

## **Growing Up Different(ly): Space, Community and the Dissensual Bildungsroman in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games***

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What strikes one first about Suzanne Collins' bestselling trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay* (2008-2010), are the echoes from William Golding's marvelously frightening *The Lord of the Flies*, Stephen King's *The Running Man* and the TV Reality show, *Survivor*. It also recalls that iconic eighteenth century text about European/Western individualism, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which really is the ancestor of *Survivor* as well. Collins' trilogy is set some time in the future when the United States has been destroyed and rehabilitated in the form of twelve outlying districts controlled by the Capitol, together called Panem, under the control of President Snow.

The novels focus on teens as warriors and survivors in a televised fight-to-the-death reality show. The Hunger Games, telecast live to all districts, are an experiment in Social Darwinism, held annually as a reminder to the districts that they had once rebelled against the Capitol. Contestants are picked through a game of chance: a lottery called the 'reaping,' where selected teens are mowed down, like the reaping of grain. The term is also a reminder to the districts that the Games in which they lose their teens are what they have collectively reaped for their rebellion. Once a contestant's name is drawn in the lottery anyone may come forward as a substitute. Katniss Everdeen, around whom the trilogy revolves, volunteers to take the place of her sister, Prim, when the latter's name is drawn in the lottery. The teens thrown into the arena of the Hunger Games learn to make allies and hard choices in order to survive, but they also learn to deceive, masquerade, pretend and kill. The novels offer us a dystopic *bildungsroman* where the process of growing up involves acquiring enough deceit, skills and ruthlessness to betray, maim and kill fellow teens. In what follows I focus on two central features of the trilogy: spaces of growing up, and community.

### **Of Other Spaces**

What Katniss Everdeen, the central protagonist of the trilogy, decides and chooses in the ruthless wastes of the arena will determine what she will be like when she returns to District 12, her home, and the people she has left behind. In a sense, her character-building—her *bildung*—occurs in the arena. The arena is a space that might shape her as an adult, if she lets it do so. The fact that Katniss chooses not to behave as a 'regular' contestant—she shows compassion, mercy, tenderness, strategy, loyalty but not the ruthlessness expected of all contestants—constitutes her 'growing up.'

The arena may be seen as the space where possible worlds—the route to *bildung*, in fact—open up to the contestants. I take this idea about possible worlds from Sarah Cantrell's reading of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, where Cantrell defines space as "a space of possibility, chance, and choice" (Cantrell, 2010: 303). The contestants in the Games are drawn by lots. This matter of chance is also a space of choice: Katniss substitutes for her sister, Prim. This choice—which might lead to Katniss' death in the Games—will be tested in the arena where she is constantly under pressure to decide whether Peeta, her fellow-teen from District 12 and now fellow-contestant, is on her side or not. What they choose will determine what they

become, and how they will shape the space of the home districts to which they will return, if they win. That is, the arena is the space that will shape Katniss' home as well.

The arena is a space where a rite of passage is held: one may survive with dignity or through sheer ruthless deviousness. We could then treat the arena as a space of passage into possible worlds, worlds of choice and decisions. The Games are, like the TV show *Survivor*, essentially “unscripted chance” where the contestants enjoy considerable individual freedom to act as they deem fit (Haralovich & Trosset, 2004, p.79), and whose outcomes are always unpredictable, given the nature of the hostile environment where the Gamemakers themselves seek to kill the contestants. But this “unscripted chance” meets choice in the Games, and how individuals choose is really Collins' theme.

Choices made by the other contestants are primarily for selfish ends. But Peeta, Rue, Finnick (all contestants from the other districts) and Katniss choose on behalf of others. For instance, all of Peeta's choices through the Games are determined by their odds of keeping Katniss safe. In the latter two books, Katniss aims to direct attention away from Peeta (and later, in District 13, from her sister Prim and her friend from district 12, Gale, whom she loves, but is not sure she is in love with). Peeta is taken prisoner at the end of Book Two, and in Book Three when Katniss wonders what the Capitol will do to Peeta, it is her sister who tells her “whatever it takes to break you” (Collins, 2010, p.159). Compassion is not a trait the Games encourage. When Katniss covers her ally Rue, now dead, with flowers, she later recognizes her act for what it was: “even that smacks of rebellion” (Collins, 2008, p.363). Selflessness and sacrifice are also out of place in the Games, and yet the old contestant, Mags, walks into the poisonous gas and kills herself so that the rest would have a chance of survival (Collins, 2009, p. 301).

Katniss is first decked out in a blazing costume. Given the spectacle that is the Games, Katniss initially thinks this costume is only about being remembered: “No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire” (Collins, 2008, p.70). The aim, however, the designer Cinna tells her, is to capture her spirit. And Katniss thinks, “My spirit ... it suggests I'm a fighter ... maybe I don't go around loving everybody I meet ... but I do care for some people” (Collins, 2008, p. 121). The arena is the space where all these qualities will not only be tested, but put on display. Similarly, what Peeta declares to the televised audience—that he is in love with Katniss (Collins, 2008, p. 138)—is what he will have to demonstrate in the space of the arena. The arena is the space of possibility where the contestants do not necessarily have to live up to the image they have ‘produced’ for the screens. But Peeta and Katniss do, and this is what transforms them into the icons of the rebellion. Peeta, for example, tells Katniss when alone:

“I want to die as myself ... I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not ... I keep wishing I could think of a way to ... to show the Capitol they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Games” (Collins, 2008, p. 141-2).

Peeta's choice is similar to that of Katniss: he will not be a pawn in the Capitol's Games.

Just before they are dropped into the arena Katniss has been gifted a gold pin with the symbol of a peculiar bird, a mockingjay.<sup>1</sup> The bird becomes a mascot to Katniss, even as she herself becomes the mascot of the rebellion toward the second volume. When the first volume concludes, Katniss and Peeta fake their deaths and thus both become winners in the Games: an act of rebellion in and of itself. Once again, a symbol, a myth and an image is what the

contestants start with, but it is the choices they make in the arena that demonstrate the validity of the myths: Katniss proves she is the mockingjay, the bird that mocks the Capitol, flying free and voicing rebellion throughout. Where the Capitol uses the Games as an icon of control and subservience, and Katniss as an icon of her home district, Katniss manages to alter the symbolic valence of these icons. Thus she becomes not a representative of the districts' main profession (coal-mining) or their allegiance/subservience but of their departure from the pre-determined role. When the other districts also support Katniss, she becomes a symbol of their refusal to be subordinate vassals. When Katniss defies the Capitol, the districts also do the same. She appears costumed and playacting as the mockingjay, and the districts validate this symbolism.

This reading implies, as Cantrell proposes of Pullman's texts, that the space of the arena is not only a real space but also a metaphor for all possible combinations of choices and their outcomes. It is a notional space as well that "also includes all the potential permutations of the past and all those possibilities that may come into being in the future" (Cantrell, 2010, p. 303). The choices Katniss and Peeta make are not, as Collins emphasizes throughout the trilogy, about the Games or the events in the arena, but about the future of humanity itself—the after-life of humanity, as it were.

In Volume Three, the rebellion by the districts against the Capitol has been successful. Coin, the rebel leader, and her troops have gained control of President Snow's palace, and placed him under arrest, with plans for his public execution. Katniss, as the icon of the districts' collective and cumulative rebellion, is chosen as the executioner of the former President. However, when Katniss is about to execute the deposed President Snow, she turns the direction of the arrow at the very last instant and shoots Coin, the leader of the rebel District 13, dead (Collins, 2010, p. 372). She does this because she understands the truth of what President Snow had told her: "Coin was intending to take my place from the beginning" (Collins, 2010, p. 357). She had "done exactly what he said. Let the Capitol and the districts run one another into the ground and then sauntered in to take power." Katniss realizes that "everything was within her [Coin's] grasp ... except me" (Collins, 2010, p. 360). It is Peeta's vow that Katniss is now fulfilling: that she will not be a pawn in anybody's game, not Snow's and not Coin's.

It is also significant that the Districts of Panem are made up of mainly working class families. In this dystopia starvation is common and, like in Stephen King's *The Running Man*, the Games actually are facilitated by the poverty of the districts: the contestants are treated well, and if they win, their families will not have to experience poverty any more: "no more fear of hunger. A new kind of freedom," thinks Katniss (Collins, 2008, p.318).

The space of the Games is a space where a growing up is at once initiated and thwarted. It is initiated because the contestants have to make moral choices in order to survive for as long as possible, and they come to terms with themselves there. The Games, like *Survivor*, valorize individual skill, utility and innovative thinking. To adapt Tony Tremblay's argument about *Survivor* (2003, p. 49), these skills become the counterpoise to the arena's chaotic space. However, they must remain children—or child-victims—for the show to be successful, for the full pathos of the Games relies upon the image of children as hunters. The arena is "elemental space," as Tremblay terms the spaces of *Survivor*: devoid of the usual structures of towns/cities, homes or parks that the contestants lived in/with before they entered the arena. This is where the parallels with *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Lord of the Flies* emerge too: individuals have to make the shift from their regular topoi to inimical elemental space where they adapt their wits and

skills to survive. The teens have to either lapse into brutal animalism where survival for as long as possible is the only end—to which any means are acceptable, as demonstrated by the other contestants—or they retain, like Katniss, Peeta and Finnick, their humanity even though they risk losing their lives. The test, then, is of the durability of humanity when placed in completely unfamiliar settings, and where it is easy to ‘become’ animal. Collins’ trilogy does suggest a *bildungsroman*, in terms of the child growing up. The classical European *bildungsroman*, Frank Moretti notes, is marked by a tension between self-determination and social integration (1987, p.15). The full and proper citizen, in this scheme of things, is one who has been convinced that his (the gender is clearly male) internal development ties in with social requirements, that one’s formation as an individual in and for oneself coincides without rifts with one’s social integration as a simple part of a whole (Moretti, 1987, p.16).

Joseph Slaughter writing about human rights narratives posits a dissensual *bildungsroman* – which dissents and departs from the usual *bildungsroman* - that “protests the protagonist’s exclusion from the public realm of rights, yet articulates this protest within the normative genre of the rights claim” (Slaughter, 2007, pp.181-182; see also Nayar 2012). Social integration here isn’t possible because the protagonist is excluded from society and is prevented from attaining personhood. The dissensual *bildungsroman* is a narrative of the dissonance. To return to the theme of space, the teens have to find their *bildung* by integrating into an “official” social order, one seen in the gamespace of the arena where they make certain choices to survive. This official social order expects them to become ruthless, deceitful and individualistic: these are the values the social order of the arena teaches them. It could be argued that the purpose is to strip the contestants of any humanity, to degrade them to the level of brutal killers without a conscience, but also to show to the viewers that all individuals, given the chance, would lose their humanity. The Capitol seems to suggest that it possesses the power to reduce the populace of the districts to mere animality. The dissensual *bildungsroman* that is *The Hunger Games* emerges not only in the kind of social order the teens are expected to integrate into—during the time they are alive, of course—but also in the refusal of some of them to acquire this particular integration.

The dissensual *bildungsroman* suggests that it is in the disrespect for and anxiety about the official social order that some of the teens achieve self-determination. The requirements of the Games, ironically, include a sense of the social as threat, as inimical to one’s personal survival, where the solidarities achieved during the Games are only ephemeral, false and thin and where the teens are expected to fake solidarity in order to survive for as long as they can. The dissensus lies in the teens finding their *bildung* in the refusal to integrate with this official social order and instead finding it in a non-official one. The social integration that is central to the sense of self emphasizes a commonality of suffering, of rights and shared agony among the contestants and their memories of the people they have left behind. Katniss, Finnick, Rue and Peeta recognize the fungibility of all contestants. And this recognition means that each of them is able to share with other victims. The social integration in the dissensual *bildungsroman* that is Collins’ trilogy is based on this equality of oppression, a shared history of injustice, manipulation and cruelty. It is in their integration into the non-official social order of victimage, suffering and oppression that Katniss, Peeta, Finnick find their *bildung*. Emanuelle Burton seems to suggest this line of interpretation when she says that the trilogy “the staggering incommensurability of our individual lives to the tasks that the world seems to set for us” (Burton, 2012, online). It is in the way in which Katniss, Peeta and Finnick negotiate this incommensurability that the dissensus and their *bildung* emerges.

One final point about Collins' dissensual *bildungsroman*: in the classical *bildungsroman*, the father figure enables the young man to fit into the social order. Here in the dissensual *bildungsroman* the individual has to reject both figures of authority as well as the social order represented by those figures (Snow, the Capitol, even their mentor Haymitch). It is in the rejection of any harmonious social integration into the oppressive and unjust social order of the Games, and the choice of identification with fellow-victims, that the protagonist discovers her/his subjecthood.

So yes, the space of the Games is a space of growing up, but one where it is not the prescribed integration into a society – where they only think of themselves—that Katniss, Peeta, Rue and Finnick demonstrate. They grow up because they recognize their fungibility with all such victims, and they turn the arena into a space where shared victimage and suffering constitutes a form of integration in defiance of the Capitol's aim to integrate them into its own structures of selfish cruelty. This is the “other space” of the arena: where programmed growth patterns and social integration fail and a certain kind of unacceptable growing-up occurs in the case of some of the protagonists. It is within this dissensual *bildungsroman* where social norms and rules are not adhered to that Collins discovers hope.

### **Does Reality TV Make a Real Community?**

Reviewing Book One, James Blasingame writes, “It [the novel] feels very much like the current brand of reality television in which the ‘stars’ are real people from dire circumstances who have fabulous wealth dangled in front of them only to have it snatched away at the last moment” (2009. p. 725). This is perhaps the most accurate account of Collins' work, and this section elaborates the link the novels forge between reality TV and community formation.

Reality TV is an experiment in social engineering where a group of people are placed in a house (*Big Brother*) or on an island (*Survivor*) and we watch them interact – quarrel, fall in love, make friends, fights – on camera. The entire gamedoc (game documentary) is a laboratory where we observe the behaviour of humans. A community also emerges in the followers who vote, text, and express opinions as the show runs on the screens. In the case of Collins' Games, various districts send in food and medicines and thus the entire gamedoc becomes a nominally participatory program. Such programming encourages the audience to constitute a community—whether to vote people off a show or apprehend a criminal and thereby render society safer (Cavender, 2004). Docudramas and crime–appeal TV with their elaborate reconstructions and pursuit of real criminals also perform a particular kind of community building. The reconstruction of a crime scene educates the audience on the kinds of crime, and criminals, in our real lives. Such Reality TV creates a world that intersects with our own: a social reality of crime, criminals, investigative techniques and law enforcement procedures. This makes Reality TV, especially its crime-appeal programs, a consciousness-raising (possibly panic-inducing) mode where social realities are made visually available to us. This contributes to the sense of community where my neighbourhood, my child, my local cops intersects with our neighbourhood, our children and our cops. The Games are primarily reality TV, a genre now almost ubiquitous across the world. Right from the “reaping” to the events in the arena, to the finale: everything is telecast to all the districts in Panem.

The Games in Collins' novels, like our own *Survivor*, are meant to replicate the conditions of

social interaction: competition, the rat-race, survival strategies, individualism, etc. As critic Nick Couldry puts it, gamedocs are “social processes that take real individuals and submit them to surveillance, analysis and selective display as means to entertainment and enhanced audience participation” (Couldry, 2004, p. 72). In this sense the gamedoc that is the Games is meant to be both a reflection of social realities as well as a way of managing the real: the audience is shown and instructed in how to survive—you have to be ruthless and selfish to survive in the world. What is subverted is the kind of community—of scared, pliant and ultimately vulnerable citizenry—that the Games intend to create. The contestants in Collins novels ‘enact’ for the camera a wholly different scenario.

As both Katniss and Peeta discover, this medium and genre could also be turned to their advantage. I propose that Collins is exploring the other uses of Reality TV: where the medium and the genre, rather than merely playing upon anxieties, actively enables community formation and civic consciousness. This theme is inaugurated in Book Two, in President Snow’s speech to Katniss, quoted above. It is taken up more substantively in *Mockingjay* where the rebels sabotage the Capitol’s telecast, producing and disseminating their own propaganda and achieving a political solidarity with other populations in the districts (as happens in the film version of King’s *Running Man* as well).

The communities in all the districts are linked together by fear of repression by the Capitol. The Capitol knows everything that is going (Snow tells Katniss that he even knows of her kiss with Gale, their first overt expression of desire and love, in the woods) ensuring that the districts do not collaborate. Within each district there is some sense of community—and it is important that all districts are essentially working class districts that slave away to provide various products to the Capitol. Within the context of the Games, every district also contributes (as ‘sponsors,’) something to the contestants. Katniss, Peeta, and Finnick are all recipients of bread, medicines and other such essentials (Collins, 2008, p. 288, and elsewhere). A sense of community begins to cohere around the contestants, and the products that are sent as ‘gifts’ ensure that contestants recognize the sacrifice a particular district has made in rustling up these valuable products for them. In a sense, then, the Games and the telecast of the events in the arena enable Katniss, for one, to become the recognizable televisual icon of the rebellion. The weapon of fear—the Games, surveillance and TV—becomes the instrument of rebellion.

Most crucially, we have the arena itself where the ideologies of community and trust, alliances and friendships clash with individualism, duplicity and false allegiances. Reality TV shows such as *Survivor*, Gary Cavender demonstrates, undermine the notion of community because they more often showcase false alliances, duplicity and treachery. They present a world devoid of trust—the adhesive binding members of the community together. In Collins’ Games contestants disguise their strengths and highlight their weaknesses, as Katniss remembers in the context of Johanna Mason:

“She seemed like such a sniveling, cowardly fool that no one bothered about her until only a handful of contestants were left. It turned out she could kill viciously. Pretty clever the way she played it...” (Collins, 2008, p. 41).

When Katniss meets Rue she offers the girl an alliance, and Rue asks her if she had been joking (Collins, 2008, p. 201). Katniss herself is led to believe, by his actions, that Peeta had teamed up with the Capitol’s contestants and was helping them hunt her down. When Haymitch advises Katniss to “make some friends” her immediate response is, “don’t trust any of them” (Collins,

2009, p. 222). Examples of such distrust, deceit and disguise could be multiplied from the trilogy, but the point, I believe, has been made. Like typical reality TV the Games are about individuals who team up but do not necessarily trust each other. The arena is a space devoid of trust and the very nature of the Games—only one contestant may live—ensures that everybody is wary of everybody else. However, Collins’ strategy is to show how, even in the midst of such a condition of competitive brutality, the choices individuals make might still ensure the anterior moments of a community. Individuals die so that others might survive: Mags, who walks to her death, Finnick who dies defending Katniss, Rue, who offers extremely useful advice that saves Katniss, are examples. This lends to the trilogy a liberal humanist tinge where Collins seems to see hope within even such contexts of hopelessness and indifference.

The visuals of the Games enable the districts to coalesce around Katniss. Within the Games, the very nature of the events ensures that alliances are formed and trust gained. Commentators James Hay and Laurie Ouellette have argued that reality TV programs educate the people on new norms and values of citizenship, capability-building, ideas of self-improvement and civic roles and responsibilities). Reality TV (they are speaking here of makeover programs) is a new “medium” of instruction (Hay & Ouellette, 2008, p.109) where the expert instructs you on what to wear, to study, to invest in, etc. (see also Bratich, 2007). In a later essay Ouellette writes, “However artificial and staged these programs appear on the surface, they help to constitute powerful truths concerning appropriate forms of civic conduct and problem-solving” (Ouellette, 2010, p. 68). Ouellette is investing Reality TV with considerable social-civic functions here. Extending this argument to examine Collins’ work, I argue that central to the novels is the sense of community formation.

The Games are not so much about the war games the contestants play but about the reportage and coverage of the Games. In the arena, knowing they are being constantly watched, some of the contestants retain their humanity. Their acts of rebellion, however minor, demonstrate to the viewers in the multiple districts (and to each other) that their humanity cannot be stripped by the Games. Katniss is initially depicted as ruthless – the incident with the lynx in Book One, where a lynx follows Katniss around and is eventually killed by her, leading to a short moment of remorse that is quickly subsumed under a sense of achievement for the profit she has made of the animal, is illustrative (Collins, 2008, p.7) but is increasingly represented as sentimental (which is how one reviewer described her; see Green, 2008). This is the object lesson of the visual spectacle of the Games: trust, community building, selflessness and sacrifice. If critics like Hay and Ouellette are right in their interpretation of the genre, then Collins seems to validate their argument in her appraisal of the Games as dehumanizing but not totalitarian in its effects, that they teach civic-communitarian responsibilities and very often help build alliances that are productive in other worlds as well. Thus the choices made by the contestants within the space of the Games determine the shape of the community they help build outside, back home in the districts.

The Games are meant to instill fear, mutual distrust and a complete dependence on the Capitol, which comes across as invincible and all-knowing in the Games (the parallel with the ancient Roman gladiatorial contests is made in the book itself). But the choices and acts of Peeta, Katniss and others deliver an entirely different message to the audience. Where the reality TV format of the Games was supposed to create a citizenry that knows only ruthlessness for the sake of survival and a fear of the Capitol the contestants here teach selflessness and loyalty. The “medium” of instruction remains the same, the lesson is however radically different. The

audience, watching Peeta enact (“for the camera” as the novels keep reminding us, (Collins, 2008, p.130, 382) his love for Katniss (helping her escape her pursuers in Book One, for example), or watching Katniss risk herself to protect Rue, Peeta and the others, learns that individuals continue to have a choice even in the game of chance like the Games. Katniss, said one reviewer, “struggles to win not only the Games but the inherent contest for audience approval” (Turner, 2008, p. 58). While this demonstrates the exact nature of reality TV’s larger purpose, it ignores what Katniss teaches the communities in various servile districts watching her on live TV.<sup>2</sup>

Collins shows how communities are formed not through the actualization of the self in consumerism or self-improvement or even survival but, ironically and often tragically, through selflessness. The dissensual *bildungsroman* I spoke of in the earlier section leads to the making of a protagonist who does not integrate into the social order ordained for him/her. Instead, the protagonist builds her/his personhood through a process of selfless fungibility with fellow victims: and this is the start, in Collins’ ultimately hopeful vision, of a new community.

Peeta swears not to become a pawn, to remain true to himself. Even with the brainwashing he is subject to, when he “can’t tell what is real any more” (Collins, 2010, p. 270), the Games and establishment do not entirely change him into a mere contestant out to kill and win. His core humanity is retrieved, in small measures, by the efforts of Katniss, Gale and others throughout *Mockingjay*. It is the selflessness of the contestants that eventually enables the rebellion. The Games teach civic responsibility and instill a sense of worth and pride in some of its contestants, and this is what is taken out of the arena and into the districts: that some of the contestants nearly died because they chose to stay human/e within the nightmarish, dehumanizing Games. Pride, humanity and dignity are set as higher values by Peeta, Finnick, Katniss, Rue and Mags, and this is the theme one takes away from the trilogy.

President Snow recognizes this power of the contestants to gather support and bring about unification among the districts’ populations. The encounter between Snow and Katniss becomes the moment when the politics of the Games becomes overt and the ideologies articulated. In all dystopic fiction, Douglas Texter argues, there has to be a dialogue between the protagonist-victim class and the elite, controlling class in which the state of the country, the political economy and the ideologies are unravelled (Texter, 2007, p. 43, 56). In Collins this moment occurs when President Snow visits Katniss’ house (Collins, 2009, p. 18-29). Snow tells her that her drama with the berries—in which Katniss and Peeta pretend to swallow poisonous berries and the organizers are forced to rescue both of them because otherwise there would be no victors—might be the moment when rebellion was ignited in the districts: “if a girl from District Twelve of all places can defy the Capitol and walk away unharmed, what is to stop them from doing the same?” he asks (Collins, 2009, p. 21). While the telecast of the incident, he says, might have fooled a lot of people “not everyone in the districts fell for your act.” He then tells Katniss of the need to control, to prevent the “system” from “collaps[ing]” (Collins, 2009, p. 21). What Snow is pointing to is the formation of a community behind the symbol that is Katniss. It is his recognition that Katniss is the point of departure for something more, a symbol not just of survival skills in the inimical world of the Games but a survivor in the real world of the twelve districts as well. Thus reality TV does create a real community, and its ‘leaders’ are the contestants who discovered their *bildung* through a rejection of the official social order and therefore can now build their communities as spaces of resistance.

Collins' valorization of the community and of human dignity in the face of great tragedy is not, however, just a grand finale. The trilogy ends with unnecessary and excessive deaths (of Finnick, Prim and numerous children). So it is difficult to see the trilogy as ending with a sense of hope. *The Hunger Games* is therefore a critical dystopia with a twist. Tom Moylan defines a critical dystopia as

“a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (cited in Texter, 2007, p. 53).

Collins ultimately seeks hope in the wasteland of the Games when she shows the (now clichéd) ‘triumph of the human spirit’, where selflessness, courage and loyalty win over greed, competition and selfishness. As Kay Sambell in her incisive essay on dystopian fiction for children argues, such fiction has more ambiguous and open endings, even as it points out to children the dangers of mankind continuing upon its present course of actions (Sambell, 2003, p.163, 172). To maintain hope at the end of the story is a dystopian author’s major dilemma, according to Sambell. Collins shows how resistance and political activism emerge from within the present system of excessive televisuality and profiteering scar-cultures (a term I have used elsewhere to capture the extreme cultures of adventure contests, where participants suffer, but also the telecasts of catastrophe, bodily disabilities and injuries, of maiming and deaths, the real-life horror of victims but also of risk-taking enthusiasts (Nayar, 2009, 2011). The arena is thus the space of possibilities in this sense as well. Empowered by the very devices that keep them subservient—the telecasts, the surveillance—the desperate human contestants (and later the populations of the various districts) evolve strategic alliances based on loyalty not necessity, on dignity rather than utility and altruism rather than selfishness. The innovative rebellion that Peeta and Katniss demonstrate—the berries incident at the end of Book One—is at once imaginative and politically significant: and this is what Snow acknowledges in his conversation with Katniss. As a critical dystopia, Collins’ work seems to seek a human core even within the brutal world of competition, and this core – a liberal humanist rearguard response to the individualism of the Games but also, perhaps the world as we live in now – is what she suggests is worth preserving.

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<sup>1</sup> Mockingjays are hybrids of mocking birds and the genetically engineered jabberjays—spy birds created by the Capitol to overhear and report the conversations in the Districts. When the Districts discovered the true function of the jabberjays they fed the spy birds wrong and misleading information. The Capitol, realizing that the jabberjays had outlived their usefulness, decide to let the birds die. But the jabberjays mate with mockingbirds and produce mockingjays, who possessed an uncanny ability to mimic human vocal sounds (Collins, 2008, p. 42-43).

<sup>2</sup> Dean Schneider (2011) argues that Collins' trilogy can serve pedagogic purposes, teaching children of the nature of war.