



## **Katniss Everdeen's Posthuman Identity in Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games Series: Free as a Mockingjay?**

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**Abstract:** *This article draws on theories of the posthuman in order to identify the significance of the figure of the mockingjay throughout the three volumes of Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games trilogy. It argues that the ever-tighter association between Katniss Everdeen and this bio-engineered hybrid species of bird thematizes issues central to posthuman theory, most notably the blurring of species boundaries and the potential dangers to society posed by advanced technology. Furthermore, it discusses the impact of biotechnology upon the protagonist's sense of identity. Analyzing the bird symbolism in the series, and in particular the development of the mockingjay, the article thus considers the values attributed to bio- and cyborg technology in the series as a whole.*

**Keywords:** *Collins, Suzanne; Hunger Games; posthumanism; biotechnology*

Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games trilogy is usually classed as dystopian fiction,<sup>1</sup> a genre that favours the blurring of boundaries and open-ended conclusions.<sup>2</sup> The categorization fits, as the trilogy features both of these characteristics. While Ellyn Lem and Holly Hassel (118–19) explore the blurring of boundaries governing gender in their analysis of the trilogy, in this article I focus

on the blurring of boundaries governing speciation that occurs in Collins's text through the symbolic figure of the mockingjay. The blurring of species boundaries is central to theories of the posthuman, a term frequently used to describe a range of possible radical changes faced by contemporary humanity in response to recent technological advances that challenge and destabilize

the boundaries between human, animal, and machine. Drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg theory and Victoria Flanagan's theorization of posthumanism in young adult literature, I analyze how the symbol of the mockingjay that graces the original book covers of the Hunger Games trilogy and the posters for the film adaptations<sup>3</sup> helps to build and develop the protagonist's gradual identification with the posthuman figure of the hybrid. Although this posthuman connection is a significant subtext in the books, it has been little discussed so far in scholarly analyses of the trilogy, and thus warrants further scrutiny. In what follows, I analyze three key, interwoven strands that link Katniss and the mockingjay: the rhetorical function of feathers as costume in the dressing up of Katniss to invoke a particular species of bird; the motif of song versus silence; and finally, the merger of the natural and the artificial. First, however, I outline the specific aspects of the theories of Haraway and Flanagan upon which my discussion builds.

### **Technology, Species Boundaries, and the Body**

An influential reference point within posthuman theory, and one that links technology and feminism, is Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," in which she argues in favour of a dismantling of strict boundaries between humans, biological organisms, and machines, as well as that between technology and the self. Haraway heralds the breakdown of these boundaries as an opportunity to

undermine what she calls "universal, totalizing theory" and to take "responsibility for the social relations of science and technology [by . . .] refusing an anti-science metaphysics."<sup>4</sup> She notes that, "science and technology are possible means of great human satisfaction as well as a matrix of complex dominations" (181). Thus, Haraway does not share in the techno-skepticism expressed by ecofeminists such as Donald A. McAndrew, who argues that ecofeminism stands in opposition to practices of science and technology, since these are founded on a view of nature as something to be mastered and conquered (371). For Haraway, "[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves," a course that involves "both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships" (181). Consequently, Haraway's view of the posthuman aims to take into account the dangers but also the promises of science and technology—a balanced view with which it is useful to approach the representation of advanced technology in Collins's trilogy.

In her discussion of technology and identity in YA literature, which focuses on the "reworking of the female subject" in terms of "technology and the body," Flanagan argues that "the emphasis that critical posthumanism places on embodiment is of particular consequence for female subjects" (101). This is because Western humanist constructions of the subject have long been influenced by the legacy of Cartesian mind/body



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dualism, which, due to the link between feminine subjectivity and the body, excludes women as subjects (Flanagan 100–01). Flanagan further notes that YA fictions depicting female characters in the process of growth and transition typically are concerned with “relations between physical appearance, subjectivity and interpersonal relationships” and that the role played by the female body in the construction of female identity is significant, since patriarchal discourses of femininity “seek to prescribe only certain body shapes, physical features and behaviours as desirable” (101). Such bodily prescriptions exert significant pressure on Katniss Everdeen, the female protagonist of the Hunger Games trilogy, who experiences a severe re-shaping of her physiognomy, her identity, her knowledge of the world, and her relationships as the story unfolds. Importantly, however, Katniss’s identity is not only shaped by the “patriarchal discourses on femininity” identified by Flanagan. Due to encounters with social and political power structures, and with different sets of cultural practices—some of which include the use of biotechnology for human enhancement—she gradually comes to identify with the genderless, cross-species symbol of the mockingjay. It is this development in the protagonist that supports a posthuman reading of Collins’s series, signalled not only in the text, but also in the cover art.

### **Katniss’s Exposure to Advanced Technologies**

Collins’s trilogy is set in a future North America, somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Panem, the country in which Katniss lives, is run by a dictatorship that keeps its segregated population in check through a variety of means. In the country’s twelve Districts, people exist on the brink of starvation, imprisoned behind barbed wire fences and obliged to produce raw materials and goods to supply the Capitol’s citizenry,

who enjoy an abundance bordering on gluttony. The country's name is derived from the Latin phrase "panem et circenses" (literally "bread and circuses"), coined by the Roman poet Juvenal (circa C. E. 60–141), who in his Tenth Satire lamented the decline of public responsibility. He claimed that the Roman citizenry had ceased to take any interest in government, clamouring only for decadence and entertainment (Köhne and Ewigleben 8). The phrase has since become metonymic, suggesting a lack of political responsibility on the part of the public. Further referencing the Roman Empire, Panem's twelve Districts must each year elect two young tributes who are sent to battle to the death in the circus-like Hunger Games for the amusement of the well-fed population in the Capitol. By providing a spectacle aimed to distract the masses from political engagement, they help to secure political stability for the country's oppressive government. In the last volume of the trilogy, the allusion to the ruling practices of the Roman Empire is made explicit (*Mockingjay* 249).

Where the Panem elite differ from their Roman forbears is in their reliance on cosmetic surgery and bio-technological medicine to modify their appearance in line with a posthuman aesthetic. As Mads Rosendahl Thomsen notes:

The options for improvement, and perhaps even perfection, are manifold at present, with new opportunities for creating incremental or significant

change through new media environments, "cyborgification," and genetic engineering, which in turn place a heavier burden on ethics, increase the number of choices individuals and societies must make, and present them with greater risks both individually and at a societal level. Many of the technologies that drive this are new, although . . . the ideas of change and conditioning are not new, but previously expressed themselves through less powerful means. (216)

The ethical challenges posed by advanced technology to both individuals and societies feature as a significant sub-text in Collins's trilogy, since the Capitol's unjust regime is founded on its creation of such technology to exploit and subjugate the poorer Districts, for instance through the use of bio-engineered animals as weapons. Katniss becomes entwined in the political power struggles of Panem through her encounter with the country's elite when she volunteers as a contestant in the Hunger Games to save her little sister. Her exposure to the Capitol's bio-medically assisted aesthetic culture sets her on a course toward posthuman embodiment, as she gradually develops into a symbol for and the rallying mark of Panem's resistance movement, though at considerable cost to herself. The pains, abuses, and deprivations that form part of Katniss's posthuman emergence are thus part of the trilogy's ethical probing of posthuman issues.

The reader first encounters the association between Katniss and the mockingjay in the paratexts of the series, since the mockingjay motif is centrally placed on the original cover of the trilogy's first volume, *The Hunger Games*. The original cover shows a golden bird within a circle against a black background (see fig. 1). Portrayed with an arrow in its beak, the bird is linked to the main protagonist and focalizer, who is an accomplished archer. The golden circle is attached to a further geometric structure of connecting circles that look like nodes in an interlocking "machinery," alluding to Katniss's entrapment in a dictatorial and unjust political system. In this illustration, the golden bird bends its head toward the bottom left corner. The dark background communicates a sense of grief, which is also suggested by the position of the bird's tilted head. Its beak is closed: the bird is silent. This motif connects to a long literary tradition, going at least as far back as Ovid,<sup>5</sup> of using the figure of a hooded, clipped, or caged bird to represent a trapped or exiled person—a motif that has also "stood in particular for a woman's restricted life in a society dominated by men" (Ferber 26–27). Both these traditional readings of the bird motif are clearly relevant to the *Hunger Games* trilogy, as are the tropes of the singing and the silent bird.

The original cover of the second volume shows a darker bird against a vibrant yellow and red background; the world is ablaze with the fire to which this volume's title refers. The bird is invigorated, struggling to break

out of its enclosure; the geometric pattern has come visually to the fore. The title alludes to Katniss, known in the first volume as "the girl who was on fire" (81), due to the costume that she is made to wear upon entry into the Games, a dress suggesting burning embers. While the bird looks scorched on this cover, the background is on fire, as rebellion stirs against the oppressive politics of the Capitol in several of Panem's Districts. The head of the bird is slightly raised; it is looking ahead toward the future. The arrow has gone, and a single line in the background makes it look as if its beak is open, suggesting that the oppressed are starting to voice their protests.

The cover of the third volume shows a light blue bird against a blue background. Its wings are fully expanded and it has broken free of the enclosing circle; part of the "machinery" that held it in place has gone to pieces. The bird's beak is again closed, but its head is turned upward, reinforcing the sense of hope that the light blue colour traditionally symbolizes. Thus, the pictorial representation on the last cover challenges the classification of the *Hunger Games* as a dystopian narrative. As Kay Sambell points out, adult dystopias demand the protagonist's final defeat and failure, whereas a key characteristic of children's literature is an optimistic outlook (165). Arguably, the original covers of the *Hunger Games* trilogy straddle this divide by drawing up a dystopian canvas while allowing the reader to maintain the hope of a happy ending. Both the gradual lightening of the background colours and the fact

that the series as a whole follows the classic trajectory of children's literature—the pattern of home/away/home<sup>6</sup>—indicate the alignment of the text with children's literature rather than with dystopian fiction. To readers who have not seen the pictorial sequence of the original covers, this alignment is less obvious, and the outcome of the narrative remains open to speculation throughout the third volume.

The paperback editions that Scholastic released in the UK in 2014 maintain the narrative suspense by omitting the sequence of the US covers (see fig. 2). These paperback editions replicate the posters from the film adaptation of the series, emphasizing the visually spectacular flames and suggesting continuity as much as change in the bird's circumstances; while the bird gradually raises its head, it seems to remain trapped within the circle rather than break free of its constraints. The bird is seemingly caught in a recurring inferno of flames, unlike the blue sky on the cover of the American Scholastic edition of *Mockingjay*. Instead of a soaring bird, the cover of the UK *Mockingjay* suggests crucifixion, or the phoenix, adding a religious touch to the iconography that is absent from the trilogy's original cover sequence. Here the phoenix iconography subtly aligns the books with the high-grossing Harry Potter series and its emphasis on both Christian symbolism and the symbol of the phoenix (Guanio-Uluru, *Ethics*). The phoenix links both these popular texts to the classic literary trope of

metamorphosis, which is central to much fantasy and world literature, and to J. K. Rowling's series (Guanio-Uluru, *Ethics*).

Through their differing emphases, the two cover art sequences cue the readers of Collins's series differently, suggesting discrepant readings of the mockingjay symbol and thereby signalling that the nature of the trilogy's engagement with posthuman concerns is open to interpretation. While the original covers indicate that the narrative revolves around the theme of freedom versus oppression, and insinuate, through the narrative sequence, that things will end well, the repetitive imagery of a bird on fire in the UK version invokes the phoenix and thus potentially (a promise of) longevity or immortality. Regardless of emphasis, both sets of covers present the bird as a key symbolic figure in the series and visually portray the protagonist as merged with the symbolic mockingjay. Given the strong association within Western culture of birds with freedom, the prominence of the bird motif on these covers hints at a connection between posthuman embodiment—symbolized by the mockingjay—and freedom. This is particularly true of the original covers, on which the bird finally soars toward an idyllic blue sky, while the cover art of the UK paperback edition undermines any association with the idyll by trapping the mockingjay in a recurring inferno of flames. The following section details how such a shift from idyll to inferno characterizes the trilogy.



Figure 1: Cover design by Elizabeth B. Parisi and Tim O'Brien. Reproduced with permission from Scholastic Inc.



**Figure 2:** Design by Ignition. Reproduced with permission from Scholastic Inc.

### From Simple Idyll to Technological Complexity

As Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry note, the Romantic conception of childhood, which regards children as innocent, pure, and close to nature, is “one of the most prevalent cultural myths of the Western world” (6). This Romantic figure is also operative in Collins’s trilogy, serving to anchor the values that are at stake in the story world. The narrative is set in motion as Katniss wakes up to find her bed empty of her little sister Primrose (Prim), a child, who—the narrator-focalizer claims—is “as lovely as the primrose for which she was named” and who has a “face as fresh as a raindrop” (Collins, *Games* 3). The idyll of the natural imagery used in the description of Prim contrasts with Katniss’s attitude towards Prim’s cat, Buttercup; looking at it as it guards the sleeping Prim, Katniss thinks back to when she attempted to drown Buttercup in a bucket. His life was only spared because Prim begged her sister to let him live. Katniss muses: it turned out all right because “he’s a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat” (Collins, *Games* 4). In this manner, an association is forged between the cat and the protagonist: they both love and protect the Romantic child, in the form of the lovely, natural, and innocent Primrose, and they are both hunters. In the opening pages of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss is further depicted as a female Robin Hood figure, a nameless character who dons hunting boots, trousers, shirt, and cap and retrieves a bow and arrows from a hollow log before trespassing into the woods to poach food.

Notably, most of Katniss’s family members are linked to the world of plants through their botanical names: Primrose, Buttercup, and Katniss.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Katniss’s mother makes herbal remedies, and the family subsists on products of nature that Katniss hunts and gathers in the nearby forest. This early emphasis on natural imagery and on a subsistence culture close to nature casts the artifice of life in the Capitol into sharp relief, almost to the point of caricature. Consequently, in an ecofeminist reading of *The Hunger Games*, Sean Connors argues that the trilogy is constructed around a nature/modernity binary since Katniss and her family value, depend on, and appreciate nature, while the Capitol is characterized by its use of “science and technology to bastardize and remake nature” (“Remember” 142–43). The gradual association between Katniss and the figure of the mockingjay problematizes such a neat binary, however, and shifts the series’ initial alignment with the trope of the idyll, so common in children’s literature, toward a posthuman engagement with the double-edged potential of science and technology. Such an angle highlights the liminality and blurring of clear boundaries that are features both of dystopian fiction and of Haraway’s notion of posthuman potential. Thus, while the nature/modernity binary serves to set the narrative and its stakes in motion, it is the figure of the hybrid that emerges as its central motif. Since posthuman theory comprises various theoretical strands, the following section examines more specifically how Collins’s trilogy aligns with aspects of the posthuman discourse.

### **The Mockingjay: A Posthuman Hybrid**

While ecofeminism is a branch of ecocriticism that takes an explicit feminist angle, posthuman theory consists of various strands, some of which are explicitly feminist and some of which are not. Like ecofeminism, however, posthumanism addresses the relationship between humans, nature, and technology. As we have seen, Rosendahl Thomsen stresses that posthuman technologies are put in service of human desires that are not new. Cary Wolfe also regards posthumanism as coming both

before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world . . . . [a]fter in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore . . . . (xv)

Arguably, Katniss is staged to undergo just such a “decentering” of her human identity in the course of the narrative, through her encounter with the high-tech culture of the Capitol, which leads to her significant modification both physically and psychologically.

One of the early posthuman theorists specifically concerned with embodiment is N. Katherine Hayles, who has described the ways in which cybernetics

have helped to articulate both machines and humans as systems of information. Wolfe argues that Hayles’s “net effect” is to “associate the posthuman with a kind of triumphant disembodiment” (xv), thus *opposing* embodiment and the posthuman. In my view, this is a misreading of Hayles, who clearly stresses that “human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines” (283–84). As Rosi Braidotti notes, contemporary information and communication technologies have more recently managed to “exteriorize and duplicate electronically the human nervous system” (90), and thereby foreground the fusion of human consciousness with electronic networks, establishing a sense of humanity as “becoming-machine,” a sense that is accentuated by advances in prosthetic technology. The development of “intelligent machines” capable of self-monitoring and self-evolving further challenges humanity’s self-understanding as both rational and relational creatures. Braidotti situates the posthuman destabilization of human ontology relative to other species and to the machine in a geopolitical context; she argues that, by trading on scientifically extracted biogenetic information, the current global economy establishes a trans-species “bond of vulnerability” to exploitation (63). Such vulnerability to exploitation is certainly a facet of life in Panem, where different species of animals are

genetically and technologically altered to be used as weapons—a fate mirroring that of the protagonist, who is modified in order to be used not primarily as a physical weapon but as a symbolic and political one.

Noting how “posthuman” has become an umbrella term to refer to a variety of different schools of thought, Francesca Ferrando distinguishes posthumanism from transhumanism<sup>8</sup> on the grounds that transhumanism does not “fully engage with a critical and historical account of the human” (28). That is, it still tries to rescue the renaissance humanist ideal, which has been exposed as limited by postcolonial and feminist thinkers, who have pointed to its racial, as well as species and gender, bias. Transhumanism is the brand of posthumanism endorsed by techno-optimists, who believe that information technology and biotechnology will enable us to create humans that are physically and ethically superior to the humans of today, although they acknowledge that this may lead to greater social inequality.<sup>9</sup> Wolfe argues that transhumanism “should be seen as an *intensification* of humanism” in the sense that the “human” in both humanism and transhumanism is “achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment all together” (xv). In the close link it proposes between the protagonist and a species of bird, the Hunger Games trilogy emphasizes rather than represses Katniss’s connection to her

“animal origins” and thus does not coincide with the ahistorical transhumanist strand of posthumanism as understood by Wolfe. In some ways, it thus posits a more radical redefinition of the human subject than does transhumanism, and one more in line with feminist strands of posthuman theory.

Due to its engagement with the possibilities and effects of biotechnology and digitalization, the concept of hybridity is central to posthumanism. In Collins’s trilogy, the reader first learns of the mockingjay’s hybrid nature when Katniss takes a closer look at the golden mockingjay pin that the mayor’s daughter Madge gave her after she volunteered to participate in the Games in Prim’s stead: “I hadn’t paid much attention to it before, but now I see it is a small bird in flight” (*Games* 44).<sup>10</sup> In all probability, the golden bird on the original cover of the first volume is a rendering of this pin, the added arrow representing Katniss, the hunter. Examining the pin, Katniss explains to the reader what a mockingjay is: at a certain point in the history of Panem, the (then thirteen) Districts rebelled, and the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons. One of these mutations, or *mutts*, was a bird called the *jabberjay* that had the ability to memorize and repeat human conversation. The jabberjays, which were all male,<sup>11</sup> were used as “recorders” of private conversations in the Districts, until the rebels realized this and fed them “endless lies.” The surveillance project was abandoned, and the jabberjays were left in the wild to die off. Rather

than become extinct, however, they crossbred with female mockingbirds.<sup>12</sup> The new species, the mockingjay, could replicate both bird whistles and human melodies—“not just a few notes, but whole songs with multiple verses” (*Games* 50). Thus, the mockingjay is a cross between a naturally occurring life form and an artificially engineered one. Accordingly, the hybrid figure of the mockingjay metaphorically gathers into itself multiple aspects of the posthuman debate. It blurs the boundary between natural organisms and artificially altered biological one; and in its capacity to learn human songs it destabilizes the boundary between human and animal. Since the mockingjay symbolically comes to represent Katniss Everdeen, it also serves to blur the boundary between a technologically constructed and a “natural” self.

### **Developing the Bird Metaphor: Feathers, Song, and Silence**

Katniss metaphorically self-identifies with a bird early on in the narrative, as she is being prepared for her entry into the Games: after she has been stripped of her body hair, she compares herself to “a plucked bird, ready for roasting” (*Games* 71). The bird imagery extends to her team of stylists, in front of whom the naked Katniss feels “no more self-conscious than if a trio of oddly coloured birds were pecking around my feet” (*Games* 73). By comparing her stylists and herself to birds, she points to a basic similarity, as well as an important difference: while she is being “plucked,” they, at least for the

present, retain their colourful “plumage.” The stripping of Katniss’s “natural feathers” symbolizes the curtailing of the previous freedom she enjoyed while roaming in the local woods: she is now confined to the “pen” measured out by the Game Makers and the Capitol organizational team. The process also marks the start of the aesthetic regime that will serve to establish her new identity as a Hunger Games contestant. Her reference to her stylists as “oddly coloured birds” foreshadows how she will, at their hands, gradually transform into a bird with an artificially crafted rather than with a naturally grown “plumage.” The bird imagery develops as Katniss is served her first Capitol meal by the head stylist Cinna: chicken and oranges in a creamy sauce—a delicious dish that is visually replicated in Cinna’s styling of the “plucked” Katniss for the opening ceremonies, where her cape is set ablaze in orange flames. Thus, Katniss’s self-identification with birds is reflected back to her through subtle imagery.

While Katniss loses her feathers, some of Panem’s inhabitants are stripped of their powers of speech: these Avoxes are people who have had their tongues cut out “for committing a crime” (*Games* 89). Having been brutally but effectively silenced by the oppressive regime, they highlight the barbarism of the Capitol.<sup>13</sup> As a warning to the District tributes, Avoxes are made to wait at their tables. Katniss recognizes one of the Avox girls serving her cake, and later discloses to her fellow tribute from District 12, Peeta, that she once saw this girl when

she was out in the woods with her friend Gale. The girl was with a boy, and they were hunted down and pulled into a hovercraft. The girl was trapped in a net and the boy was speared and killed. Katniss and Gale stood by watching, making no effort to help or hide the children in spite of the girl's call for help. The episode is framed in Katniss's memory by birdsong: "Suddenly all the birds stopped singing at once. Except one. As if it were giving a warning call. And then we saw her. I'm sure it was the same girl" (*Games* 95). When the hovercraft departed, the birds resumed their song. For Katniss, the memory is associated with guilt as she wonders whether they should have tried to help the hunted children. In the narrative as a whole, the girl's predicament is a foreshadowing of what is about to befall Katniss and Peeta: in the arena they will be hunted and possibly killed, with spectators who may or may not heed their pleas and endeavour to send help. The framing of the memory in terms of birdsong contributes to the development of birds as symbolic figures in the text. In association with Katniss's remorse at her own and Gale's passivity, the one bird that continues to sing represents the power of speaking out against oppression.

Katniss's deeper association with the figure of the mockingjay begins with her recollection that her father was particularly fond of mockingjays. In many ways, Katniss seeks to emulate her father. She owes her hunting skills to him, and it is his shoes she is attempting to fill as she trespasses in the woods to feed her family

after his death in a mining accident. Katniss discloses that her father used to whistle or sing complicated songs to the mockingjays, who would sing them back to him. She further reveals that having the mockingjay pin is "like having a piece of my father with me, protecting me" (*Games* 50). The comfort the pin offers her seems to affect others as well. Rue, the female tribute from District 11, discloses that it was Katniss's mockingjay pin that induced her to trust Katniss (*Games* 248).

When Katniss teams up in the Games with Rue, who reminds Katniss of Primrose, the importance of song is again foregrounded. Rue discloses that she has a few mockingjays as her special friends: "we can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me" (*Games* 247). Katniss offers Rue her mockingjay pin, but Rue declines. Rue teaches Katniss a signal that she will sing to the mockingjays if they get separated in order to let Katniss know that she is still unharmed. When Rue is dying—after having been speared through a net, thereby recalling the fate of the Avox girl and her companion—she asks Katniss to sing for her. Katniss sings her a lullaby, which is taken up and repeated by the mockingjays in the arena. In defiance of the cruelty of the Games and as a tribute to Rue, Katniss covers Rue's dead body with flowers in a poignant scene that is one of the few spiritual moments in the series.<sup>14</sup> The scene also signals Katniss's political awakening. Faced with the dead Rue, she understands something Peeta told her as they were preparing for the Games: that he wanted to show the



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Capitol that he was “more than just a piece in their Games” (*Games* 276). The ritual act of decorating Rue’s body is Katniss’s way of showing the Capitol that “there is a part of every tribute they don’t own” (*Games* 276), invoking the freedom and independence that the bird is habitually called upon to represent.

As the hovercraft that comes to collect the dead bodies of tributes appears, Katniss’s narration creates a further connection between Rue’s death and the capture of the Avox girl that Katniss had witnessed: “The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a mockingjay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft . . . . Another mockingjay . . . bursts out Rue’s melody . . . her handful of notes. The ones that mean she’s safe” (*Games* 277). Following the incident with Rue, the mockingjay comes to represent what Katniss loves and what she has lost, as both her father and Rue had a particular fondness for mockingjays. In both of these scenes, the mockingjay is associated above all with its musical and communicative ability.

While the artificially engineered jabberjay could repeat human words, the mockingjay can repeat whole melodies within an impressive range: “from a child’s high-pitched warble to a man’s deep tones,” but only “if they like your voice” (*Games* 50). The mockingjay’s effortless ability for song thus echoes Haraway’s assertion that science and technology may afford “possible means of great human satisfaction” (181): as a partly bioengineered species, the mockingjay’s melodic capacities exceed those of naturally occurring species of birds. In this sense, biotechnology has altered, and helped improve, a natural trait in birds in a manner that appeals to, and gives pleasure to, humans, principally because it facilitates interspecies communication. Simultaneously, the mockingjay represents the power of nature to modify human intent: to the oppressed inhabitants of Panem, the

mockingjay also symbolizes power gone wrong, a scheme of surveillance that has backfired. Thus, in the trilogy as a whole, it comes to symbolize political revolt.

Jon Fitzgerald and Philip Hayward argue that the location of District 12 in the Appalachian region, with its repository of traditional Anglo-Celtic folk songs evokes “a cultural continuity and dignity for the inhabitants of District 12” in contrast to the “superficial world of the Capitol” (77). Discussing only the trilogy’s first volume, they read the mockingjay as “a potent symbol of hope” (83), as it “represents a victory of natural elements over human attempts to manage and control them” (82). In my view, when read in relation to the trilogy as a whole, the hope associated with the mockingjay as a symbol is less unequivocally linked to the victory of nature over human control.

Intertextually, the motif of birds falling silent invokes the opening fable of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), “A Fable for Tomorrow,” which marks the emergence of modern environmentalism (Gerrard 1). Carson’s fable starts by dwelling on images of natural beauty and by portraying a harmonic relationship between human subsistence and nature. When the idyll is broken, birds’ falling silent heralds the catastrophic change that follows. In *The Hunger Games*, the scenes with the Avox girl and Rue are linked by similar imagery. In both instances, Katniss reports that all the birds fall silent—except one. Moreover, in both cases the notes of the single bird still singing are interpreted as

a warning. In the second instance, the species of the calling bird is disclosed: it is a mockingjay. This identifies the mockingjay as a “whistle blower,” one who gives a warning call on behalf of those silenced, like the mute Avox girl and the dead Rue. One may argue that the mockingjay is able to perform this function because of its hybrid nature. Due to its special abilities, some of which it owes to biotechnology, the mockingjay has in a sense become “humanized:” its existence and abilities blur species boundaries and alter the possibilities for cross-species interaction. The mockingjay has ceased to behave in the typically “birdlike” way of falling silent as danger approaches. It is this ability to continue singing that makes it such a potent political symbol. The next section examines Katniss’s developing association with the mockingjay through dress.

### **Bird in Borrowed Feathers: Designing the Mockingjay**

In *Catching Fire*, the mockingjay develops into the rallying symbol of Panem’s resistance movement. Before Katniss embarks on the “victory tour” that the game winners go on each year to all the Districts, facing the families of those they have been forced to kill, Panem’s president, Snow, visits her at home in the “Victors’ Village.” He warns her that her seditious act of threatening to eat poisonous berries with Peeta in order to deprive the games of a winner may spark rebellion. Understanding early on the political potency of Katniss’s symbolic role, Snow encourages Katniss to play up her

love act with Peeta in order to divert attention from her subversive potential, threatening that unless she continues the love charade he will harm her family. When Katniss and Peeta's mentor, Haymitch, learns of Snow's threat, he encourages Peeta to propose to Katniss. He does, and she accepts. Snow consequently announces that he will host their wedding, and the Capitol citizenry is invited to vote for their favourite dress from a range designed by Cinna. Here, Collins makes obvious the patriarchal discourses of femininity that "seek to prescribe only certain body shapes, physical features and behaviours as desirable," to quote Flanagan (101). The effort to style Katniss as feminine is also evident prior to her entry into her first Games. Because of this, both Sean Connors ("Remember" 147) and Amy L. Montz (147) question Katniss's degree of agency: she is forced to perform gender<sup>15</sup> in ways that Cinna, Haymitch, and Peeta establish for her.

Things do not turn out as the president hopes, however. Cinna continues to play a vital role in the shaping of Katniss's public image through dress, but now his emphasis is on turning her not into a woman but into a symbolic mockingjay by creating a succession of stunning bird costumes for her. As Katniss and Peeta are forced to re-enter the annual Hunger Games in *Catching Fire*, this time in a special event—the Quarter Quell—that features previous winners from all the Districts, Cinna has Katniss's dress go up in flames in the televised contestant interviews, where her winning wedding dress burns away to leave her in a smouldering black dress with tiny

feathers. Katniss muses, "Cinna has turned me into a mockingjay" (*Fire* 284)—an act for which Cinna pays with his life as the government clearly interprets his wardrobe choices for Katniss as political statements. Indeed, his "branding" of Katniss as the mockingjay proves to be highly effective. R. S. Koppen notes,

As a symbolic system clothes may serve to interpellate and discipline, to signify the place of individual bodies in social, economic, or sexual orders; as event, on the other hand, they offer an opportunity for individual performance, in Butlerian terms, as the idea of variation within a set of discursive possibilities. Beyond the material and the symbolic, clothes matter because they come with a deeply anchored phenomenology and an equally fundamental imaginary, and because they are invested by tradition with the ability to speak otherwise, in or as allegory. (1)

Fluent in the sign system of clothes, Cinna fashions Katniss allegorically into a public symbol in order to help spark a revolution in the oppressed Districts of Panem. Toward the end of *Catching Fire* Katniss comes to realize the extent to which she has been manipulated in order to serve this cause. She learns that the new Head Gamemaker, Plutarch Heavensbee, is part of an undercover group working to overthrow the Capitol. As Katniss shoots an arrow collapsing the game space in the Quarter Quell, she is pulled out by a hovercraft

and rescued. She feels deeply betrayed that she has not been let in on her mentor's plan to free the tributes: "Used without consent, without knowledge. At least in the Hunger Games, I knew I was being played with" (*Fire* 432). This sense of having been manipulated highlights how Katniss is still "wing clipped" in her decision-making in terms of her own role in the revolt: she is coerced into her role as the mockingjay much as she was coerced into her role as a Hunger Games participant. Taken to District 13, Katniss learns why she has been saved: "'We had to save you because you're the mockingjay, Katniss,'" says Plutarch. 'While you live, the revolution lives'" (*Fire* 433). Katniss finally draws the lines to connect the dots: "The bird, the song, the berries, the watch, the cracker that burst into flames. I am the mockingjay. The one that survived despite the Capitol's plans. The symbol of the rebellion" (*Fire* 433–34).

Even after his death, Cinna continues to develop Katniss's symbolic role as the mockingjay through his designer wear. While visiting District 13 Katniss learns that he has left her an entire wardrobe of mockingjay outfits. She eventually agrees to wear them, performing in a series of "propos" or propaganda shoots in order to boost rebel morale. Cinna's costumes are thus vital to Katniss's symbolic, political, and visual transformation into the mockingjay, a role Katniss eventually accepts, partly due to her enduring admiration for Cinna and his creative works. Consequently, in the third volume, Katniss is still pressured to perform—in this case not as the feminine

gender, but as a cross-species embodiment. It is fair to say that Katniss is forged into the mockingjay mostly through external pressure. Ultimately, her emerging identity as the mockingjay is the product of a collective effort, rather than an exercise of individual and independent agency. In several senses, she seems to don the skin of others, from her father's hunting jacket to Cinna's intricate costumes. In the next section I examine the transformation of Katniss's body that takes place *underneath* her designer wear.

### **Written on the Body: Katniss as Bio-Technological Hybrid**

Flanagan argues that the centrality of embodiment to more recent developments within posthuman ideology "has generally been overlooked in children's criticism" (103). How recent this development is within posthumanist criticism is debatable, given Hayles's influential analysis in 1999 of the link between information and disembodiment forged from within cybernetics.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the body is a contested locus in Collins's trilogy. As Haraway noted in 1991,

Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality. (149-50)



Through reconstructive  
medical technology

Katniss emerges  
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several experiences of  
bursting into flame.



While the electronic tracking device inserted into the arm of Hunger Games’ tributes before they enter the arena obviously links Katniss’s body to the trope of the sci-fi cyborg, it is her repeated encounters with the Capitol’s high-tech medicine that influences her sense of self more deeply. Adding to the symbolic work of costuming, the series of bodily transformations Katniss undergoes in the course of the trilogy further serves to align her with the bio-technological hybrid of the mockingjay. The blurring of her “natural” body boundary commences when she is “plucked” and styled for the Games. Even in her first Games, medical technology has begun to have a deeper transformative effect on her physical body. Having narrowly escaped a forest fire, she receives a precious gift of burn medicine:

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, it’s high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol’s labs . . . . I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches to a soft baby-skin pink. (*Games* 220)

Here, Katniss contrasts her mother’s herbal remedies with the “high-tech medicine” of the Capitol, clearly appreciating the superiority of the latter. In applying the medicine, Katniss assimilates a product of the Capitol’s advanced technology into her own body, in a sense contributing to the “compromising” of her “naturalness” that the styling sessions initiated. The “magical” transformation of her skin that results from this treatment is evoked again later in the first volume, when Katniss’s whole body is reconstituted by medical technology, leaving her skin “smooth and

glowing.” All her scars, not just those from the arena, but also “those accumulated over years of hunting[,] have vanished without a trace” (*Games* 410). Thus, while the styling process to an extent interferes with the “naturalness” of Katniss’s body, it is the treatment with the burn medicine, and later her various encounters with advanced bio-technological medical practices, that help define her physical transformation into a bio-technological hybrid in a literal and not only symbolic sense. After her first Games, she is subjected to this “body polish” (*Games* 413) while unconscious after barely surviving in the arena. In *Catching Fire* as well, it is thanks to the Capitol’s hi-tech medicine that she survives the effects of the Quarter Quell, where another tribute knocks her unconscious in order to cut out the electronic tracker mechanism implanted in her arm. In *Mockingjay*, the hybridization of Katniss’s body through bio-technological medicine reaches new extremes. Suffering severe burns from the bomb that kills Prim, she receives transplants of new skin that we later learn are “laboratory grown cells” (*Mockingjay* 421). She notes: “The skin grafts still retain a newborn-baby pinkness . . . I’m like a bizarre patchwork quilt of skin,” the “patchwork” consisting of both laboratory-grown cells and “[p]atches of my former self” (*Mockingjay* 397). Through reconstructive medical technology Katniss emerges “reborn,” like the phoenix, from her several experiences of bursting into flame. Evidently, these repetitive experiences also affect her sense of selfhood.

Even though she embraces the beauty of Cinna’s costumes at times, she fails to deeply identify with the mockingjay figure created through the cosmetic makeovers and the styling for the District 13 propos. Examining the made-up and seductive version of herself as she is prepared for the cameras, she says: “I do not know who this person is” (*Mockingjay* 79). Rejecting what she calls the “painted Capitol mask,” she identifies instead with her body’s “damage, fatigue [and . . .] imperfections” (*Mockingjay* 101). As has been noted, Capitol medical technologies are drawn upon to smooth out these “imperfections,” marks that for Katniss signal an individual identity. Unlike the rebels’ “painted masks,” however, Capitol medical technology gradually becomes a prerequisite for Katniss’s biological existence. Toward the end of *Mockingjay*, burn damage is threatening to cause the disintegration of her skin—the layer that frames her body and defines her to the outside world. Like the Capitol’s bio-engineered cyborg mutations, Katniss, in her new patch-work “dress” made up of her own and of synthetic skin cells, describes herself as having “a naked fire-mutt body” (*Mockingjay* 396); she sees herself as what she has become: one of the Capitol’s bio-engineered hybrid creatures.

### **The Caged Bird Sings**

In the final volume, Katniss’s identification with the mockingjay returns to the emphasis on this species’ musical ability through the motif of significant silences

punctuated by bursts of song, which come to symbolize Katniss's deeper sense of self, hidden beneath the skins she chooses to wear or is made to don. When she sings for Rue in the arena, it is both from compassion and as an act of defiance. In the bombed-out District 12 in *Mockingjay*, she sings for the Avox camera operator Pollux at his request, noting, "I have not sung 'The Hanging Tree' for ten years, because it's forbidden, but I remember every word" (*Mockingjay* 138).<sup>17</sup> As Katniss sings, the mockingjays around her fall silent—"just as they did for my father" (*Mockingjay* 139). Her burst of song is captured on camera and turned into a prop in service of Panem's resistance movement, making literal Haymitch's metaphorical comment when Katniss first started participating in the promotional videos: "we wouldn't want to lose our little Mockingjay when she's finally begun to sing" (*Mockingjay* 121).

Like the birds that fell silent when the hovercrafts came to collect the bodies of the Avox girl and Rue, Katniss too at one point falls completely silent, to resume her song only weeks later. When a firebomb kills her sister in the rebels' attack on the Capitol, Katniss becomes a "mental Avox" (*Mockingjay* 395), silenced by trauma. Killed by a bomb engineered to take out medical personnel, Prim's death represents the ultimate loss in Katniss's life. In the narrative Prim's death also represents the demise of the Romantic child, pure, innocent, and at one with nature. Left to mourn Prim is her increasingly "compromised" sister, turned into a biomedical hybrid

by the Capitol's advanced technology and by an aesthetic culture that values artifice over human biology: Katniss has been stripped of her innocence through her exposure to human violence and political corruption. The Romantic child is dead and deeply mourned. The incident further marks Katniss's estrangement from Gale, who crosses what she considers an ethical boundary when he creates bombs timed to kill those who rush in to care for the wounded. Gale fights oppression at all costs; for Katniss, there is a limit to the means acceptable in the name of the cause.

After weeks of silence, and in an act declaring her independence, Katniss shoots Panem's new rebel leader, Coin, rather than Snow, whom she has been commissioned to execute with her bow and arrows. Locked in a padded cell afterward, "something unexpected happens. I begin to sing . . . Hour after hour of ballads, love songs, mountain airs. All the songs my father taught me before he died" (*Mockingjay* 423). Like a caged bird, Katniss sings her deep buried grief for weeks on end, the trapped nightingale and the musical mockingjay rolled into one. As her voice warms up, it turns from an initial roughness into "something splendid" (*Mockingjay* 423). Has her musical ability, like that of the mockingjay, been enhanced by her hybridization process? She sings for weeks. When she nearly starves herself to death, she is released and asked if she wants to perform on Plutarch's new singing show. Yet again, Capitol culture is exposed as aesthetically oriented but ethically shallow, still aiming to capitalize on deep human emotion and

suffering by turning them into spectacle. For Katniss, the musical memories of her cultural heritage live on underneath her bioengineered skin.

### Conclusion

This article has aimed to demonstrate the engagement of the Hunger Games with posthuman concerns, an engagement that is most evident in the societal pressures that shape Katniss. While the stylists readying her for the first Games are focused on playing up the feminine features of the tomboyish Katniss, in the Quarter Quell she is styled in a burned-out bridal gown in order to subvert Capitol power through her incarnation of the mockingjay. Her feminine identity up in smoke, the rebels in District 13 push her to regularly engage in species cross-dressing.

Because the fashioning of Katniss's posthuman identity takes place in a dystopian setting, and the modifications to her body and identity through dress and medical surgery are forced upon her rather than freely chosen, the trilogy as a whole expresses techno-scepticism. Through the frightening mutts and the politically ignorant Capitol citizens who use technology in the service of body modification rather than to address social injustice, the potential of genetic engineering is portrayed in a bleak light. Nevertheless, Katniss's admiration for the Capitol's high-tech medicine shows that the trilogy's techno-scepticism stops short of that found within ecofeminism. Pointing further to the positive

potential of advanced technology are the positive effects of biogenetic engineering on birds' naturally occurring ability to sing and the resulting opportunity for inter-species communication. Technology is no good on its own, however. While the jabberjay could not sing, the mockingjay can: the ability to sing stems from the mockingbird, a naturally occurring species. Song is thus linked to what is natural as opposed to what is artificially made. This identification of song with "true essence" is mirrored in Katniss's expressive singing while captive, an identification that signals adherence to a classical conception of "soul."

The significance of the mockingjay as a symbol shifts in the course of the trilogy. While in the first volume it is associated with love and hope, but also with personal loss, in *Catching Fire* it transforms into a revolutionary symbol. The connotation of the mockingjay is at first positive, but its significance is modified in the final volume, as the rebels' use of the mockingjay is paralleled with their readiness to employ advanced destructive technology in the fight against the oppressive regime. Thus, the text expresses wariness of advanced technology while suggesting that its medical uses are more acceptable than its development for military purposes. While advanced technology can heal, it can also destroy.

Aligned with the narrative sequence on the original covers, the trilogy's epilogue in some ways signals a return to the figure of the idyll that sets the narrative stakes in motion. Here, twenty years later, the reader

meets Katniss's two children, tumbling around in a green meadow. The grass has grown back to hide the earlier devastation of District 12. Katniss has resumed her hunting, and Peeta, his baking. It is a problematized idyll, however, as underneath the surface Katniss still has nightmares that keep her awake. In addition, she dreads the moment when she will have to expose her children to the horrors that she and Peeta lived through. Katniss has children, but only, she says, because Peeta really wanted them. Unlike the mockingjay on the original cover of the series' last volume, Katniss is hardly soaring optimistically

toward a clear blue sky. Rather, the cover's positive outlook must represent the hope tied to her yet innocent offspring, since Katniss is still, like the repetitive images of firebirds on the UK paperback editions, regularly going up in flames in her own personal nightmares. Consequently, the trilogy expresses a longing and nostalgia for a Romantic vision of human life in harmony with nature, while at the same time advocating a realization that such a vision is shaky, due to the human potential for destruction and the development of advanced technology to this end.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Mary Pharr and Leisa Clark (13) and Sean Connors ("Surveillance" 85). Pharr and Clark single out the events of 11 September 2001 as a decisive turning point in the American dystopian genre. They argue that prior to this event, "YA dystopian/post apocalyptic novels tend to be single-minded tales of survival, whether against oppression, aliens, or the environment," while they are now "somehow different" and focused more on social and personal change—a trait they see reflected in Collins's trilogy (8). Stressing continuity within the genre, Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz note that the current dystopian trend of presenting young women as agents of change extends a tradition of apocalyptically themed YA fiction prevalent since the 1960s (7), where "adults expect adolescents to improve the world conditions that they themselves cannot fix" (Braithwaite 6).

<sup>2</sup> Day et al. emphasize that dystopian literature is useful for considering questions of liminality, since the extremes of dystopian consequences tend to "blur otherwise clear boundaries," and note that female authors have made unique contributions to the dystopian genre by frequently writing open-ended conclusions (9).

<sup>3</sup> Created by Elizabeth B. Parisi and Tim O'Brien, this bird icon has become emblematic of Collins's novels, signalling its key symbolic role in the trilogy.

<sup>4</sup> That is, the belief that science is inherently "evil."

<sup>5</sup> In exile, Ovid compares himself to a nightingale. See *Ex Ponto* 1.3.39–40.

<sup>6</sup> See Nodelman and Reimer.

<sup>7</sup> In *Catching Fire*, the reader learns that Katniss is named after an edible tuber (39).

<sup>8</sup> For a reading of transhumanist aspects of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series see Guanio-Uluru, *Ethics*.

<sup>9</sup> See Bostrom, who argues that increased human capacities will follow the financial capability to pay for such enhancements, further enhancing social inequalities.

<sup>10</sup> Prior to this episode, the pin is mentioned once in the narrative, when Katniss's friend Gale expresses his resentment of it as a symbol of Madge's privileged position.

<sup>11</sup> Thus gendering bio-technological alterations, or advanced technology, as "male."

<sup>12</sup> This pairing genders "original nature" as feminine. Along this axis, Connors's ecofeminist reading makes sense ("Remember").

<sup>13</sup> This recalls Ovid's development in *Metamorphoses* of the myth of Philomela and Procne. Philomela is abused by Tereus but has her tongue cut out so she cannot tell. With the help of her sister Procne, Philomela has her revenge. They both pray to be turned into birds in order to escape the wrath of Tereus.

<sup>14</sup> Noting the "missing religion" in the series, Tammy L. Gant has argued that music is used in the narrative "to fill the space meant for religion" in Katniss's life (89).

<sup>15</sup> For a reading of gender performances in *The Hunger Games*, see Guanio-Uluru, "Female."

<sup>16</sup> Hayles points out how cybernetics, in a simplifying move, defined information as context independent, thereby facilitating the cybernetic analogy between human and machine that has remained influential within a range of posthumanist frameworks.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the significance of "The Hanging Tree" for Katniss's moral development, see Torkelson.

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