destiny is a "given": the offer to occupy a position of importance and influence with the government is never a viable choice.[530] However, Katniss's return to District 12 follows her stated desires: it is her choice. Being able to choose is a step forward *per se*: Katniss is not forced into motherhood, but voluntarily decides to have children. However, this narrative points to the postfeminist and neoliberal discourse of choice and its many pitfalls. In a postfeminist setting in which many deem feminism no longer necessary, it is assumed that it is woman's right "to work *and* to mother."[531] By the 1990s, turning into a mother was the romantic daydream of many unmarried women in their twenties and early to mid-thirties, as Peggy Orenstein reported in her 2000 book *Flux.* By the end of the century, motherhood had supplanted marriage as the main aspiration for women in their twenties and thirties. The women Orenstein interviewed believed that children "would answer basic existential questions of meaning" and would "provide a kind of unconditional love that relationships with men did not."[532]

Motherhood is highly romanticized, and it is considered to be "the right choice". The neoliberal rhetoric of choice coincides with the rise in the media of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels called in 2004 the "new momism": "the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of

[528] Palmer-Mehta and Shuler, "Devil Mamas", 221.

[529] Barnett, *Motherhood in the media,* 2.

[530] Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers", 103.

[531] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 93.

[532] Douglas and Michaels quoting Orenstein, *The mommy myth*, 25-26.

children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children."[533] Moreover, the discourse of choice also establishes categories of "good choice"-makers and "bad choice"-makers, which reinforce the belief that motherhood "is the earned privilege of the middle class."[534] The feminist insistence that women have choices and autonomy and that they are active agents in control of their own destiny is central to the "new momism". But as Douglas and Michaels note, here's where the distortion of feminism occurs, since "the only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a "real" woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a 'mom.'"[535]

I agree with Dubrofsky and Ryalls when they eloquently point out the paradoxes in the creation of the character of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*. Despite Katniss's disinterest in love and children, she is equipped with the qualities "to be the perfect wife and mother, almost unwittingly – these qualities so innate and instinctive, they emerge regardless of Katniss's stated desires."[536] Adrienne Rich already said in 1976 that institutionalized motherhood demanded of women maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence[537]; Katniss's maternal instincts seem to be more relevant than her stated desires or her work as a revolutionary hero. By using this type of resolution, the saga constraints a seemingly strong female protagonist in heteronormative ways,[538] and it

[533] Douglas and Michaels, *The mommy myth*, 4.

[534] Thompson, "Juno or Just Another Girl?" 163-64.

[535] Douglas and Michaels, *The mommy myth*, 4-5.

[536] Dubrofsky and Ryalls. "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 406.

[537] For Rich, institutional motherhood requires women to have maternal "instinct" rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, and relation to others "rather than the creation of self". See Rich, *Of woman born*, 42.

[538] Woloshyn, Taber and Lane, "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games", 150.

seems to suggest that it is possible for a woman to become a revolutionary symbol and change a dystopian world, but only if she comes back to her role as a mother and conventional wife afterwards. The overall message of films that feature military heroines such as Mulan and Katniss is that women "can indeed do everything, but only if they act like a man, are more successful than men, and then agree to step back into a domestic role while the men carry on with governing."[539]

It could be argued -like many have done, as my analysis shows- that the ending reassures readers and viewers by providing hope. Although I do not deny these arguments, I posit that the heteropatriarchal echo is stronger than the message of hope. This ending continues telling young women -and young audiences, overall- that a rebellious attitude is only tolerable during teenage years, and that the right choice once a woman attains maturity -the only one that matters- is the return to domesticity. The neoliberal setting constructs life-long romantic partnership and motherhood as choices, but the ultimate outcome remains intact, as romantic love and motherhood are constructed as the *right* choices. Katniss looks happy -as happy as she can be-, but she also looks complacent. She looks nothing like herself, as the mother identity has imposed itself over the identity of the heroine. Even in our current postfeminist context, when young adult literature and the Hollywood industry increasingly feature strong young female protagonists determined "to carve their own niche in the world", our stories continue to evoke the 'Reader, I married him' ending that characterized so much nineteenth century literature for women.[540] The recurrence of this ending, even today, is disturbing.

[539] Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers", 105.

[540] Brown, *Declarations of Independence*, 177, 180.

5.2 Participant research

	Focus group 1 Oct 9th, 2017	Focus group 2 Oct 11th, 2017	Focus group 3 Nov 13th, 2017
Participants	Annie Siena Headband	Wolfe Robin Catwoman Batman	Queenie Piggy

Table 1: Pseudonyms of participants in each focus group.

Katniss's protégées: Prim and Rue

As I analyzed previously, Katniss's maternal instincts crystalize through her relationships with her sister Prim and her friend Rue. These rapports are crucial to the action of the story and the character arc of the protagonist, and the participants I interviewed quickly noticed it. Many of the participants highlighted the importance of the relationship between Katniss and her sister, Primrose Everdeen. They thought the heroine had a strong sister complex (Robin) and was always concerned about her sister, which acted as a catalyst for the whole action. Batman also considered this relationship an aspect of the saga she could relate to as a young girl.

> Robin: "I think that was one her most redeeming traits, and I wish we would have seen more of."

The participants agreed with Robin, and wished the saga had further explored Katniss and Prim's relationship. To them, the latter was significantly more relevant than Katniss's relationship with her romantic contenders.

> Robin: "The whole reason any of it even started was because she volunteered for her sister. Not because she wanted to help Peeta, because if Peeta had gone it first, she wouldn't have cared."
>
> Catwoman: "She wouldn't have done it for Peeta. Peeta is just a guy. Her sister is her sister."
>
> "Robin: "She had such a good relationship with Prim, and then they go and kill off Prim. Kill the boys, I don't care about the boys."

Similarly, the participants deemed Rue's character "completely integral to the whole action" (Headband), providing the narrative with a second catalyst. The first one -Prim being chosen at the Reaping and Katniss volunteering for her- throws Katniss into the *Hunger Games* arena; the second one -Rue's death- fosters the revolution in Panem. Rue's character also gave Katniss a chance to show her compassion, as Robin noted. "She has a lot of compassion, which is something I didn't expect [...] She did have a lot of compassion even though she was totally badass." On another hand, Wolfe and Queenie reflected on how Katniss's relationship with Rue paralleled the heroine's relationship with her sister.

> Wolfe: "I loved seeing that sister dynamic in a different setting."

> Queenie: “I know they definitely respected each other. And they looked out for one another. I feel like Katniss in a way saw her own sister in Rue [...], because of how young she was.”

Rue’s death provoked Katniss's first rebellious act against the Capitol, as she defied the system by honoring Rue’s body, “respecting a loved one” (Queenie). In doing so, Katniss provided “so much meaning to her death” (Siena).

> Headband: “Katniss was not about to get involved, but [...] a young black girl being murdered by the state was literally the catalyst for all. Katniss having respect and compassion for a young black girl’s death, at the hands of the system, that was what started all.”
>
> Siena: “Everybody sees it on television. It’s almost like showing people: “Hey, this is a thing, she exists, she is a person. This isn’t just a show. It’s real, it’s happening right now, this is a little girl who died”.

Rue’s ethnicity was not thoroughly discussed during the focus groups, but for Headband it was crucial to the story, and Katniss’s gesture led the citizens of District 11, primarily black, to revolt against the Capitol: “That was so important. It literally could not whitewash without taking away the entire message of the movie. Everything hinged on Rue being black. That was one of the things that Suzanne Collins got so right in those books: She was really ambiguous about Katniss's ethnicity and racial identity, but she made sure you knew that Rue and Thresh and all of them were black.”

Grey Morality and Character Depth

As I referenced in the textual analysis, in spite of her compassionate nature and her role of protector, Katniss does not always make the moral choice. Her morality shifts as a consequence of her young age and the difficult decisions she is forced to make. The participants I interviewed also noticed this aspect, and said to appreciate the character even more because of it.

> Headband: "She has so much more depth that way."
> Siena: "I think that's why a lot of us like her. I think that's why she's so appealing. If you think about it, most appealing characters in fiction are morally grey."

As Headband notes, Katniss is "a very complex character" who needs to make certain decisions that are "morally grey": the heroine is doing what is necessary in order to survive. For Piggy, although Katniss starts her journey as a "pragmatic survivalist", she eventually transforms into "the hero figure that she's seen as." For Headband, "you never get to see" women in these circumstances and with this story, neither being presented as capable of handling everything nor being shown as really weak. Katniss is located in a "middle path" (Headband). Siena compared Katniss's grey morality to Daenerys Targaryen, one of the most popular female characters of the literary saga and television show *Game of Thrones*.

***The Hunger Games*' Epilogue: A Controversial Ending**

One of questions included in the questionnaire asked participants to express their opinion about the ending of the saga. Their responses ranged from being satisfied with the outcome to being

appalled. Some interpreted it as an attempt of a happy ending, given that Katniss is recovering and "content enough" (Queenie). For Piggy, it was a good ending, "as good as she [Katniss] can hope for them". As she points out, in spite of the bittersweetness Katniss and Peeta look happy and healthy and have "pretty smiling children". Nevertheless, the recurring PTSD symptoms from "the lingering tragedy" (Siena) were not bittersweet enough for other focus groups members like Headband and Siena. This bittersweetness "is supposed to happen to all heroes", thinks Siena, but an ending in which Katniss gets married and has children does not have that bittersweetness. On the other hand, Robin wished the ending had expanded upon the consequences of the PTSD, "but they just summarized it", she said.

Piggy asserted that after all of that "intenseness of the movie[s]", it is a nice ending. In a different focus group, Catwoman seemed to respond by saying that it was a nice ending, but not a good one. Catwoman's fellow interviewees were very vocal about their discontent. "We hate it", "Awful", "I'm not a fan", "We're not here for it" and "It's just unrealistic" were some of the short answers I received during the second focus group. "It doesn't represent Katniss as a character, it's rushed, it's not substantial, it's just terrible", Robin added. After studying their arguments, I have categorized their harsh criticism of the ending in three subcategories: 1) The participants disliked the ending because it was rushed, 2) the participants disliked the ending because it is inconsistent with the character of Katniss, and 3) the participants disliked the ending because it represented a reinforcement of heteronormativity. For Headband, "it just wasn't the right kind of resolution" for Katniss. "I don't really know what I would have wanted instead", added Headband, "but it was just weird, it didn't feel alright." Overall, the discontent of the participants who disliked the ending is explained by one or a combination of the reasons above.

Members of the focus groups like Batman and Robin felt that the ending was rushed. To Robin, the saga was gaining "so much momentum" as pop culture novels, and writer Suzanne Collins needed to finish the third book quickly, the reason why the narrative resolved too fast. Batman did say to like the outcome, or at least Katniss's decision to settle down with Peeta, but to her "the whole process was so rushed." Other participants disliked the ending because it was inconsistent with the narrative created around Katniss Everdeen. "It doesn't mean that she needs to continue being an activist [and] burning everything down again", said Annie, "but it just felt like such a flip flop to her character." For Headband, although they could understand Katniss's desire to go back to her district and settle down with Peeta, in their view "they made so ideal, especially in the movie [...], that it really felt flat". Siena, Headband, and Wolfe were also critical with Katniss becoming a mother. As Headband rightfully noted, Katniss had spent "the whole time" saying that she did not want to have kids. However, Katniss changed her mind in the epilogue of the third book.

> Wolfe: "The way I interpreted Katniss, she would never wanna be a mother."
> Siena: "I had expected her not to be able to have children. That would have had more meaning. The fact the she felt like, because of what she had been through, she couldn't be like a good mother. I think that would be more true for the character. And basically she had already raised her sister, so it's like she already had a child."

The participants' analyses also attend to the temporality of consumption. As I mentioned previously, by the time Jennifer Lawrence was cast for *The Hunger Games* she was a reasonably respected actress, and soon her performances and beauty would be widely praised. Lawrence was

included in People Magazine's 2013 "Most Beautiful List" or named "the Sexiest Woman in the World" (2014, FHM).[541] As Annie noted, casting Jennifer Lawrence in her twenties decreased the extent to which the character of Katniss was relatable -- by the time the first film was distributed, Lawrence was a mature (and sexualized) woman, and nothing like the teenager Katniss was supposed to be.

Temporality also altered the ways in which the participants understood Katniss's character arc. The imagination is a free process, and as Annie's input exemplifies, it can change. As she matured, the saga crystallized certain issues that she had not noticed during her first read of the novels. Annie explained that she had been happy with the ending when she was younger and first read it, but she feels disappointed now that she's older. "Just because after [...] doing all these things, just to prove that she was still a woman, [Katniss] went back and did exactly the thing that a woman is expected to do", she said. Headband supported Annie's point, taking this interpretation further and asserting that the ending perpetuated normative ideals about love and womanhood.

> Headband: "It just perpetuates this whole idea that in your wild youth you're fighting the good fight, but then you grow up and grow out of it and settle down, and you do exactly what you're supposed to do: get married to a man, have children... and that's not really our reality anymore. [For] people in our generation that is not really the goal anymore. Like you said, they had to do all of this to prove that she's still a woman [...], she just had two children and she's married to a man. So there you go, femininity accomplished."

[541] See Leon, "Jennifer Lawrence Named Sexiest Woman in the World" and People Staff, "PEOPLE's 2013 Most Beautiful List."

As opposed to this resolution, and just as they fantasized about different love scenarios for Katniss, the members of the second focus group also imagined alternative endings for the saga. Those included killing Katniss in the explosion and turning Prim into the *Mockingjay* (Robin), turning Rue into the *Mockingjay* and Prim into her sidekick (Robin, Catwoman), building a love story between Prim and Rue (Robin, Catwoman), or creating a gay narrative or "making it gay" (Robin, Catwoman) overall.

5.3 Conclusions

The epilogue of *The Hunger Games* saga favors two main interpretations. The first reading is shared by scholars such as Kathryn Strong Hansen, Mike Cadden, and some of the participants I interviewed. For them, the ending constitutes a hopeful message for the future, and shows that a life can be had following the horrors of traumatic experiences. The second interpretation -which is also mine- is more critical, and refers to an entrenchment of normative conceptions regarding womanhood and motherhood. In a rushed and inconsistent ending, as many participants pointed out, Katniss returns to a "safe" life that is supportive of a heteropatriarchal status quo, reinforcing the idea that being a perfect mother is the most important thing a woman can do. Scholar Holly Blackford shares this view, and suggests that Collins tricks her readers by offering them a "ruthless female gamer" and then taming her into a heterosexual romance plot that ends with marriage and reproduction. As she notes, this type of texts "open as many possibilities as they close".[542] The epilogue also parallels traditional ways of dealing with gender in children and young adult literature, as girls usually lose their independent agency and adopt properly gendered behavior when they grow up.

[542] Blackford, "The Games People Play", 49-50.

In March 2018, when my first dissertation draft was close to completion, I gave a talk at the national conference of the Popular Culture Association that summarized the fifth chapter of my project. Since I was criticizing the ending of the saga as a return to heteropatriarchal messages and an idealization of motherhood, one of the attendees to my talk asked if feminism and the nuclear heterosexual family were incompatible. “Can’t we be feminists and also marry and have children?” she wondered. “Why is this ending so problematic?” I argued there as well as through these pages that *The Hunger Games*’ ending is not problematic per se, but does absolutely nothing to challenge normative conceptions about romantic love and models of companionship. As the participants in my study noted, this epilogue would have not been such a shock if the films and novels had maintained the identity of Katniss as a hunter and a rebel when she became a mother. She could be braiding her children’s hair, teaching them how to hunt, exploring the forest with them. Or else, they said, Katniss could have ended up with a person of the same sex, or with nobody.

The turn of Katniss into mother shows how neoliberal media industries are still prompted to impose motherhood on women at all costs, making motherhood compulsory and the postfeminist right choice. These discourses also privilege the biological nuclear family. Vera Woloshyn, Nancy Taber and Laura Lane wonder at the end of their analysis of the discourses of masculinity and femininity in *The Hunger Games* what else the series might have been able to do to critique patriarchal and heteronormative ideals.[543] A handful of different strategies could have been introduced in order to reduce patriarchal standards, such as suppressing Katniss's instinctive maternal qualities, matching her stated desires and actions more accordingly, increasing her agency in Panem, developing her relationship with Prim, etc. Anne E. Kaplan already advocated

[543] Woloshyn, Taber and Lane. "Discourses of Masculinity and Femininity in The Hunger Games”, 158.

in 1994 for images of a "radically transformed family" to help us move "toward new institutional forms for the postmodern era."[544] More recently, Beth Boser argued that the destabilization of patriarchal motherhood is dependent on "our ability to theorize models of mothering that pull apart such a system from multiple directions."[545] One of the participants of the focus groups shared a similar view, and stated that for people in their generation compulsory motherhood was no longer the ultimate goal. I argue that while a conventional happy ending is not necessarily opposed to feminism -as long as it constitutes one free (and neither right nor wrong) choice among many others-, we need stories that promote different scenarios. My research encourages the creation of alternatives to this happy ending in our cultural and media products because, in words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, diversity in the tales we tell will help us avoid "the danger of a single story".[546]

[544] Kaplan, "Sex, Work, and Motherhood", 269.

[545] Boser, "I Forgot How It Was to Be Normal", 177-178.

[546] Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story".

Chapter 6: Summary, Conclusions, and Suggestions for Future Research

Introduction

The influence and impact of *The Hunger Games* saga is unquestionable, both inside and outside the academia. The successful film adaptations of the series have grossed millions of dollars,[547] they have become an important piece of the dystopian fiction repertoire, and have sparked remarkable interest in fans in the United States and abroad. During one of the focus group I facilitated, some of the participants endorsed the originality and uniqueness of Suzanne Collins' saga by asserting that the writer had shown the readers "people and demographics" that are not represented a lot in fiction or films. They appreciated the inclusion of a female protagonist that juxtaposed different gender roles, the existence of queer and black masculinities, and the depiction of marginalized populations -Appalachian and people of color- that dismantle an oppressive system. Their insight suggests that young audiences crave stories, in print and the screen, that update or disrupt normative representations. Although for some focus groups members *The Hunger Games* and the character of Katniss Everdeen were not necessarily groundbreaking, given that "the whole idea of her leading the revolution and the dystopian society" has already been done (Wolfe), for others the saga's demographics were what made it "different and special"(Siena). "Not the fact that is dystopia, like every other book out there, it's the fact that you see real people. These are real people, they are not 'made up.'" For Headband, Suzanne Collins "knew exactly what was up" when she had the Appalachians and black people in District 11 leading the revolutions.

[547] According to *Variety*, Lionsgate's films grossed $2.9 billion worldwide. See McNary, "Lionsgate Plans South Korean Theme Park With Hunger Games, Twilight Areas". See also the revenue according to box Office Mojo, an IMDb Company, at http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=hungergames.htm

Accomplishments

Through the content analysis I show that Katniss Everdeen, despite being presented as a revolutionary idol, still lingers in patriarchal and heteronormative standards, and her feminist potential, higher in the books, suffers a loss in the adaptation to film. A few accomplishments, however, need to be noted. First, *The Hunger Games* was written by a woman and stars a woman, making it a true female-centric blockbuster franchise."[548] As the focus groups participants noted, this female-centric cultural product also showcases the importance of relationships and alliances among women. Rather than mocking the fetishized femininity of Effie or the passivity of Katniss's mother, the participants focused on the relationships of support among them, implying that multiple ways of embodying femininity can coexist together. I argue that the participants' insight about the centrality of female relationships in the saga is also an indicator of the relevance of sisterhood -and at large, of feminism- for young women.

One of the participants I interviewed (who used the pseudonym "Batman") rightfully associated the saga to a larger movement in which the film industry is providing more independent female characters. "Which I really like", she said. Batman asserted that Katniss came after Hermione in *Harry Potter*, "and girls loved her", and noted that Disney princesses in general had become stronger. "There's a movement towards it, Katniss was just a part of it", she concluded. Katniss Everdeen is part of a larger movement that brings strong female main characters to our cultural products, providing women -and men- with an array of new fictional heroines. A few years ago, only a few were available -such as Princess Leia, Ripley in *Aliens*, or Wonder Woman-. Now, the list is significantly longer. While featuring strong female leads in films and other media is not a fundamental challenge to patriarchy, I argue that it is a positive step toward more inclusive and

[548] Stewart, "Racist Hunger Games Fans Are Very Disappointed".

diverse cultural products. In the last few years, the film industry has provided an array of female protagonists who take up traditionally male-occupied roles, and this increases the visibility of women in non-normative positions and offers new models of femininity and womanhood. Young audiences have long yearned for these new representations, as the box office success of films such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017), *Atomic Blonde* (dir. David Leitch, 2017), *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (Ava DuVernay, 2018) demonstrates. The neoliberal market makes these "girl power" narratives available to foster consumption, and not to fundamentally alter social and political structures. Nevertheless, this project demonstrates how young audiences engage with neoliberal cultural products in different ways: both enthusiastically and critically, and as a place for resistance and self-care. Participants like Siena and Peggy also mentioned they would like to see more narratives similar to *The Hunger Games*' story and characters like Katniss.

> Peggy: "I think we could do with a few more characters like her, especially for the consumption of younger girls [...]. I think it's definitely good for young girls to see characters like that, and the rest of us too."

On the other hand, the saga includes small but definitive attempts to problematize stereotypical femininity and to disrupt the myth of marriage. The tone and depth of the critique are limited because it is contained in a mainstream product, but the subtext that problematizes marriage as a life goal for women still pervades the trilogy. Peeta and Katniss also perform a role reversal in which Katniss is the hero and Peeta has the role of the "helper". Moreover, Katniss showcases traits of hegemonic masculinity while Peeta is characterized by his compassion, tenderness, and

empathy. These small gestures are important in that they problematize limiting and oppressive gender roles and ongoing romantic expectations, especially for women. Offering new understandings of masculinity and femininity, even if it is through neoliberal cultural products created for consumption, gives readers and consumers the opportunity to relate to and find comfort in a wider variety of roles and identities. I argue that a greater diversity in mainstream media representation has been long needed and, although in a commodified and *tamed* version, is finally reaching our cultural landscape. The participant research confirms that these new narratives are welcomed.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of the saga is that conventional racialized and gendered tropes are reaffirmed in the films, a normal trend in a popular big-budget film such as *The Hunger Games*.[549] Although the dystopian world of Panem offers a progress narrative in that it seems to take place in a postracial society, common racial tropes still endure in the films. The hero is a white victor, whom black characters support and help thrive. Katniss Everdeen's vague description in the books could have been interpreted as the description of a multiracial character, but white actress Jennifer Lawrence was cast for the role. Nonetheless, there is an important part of the cast that is African-American, and a black woman -Commander Paylor - becomes President of Panem in the 4th film.

Secondly, Katniss's heroism is constructed as exceptional, a usual pattern in the representation of remarkable women. This is often applicable to military female characters such as Mulan and the military mothers. They are perceived as exceptions to gender stereotypes due to their success in military contexts. However, as Taber notes, "a closer analysis suggests that, instead

[549] Dubrofsky and Ryalls, "The Hunger Games: Performing Not-performing", 407.

of demonstrating women's equality with men, their representations and experiences exhibit a complex relationship in that they are each still constrained by societal expectations of gender norms."[550]

It is important to note that the margin of *The Hunger Games* films to disrupt neoliberal socio-cultural structures is slim. Postdoctoral teaching fellow Susan Shau Ming Tan notes that Suzanne Collins "is caught in the very mechanisms she critiques", and co-writes the screenplay of a bestselling book that intended to critique consumerism in the first place.[551] The consumption of reality television is a key factor in the inception of the saga -- Collins was flipping through snippets of reality television when she first thought about writing the story of Katniss Everdeen. According to the author, after the reality television bits she saw some images of the Iraq war, and the two sets of images began to juxtapose "in a very unsettling way," resulting in the idea of *The Hunger Games*.[552] The story presents an unfavorable depiction of reality television and its wide acceptance, highlighting its powerful and pervasive impact. Surveillance apparatus (cameras, mics, and trackers) are used in the saga to follow and control the tributes, and the entirety of each yearly Hunger Games is televised and publicly screened in the Capitol and the districts. This dystopian narrative is a satirical critique of neoliberal reality television, and of the desensitized engagement with the media. The mechanisms of surveillance in Panem and the use of reality television also illustrate how audience manipulation operates, and allude to neoliberal regulation and control of subjects. Surveillance apparatus, together with centralized media and reality television, have rendered citizens from the Capitol and the affluent districts insensible to violence and suffering, to

[550] Taber, "Mulan and Western Military Mothers", 95.

[551] Tan, "Burn with Us", 71.

[552] See Harris and Forer, "Meet the Woman Who Created 'The Hunger Games."

the point of being complicit with the celebration of the Games. The televised battle is a political strategy that alienates and distracts the citizens of Panem, since consuming the controlled and manipulated images of the Games prevents them from organizing and raising consciousness against the atrocities of the system.

The Hunger Games saga incurs two paradoxes. Although the novels by Suzanne Collins call attention to neoliberal consumerism, the film saga is nevertheless a product of Hollywood, created and distributed for consumption according to the market's interests. Besides, although it critiques the frivolity of desensitized consumption, the product is also an escape narrative that favors the enjoyment of violence for the sake of violence. The production of blockbuster films such as *The Hunger Games* do not have an explicit motive to affect the real world and generate critical conversation: their main goal is to obtain revenue from the distribution and consumption of the films. As Ming Tan noted, this paradox positions Suzanne Collins in the very mechanisms she critiques. The saga targets a wide, global audience, the reason why it needs to conform to current social and cultural expectations for the audience and to the clichés and modus operandi of the genre (dystopian fiction). Disrupting these conventions could upset a portion of the audience, and losing potential spectators is far from the purposes of the films, centered on a wide distribution and revenue.

The young adult dystopia of *The Hunger Games*, like many other literary and film products that belong to the dystopian genre, fosters the critical analysis of social and political issues, practices, and structures. Specifically, *The Hunger Games* critiques existing inequality among classes and populations and imagines social transformation. However, it reinserts its main female character into conservative gender roles. The pervasiveness of normative gender discourses and the non-neutrality of our media technologies present a challenge to feminist representations of

female heroines, who are often reinscribed in patriarchal settings. Like Katherine Broad, I believe that one of the solutions to avoid this trend should start by "complicating, subverting, or even downright rejecting the conventions of the romance plot that place women in such positions."[553] Many of the participants I interviewed seemed to agree with me, since they harshly criticized the inclusion of the love triangle and the romance that was "thrown upon" Katniss Everdeen.

The Hunger Games' Novels and Films: A Comparison of their Feminist Potential

The participants I interviewed were eager to discuss the process of adaptation from *The Hunger Games* books to the films. Inevitably, the process of adaptation of such popular novels was met with different reactions, as the outcome in the films can never be equal to the story the participants imagined when reading the literary work. The participants identified several problems in the adaptation. Some pointed to a slower pace in the films (Catwoman), while others thought Katniss was more "independent" (Siena) or strong (Queenie) in the novels.

> Queenie: "I remember I did like the novels more than the films [...]. Her characterization in the movie wasn't what I was expecting it to be, especially *Mockingjay*. [...] But I think at least 'novel' Katniss is really strong, she's been through a lot [...]. 'Movies' Katniss disappointed me in a way, because it was the way Hollywood does things [...], they removed things that were huge elements of her character, but that doesn't take away how empowering she is [...]. If you've seen the movies you should definitely read the books though."
>
> Siena: "Still seeing a strong woman on the screen is better than not. I think she's both empowering in the books and the movies, but way more so in the books. [...]

[553] Broad, "The Dandelion in the Spring", 127.

> She's more empowering, she's more of a feminist, she's more relatable, all of that more so in the books than the movies."

Some participants also discussed the backstory of the Mockingjay pin. They noted the importance of the pin for the narrative and the character of Katniss in the books, and to their understanding the movies did not translate it correctly. The films "glossed over" it, and the symbolism was lost in the process.

> Robin: "They didn't even get the backstory of why she's called the Mockingjay. The mockingjays were like a rebellion against the Capitol, she was the rebellion against the Capitol, there was so much symbolism there."

Last, focus groups members such as Sienna and Piggy commented on the way the movies had increased the importance of the romance. "I get it, everybody likes romance", said Siena, "but when you adapt the book into a movie, why do you need to change it so much? It obviously succeeded as a book", she asserted. Piggy noted that although the movies still had the themes of the books, it was "the way people responded to the movies" that changed the interpretation. She mentioned the teams that were created around the "whole Peeta vs Gale thing", which made the story comparable to teen romances. However, she noted she could not think of many other blockbuster movies with a female main character that was so successful. "And that wasn't a princess movie", she concluded.

Although my textual analysis focused on the films rather than the literary material, it is important to highlight this comparative analysis between the films and novels. This comparison

reveals a higher feminist potential in the novels than the films, as the opinions of the participants have shown. Those who have read the novels align Katniss Everdeen with a clear feminist angle, understanding her as a complex and active subject and as the chief creator of her own life. For those who have only watched the movies, this potential is less clear. The loss of complexity in the narrative of the character and her feminist appeal responds to several reasons, which I summarize below.

1. The construction of hunting as a non-normative activity for girls. Katniss's role as a hunter is framed in the novels within her personal history: she was born and raised in the forest, she learned to be familiar with her surroundings and to understand and respect nature. In this context, her father taught her how to hunt: it was an activity that they both shared and enjoyed. She developed her skills further after her father's death, when she was prompted to become the family provider. In the films, however, Katniss is shown to hunt only because she has no other choice: being the family provider is constructed as the result of an exceptional situation (her father's decease). This perpetuates the idea that hunting is normative for boys, but not for girls.
2. The reinforcement of the idea that masking emotions is a reflection of courage. In both the novels and the films, Katniss is masking her emotions. In the novels, this process responds to a threat, to the fact that her life or the lives of those she loves could be in danger if her true feelings were revealed. In the films, however, this is not specified. This is unfortunate, because as a result the movies perpetuate the idea that emotions and feelings are a sign of weakness traditionally associated to femininity. Since Katniss is engaging with stereotypical hegemonic masculinity, she does not have a choice to show her emotions and communicate them effectively.

3. The loss of Katniss's inner voice. The novels are told in first person by Katniss herself, which provides the spectators a clear understanding of her circumstances, internal battles, thoughts, fears, and desires. While the movies often adopt Katniss's perspective as well through camera angles and movement, they do not fully capture the depth of the character. By suppressing Katniss's inner voice, we lose track of those moments of self-doubt and self-discovery that come with the transition from adolescence to adulthood ("I'm beginning to understand who I am", she asserts in the second novel)[554] and we miss details about her relationship with her father ("My father [...]. I miss him so badly it hurts)[555] or even her suicidal thoughts at the end of the third novel.[556] The character becomes flatter, less rich, and less empowered in the film.
4. A reduction of free will and agency. In the novels, Katniss is open to the idea of being a revolutionary symbol, she often challenges and disobeys her superiors, is aware of the power she holds, makes her own requests and voices her own ideas. In the films, however, her agency has decreased, and she seems to spontaneously enact what others have planned for her.
5. The naturalization of whiteness. White actress Jennifer Lawrence is cast for a character who was understood by many readers as a mix-race protagonist. This decision perpetuates contemporary tropes about race and naturalizes whiteness as heroic. For Gonick *et al*, in

[554] Collins, *Catching Fire*, 203.

[555] Collins. *Mockingjay*, 211.

[556] Ibid, 375.

our postfeminist setting the constraints of heteronormative white femininity persist and are firmly entrenched, "though not necessarily in exactly the same old versions."[557]

6. The suppression of Katniss's weaknesses. In the novels, Katniss's fears, anxieties, and weaknesses are presented to the readers through Katniss's inner voice. The films, however, reduce the moments in which Katniss is shown as vulnerable or weak, consequently reducing the depth of the character.

Overall, the novels achieve a better juxtaposition of gender roles than the films. The lack of emotional depth in the films is notably problematic, since it perpetuates the idea that emotions (and particularly, female emotions) equal weaknesses, and the opposite is true for the character of Katniss Everdeen. Katniss' vulnerability in the novels is an asset, and a central trait to her teenage personality. As the participant research shows, the suppression of Katniss' inner voice and emotional side and the significant reduction in her free will and agency greatly impact her likelihood to become a role model to whom young audiences can relate. Katniss' strength stemmed precisely from her vulnerability, and not from the stereotypically-masculine traits she embodies. It did not need to be suppressed -- in fact, keeping those signs of vulnerability was paramount to increase the complexity of the character and her feminist potential. I have posited before that while featuring strong female leads in films is not a fundamental challenge to patriarchy, it is a positive step toward more inclusive and diverse cultural products, which young audiences welcome. However, if the film and media industries at large are eager to provide new female role models, they need to do so without recentering hegemonic masculinity. Strong heroines should not be emotionless puppets; their internal battles, desires, and anxieties hold part of their strength and

[557] Gonick *et al*, "Rethinking Agency and Resistance", 2.

make them more accessible. As the participant research shows, the character of Katniss Everdeen provides a shelter for readers because the heroine is a teenager who faces and overcomes difficult situations -- a scenario that many teenagers surely find relatable.[558]

Why Katniss Everdeen is Our Favorite Feminist

In each focus group, I asked the participants whether they considered Katniss a feminist. The multiplicity of responses they provided illustrate the myriad of ways in which young audiences interpret terms such as "feminist representation", "feminist heroine", and the concept of feminism itself, and exemplify the fluidity and complexity of these terms. They are always subject to intense debate and to constant reevaluation and reinterpretation. This reevaluation is necessary in order to avoid new orthodoxies that could be exclusionary[559], and also because not all feminists share the same feminist politics. Feminism is plural and diverse, and the participant research corroborates it. The totality of the participants identified as feminist in the initial demographics survey, and most of them argued they were feminists because they believed in equality among genders. However, their understanding of Katniss as a potential feminist heroine differed, which exhibits the difficulty of pinning down what a feminist heroine really is.

To the question "Is Katniss Everdeen a Feminist?" some of the participant quickly responded affirmatively (Headband and Siena: "Yes, absolutely", "Yes, a hundred percent"), while others hesitated. Focus groups members such as Batman, Siena or Robin did not identify a clear oppressive system of men over women. This is not a surprise, since Panem is located in a seemingly postracial and postfeminist setting. The novels and films present a narrative of progress

[558] For a discussion on Katniss Everdeen's affective dimension, please see "Why Katniss Everdeen is Our Favorite Empowering Heroine."

[559] See Grewal and Kaplan. *Scattered Hegemonies*, 18.

that situates gender and race as irrelevant; they do not provide a strong female heroine with the purpose of posing a fundamental challenge to patriarchal structures. For Siena, gender was never a problem for Katniss, and she had "no gender bias". Batman expanded that idea and asserted that in the saga there was not an "imbalance between genders", and that "there's never any sense of men [being] better than women". According to some participants, the struggle was centered around class, and not on a distinction between men and women (Catwoman, Robin). However, Katniss was associated to feminism by some of the interviewees for being a strong female character (Batman) whose actions could be interpreted as feminist (Wolfe). The participants also noted that if feminism is understood as the resistance to oppression or the defense that everybody should be equal and have the same rights, then Katniss could be considered a feminist.

> Piggy: "If you look at feminism as ending oppression, resistance to oppression... then yes, she would definitely be a feminist. It's more about [...] an oppressor regime and poverty, but that can be part of feminism too."

Headband was the only student to posit that Katniss had a "distinctively female experience in the Capitol", and that gender normativities still existed in the saga. For Headband, Katniss used the gendered actions that the system had imposed upon her against the system itself.

> Headband: "Suzanne Collins didn't try to make this genderless future, there were still roles and she still transcended it, and still gendered actions that people perpetrated against her because she's a woman. She played to them when she had to survive, she played the Capitol so well by playing into their conceptions of what

a woman must do, what a woman must be [...]. She brought down the whole system as a result. That was the most feminist thing she could have done."

Although the participants were savvy consumers of the saga, these responses illustrate their difficulties in discerning whether this female heroine in particular contributes to a feminist cause or can be understood as feminist. I interpret a representation as feminist when it provides the heroine with choice and portrays her with complexity and without condescension, when it avoids one-dimensional descriptions with minimal depth, and it lets the character speak in her own terms, and not through the voices of others or the filming of a male gaze. Last, this feminist representation entitles the character to make her own choices without forcing her to perpetuate traditional western depictions of romance, family life, and relationships. After a few moments, the participants I interviewed were able to identify ways in which Katniss could be read as feminist, namely that she was a strong female character, she led a social revolution, and she fought oppression. However, only one of the participants was able to identify gendered actions and behaviors against which Katniss rebelled. These findings corroborate the pervasiveness of dominant patriarchal ideologies -- these tropes are so entrenched and assimilated that they remain unnoticed.

Why Katniss Everdeen is our Favorite Empowering Heroine

One of the goals of my project -and one of the objectives of studying Katniss as a potential feminist icon- was centered on the idea of empowerment. I wanted to explore whether neoliberal cultural products such as the popular saga *The Hunger Games* could have a positive impact on the lives of young women, as they feature a -seemingly- strong female lead. Whether these novels and films encouraged a confident gesture in these women, or affected their feminist consciousness in any way, was one of my research questions. Overall, I argue that they did - the participants I

interviewed reflected on the ways they interpreted Katniss, concluding that she was an empowering, strong character; a character type they would like to see in the industry more often.

As a theorist who studies the intersections between film and media consumption and feminism, I ought to address whether these products can be feminist, and whether their consumption is a feminist act in itself. Although I acknowledge the pitfalls of commodity feminism[560] -as only available to those with consumer power - I also believe that a product stemming from a neoliberal state can still provide possibilities for participation, empowerment, and choice, even if this possibility is presented as empowerment through consumption. *The Hunger Games* is an exemplary instance of a neoliberal product that can be reappropriated by readers and viewers and interpreted as feminist. While it did not significantly alter the political sphere, it did have a strong impact on the cultural realm. The trilogy is written by a woman and features a female heroine, becoming a female-centric franchise. However, it was not only consumed by a predominantly female audience, but for men and women, girls and boys, alike. The saga presents a strong female character whom many young women can relate or admire and, even though it entrenches problematic tropes, it also disrupts or problematizes gender roles and dominant ideals regarding femininity, masculinity, and romantic partnership.

The recent media trend that positions strong women at the center of novels, films, and other media products is more likely to foster or strengthen feminist consciousness than to advance feminist politics, since it represents more of a "confident gesture" than a radical action against the

[560] Third Wave feminism is intrinsically linked to commercial culture and the neoliberal focus on individualism. As Sarah Banet-Weiser explains, "commodity feminism" is tied to consumption, filled with tension and contradiction, and represented as an individual choice. Examples of this new type of feminism can be found in the TV network Nickelodeon's programs *Clarissa Explains it All, As Told by Ginger* and *Nick News*. See Banet-Weiser, "Girls Rule!: Gender, Feminism, and Nickelodeon".

structures of society.[561] I posit, however, that the importance of this feminist "confident gesture" should not be dismissed. My position regarding the neoliberal market and its relation to consumers is similar to David Buckingham's, who understands consumption as a site of control and constraint as well as a space for choice and creativity.[562] As Buckingham asserts, the two sides of the debate are usually organized into "either/or" categories: either we believe in the power of the market, or the power of consumers. These polarized views represent the larger debate between structure and agency. Like Buckingham, I resist positioning myself in either one of the two poles. There might be elements of truth in both positions, and the two might not be as incompatible as they may seem.[563] In fact, the participants of my study were both highly excited and very critical of the product, which crystallizes how readers and spectators negotiate the meanings they receive from their cultural contexts. While sometimes their interpretations did not overcome the pervasive entrenchment of gender, sexual and racial normativities -for instance, they blamed the female protagonist or writer Suzanne Collins for the problematic love triangle-, other times they were able to identify ongoing cultural tropes. The participant research shows how non-neutral media and media products affect young women's collective imagination, but also how they can resist those dominant conceptions.

My textual analysis, based on the tradition of cultural studies and the Birmingham School, had not considered the affective dimension that the texts of *The Hunger Games* could inspire in young women. Yet this affective dimension was crucial in the readings of the participants I interviewed, and it emerged from the three focus groups I conducted. As teenage readers, many

[561] Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 136.

[562] Buckingham, *The material child*, 2.

[563] See Buckingham, 33.

participants had found shelter in the texts of the saga, had found a character whom they could admire and relate, and had found comfort in reading that someone else -although in fiction- had endured difficult circumstances. Grasping the importance of this affective dimension has been contingent on undertaking focus groups, as they have showed how these products can be used as a site of resistance as self-care. The mixed-methods approach that I advocated for has allowed different voices to enter the research process; and they have shown the importance of the affective dimension of the cultural products of *The Hunger Games*.

Many participants agreed that Katniss was a really strong woman (Siena, Catwoman, Wolfe, and Piggy), unapologetic (Batman), and a good role model (Catwoman, Wolfe, and Batman). The participants differentiated Katniss from the romance that was thrown upon her. They respected her aside from the love triangle, which many strongly criticized. Siena, for example, said she really admired her strength as a character aside from the romance: "In the book, she's a really strong person that I can really admire and really look up to." The interviewees noted that Katniss had gone through difficult experiences (Siena, Queenie, Headband), becoming an inspiration unintentionally (Siena). Piggy and Queenie agreed that she was an empowered/empowering figure, especially at the beginning of the story. "She is seen as an empowered figure to the other districts, she gives them hope that there can be change", Queenie says. Other participants also appreciated her role as a hunter and family provider. For Annie, having a woman in this "male-occupied, male-stereotyped role, and exceeding at it, and being better at it than anyone else" was very empowering, especially as a young girl.

Regarding the actual effects that the character had on the participants, it is worth to note a few actions and behaviors that were inspired by Katniss. These actions were limited: we need to remember that Katniss is only a fiction character that obtained a remarkable fan response, but a

product of fiction nonetheless. However, some of these gestures are noteworthy. Some focus groups members (Siena, Annie) related to Katniss through the sport of archery, one of the main sources of empowerment of the saga.

> Siena: "I was already an archer when I was younger because I was obsessed with *Lord of the Rings* [...]. I used to run around my backyard and try to do moves, pretending I was Legolas. When I read *The Hunger Games* I was like, "Oh my god! She's a hunter, she's an archer, it's so cool! I'm Katniss Everdeen". I started wearing my hair like her, because I thought it was so cool. I used to have my mom braid my hair like that all the time. [...] *Lord of the Rings* is so male-powered, [having a girl in that role] was really cool to me. Finally, someone I can relate to, it was really fun."

Annie, on the other hand, said she participated in archery at summer camp, and felt inspired by the heroine. Moreover, she noted that around the time the books and films were coming out people were telling her regularly about her resemblance with Jennifer Lawrence. "I took that, and I internalized that, because I didn't feel so good about myself then", she said. Having people comparing her to such popular actress "made her beautiful", she expressed: "I don't get it as much anymore, which I don't mind actually. But when I was younger it meant a lot." Siena also added that she could relate to Katniss regarding her relationship with Prim, as she also had a younger sister. Finally, as it is the case of many other film protagonists, Katniss's popularity prompted some of the participants to dress up like her for Halloween (Robin, Batman).

The findings from the focus groups confirm what Holly Blackford argued in *Out of this world: Why literature matters to girls*: that girls have sophisticated ways of engaging with literature. Besides understanding Katniss as an empowering, strong heroine and being inspired by her role as a hunter, some of the participants also related to the heroine at an emotional level, and found her "mental and emotional strength" inspiring (Piggy). Katniss goes through a series of difficult situations and decisions as a teenager, something many teenage women who watched the films and read the novels at the time could relate to. In this sense, these products are as a site of resistance, a type of feminist teenage self-care similar to the self-care as warfare of the website *Rookie*.[564] Queenie, for example, thought that Katniss could be a role model for other women who have been through difficult situations. Headband praised the story of the *Hunger Games*, since it situates a poor "Southern Appalachian woman, daughter of a coal miner" in the center of a revolution, something that "you never see". Headband appreciated the importance that female relationships had in the saga, the pride that women had in their gender and the way Katniss reacted to the revolution she was forced to lead. "It meant so much to me", Headband said, "and it still does."

> Headband: "In the books I definitely thought that she was groundbreaking in her way. I've never really seen a poor Appalachian protagonist in that kind of way. That isn't really a story you get to see of people from that region."

[564] *Rookie* falls outside the dominant context of online self-making, and teaches young women how to challenge gender norms and how to resist dominant expectations for them. See Ouellette and Arcy, "Live Through This: Feminist Care of the Self 2.0"

My research verifies Lawrence Grossberg's claims about the relation of audiences to cultural products. He argues that the fact that audiences relate to cultural products' appeals does not guarantee their subjugation to the interests of the commercial sector. The participant research, and specifically the affective dimension they attribute to *The Hunger Games* products, proves that active sites of resistance (and not only passive sites of evasion) are also possible. Even those participants who were not necessarily inspired noted that having a strong female lead in a blockbuster saga was a positive aspect. Catwoman, for example, admitted that she had not been inspired by Katniss when she was a kid, she did not want to be like her, but she asserted that it was nice "they showed someone strong" instead of a stereotypical female character, "dressing up every single day and caring about a guy every single night". Wolfe had a similar view, and asserted that although Katniss Everdeen "as a whole" had not inspired her, "there were certain aspects of her character that did", such as being independent and stoic.

Final Thoughts

As I stated in the introduction of this dissertation, the beautiful promise of Katniss Everdeen eventually falls into heteropatriarchal standards. My project proves that societal standards and expectations for men and women are still deeply entrenched in the media products we consume, even within a neoliberal system that presents women as empowered agents of change. The saga consolidates heteropatriarchal narratives and reproduces ideological notions associated to neoliberalism, namely the emphasis on individualism, the faith in social progress that transcends gender and race, and the promotion of motherhood and the nuclear family.

Although Katniss' narrative attempts to provide an updated model of femininity, it surreptitiously recenters hegemonic masculinity. Katniss embodies traits that are usually

associated with masculinity, such as activity, ritualistic combat, emotional detachment and individualism. Masculinity has been largely constructed in the western world around the virtues and roles of a self-made man, such as self-determination, autonomy, and individualism. These are values that in a neoliberal setting apply to women as well, as the character of Katniss exemplifies. Instead of providing a new model of femininity or female masculinity, Katniss embeds the traits of the western male hero. Her portrayal is meant to problematize gender roles, yet it reinserts the protagonist into normative conceptions of masculinity and essentialist notions of white femininity. Our current cultural structures are eager to produce and distribute long-desired models of strong female characters, and this is a reason to be optimistic. Nevertheless, I argue that these representations should not be used to recenter hegemonic masculinity or perpetuate essentialist notions about feminine beauty or maternal instincts, but to offer new ways of understanding womanhood.

As opposed to the hegemonic masculinity entrenched in the figure of Katniss Everdeen, the saga also offers a myriad of depictions of men that diverge from the hypermasculine archetype. Research in masculinities studies have shown that alternative and sometimes nonconforming versions of masculinity feel more comfortable for many young boys and men, and the saga successfully incorporates several alternative masculinities. *The Hunger Games* saga is not only a female-centric franchise (written by a woman and featuring a woman as the main protagonist), but also advances the agenda of diversity in film by exemplifying the multiple ways in which mainstream film industries can incorporate non-normative masculinities. Specifically, Cinna becomes the site where the new possibilities for the representation of alternative masculinities (black and queer) reside. It encapsulates a rupture with normative conceptions of masculinity, and

it illustrates how small rebellious acts can be executed within the constraints of an oppressive system.

Against a hypersexualized view of femininity, Katniss is also portrayed as naive and pure. *The Hunger Games* saga exemplifies how conservative sexual ideologies and contemporary postfeminist culture converge through the discourse of choice. These films become a channel to advocate for sexual conservatism, in which naivety and innocence are idealized, constructed as the right choice, or deemed heroic. *The Hunger Games* films fit a neoconservative trend that transforms virginity into a progressive and feminist neoliberal ideal. The remaining options are displaced, located in the margins, as the protagonist is the girl who is incompetent, naive or interested in sex. Johanna Mason, with a defiant attitude and in control of her own body, is an example of female sexuality in the margins. She is Katniss Everdeen's ally, but she does not occupy a central role in the narrative. Her femininity is constructed as "other"; her choices, as "not right". The neoliberal rhetoric works here by locating women in polar opposites that have oppressed them for centuries: the model of the Virgin Mary *versus* the sexualized Eve. I have argued that the transformation of virginity into a feminist and empowering ideal is a distortion of feminism, and that neither of these two ongoing polar opposites regarding female sexuality provide empowered models of femininity.

The subtle gender and sexual normativities that permeate the saga crystallize in a problematic epilogue that reinforces myths regarding motherhood and everlasting love with a heterosexual romantic partner. Media industries insist on fulfilling the perceived need for this type of resolution, even if the ending is severely limiting to the female heroine involved. The recurrence of this ending in our cultural products is disturbing, especially within a neoliberal system that provides women with "choices." This neoliberal rhetoric of choice keeps oppressing women, as it

continues to promote a domestic and natalist viewpoint as the right choice. We have been impeccably trained to identify this as our life goal, and even in dystopian imagined futures these imagined happy endings endure. I posit that as long as this happy ending keeps being the only story, it would be difficult to imagine alternative scenarios. My critique does not advocate for the complete rejection or dismantling of happy endings that feature heterosexual everlasting love and nuclear family. Nevertheless, my research does encourage and promote the creation of alternatives to it. We need new stories, new endings, new possibilities that showcase the multiple ways through which we can find support and love. The representation of those who do not conform to Hollywood's standard ending (marriage and kids) would increase the visibility and legitimacy of other family and love scenarios. Their stories are also worth telling.

The Hunger Games saga attempts to disrupt gender roles and models of femininity and masculinity, to question the institution of marriage, and to offer diverse representations regarding race and sexuality. Nevertheless, the textual analysis shows how neoliberal values are entrenched, and that gender, racial, and sexual tropes endure. Participants' responses to the narrative of the saga are manifold. On the one hand, the non-neutrality of media and the pervasive influence of normative tropes regarding gender, race, and sexuality determined their responses. For instance, the participants did not celebrate the alternative masculinity of Peeta (a clear triumph for hegemonic masculinity), and they refused to situate the saga as a narrative about race.

On the other hand, the participants showed a highly critical engagement with the films and novels. As Gemma Moss showed in *Un/popular fictions*, girls are able to modify and adapt the formulas of popular fiction, using them to raise their own questions and to express their own purposes. The participants of the focus groups used the saga on their own terms as well. I had argued that instead of protecting young girls from the tools of patriarchy, we could believe they

would be able to handle those tools, problematize them, and even use them to their own advantage. The participants' responses often corroborated my claim. They celebrated the mockery of stereotypical femininity and the introduction of traditionally-masculine traits in the narrative of Katniss Everdeen such as the display of anger or a stoic attitude. They highly criticized the love triangle, they did notice how whiteness was centered through casting decisions, they mocked the hegemonic masculinity of Gale and celebrated Cinna's queer masculinity; they imagined new endings for Katniss Everdeen. They used the saga as an escape narrative but also as a shelter, they found comfort in the figure of the heroine; they asserted that she was an empowering role model for girls.

These findings suggest that the displacement of feminism in neoliberal cultural products has not been totalizing. While Angela McRobbie rightfully noted in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) that the media landscape had instrumentalized feminism, my research shows that the commodification of feminism has not been totalizing. While this case study illuminates how gender, racial and sexual normativities operate through our sociopolitical and cultural landscape to consolidate heteropatriarchal and neoliberal narratives, it also corroborates that cultural products can be reappropriated and reinterpreted by the consuming audience. The heroism of Katniss Everdeen has become part of the collective imagination of a young generation of women and girls who are speaking up against sexism and oppression and mobilizing to demand social change. The instrumentalization of feminism by the media has not been enough to desensitize women. The opposite is true: as my research shows, women are taking up representations of strong heroines to find comfort, shelter, and empowerment. The impact of these female heroines is usually circumscribed to cultural spaces, but given the reciprocity of the fictional and the real world this symbolic cultural empowerment might spread to other spheres as well. Feminism might have been

instrumentalized by the system, but it has not lost its relevance. In the last few years, women have brought long-ignored or diminished gender issues to the surface, they have organized to speak up and fight for change. *May the odds be ever in their favor*.

Future Research

In her article "Hunting Girls: Patriarchal Fantasy or Feminist Progress" American author Kelly Oliver wonder whether the move to represent girls as tougher and more self-sufficient is a feminist progress or yet another patriarchal fantasy.[565] She concludes -and I agree- that it might be both. In a context in which strong women are encouraged to fill the main roles in the pages of young adult literature as well as becoming the protagonists of film blockbusters, future research must explore how these tales disrupt dominant discourses and/or continue to entrench gender, sexual and racial normativities. Given the striking success of blockbuster films that have a strong female character at its center, the academia needs to continue investigating whether these neoliberal products are beneficial or detrimental for women. These novels and films are created for consumption, but as my research suggests, they might also allow alternative readings and foster feminist empowerment. Future research projects might entail, for instance, a comparison of Katniss Everdeen with other contemporary science fiction and dystopian heroines, such as Beatrice "Tris" Prior, from the *Divergent* series, Clarke Griffin, from the television show *The 100*, or Bella Swan, from the series *Twilight*. During the focus groups, participants such as Siena and Headband considered *The Hunger Games* trilogy a pioneer series that inspired others like *Divergent*, according to Siena. The *Divergent* trilogy, written by Veronica Roth, was the series that participants discussed the most in comparison to *The Hunger Games*. Most participants seemed to

[565] Oliver, "Hunting Girls".

prefer *The Hunger Games* over *Divergent*, and some (Robin, Catwoman) criticized the latter harshly. Queenie also compared *The Hunger Games* to *Throne of Glass*, written by Sarah Maas.[566] In general, my research interests are located in the intersection of critical media studies, film and gender studies, and in the ways dominant media discourses are presented, and how audiences, readers, and film spectators engage with them. Other research lines have included Foucauldian analyses of the surveillance in *The Hunger Games* saga or studies on the graphic violence that the latter entails and the interest it sparks in young audiences.

[566] Queenie compared *Throne of Glass* to *The Hunger Games* and found that although romance was included in both sagas, it was not their main focus. According to Queenie, the main female character of Sarah Maas' series is also a really strong character who, likes Katniss Everdeen, "goes through a lot" and eventually inspires change within people.

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Appendix 1: *The Hunger Games* film saga - Production details[567]

Produced by - Nina Jacobson & Jon Kilik

Screenplay by - Gary Ross, Suzanne Collins and Billy Ray (*The Hunger Games*, 2012), Simon Beaufoy and Michael Arndt (*Catching Fire*, 2013), Peter Craig and Danny Strong (*Mockingjay*, Parts I and II, 2014 and 2015)

Based on - *The Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins

Starring - Jennifer Lawrence (Katniss Everdeen), Josh Hutcherson (Peeta Mellark), Liam Hemsworth (Gale Hawthorne), Woody Harrelson (Haymitch Abernathy), Elizabeth Banks (Effie Trinket), Stanley Tucci (Caesar Flickerman), Willow Shields (Primrose Everdeen), Amandla Stenberg (Rue) Lenny Kravitz (Cinna), Dayo Okeniyi (Thresh), Alexander Ludwig (Cato), Sam Claflin (Finnick Odair), Jena Malone (Johanna Mason)

Donald Sutherland (President Snow)

Music by - James Newton Howard

Cinematography by - Tom Stern (*The Hunger Games*, 2012), Jo Willems (*Catching Fire*, 2013, *Mockingjay*, Parts I and II, 2014 and 2015)

Production Company - Color Force

Distributed by - Lionsgate

Country: USA

Language: English

Budget - $493 million

Box office - $2.968 billion

Genres: Adventure / Sci-Fi / Thriller

[567] Production details obtained from the online website Internet Movie DataBase (IMdB).

Directed by: Gary Ross / Francis Lawrence. American writer, director and actor Gary Ross directed the first movie of the series, *The Hunger Games*. He has developed his career mostly as a screenwriter, and has been nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Adapted Screenplay nods for the film *Seabiscuit* (2003).[568] The popular music director Francis Lawrence, born in Austria, directed the three remaining films.

[568] Check Gary Ross' biography in the IMDb: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002657/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

Appendix 2: Tentative questionnaire for the focus groups

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">*Katniss Everdeen* - Research study

Focus Group #

Questionnaire

Date:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Key questions</td><td>Follow up</td></tr>
<tr><td>Screening image: Katniss Everdeen in her uniform as a tribute

• Tell me what you think of Katniss Everdeen.

• What do you think of Katniss as a woman?

Screening video clip: Katniss Everdeen as a hunter
Katniss Everdeen is shown hunting in the forests of District 12. She is interrupted by her friend Gale at the end of the clip.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU_iaSWiknk

• What do you think of Katniss as a hunter?
• Do you feel inspired by the character? In which ways?

Screening image: Katniss, Peeta and Gale

• What did you think of the romance in the films?

• What did you think of Katniss's relationships with other men? (President Snow/ Finnick/ Haymitch/ Caesar Flickerman)

Screening video clip: The Hanging Tree
Katniss is shown singing a song that later becomes the anthem for the revolution
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-Oi43EsQNU

• What is the role of race in the saga?</td><td>Name values and characteristics that you associate to her.</td></tr>
</table>

• What do you think of Katniss's relationship with her stylist, Cinna? What do you think of her relationship with Rue? • Do you consider Katniss groundbreaking in movies? • Do you find Katniss empowering? How? *Screening video clip: Ending scene* *Katniss is shown taking care of her baby, while Peeta is playing with their other son* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUxVMszS_6E • What do you think of the ending of the story? • Do you consider Katniss Everdeen a feminist? Why /why not?	Would you like to see more characters like Katniss Everdeen in films and books?

Appendix 3: Demographics survey

- Participant's pseudonym

(your pseudonym should not include initials

or any other identifiers)

_____

- What is your age? _____

- What is your race/ethnicity?

  _____

- Country of citizenship:

  _____

- What is your gender identity?

  5. Male
  6. Female
  7. Transgender
  8. Trans woman
  9. Trans man
  10. Genderfluid
  11. Nonbinary
  12. Agender
  13. Other. Please specify:

- Which of the following terms best describes your sexuality?

  - Heterosexual /straight
  - Gay
  - Lesbian
  - Bisexual
  - Asexual
  - Pansexual
  - Demisexual
  - Other. Please specify:

- What is your marital status?

  1. Single, never married
  2. Married or domestic partnership
  3. Widowed
  4. Divorced or separated

- Do you have children?

  _____

- Are you currently employed?

  A. Yes, part-time.
  B. Yes, full-time.
  C. No.

- Do you have any religious

  affiliations? Identify/explain.

_____

_____

_____

- Have you read The Hunger Games trilogy?

- Yes, all of the novels.
- Yes, one or two of the novels.

Which ones? Mark all that apply.

- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*, 2008 (Book 1)
- Collins, Suzanne. *Catching Fire*, 2009 (Book 2)
- Collins, Suzanne. *Mockingjay*, 2010 (Book 3)
- No, I have only watched the films.

- Have you watch *The Hunger Games* movies?

1. Yes, all of them.
2. Yes, some of them.

   Which ones? Mark all that apply.

   - *The Hunger Games*, 2012 (Film 1)
   - *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, 2013 (Film 2)
   - *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part I*, 2014 (Film 3)
   - *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part II*, (Film 4)
3. No, I have only read the books.

- Do you identify as a feminist? Why? Why not?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

- If you responded "yes" to the previous question, please tell us what type of feminism you identify the most with.

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 4: Focus groups information sheet

EXEMPT INFORMATION SHEET
TITLE: Katniss Everdeen Research Study

VCU IRB NO.: HM20010372

INVESTIGATOR: Paula Talero Alvarez PI: Dr. Archana Pathak

If any information contained in this form is not clear, please ask Paula to explain any information that you do not fully understand.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to find out about young women's attitudes toward Katniss Everdeen.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a young woman who has shown an interest in the novels and/or *The Hunger Games* films.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

In this study, you will participate in a one-hour discussion about Katniss Everdeen. Four more participants will engage in this discussion, which will be mediated by Paula Talero. The meetings will be tape recorded so we are sure to get everyone's ideas, but no real names will be recorded on the tape.

Significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Sometimes talking about these subjects may cause people to become somewhat upset. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the group at any time. If any of this conversation is uncomfortable to you, the study staff will give you names of counselors to contact so you can get help in dealing with these issues.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but, the information we learn from people in this study may help us better understand the ways young women engage with cultural products.

COSTS

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the group and filling out questionnaires.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of a preliminary survey, the interview notes and recordings. Data is being collected only for research purposes.

Your data will be identified by pseudonyms, not names, and stored in a locked research area. Records such as the preliminary survey and the notes from the discussion will be kept in a file cabinet after the study ends and will be destroyed five years upon dissertation defense, or when primary researcher is able to publish manuscript, whichever comes last. Access to all data will be limited to study personnel.

The group sessions will be audio taped, but no real names will be recorded. At the beginning of the session, all members will be asked to use their assigned pseudonyms only so that no names are recorded. The tapes and the notes will be stored in a locked cabinet. After the information from the tapes is typed up, the audio files will be destroyed.

The answers you give us will be protected under a pseudonym. However, information from the study may be looked at or copied for research or legal purposes by Virginia Commonwealth University. Personal information about you might be shared with or copied by authorized officials of the Department of Health and Human Services or other federal regulatory bodies. What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your real name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study. Your decision not to take part will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you do participate, you may freely withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research, contact:

Paula Talero Alvarez at taleroalvarep@vcu.edu *and/or*
Dr. Archana Pathak at aapathak@vcu.edu

The researcher/study staff named above are the best persons to call for questions about your participation in this study.

If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

Office of Research

Virginia Commonwealth University

800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000

P.O. Box 980568

Richmond, VA 23298

Telephone: (804) 827-2157

Contact this number to ask general questions, to obtain information or offer input, and to express concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or if you wish to talk with someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at http://www.research.vcu.edu/human_research/volunteers.htm.

You will receive a copy of this information sheet once you have agreed to participate.

Vita

Paula Talero Alvarez was born on April 18, 1990, in Calamonte, Badajoz, Spain, and is a Spanish citizen. She graduated from Ruta de la Plata High School, Calamonte, Spain in 2008. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Complutense University, Madrid, Spain in 2013. She received a Master of Arts in Cinematography from University of Cordoba in 2014 and a Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2015.