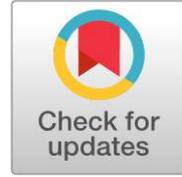


RETHINKING GENETIC BORDERS IN *THE HUNGER GAMES*

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Abstract

Emphasizing the fading distinction between reality and artificiality due to the innovations in the fields of science and biotechnology, this paper argues that the fantasy world depicted by science fiction is no longer far from today's reality. Although technological advancements have enabled us to live more comfortably, when they are misused by those seeking to use them as a sign of power or superiority, they can have disastrous effects on both people and the environment. This study explores how an oppressive regime called Capitol in *The Hunger Games* employs science and technology to transform animals and humans into commodities within the arena, reducing them to instruments of entertainment. The Games' intentional replacement of natural beings with biotechnological mutations serves as a deliberate display of power, employing genetically engineered species as weapons and reviving the dead as monsters. This not only captivates the audience but also strengthens the regime's superiority, exemplifying how technology is weaponized to manipulate both fear and entertainment.

Keywords: Biotechnology, The Hunger Games, commodification, mutation, science fiction

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The border between real and artificial has already been blurred, facilitated by the revolutionaries in scientific and biotechnological realms in recent decades. In *The Postmodern Adventure*, American scholars Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, who work on contemporary critical theory and cultural studies, discuss the rise of technology, globalization, environmental crises, biotechnology and new media cultures in postmodern society. They contend that “boundaries are collapsing everywhere, in both the natural and the social worlds, collapsing differences among species (bacteria, plant, insect, animal, and human) and between biology and technology, transgressing the limits of what previously was declared improbable or impossible” (2001, p. 176). Owing to the biotechnological developments, what has been written in science fiction is becoming our reality. In the first book of *The Hunger Games* series, Suzanne Collins attracts readers’ attention to the link between powerful rulers subjugating weak humans and the way nature is cultivated, controlled, simulated, and destroyed to show their dominance by means of advanced technology. Hunger Games is a reality TV show in which twelve male and twelve female teenagers selected from poor twelve districts fight in the arena until one of them survives. In the book, Gamemakers construct and organize a virtual field where they control the weather and engineer new animals just to make the Games more exciting and entertaining for the audience. To heighten the show, the Games are meticulously designed to allure the audience with entertainment, expose tributes to psychological and physical torment, and eventually maximize profitability through a carefully orchestrated fusion of show, cruelty, and commercialization. Given the commodification of district inhabitants, their simulation of reality, and their use of animals as test subjects without regard for their intrinsic value, it is evident that both human and non-human communities suffer profoundly from misery and despair under the Capitol’s rule. This study delves into the mutation of animals and humans into simulacra within the arena, serving as tools of entertainment. It critiques the malevolent application of technology and science under an oppressive regime that commodifies everything. In the contemporary capitalist world, disturbingly similar to that of *The Hunger Games* in terms of the commodification of nature, natural organisms are valued solely based on their market worth.

Modification of body through genetic engineering has always been an interesting topic to explore and examine through young adult fiction. Elain Ostry argues that

literature helps young adults to get involved in and contribute to discussions on biotechnology: “What are the pros and cons of such advances as cloning? Of what value is the human versus the new, ‘improved’ human? Literature confronts both the hopes and fears that biotechnology inspires” (2004, p. 223). Suggesting that human body is shaped by technology, it makes adolescents interrogate what makes someone human. By exploring the stories of genetically engineered characters undergoing identity crises, young adult fiction asks what it truly means to be human. The blurry line between humans and machines generated by biotechnological advancements challenges the concept of what is natural. Elaine Graham asserts “new technologies have done more than simply introduce new patterns of work, leisure and social interaction; they have called into question the immutability of boundaries between humans, animals and machines, artificial and natural, ‘born’ and ‘made’” (2002, pp. 1-2). She contends that by questioning the fixity of “human nature” in this way, the digital and biotechnological era brings about a renewed examination of the fundamental presumptions that underlie issues like individual identity, community structure, human uniqueness, and the connection between the body and the mind. Biotechnology that was once considered futuristic and confined to the realm of science fiction, is now an integral part of our contemporary life. It is no longer a mystery that could only happen in a non-existent society but the new and a threatening truth that could happen anytime soon. That is why novels like *The Hunger Games* are no longer depicted as impossible stories that could never happen; unfortunately, considering modern events, they do not seem far removed from today’s reality.

In *Posthuman Capital and Biotechnology in Contemporary Novels*, Justin Omar Johnston asserts that economy, politics and ideology play crucial roles in shaping biotechnology and cloning, and he mentions that when Dolly was cloned, Bill Clinton wanted “to propose a legislative ban on all forms of human cloning” owing to the ethical concerns about human life (2021, p. 15). Cloning has always been controversial as it may pose a threat to human individuality, causing religious and ethical disputes. For that reason, it has captivated the interest of novelists, as exemplified in popular dystopian fiction *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, where cloning is a fundamental part of society, shaping and fortifying social order. Huxley examines dehumanization and social control through cloning in this dystopian world where people have become products lacking

individual thoughts and goals. Similarly, Suzanne Collins incorporates cloning into the narrative of *The Hunger Games*, which vividly exemplifies a futuristic theme park consisting of cloned animals and genetically engineered species, offering as an alternative to contemporary wild parks. Natural beings are replaced by hyperreal and biotechnological mutations. The Games even present the technological recreation of deceased individuals as monsters for entertainment using advanced technology. The physical recreation of these individuals lacks basic human traits in that they are solely programmed to attack by the Gamemakers. They produce half human and half animal hybrid species to make the show more interesting.

To follow all tributes in the arena, they insert a metal tracker device in their forearms. They are controlled and directed by the the Gamemakers who act like their owners and watch them whatever they do in the arena: "Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Gamemaker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit" (Collins, 2008, p. 175). The allure of simulacra in the Games, which are shaped and controlled by the Gamemakers, appears to have mesmerized the audience to such an extent that they are too distracted from reality to recognize the true suffering endured by these miserable tributes. As a reality television show everything is expected to be exaggerated and ostentatious. Tom Henthorne asserts that what Collins argues is reality shows have a profound "ideological effect" and people believe they are entitled to the benefits they have: "Like the Hunger Games, these programs accomplish this by dehumanizing people: they stage conflicts, elicit negative behaviors, and then construct narratives around those behaviors that present them as authentic, ultimately suggesting that people get what they deserve" (2012, p. 106).

In the contemporary capitalist world, which unfortunately does not look much different from the one in *The Hunger Games* in terms of commodification of nature, natural organisms are equally treasured in accordance with the value they have on the market. Scientific developments in biogenetics consequently put an end to nature with a shift in its perception: "Once we know the rules of its construction, natural organisms are transformed into objects amenable to manipulation" (Žižek, 2008, p. 435). Gamemakers unethically manipulate the genes of the animals by turning them into mutations, or shortly mutts, during the war, like jabberjays and tracker jackers, the mutations of wasps

genetically engineered in a lab by the Capitol during the dark days in order to kill people. With “the ability to memorize and repeat whole human conversations” (Collins, 2008, pp. 42-43), jabberjays are sent by the Capitol to the areas where rebels are hiding from the Capitol to spy on them. These animals serve as voice recorders to record the conversations of the enemies, to learn about their plans and bring this information to the authorities in the Capitol. After a while, the rebels in the districts have realized the way the Capitol knows their private talks and have started to make fun of them.

Then, of course, the rebels fed the Capitol endless lies, and the joke was on it. So the centres were shut down and the birds were abandoned to die off in the wild.

Only they didn't die off. Instead, the jabberjays mated with female mockingbirds creating a whole new species that could replicate both bird whistles and human melodies. They had lost the ability to enunciate words but could still mimic a range of human vocal sounds, from a child's high-pitched warble to a man's deep tones. And they could re-create songs. (Collins, 2008, p. 43)

They could no longer imitate the words of people, but their sounds like whistles or melodies of the songs. If they like the songs they hear, they could sing all of them like the ones Katniss's father has sung while hunting with her in the woods. His father liked these animals which showed respect to his songs possibly because of his beautiful voice. They are also used by District 11 as a way of communication, to let everyone know when it is the time to stop working. Rue explains her friendship with the mockingjays that carry her messages to other people. As soon as Rue sees the flag signaling the time to knock off, she “sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice”, which is imitated by the mockingjays that inform other working people in the orchard (Collins, 2008, p. 212).

The American philosopher and literary critic Fredric Jameson believes that capitalism uses every opportunity to commodify anything for its market value. He states that “today the complexities of biology and the genetic, indeed bio-power itself, offer a content and a raw material far more recalcitrant to plot formation than even Einsteinian cosmology and the undecideability of atomic sub-particles” (2005, p. 67). Focusing on biopolitical themes, contemporary science fiction tends to explore the nature of the individual, how society governs the body, and the ethical dimensions of genetic engineering. *The Hunger Games*, seamlessly integrating biology, genetics and biopolitics

into its narrative, reveals how a totalitarian regime manipulates genetic engineering and commodifies human life.

Another species that are mutations are tracker jackers, which, unlike mockingjays, do not seem very friendly. These killer machines used as land mines in the districts are bigger than normal wasps and “have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people can’t tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once.” (Collins, 2008, p. 185). Even though you manage to live, the hallucinations it causes can drive anyone crazy. They deserve the name “tracker jackers” as they follow those who disturb them and attack them to kill. When Katniss notices a wasp nest in the tree while she is running away from Career pack in the arena, she thinks they might be ordinary, but then she changes her mind since “these are the Hunger Games, and ordinary isn’t the norm” (p. 185). Ordinary is not enough to make exciting Games to captivate the audience.

The French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who is known for his works on simulation, consumerism and postmodernism, also believes that capitalism has commodified everything in postmodern world. He asserts that animals were once valued as holy creatures, revered and pure enough to be sacrificed for the Creator. Their lives served as a reference for humans to organize their own for centuries. However, he harshly criticizes the contemporary treatment of animals, arguing that they are now given no significance beyond their market value. We no longer punish the animals in the same way we did during the Middle Ages when they were found guilty, which “was a way of honoring them”, yet we have achieved the worst by domesticating them: “we have made of them a racially inferior world, no longer even worthy of our justice, but only of our affection and social charity, no longer worthy of punishment and of death, but only of experimentation and extermination like meat from the butchery” (1994, p. 130). With the emergence of humanism, putting humans on the top, animals have been looked down on as they belong to an inferior world that gives us the right to make any experiments on them rather than accept their world in their own way. The Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess, who has coined the term “deep ecology” also expresses his discomfort with animals being used as test subjects on experiments related to a possible nuclear war: “One factor often overlooked is the mishandling, even torture, of millions of

animals in experiments involving nuclear radiation. These animals live and die in a nuclear war today” (2003, p. 160). Because of the power relations between the countries, the planet is under the threat of a nuclear war, which would contaminate everything on earth and create an ecological calamity. In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol carries out such experiments further in its labs by changing the genetics of wasps and mockingbirds in order to use them against its enemies to show its advanced technological power.

They do not adopt the land ethic suggested by Aldo Leopold, which “enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (1989, p. 204). Though some animal species have been extinct and many plant communities have been exploited, it is necessary to alter our perception of animals, plants and soils in order to assure “their continued existence in a natural state”: “... a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (p. 204). The Capitol, thinking everything and everyone around them owes their existence to them, cannot change its role as the “conqueror of the land-community” and thus shows no respect either for human communities or plant and animal communities. With the role of being the conqueror, there is nothing wrong with altering the genetics of the animals as long as they perform services in accordance with their wishes.

The Slovenian philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek criticizes that technology has been used by capitalist systems to control people despite its promise of increasing human freedom. He claims that the mission of contemporary science and technology is no longer to understand and reproduce “natural processes”, rather, to produce “new forms of life”; “the goal is no longer just to dominate nature (the way it is), but to generate something new, greater, stronger than ordinary nature, including ourselves...” (2008, p. 436). In addition to genetically modifying animals, the Capitol callously alters the dead bodies of the tributes, treating them as mere waste products rather than once-living human beings. In the final part of *The Hunger Games* show, the last three tributes are pursued by creatures resembling large wolves that can balance on their hind legs. These terrifying mutations chase the tributes to the Cornucopia, where the survivors must climb to escape them. Katniss senses something which makes them

profoundly different from other mutts she has seen, with their colours varying from black to blond and their straight, sleek or curly shaped coat or fur and their legs that give them "human quality" (p. 332). Eventually Katniss realizes these mutations are the dead tributes:

The small one with the red coat and amber eyes . . . Foxface! And there, the ashen hair and hazel eyes of the boy from District 9 who died as we struggled for the backpack! And worst of all, the smallest mutt, with dark glossy fur, huge brown eyes and a collar that reads 11 in woven straw. Teeth bared in hatred. Rue . . . (Collins, 2008, p. 334)

While Peeta wonders whether the eyes of these mutts truly belong to the dead tributes, Katniss is troubled by the possibility that their brains might retain the disturbing memories of the real tributes, particularly those related to her and Peeta. The Gamemakers have clearly succeeded in their goal to unsettle the remaining tributes by transforming their acquaintances from the Games into these horrific mutations. Katniss is psychologically disturbed by these dehumanized and animalized beings, which blur the distinction between humans and animals. The first mutation she recognizes is Glimmer, who has died because she has been stung by a lot of tracker-jackers after Katniss's cutting their nest from a tree. The beautiful girl defined by Katniss as sexy with her emerald green eyes, blonde hair and tall body during her interview with Ceasar goes through a "grotesque bodily transformation under the masculinist gaze of the viewing public" (Curry, 2013, pp. 69-70). While displaying her seductive appearance in public interviews to draw the attention of sponsors, she has turned into a grotesque and unappealing figure "reconstituted in a new posthuman form" exposed to "the violent mechanisms of Capitol control. Contained, ruptured, and contained once more, Glimmer's body becomes a graphic manifestation of the interplay of competing feminine discourses" (p. 70). With her body still a site for the Capitol control, Glimmer is one of the other creatures genetically engineered by Gamemakers to make sure that the death of the last two tributes will be more challenging and exciting.

With the animals which seem to be mutations produced in the labs, people who rather than thinking independently, behave like animals under the control of the signs of

advertisements and TV, and artificial nature which has lost its spontaneity, the Capitol is in fact a desert despite all the bright artificial colours it owns.

We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of wandering and simulating animals that capital, that *the death of capital* has made of us—because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand—the jungle of signs is equal to that of the forests—the vertigo of simulacra is equal to that of nature—only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which work buries work, in which value buries value—leaving a virgin, sacred space without pathways, continuous as Bataille wished it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 153)

The cities have lost the natural and turned into a desert by “the vertiginous seduction of a dying system” which assigns market value not only to material goods but also to workers, animals, and natural resources. People visit camps to immerse themselves in nature, escape the chaos of city life, and unwind in a natural setting. However, some campsites in major cities have been commercialized, turning forests into theme parks for material gain.

Katniss realizes this “desert of sand” because she knows that the city they have been brought into consists of artificiality of everything such as bioengineered animals and even humans too fascinated by the fun of the show to see the cruelty of the Games that give the teenagers unimaginable pain. She nevertheless thinks she has to participate in their Games in order to get back to her family. It is in the second book *Catching Fire* when Katniss decides to save Peeta at her own expense in the Quarter Quell, she “is no longer someone the Capitol can manipulate and victimize... Ultimately, Katniss becomes a fully autonomous individual when she stops merely responding to her circumstances and begins making choices of her own accord” (Green-Barteet, 2014, p. 42). However, Peeta appears to be more conscious of his actions, which partly distances him from the Capitol’s Games. His primary goal is to keep Katniss alive, directly opposing the Capitol’s intentions. When Peeta gazes out the window at the Capitol residents partying, he reaffirms his desire not to be a part of their Games; in other words, he wants to show the Capitol that they do not own him and that he is an autonomous individual. He

demonstrates this autonomy by prioritizing Katniss's survival in the arena, as evidenced by his efforts to convince Haymitch of Katniss's skills while downplaying his own chances of winning. Unlike the Capitol's expectations, he does not compete with Katniss but instead tries to win Haymitch's sympathy and assistance during the Games. Peeta explicitly tells Haymitch to choose whom to help, stating at the lunch table that he cannot win the Games. However, it takes some time for Katniss to be autonomous, disregarding the conditions surrounding her and being determined to do whatever it takes to save Peeta alive in Quarter Quell.

In fact, it can be claimed that Capitol, which plays with the genes of the animals disregarding their rights, does not care for the rights of the people in Panem, but desires unwavering compliance with the rules. Peeta also seems to be aware of the oppression of the Capitol on the Capitol citizens, whereas Katniss, when considering the affluent lifestyle they have, thinks they have no worries. She gets surprised after hearing Haymitch, calling the Avoxes traitors: "Against what? It could only be the Capitol. But they had everything here. No cause to rebel" (Collins, 2008, p. 83). Like Katniss, most of the Capitol residents do not realize that they are also oppressed by the government. Even the citizens in the Capitol are being suppressed, but they do not realize it. In fact, the introduction of the arenas as sites of brutality in the Games is to assure "the Capitol citizens that they are safe, to conceal the fact that violence and repression are everywhere" (Day, 2012, p. 176). When Katniss mentions Peeta that she and Gale, while hunting in the woods, saw a girl and a boy from the Capitol were caught by a flying vehicle while running in the wilderness, she says she cannot understand why someone would leave the Capitol, where there is no hunger, no poverty. Since he is also aware of the suppression of the Capitol citizens despite the bright life they have, Peeta says he would also leave the Capitol but then he changes the subject in case someone might hear them.

Scientific knowledge is a powerful mechanism that can be used for a new way of dominating natural world, leading people to adopt an arrogant and masterful approach to it: "Its vision of mastery and salvation remains the underlying project of research into space colonisation and into genetic engineering, cloning and other life-extending technologies that" may give "radiogenic harm to both human social groups and the earth's environment" (Plumwood, 2002, pp. 49-50). Capitol employs scientific and technological

power to dominate “human social groups” and the environment, manipulating innovation as a tool to strengthen its superiority and control. It treats animals and poor districts as slaves to work for and to entertain rich people. This fragmented way of governing does not lead to a peaceful country. The Capitol’s division of Panem’s people into classes—poor districts and wealthy Capitol citizens—results in widespread oppression. Bohm argues that our fragmented way of thinking only leads to chaos, suggesting that “[t]rue unity in the individual and between man and nature, as well as between man and man, can arise only in a form of action that does not attempt to fragment the whole of reality” (Bohm, 1980, p. 20). For a tranquil world, it is crucial to recognize that every living being on Earth has a significant mission in their own right, without establishing hierarchical relationships. In fact, animals and plants that can survive in the wild do not need us to continue their lives, whereas our lives depend on them, which makes it crucial for us to guarantee that the world will not run out of any species. This is the only way in order not to break the wholeness of the world, which is substantially necessary to sustain our lives. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel turns to nature by giving the metaphor of a plant in order to exemplify the importance of the diversity of philosophical systems rather than considering them to be disagreements negating one another:

The bud disappears in the bursting-forth of the blossom, and one might say that the former is refuted by the latter; similarly, when the fruit appears, the blossom is shown up in its turn as a false manifestation of the plant, and the fruit now emerges as the truth of it instead. These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as mutually incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone constitutes the life of the whole. (1998, p. 2)

All philosophical concepts are interconnected, forming a cohesive whole. In nature, everything is interdependent, growing and contributing to the universe’s completeness without any element being more important or valuable than another. With an “organic unity ... in which each is as necessary as the other,” nature offers numerous lessons for human relations and a remedy for the world’s decaying institutions. However, humans, failing to learn from nature, seek to dominate one another, leading to a society reminiscent of *The Hunger Games*, marked by undeniable class-based discrimination

against those born in the districts. In the book, the new species are genetically engineered and weaponized against districts. Even deceased tributes are used to psychologically torture Katniss and Peta to make the Games more exciting to display the power of the Capitol.

When we fail to see the world as a whole, we lose touch with one another and attempt to prove our superiority over those who are weaker than us rather than accepting the diversity of people, animals, and the natural world. This study displays the catastrophic results of the Capitol's negative affiliation with science, disregarding the rights of humans and animals.

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