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### Warnings Against the Exploitation of Children in Young Adult Dystopian Literature

James Henry Lambert

University of Nebraska at Kearney, [lambert.jim1986@gmail.com](mailto:lambert.jim1986@gmail.com)

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WARNINGS AGAINST THE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN YOUNG ADULT  
DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

A Thesis

Presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of the English Department  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
English Master of Arts  
University of Nebraska at Kearney

By

James Henry Lambert

July 2023

# THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the English Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Kearney.

## Supervisory Committee

Name		Department
KIRKLIN J. BATEMAN, PhD	<i>KJ Bateman</i>	EWS/MAN
Todd T. Holm, PhD	<i>Todd T. Holm</i>	EWS/MCL
Susan E Honeyman	<i>Susan E Honeyman</i>	English
Megan Hartman	<i>Megan Hartman</i>	English

*[Signature]*  
Supervisory Committee Chair

*26 July 2023*  
Date

## **ABSTRACT**

The works of Suzanne Collins, Koushun Takami, and Neal Shusterman present a unique subset of young adult literature in which young adults are forced to kill one another. My thesis argues that the presentation of child gladiators in these stories is a form of weaponization conducted by the fictional governments as deterrent weapons against the parents of these fictional dystopias. This weaponization is accomplished through the creation of spectacular events that are meant to draw the attention to the power of the government, also as a form of deterrence against rebellion. Next, my thesis demonstrates how the human body is devalued and transformed into a weapon in various ways. Finally, my thesis focuses on how the characters in these stories are stripped of their individual personalities and reassociated with weapons as a final step in their weaponization. This dehumanization culminates in the loss of human identity and the creation of an identity that is based on their usefulness as a tool and not their value as a human being. I will argue that these acts should be read as warnings of the dangers of exploitation of childhood by adulthood, and these novels challenge readers to use these fictional examples as ways to identify potential real-world exploitative threats to children.

## **DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

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## Introduction: Meeting the Child Gladiator Texts

The author of this thesis argues that the works of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale*, and Neal Shusterman's *The Arc of the Scythe* present warnings against the exploitation of children by adults. In the last 25 years, a subgenre of literature that focuses on children being empowered, and also forced, to kill each other in a gladiator style contest has evolved. This subgenre is a part of the larger young adult dystopian literature as a whole, and comprises several works of varying popularity and notoriety. The works of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale*, and Neal Shusterman's *The Arc of the Scythe* each present a fictitious world that straddles childhood and adulthood. Children and youth, primarily between the ages of twelve and seventeen years old, are the main protagonists within these works of fiction. The overarching message of the *Hunger Games* novels, *Battle Royale*, and the *Scythe* novels to modern readers, who do not live in the dystopian present or futures depicted in these works, is a warning against the exploitation of children by the adult world. This warning against exploitation by the adult world is accomplished through weaponizing various portions of life and using them against not only the children of these novels, but also against adults as well. Weaponization, the process by which something that would otherwise be non-threatening is transformed into a weapon, allows for the antagonists of these novels to transform innocent portions of childhood into life threatening contests. This weaponization is most readily seen in the use of spectacle and pageantry against the populace, followed by the transformation of the human body itself



into a weapon, and concludes with the transformation of identity away from the individual and towards association of identity with weaponry.

Weaponization should be linked emphatically with the ideas of exploitation and dehumanization. David Petraeus, a retired four-star Army General and a former Director of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), mentions that "everything can be employed in some fashion with someone hijacking it as an attack" (Yonah 4). The term hijacking refers to the act of using force to steal something, while weaponization refers to the transformation of an otherwise nonmilitary tool into a combat capable one by altering the tool to allow it to employ weapons or by altering how it is used, thereby making an otherwise nonviolent tool into a weapon ("Hijack," "Weaponization"). In some instances, such as hijacking a civilian airliner to attack a building, hijacking and weaponization occur at once, as the plane, though not containing ordnance, is used to conduct an act of violence to further a political or ideological goal. The relationship between weaponization and tools is complex, because in themselves, weapons are a category of tools, albeit tools of human conflict which can be used to end life. The definition of weapons as tools of conflict is also complicated as throughout human history, non-state entities – individuals – have owned and used weapons outside of large-scale armed conflict between political powers.

Weaponization is the act by which tools that are normally not weapons become weapons. Weaponization can occur as rudimentarily as using a shovel – a tool for digging – as a club with which to beat someone or something to death, or it can be as complex as transforming a plane into a flying, guided bomb, much like the infamous Japanese

*kamikazes* in the final years of World War II, in which Japanese pilots flew their planes into Allied ships to inflict damage. The specific term of hijacking, or the unlawful commandeering of an aircraft or vessel, is useful in terms of this thesis as it connotes not the lawful use of weaponized tools, but rather that something more nefarious is occurring in the process of weaponization within these dystopias. What is actually occurring in Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's works is the hijacking and weaponization of children. The authors' antagonists hijack childhood for use as a weapon against their populations at large as a method of control and deterrence against revolution. The conflicting political powers of these dystopias are the small governing body desiring to maintain their consolidated political power and the governed people of these dystopias. The weapon of choice for the reigning powers is the children of the people whom they govern as the hijacking and weaponization of their children degrades the political will of the governed to resist the status quo while also demonstrating the perceived near-absolute power of the governing.

Weapons at their core are tools with the capability of ending life to be used in conflict, but they remain tools nonetheless. More importantly, it should be noted that tools lack self-agency because they are objects meant to be wielded by a user. More broadly, tools are largely inanimate objects that lack any type of rights that would normally be afforded to humans based on their status as people. Tools have none of the rights that people do, and as such can be used and discarded as the user sees fit. In the past, humans themselves have been viewed as tools, which, beyond the moral bankruptcy of one human owning another, robs the people who are owned of their self-agency. An

inanimate tool can be used by a human; a human viewed as a tool is a human being exploited by another human. In these stories, humans, specifically children are weaponized into tools to maintain the power of the political and social elites, as will be demonstrated in the Tributes of *The Hunger Games*, the ninth graders of *Battle Royale*, and the Scythe trainees of *Scythe*.

While child gladiators do not exist in the modern United States, other aspects of childhood are weaponized in ways that should alarm adults. One such example is how books in libraries, particularly in public school libraries, have recently come under attack by entities outside of educators and parents. Trisha Tucker points out that “in 2022, the American Library Association (ALA) tracked 1,269 challenges to library, school, and university materials, targeting a total of 2,571 unique titles” (Tucker 1). These challenges are notable for the frequency of their occurrence and the origins of the challenge. Tucker points out that occurrences of challenges to books in school libraries in the past have largely originated with concerned parents acting independently, the book challenges that have occurred since 2021 have been accompanied by concerned parents who are backed “by nation-wide advocacy groups and politicians authoring legislation that seeks to outlaw or criminalize making so-called controversial books available to children” (Tucker 2). Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Johnson, editors for PEN America, point out that “the large majority of book bans underway today are not spontaneous, organic expressions of citizen concern. Rather, they reflect the work of a growing number of advocacy organizations that have made demanding censorship of certain books and ideas in schools part of their mission” (Friedman and Johnson 2022). The point made by

Tucker, Friedman, and Johnson is that these challenges have been made not with a focus on what is best for the children themselves, or even on creating a better educational environment, but rather as part of a larger cultural and political movement. In making books in schools a battleground of a cultural movement, schools – and the children they educate – cease to be places of learning and instead become tools to accomplish a political task. While there appears to be a substantial gap between children being forced to fight each other in gladiatorial combat and in attacking books available in libraries, the presence of outside entities as financial and political backers to these parents transforms the concern of a parent into a political weapon.

What makes the empowerment of parents by an advocacy group so problematic is the intent, not of the parents, but of the advocacy group. That parents are engaged with what their children are reading from a school library is a good thing, and even if those parents disagree with the content of the book, parents being allowed to voice concern over a book in a forum such as a school board meeting is a healthy way to approach their concerns for their child's education. Robert Kim, a law professor, points out judicial precedent set by the United States Supreme Court in *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* “that school boards cannot ban books in a narrowly partisan or political manner to prevent access to ideas with which they disagree” and that since that decision, determining the “legitimacy of a board member's motivation” for removing a book is the key factor in determining if a book is lawfully removed or not (Kim 62, 64). Friedman and Johnson demonstrate the relevance of the *Pico* decision as the books that are currently being attacked in the United States are predominantly ones which involve a

character who is either an ethnic or religious minority, or else a member of the LGBTQIA+ community (Friedman and Johnson 2022). The danger in allowing outside entities to finance a parent's concern is that it brings into question both the legitimacy of the parent and the school board as the advocacy groups have a clear political or cultural objective. In allowing an advocacy group to provide monetary support, the focus of the debate surrounding shifts from what is best for children and towards the social agenda of the advocacy group. Once a political agenda has been imposed, the child, and their education, has been transformed into a tool to accomplish a task, and then hijacked as a weapon against anything outside a white, heteronormative standard.

Another area that will become relevant to the weaponization of youth in this paper is the realm of gun control in the United States, particularly in regard to the presence of guns in schools and in the lives of children. Virtually all American can agree that the presence of firearms in schools represents an existential threat to a safe learning environment, and therefore represents a threatening incursion by the adult world into the world of children. Unfortunately, agreeing that guns are a threat in a school environment is about as much as people in the United States can agree upon. This inability to agree on any types of gun reform legislation is driven largely by the presence of pro-gun interest groups that provide financial backing to keep gun laws in the United States among the laxest in the world. Megan Sanders points out that gun proliferation in the United States makes obtaining a firearm easy, saying "there are 330 million Americans and 390 million guns in this country. No other country on the planet has that ratio of guns to people" (Sanders 14). To the point of weaponization of youth, the presence of pro-gun lobbyists

in the political sphere directly impacts children through the inaction of politicians. By refusing to enact gun legislation reform that would directly protect them, children are transformed into economic tools by politicians who care more about the financial backing of gun lobbyists and pro-gun constituents.

Like outside organizations backing parents' objections to certain books in public schools, the presence of lobbyists in the political gun control debate presents an ethical quandary regarding children and gun control. Reverend Deanna Hollas, who works with the Presbyterian Church to end gun violence in the United States, pointedly states "the more gun violence we have, the more people buy guns. And the more guns we have, the more gun violence we have. This continuous, self-sustaining loop only benefits the gun industry by promoting gun sales and also the politicians who cater to gun extremists for votes" (Hollas 35). Hollas' assertion is alarming in that it highlights that what is standing in the way of gun legislation reform are political and economic actors that are more concerned with profit than they are with public safety. Hollas' quote becomes even more unsettling when combined with Education Week's tracker of school shootings that there were 167 school shootings in the United States between 2018 and August 2023 resulting in 114 people killed and 296 injured ("Education Week"). Importantly, Education Week only included gun violence that occurred on school property or in a school building, not gun violence against children that occurred elsewhere.

Melvin Livingston's study of school shootings from 1999 to 2018 highlights that the types of weapons used, specifically semiautomatic handguns and rifles, dramatically increased the fatality rate in school shootings, while the presence of school resource

officers, often touted as the solution to school shootings by politicians who identify as right of center and by pro-gun lobbyists, did nothing to decrease school shootings (Livingston 788). Livingston also argues that the best way to curtail gun violence in schools is to “enact stricter gun laws” (788). Similarly, Mark Guis conducted a similar reviews of the seventeen school shootings that occurred in 2014 and found that only states with bans on semi-automatic assault-style weapons produced a statistical decrease in the number of fatalities during a school shooting and that “all other gun control laws – concealed carried weapon laws, private sale background checks, and federal dealer background checks – had no statistically-significant effects on the number of school shooting victims” (Guis 319). Thus, the conclusion is that the only way to prevent school shootings, and thereby protect children, or at least to mitigate the horror of them, is to enact nationwide bans of certain types of firearms, particularly semi-automatic rifles. However, rather than enact legislative reform that would directly protect children, politicians have instead devalued them and transformed them into a form of currency to maintain both political and economic power through pro-gun constituent votes and pro-gun lobbyists.

In the novels my thesis examines, weaponization of childhood and children has advanced past the real-world examples discussed above. In these novels, not only are children directly weaponized, aspects of childhood are hijacked and weaponized as well. Each of these novels incorporates an element of childhood – specifically, “games of chase,” as Hanin Hussain calls them in *Early Childhood Folio* – because these games are artificial social constructs we as humans create for ourselves and for young children to

allow ourselves and our children to test the boundaries of our knowledge regarding what is acceptable in our societies (Hussain 24). These games of chase are games such as tag, or hide-and-seek and its derivatives, such as manhunt. In these games, the objective is to not be tagged. Because of their prevalence from the earliest stages of human growth and development, being present in the laughter of children playing with family or friends, or the screams and squeals of the playground at school, games of chase represent a vital tool in laying a firm foundation for functioning human society. Games of chase lay this societal foundation because they demand adherence to a certain ruleset – no pushing, no fighting, no hitting, no biting, etc. – while teaching and reinforcing that rulebreakers find themselves on the receiving end of punishment from an authority figure to the child. Thus, the first and most important part of the work of the in-world creators of the various games is to take an otherwise innocent aspect of childhood and to twist it to involve a lethal aspect and thus invert everything the game stood for prior to the contestants' involvement. Now, no longer is “no fighting” a rule; instead, fighting, and more importantly, winning, becomes the one and only rule. By altering the fundamental rules of childhood games, the gamemakers not only steal a portion of childhood, they also repurpose it to be a tool which they can utilize for their own purposes as a weapon against their own citizenry.

In each of these worlds, the objective for the participants in the games is the same as in the real world's children's games: don't get tagged! Each world is built around a scenario in which an aspect of childhood is coupled to an aspect of adulthood and the resultant combination forces the contests' participants, as well as the readers, to act as



adults for the entertainment of adults. For *The Hunger Games* novels and *Battle Royale*, the game of tag is obvious because the participants are quite obviously trying to tag one another, albeit in ways which will cause death – until only one child is left. The game of tag is less obvious in *The Arc of the Scythe* novels – not because the rules are different, but because the scale of the game is different. In Collins' and Takami's work, the games are limited to a relatively small size, normally two to four dozen or fewer participants. In Shusterman's work, however, the Scythedom as a whole are the taggers and the entirety of the world population is playing. The twist for all three universes is that in reality, to be tagged is simply to be removed from the game; in these games, to be tagged is to be removed from the game of life.

Not only do these games take on new meanings in their respective stories, they also become hideously violent. This violence, recorded by adult orchestrators, then becomes a grotesque form of entertainment, which is willingly consumed by the ruling powers and forcibly fed to the general populace with the end goal being an overt exertion of political control over the populaces of the worlds of *The Hunger Games*, *Battle Royale*, and *The Arc of the Scythe*. These violent acts become weapons which are wielded by the ruling powers aimed at the general populace of the various fictional worlds, with the goal of producing a sense of fear within the populations. The ruling powers strive to create a sense of terror at the prospect of being murdered, or of watching one's children being murdered, which can then be used by the ruling power as a method of deterrence against social upheaval. The ritualized spectacle and pageantry of the various contests exist to demonstrate not only the governments' power to force these contests upon their

populations, but also to break the resolve of the populations to resist the injustices of their governments. This weaponized terror ultimately acts as a method of control through the fear of death and destruction to one's self and one's family.

This thesis will examine three sets of fiction: Suzanne Collins' novels: *The Hunger Games*, published in 2008, *Catching Fire*, published in 2009, and the prequel novel to *The Hunger Games*, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, published in 2020; Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale*, published in 1999; and Neal Shusterman's *Arc of the Scythe* novels: *Scythe*, published in 2016, *Thunderhead* published in 2018, *The Toll* published in 2019, and *Gleanings: Stories From the Arc of a Scythe*, published in 2022. Collin's fourth novel, *Mockingjay*, published in 2010, is largely not a focus of this thesis as *Mockingjay* shifts away from gladiatorial combat and becomes a war story in that Katniss, Peeta, Finnick, and Gale, among others, become soldiers in an army fighting against the Capitol. These novels were selected because they each deal with a group of children, chosen from among the general population, who are empowered, authorized, and otherwise forced to kill other humans, specifically other children, in a gladiatorial setting.

### **Different Readers and Different Messages**

On the surface, these novels appear to be written primarily for young adults. However, given that these authors also enjoy a wide readership who are adults, it becomes possible for the novels to convey two different sets of messages based on when in their lives the readers read the books. For example, this thesis will discuss various predatory behaviors of adults on preadolescent and adolescent children. The differences

seen by both young adult or adolescent readers and adult readers is to be both expected and encouraged as it allows for the creation of dialogue and allows for a more thorough understanding of the works as a whole. While these novels are written for young adults, both their themes and their wide readership advance the argument that they actually are part of a larger genre of literature known as “crossover fiction,” which Sandra Beckett defines in *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives* as literary works that are capable of straddling literary boundaries and are instead literature written for multiple age ranges, namely literature written for children, young adults, and adults (Beckett 3). Beckett points out that the most enduring and successful children’s authors, such as E.B. White, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and a host of others, have written works that are considered children’s books (4). Beckett goes on to argue that until the closing decades of the 20th century, children’s literature specifically had not received the same amount of scholarly examination as literature written for adults despite these literary works having a shared cultural heritage with literature for adults and providing a cultural foundation in societies around the world (12). This shared cultural heritage is important because it creates a foundation from which novels that are considered crossover fiction can appeal to both children and adults.

Looking specifically at readership, adults and adolescents will read the same novel differently, and the same person may read the same novel differently at different times. These books could straddle multiple literature genres, notably dystopian literature, young adult or adolescent literature, and children’s literature for adults. Michelle Abate, in her book *No Kids Allowed: Children’s Literature for Adults*, argues that Theodor

Geisel, more popularly known as Dr. Seuss, was responsible for creating the genre of children's literature for adults in 1986 with his book, *You're Only Old Once!* (Abate 36).

It is this final genre of children's literature for adults that is perhaps the most intriguing as these stories intermingle the world of children and the world of adults and appeal to both audiences. Further, Beckett argues that crossover fiction has come to occupy the cultural place once held by fairy tales, myths, fables, and legends, and suggests that they are a genre of literature "of the people" in that they are a shared cultural heritage (Beckett 9). As this thesis will demonstrate, the works of Collins, Takami, and Shusterman are firmly within crossover fiction and advance ideas that benefit children, adolescents, and adults.

In declaring these novels to be crossover fiction, it is important to define why they are not solely children's literature. One example of why these works are not solely within the genre of children's literature is their deconstruction of various hallmarks of children's literature. Perry Nodelman attempts to define children's literature in his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* and he points out two very important hallmarks of children's literature. The first is sameness, or repetition, in that children's stories tend to follow a very formulaic pattern, which often includes a happy ending, or at least the resolution of the problem and a restoration of a quasi-utopian worldview for the children in the book (Nodelman 298). This pattern of problem and resolution, in which "home" is representative of safety and stability, while anywhere "away" from home is filled with danger and adventure, culminates in the creation of "home/away/home plots" that is a formulaic starting point for understanding the structure of children's literature (98). The second hallmark Nodelman points out is that all children's literature must intrinsically

appeal not just to one adult – the publisher – but to many adults (287). The second point will be addressed first. As publishers are corporate entities that exist to make money by selling books, a book that does not sell well is a bad financial investment. Therefore, publishers of children's books must find children's literature that possesses at least some broad appeal to adults as purchasers of children's literature – either for children or for themselves. If children will not read the novel, then the only remaining financially viable option would be for adults to be reading the children's literature. Both Nodelman and Beckett agree that children's literature cannot exist solely for children, with Beckett going so far as to quote C.S. Lewis that “children's stories that [are] only enjoyed by children [are] bad children's stories” (Beckett 9, Lewis 25). The enduring children's stories are the ones that speak to both children and to adults. Further, when looking at readership, when children cannot yet read to themselves, adults, or older children, become the reader for them through reading aloud to listening children, so someone other than the child needs to enjoy the material, or at the very least be able to tolerate reading it to a child.

Regarding Nodelman's first point about the sameness of children's literature relating to happy endings, it can be argued that Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's fictional works do indeed have happy endings, though with a twist. These stories begin with the protagonists in their homes, as demonstrated in the cases of Katniss and Citra, who begin their stories physically inside their own domiciles, with Citra literally at her family's the kitchen table eating a meal with her parents and brother, and then proceed on adventures, before ultimately returning home, though the home, and the characters, are

greatly changed (*The Hunger Games* 1, *Scythe* 5). The three sets of primary protagonists – Katniss and Peeta from *The Hunger Games*, Shuya and Noriko from *Battle Royale*, and Rowan and Citra from *Scythe* – do indeed survive to the end of the story, and go on to life beyond the story, though it is precisely this life beyond that is the twist. Peeta and Katniss survive to the end of *Mockingjay*, though several secondary characters like Finnick, Prim, Rue, Thresh, as well as thousands of others, perhaps hundreds of thousands, do not and their world is left in the ruins of a second civil war in less than a century. Shuya and Noriko survive the Program in *Battle Royale*, but as they try to escape to America they are relentlessly pursued by the Greater Republic of East Asia. In Shusterman's *Scythe* works, Rowan and Citra escape into space with hundreds of others minutes before a cataclysm upends the status quo on Shusterman's Earth. In all instances, the protagonists live, and in that light, these are indeed happy endings – the reward for their trials is to live their lives and possibly die of natural causes instead of dying with weapons in their hands. However, their endings are not a return to utopia, but in fact an awakening to the very broken and harsh world of adults and the places they return to are not perfect.

Nodelman highlights this innocence as one of the defining characteristics of children's literature, "claiming children's literature tends to see things from the viewpoint of innocence - as children theoretically see them" (Nodelman 189). The hopefulness seen at the end of Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's texts is not an idyllic innocence of childhood, but rather has transitioned into an adult hope that understands innocence has been lost through bloodshed, but that hope still remains. Nodelman likewise declares that young adult literature is "fiction "for young adults" – people in the process of changing

from childhood to adults” (86). The ultimate transformation of hope for the various sets of protagonists at the end of their adventures is precisely what makes these texts young adult works. While these stories satisfy the need of children’s literature to be similar, to have the same happy ending as part of a larger home-away-home pattern, they do so in a far more adult resolution than would be expected in children’s literature aimed at a younger audience. The sameness achieved is hopeful, but it is hopeful in an adult way – that though the societal structures in which they live are broken – goodness can, will, and does come from broken things.

It is precisely this unique sameness, as much of an oxymoron as that may be, that makes these works appeal to adults. Adults can read and examine the works in a different way than a child would read them. A child can see themselves – as a peer – in these novels, while an adult can look back and still see themselves, albeit their younger self, and in doing so they can identify dangers that might be camouflaged to younger readers, or even to themselves upon an initial reading. Adults should also be able to identify the obvious threats in these novels, particularly the ones rooted in governmental abuse of power. While the stories themselves revolve around gladiator children, the readers of these stories should be equally concerned with how these children, and the weapons they wield, got into the arenas in the first place. Further, the focus on the creation of gladiator children should alarm adults as it speaks directly to the personhood of the children involved. In many ways, the children of these novels are reduced in their humanity – dehumanized – because they possess the capability of being a tool for the ruling powers to use against their citizenry. Sara Hagá points out that children are susceptible to

exploitation because they are seen as “*human becomings*” instead of *human beings* because they have not yet reached full adulthood, in contrast to adults who, while still in the process of *becoming*, have nonetheless been afforded full legal rights because of their status as adults, which begs the question of whether children should be afforded the same rights as adults, and what ages they should receive these rights (Hagá 3-4). The creation of gladiator children forces readers to give a valuation of the humanity of children, and if their lives are worth more, or less, than adult lives, and why.

This thesis will demonstrate the many ways in which children of these dystopias are dehumanized and reduced in their own personhood from children to tools of a larger political entity. The purpose of a tool is to be used to accomplish a specific task, and by reducing children to a tool to maintain political power and inflict political damage, the governing powers of these dystopias are robbing them of their personhood in favor of the good of the governing power. This exploitation is shown in the numerous fatalities that arise from the competitions and occupations forced upon these children. Examining these three fictional dystopian universes as children’s literature for broader interpretation that encompasses both children’s literature and adult literature than if they were simply viewed as either one or the other. More importantly, my hope for this thesis is to draw readers’ attention to reality and show children and childhood are worthy of adult defense. In the modern day, one does not have to read deep into news headlines to see instances of gun-based school violence, increased sexualization of childhood and children accompanied by predation from adults, and fringe political groups on both ends of the political spectrum that see children as political pawns. My goal is to highlight where



these dystopias went wrong and in drawing attention to their failings to enable readers to work against creations of social systems that would enable such exploitation.

Life experience brings with it a different perspective, and this should be encouraged because it demonstrates the personal growth of the reader. However, neither an adult reading nor a subsequent reading should ever invalidate the reaction of younger readers to the work for the first time. If the young readers identify with the main characters more than other details seen later in subsequent readings or by adults, that should be valid because they might see in these works themselves or their peers. For example, if younger readers only see themselves in Rowan Damisch and yet fail to see the warning signs of Scythe Goddard in a potential real-world authority figure, an adult might not only see Scythe Goddard in that living authority figure, but might be able to identify warning signs of exploitation before harm is done in reality. Both the child's and the adult's reading are equally valid, but it allows for teaching moments and ways to foster the creation of language for young people that allows them to accurately describe their world and interpersonal interactions within it.

These dystopian novels show us children on the cusp of adulthood, thrust into very adult situations where they must kill one another. It is also natural to assume the older Tributes would be attracted to one another as they are in the same age range. Similarly, Mitsuko Souma in *Battle Royale* is a perfect example of a female character who uses her sexuality as a weapon against other students, and there are open expressions of sexual desire directed at the students by other students, such as Peeta towards Katniss, and through various members of class Ninth Grade Class B, and Rowan and Citra's

series-long, slow developing romance. In that sense, these novels present a mostly normal expression of human psychological growth and development, the killing aside. However, the direction of sexual attention from adults to the Tributes and Victors in *The Hunger Games* must always be called what it is: predatory. No matter how magnanimous a gift from a sponsor to a Tribute to aid them in the arena, such as Finnick's trident, if the gift is given with the idea of one day receiving sexual favor in return, it is simply childhood sexual exploitation and the Capitol must be condemned for promoting it. For readers, this particularly horrid abuse must be highlighted because it is both perpetrated by the government, in Finnick's case, and ignored by it, in Mitsuko's case. The warning for modern readers is not just to protect children, but to beware of entire social systems which silence the voices of the marginalized for the benefit of those in power. The message is if a single voice becomes too inconvenient to hear, every other voice that might dissent is in danger of being silenced as well.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will focus on the use of violent spectacles as weapons. The use of spectacles as a weapon will be shown to be an overt weapon by reigning powers in these dystopias as weapons against the general populations of these dystopias. The second chapter will focus on the human body and the various ways the authors of these texts have enabled their antagonists to weaponize the human body. The third chapter focuses on the transformation of the protagonists' identities away from their humanity and towards being seen as tools through dehumanization. In each chapter, the thesis will draw attention to how the various

elements of childhood are hijacked and weaponized by the reigning powers of these fictional worlds and then used against the lower social echelons.

### **Items of Note**

There are several small discussion points that must be made before beginning an analysis of the novels themselves. The first involves the relationship of Takami's *Battle Royale* and Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Of the three sets of fiction, these two are the closest in terms of plot as they focus on children fighting and killing other children. Collins has publicly stated that she had never heard of Takami's work prior to writing *The Hunger Games*, instead saying that her inspiration came from the Theseus myth and watching live news coverage of the early stages of the Second Gulf War ("Suzanne Collins Talks about 'the Hunger Games,' the Books and the Movies" 375). While there have been comparisons between Collins' and Takami's novels, the greater number of comparisons have been between the film adaptations of the two authors' work. Takami's work did not receive wide release in the United States at the time of its publishing as it was written in Japanese. *Battle Royale* was reimagined into a manga, or Japanese comic, which was also written in Japanese, and then reimagined again into a film version, which was released in 2000. The film was not released in the United States due to it being considered too gory in the wake of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado (Akiko 8). However, as the films of both of these novels are largely not the focus of this thesis, this comparison is mostly a moot point other than to say the two plots are similar in nature.

Next, regarding Takami's *Battle Royale*, it should be noted that it was originally written in Japanese and has since been translated to English. This thesis utilized the 2014 English translation of Takami's work, and I am willing to concede the inherent weakness of reading a translation without being able to read Takami's work in its original language – Japanese. Some things, such as the meanings of names, that are inherent in Japanese writing are lost in English translations, particularly if not pointed out by a person who reads Japanese. Seung-Eun Soon and Sook-Jong Park point out that “Culture Specific Items,” or CSI, are lost in translations of books, and this is especially so regarding names as names carry different meanings in different cultures (Sung, et al 215). For example, from *Battle Royale*, Mitsuko Souma's name literally translates to “light child” and the tragic irony of her name in relation to her character is lost in English (Campbell 1). As English readers, Mitsuko's name is only Mitsuko; in its native Japanese, Mitsuko – “light child” – forces readers to grapple with the meaning of her name when weighed against her past of sexual abuse at the hands of at least five men, including her elementary school teacher “in a dark, confined archival room” (Takami 550). While these small nuances are lost, and some translations are cumbersome or wordy in English, such as the name of the competition in which the children participate – Battle Experiment No. 68 Program – overall the translation functions and the plot can be compared, contrasted, and analyzed in English. The utmost attempt to be respectful of CSIs has been made, though this would certainly be an area of future study to create a fuller, more complete picture.

Third, this paper will not address the ancient stories of adolescents being pulled into gladiatorial contests or large-scale wars, such as the Theseus myth sequence,

Achilles and his part in the Trojan War, or David in the biblical Book of Samuel. While these sources may be used in the future, the cultural differences between the ancient and modern sources are significant enough for them to deserve a different examination. As with *Battle Royale*, an English translation would be both sufficient and usable, but in using a translation the CSIs are lost. Further, Takami, Collins, and Shusterman's writing occupies a span of less than 25 years, while they share a gap of several millennia with the ancient sources, if the ancient sources can even be dated accurately. Because the ancient stories all stem from oral traditions, it becomes impossible to determine both when the story occurred and when it was initially written down. Rather than attempt to shoehorn the ancient with the modern in one paper, the conscious decision was made to focus on the modern over the ancient texts, though a place for future study might be to compare the two sets of text.

Another novel that was considered for this thesis but not included was Orson Scott Card's 1985 novel *Ender's Game*. There is an overall larger subset of young adult literature that deals with children and war, and both *Ender's Game* and the novels examined in this thesis do all fit in that larger subset, especially when considering just war theory and the transformation of children into warriors. However, the training of children specifically to become warriors is a different subset than those who are forced to be gladiators without significant training as warriors carry the connotation of fighting in a military force while a gladiator is someone who is forced to fight for the entertainment of others. While *Ender's Game* does share some narrative similarities with this thesis' texts, such as a child being specifically prepared for combat, the differences outnumber the

similarities. The major distinction is that Andrew “Ender” Wiggins in *Ender’s Game* is prepared from a young age specifically for military action for the benefit of the human species against an alien species, not against other human children.

Lastly, Shusterman’s works differ from the works of Collins and Takami in that Shusterman does not specifically focus on a group composed only of children being forced to fight and kill each other, though he does incorporate children involved in both gladiatorial combat with one another, as well as children being empowered to kill other people. While Collins and Takami share a relatively similar plot in which children quickly become gladiators, and are often, but not always, both unconsenting to this new identity and surprised by it when it is thrust upon them, in Shusterman’s work the decision to become a killer is done with a person’s consent. In Shusterman’s work, members of the general population are taken, trained, and empowered to become Scythes, whose occupation it is to kill other humans in order to maintain population growth of an otherwise immortal humanity. Where Shusterman’s novels are similar to both Collins’ and Takami’s is that most of the future Scythes chosen for apprenticeship are approximately the same age as the contestants in *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* and that they are equally tasked with killing other people.

## CHAPTER 1

### Violent Spectacles as Weapons

The first warning to adult readers in Collins' *The Hunger Games* novels, Takami's *Battle Royale*, and Shusterman's *Arc of the Scythe* novels is to beware of violent acts committed against children – particularly violent acts that are methodically and overtly executed in ways that are meant to be seen by the masses. The weaponization that occurs is not only the transformation of games of chase from simple children's games to gladiatorial games, but also a second stage of weaponization by transforming the newly weaponized games of chase into events that are meant to be watched and consumed by an audience. This thesis calls these contests gladiatorial games because of the certainty that most of the participants will die, as opposed to sporting events in which the contestants survive to play another day. While gladiatorial combat would be morally dubious if it involved only consenting adults, these authors maintain that children are the combatants who do not have the ability to refuse to participate, which forces the interpretation that these children are being used specifically and with a predetermined justification and desired outcome in mind. An adult volunteer in a gladiatorial game maintains self-agency and therefore the moral responsibility for their actions in the arena, while a child conscript has had their self-determination removed and is therefore forced to kill another child for adults' entertainment.

In each of these texts, the authors have created stratified societies that each have two broad groups of people: the small group of ruling elites who have political power, and the majority of the populations that do not have political power. In this regard, the

desired outcomes of the gladiatorial contests are very much in line with war planning between two competing nations, in which weaponized games are used as a strategic deterrence by the reigning powers against their perceived political opponents, who just happen to be their own politically powerless populations. The justification for all three dystopias is the ultimate maintenance of the status quo where those with power remain in power and the subjugated remain ruled. Collins accomplishes this weaponization through the dramatic use of spectacles in order to demonstrate the power of the Capitol.

Meanwhile, Takami utilizes a more subtle spectacle in order to generate fear of the government and sow dissension and division among the populace to keep them from forming an organized resistance. Lastly, Shusterman utilizes almost invisible forms of spectacle that, despite their horrific violence and scale, appear so commonplace in his fiction world that the population has become numb to them until faced with them directly, as well as a way to quietly and efficiently curtail individuals who may disrupt the human collective.

Suzanne Collins significantly recounts the pomp and circumstance of the Hunger Games in *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, though the source of this spectacle is actually *The Ballad of Songbird and Snakes*. This prequel novel presents a world in which the Hunger Games are a dying tradition only a decade after their initial implementation. Takami's Greater Republic of East Asia utilizes Battle Experiment Number 68 Program, or simply "the Program," in *Battle Royale* as a method to control the Japanese populace to create a sense of fear of the government, friends, and family. Similarly, Shusterman demonstrates the way in which numerous Scythes of his universe



utilize spectacle in their killings to instill fear, but also to exert naked political control over the world populace, and to keep the human population from exploding beyond control. As with *The Hunger Games*, Shusterman demonstrates spectacle in his *Arc of the Scythe* trilogy, but utilizes a short story collection, *Gleanings*, to demonstrate how the Scythes utilizes spectacle to accomplish both the culling of the human population and to instill within the general populace a sense of fear of the Scythedom, as well as a sense that the Scythedom can do whatever they desire. Ultimately, each of these stories utilize ritualized spectacles in which the act of killing is the primary focus. This focus on the taking of life becomes important because it forces the focus of the populace to be on the preservation of their own lives.

In taking a childhood game and weaponizing it, the gamemakers essentially end a portion of childhood for not only the participants, but also for children throughout their worlds because each person who survives the game bears the psychological scar of surviving. In a sense, games of chase, and game in general, can never again be a safe place to play and learn because they have taken on a new, deadly meaning. As previously mentioned, according to Hanin Hussain, the primary purpose of games of chase is the development of understanding socially acceptable conduct, particularly the social understanding that “we must not hurt people playing the game” (Hussain 23). Games are designed as safe ways to test boundaries of what is socially acceptable. In taking an otherwise safe tool and twisting it to involve a lethal component, the gamemakers have removed any developmental benefit and made it entirely about survival. The changing of childhood games to include a lethal element, specifically to include instances in which

children must kill other children, accomplishes several objectives in making a portion of childhood a weapon. The first is to implicate the entire population in the games because the games' players are children. The unselected children – those children who are forced into the candidacy pool, and yet not selected to play in the respective arenas – will eventually reach adulthood and therefore become longstanding participants in the games themselves. The children, and later adults, who were not selected still played the game, though they successfully avoided being tagged in the first portion of the game – the selection round. Next, the adults of the games are perpetual participants because they are both survivors of the games and the source of not only future participants, but future spectators as well.

This cycle of game survivors providing more potential participants is significant because it is not just a cultural trauma, but a perpetual cycle from which the participants cannot break free because the horrific circumstance has been normalized in their culture and minds. In each of these stories, the lethal children's games have been occurring for decades. Few people, if any, remember anything else other than the status quo, and thus, every aspect of life has normalized around the terrifying reality experienced by the characters. This transformation of the abnormal into the norm is not unheard of in reality. For example, in her book *Children During the Holocaust*, Patricia Heberer points out how, in 1930s Germany, both children and adults played games with the clear goal of “[instilling] in young children the basest tenets of Nazi antisemitism,” such as a board game in which the objective is to “remove the Jew” by removing stylized wooden tokens possessing racist caricatures of Jewish people from a gameboard with the winner being

the player who has removed the most (Heberer 228). Not only do games used pragmatically in this way normalize otherwise unacceptable behavior, they also reinforce the standard which the ruling power desired to be set. Further, George Eisen points out the normalizing power of games in his book *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows*, which shows how Jewish children living in concentration camps processed and understood their terrifying reality by playing games where they pretended to bury one another after they had been executed in a gas chamber (Eisen 78). These examples show the norming power of play and games for both children and adults, and demonstrate how inward acceptance of a new reality manifests itself outwardly. While they might protest their children participating, the surviving adults have accepted their cultural norms because it is all they have known. Participation in the selection portion of the games is thus normalized for the child players because everyone eventually participates in some portion of the game. Thus, adults are both the actual target of the games as well as perpetual participants who must force their own children to participate in lethal games, creating a never-ending loop of carnage that keeps the adults of these worlds locked under the control of the gamemakers and the governments they serve.

Further, the act of weaponizing games comes from the way in which the populace, at all socio-economic levels, is forced to consume the games as a form of entertainment, regardless of if they want to or not. In each novel, the games are performed in such a way as to create a spectacle. Collins mentions through Katniss that everyone in Panem is provided a government-issued television and required to watch the Hunger Games annually (*The Hunger Games* 81). Takami doesn't require the adults of

his world to watch their children die, but only to give them up willingly, while the winner is crowned in the press (Takami 44). Shusterman is again slightly different in his handling of the Scythedom, though he repeatedly states the Scythedom, in its guiding directives, declares that every human is fair game for death, as demonstrated when the first death in *Scythe* is a talented high school football player who is killed to demonstrate he would statistically have been among the many teenagers who would have died in the real, pre-immortality world (*Scythe* 25). It is this spectacle that is the actual weapon used by the gamemakers against their population. The violence of the games is used as both a form of entertainment as well as a weapon. So effective are the games that no one is capable of escaping them because their cultures are built around them. Much like the Rome emperors once used the Colosseum as a way to not only demonstrate their power but to also give “Panem et Circuses,” or “bread and circuses,” as a way to “lull people into relinquishing their political power,” these games act as both an entertainment as well as a way to continually remind the general populace of their actual position in their world relative to their overlords (“Suzanne Collins Talks about ‘the Hunger Games,’ the Books and the Movies” 375). Again, while each universe differs slightly, this chapter will show how the authors individualize the use of spectacle as a weapon against their people.

Weaponized games are designed to not only remind people why they are under the control of their government, but also that the government controls every aspect of their lives. For Panem, the Capitol rules every aspect of the outlying Districts, while the Scythedom and the Thunderhead rule their future Earth, and every Japanese citizen is subject to the authority of the Republic of Greater East Asia. These novels transform an

aspect of childhood from a playful game into a miniature war as an expression of political will of the ruling power of these dystopias. General Carl von Clausewitz, whose military theory has influenced military strategy around the globe since the 1800s and still provides a core military doctrine for both the United States and her allies and enemies, defines war as “an act of force to compel [one’s] enemy to do [one’s] will” (von Clausewitz, 75). The end state which the Capitol, the Greater Republic of East Asia, and the tandem of the Scythedom and the Thunderhead seek to achieve in their respective realities is a universe in which order, or at least their version of it, is maintained, with these ruling entities at the top of the social structure. To that end, the execution of violent acts against children, and adults by extension – and against adults too, in the case of the Scythes – is not only an act of force against the general populace, it is an act of war on their own populations.

The intent of these acts of war is to force compliance with the social structure each of these dystopian rulers envisions for their universe. These games are engineered in such a way as to remove the ability of a population to resist them in terms of both military resistance and social resistance. Michel Foucault points out in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that prisons, and by extension the punishments that come from them, have been designed to strike at the heart and soul of men and women (Foucault 16). While the end result of the legal system was once the exacting of justice, Foucault points out in the late 1700 a shift occurred in which torture mostly became an outlawed practice, though governments across the globe, of all religious and political variants, have since continued to employ various methods of eugenics, torture, and genocide when it suited them. Prisons shifted focus from

punishment to reeducation, where the point of incarceration itself was no longer to break the body of the criminal, but to reeducate the prisoner's spirit. The goal changed to reorient the offender's mindset so that they see their place within the societal whole and become willingly submissive and compliant to their masters. While there is certainly hope for redemption and rehabilitation as the absolute best outcome in a world in which punishment is tempered by reeducation, the games of these dystopias have been designed not just to be a prison, but to be weapons as well. The inmates in these dystopias can never be rehabilitated, and instead are subjected to a torture of the soul and to a prison of the spirit as a way to keep the human spirit subjected through fear. More insidiously, these games are not just an act of war on the populations of these dystopias, but they also effectively force the populations to be complicit in their own subjugation as they render the adult populations complicit in the games themselves through survivorship.

### **The Spectacle of the Hunger Games**

When Suzanne Collins first introduces her readers to the Hunger Games, the Games have been held annually and are in their 74th iteration. It should be noted that while readers are first introduced to the Hunger Games in Collins' 2008 eponymous novel, it is her 2020 prequel that fleshes out what life was like in the previous decades and demonstrates how important the weaponization of spectacle is to her Panem universe as a whole. While Katniss and Peeta's Games are a well-oiled machine of annual pageantry, Collins shows her readers in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* that this was not always the case. In actuality, the Games only became a successful annual event in their 10th iteration, which is the Hunger Games covered in *The Ballad of Songbirds and*

*Snakes*. In this iteration, the Tributes are rounded up and then transported via boxcar to quickly slaughter each other. This quick slaughter should be remembered later as it closely aligns with the three-day time limit used by Takami in *Battle Royale*. While Collins wrote *The Hunger Games* more than a decade before *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the fourth novel of her Panem universe acts as a prequel to the first and the differences between the 10th and 74th Hunger Games are meant to be stark so that the readers can notice the substantial evolution that occurred in the 64 years that occurred between *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* and *The Hunger Games* in Collins' future timeline. The changes between the 10th and 74th Hunger Games is entirely because of the introduction of, and weaponization of, spectacle to the Games.

While the Hunger Games themselves were originally devised as a way to remind the twelve Districts of their defeat at the hands of the Capitol, it became obvious that most of the general populace of both the Capitol and the Districts had very little interest in watching twenty-four children being forced to slaughter each other, especially if the children are simply taken and the only observers are the rulers of the Capitol themselves. The Games were originally the brainchild of Casca Highbottom as homework to a prompt. The prompt, to determine a way to enforce perpetual suffering on a conquered enemy, was answered in what was meant to be a tongue-in-cheek answer very much like Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* to allow the Irish of the 1800s to use one-year-old children to "contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing of many thousands" of their fellow Irish (Swift 4). Like the call to eat children of the Irish, who were at the time likewise conquered, colonized, and subjugated by the English, Casca's proposal was

never meant to be something to be enacted in reality. However, while Casca's response was the seed that would eventually blossom into the Hunger Games, his answer lacked the ability to truly captivate the intended audience and motivate the citizenry to not only condone the Hunger Games, but to participate as well. It would fall to Cornelius Snow and Dr. Volumnia Gaul to eventually unlock the full and twisted potential of the Hunger Games as a weapon and a tool of control.

The single most important way in which Snow forced an evolutionary change in the Hunger Games was to make them something that directly involves and engages with the audience. Prior to Snow's stroke of devilish genius, the Games occurred largely out of the purview of the public eye. Snow's changes allowed the public to both bet upon and directly support contestants through a program of providing supplies, called sponsorship. Cornelius Snow, who would eventually become the antagonist of the original *Hunger Games*, would determine the value of items sent to aid Tributes and thereby make the ability to sponsor a child a sign of affluence and wealth (*The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* 100). Similarly, Snow advocated for the introduction of betting on the Games, which allowed for the Capitol to make money off of its citizens' greed, while also providing a source of funding for the Games (100). Lastly, though not the brainchild of Snow, but instead his mentor, Dr. Volumnia Gaul, the introduction of mentors for the Tributes was designed to help generate interest for the Hunger Games by making the Tributes likable storylines instead of just victims (5). This change – to make a story out of the Tributes instead of just lambs being led to the slaughter – will echo down in the decades following the 10th Hunger Games.



Prior to the advent of sponsorship, the overall citizenry of Panem could claim that they did not condone the annual reaping of Tributes and the Tributes' subsequent slaughter. More accurately, before the 10th Hunger Games the 24 Tributes of Panem were unceremoniously dumped into an amphitheater and the last one left alive would be declared the winner and then sent home to their District without any fanfare. The Games were not broadcast to the Districts, and the Districts perceived their children to be abducted by the Capitol and their lack of returning to be the sign of their demise. This lack of fanfare afforded at least some plausible deniability that the adults of the Capitol, and the adult survivors of the Tribute pool did not ever actually want to participate in the Hunger Games to begin with. However, by the 10th Hunger Games, the political aristocracy within the Capitol had realized "if the Hunger Games were to continue, they [would need] to evolve into a more meaningful experience" for both the Capitol and the Districts (*The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* 198). With this sobering thought in mind – to continue on with the murder of children or not – the Capitol decides to find ways to add excitement to the Games. The sponsorship system would develop over the next six and a half decades to the point that all members of society strove to provide their favored Tribute with an item that would be helpful to them inside the arena.

When readers were introduced to the Hunger Games in 2008's *The Hunger Games*, there was already an elaborate process of selecting the Tributes, which involved a parade of children and the selection of a single boy and girl from each region of Panem. There is also an opportunity for children to volunteer themselves as Tributes, as is the case with Katniss, Clove, Cato, Glimmer, Marvel, and the unnamed Tributes from

District 4. This selection ritual culminates with the Tributes being paraded out before the citizens of the Capitol. However, the ritualized pageantry does not end with the Tribute's arrival in the Capitol: to the contrary, it is just beginning. Upon their arrival in the Capitol, the Tributes must then work to demonstrate their skills and potentially gain fans and admirers who will provide support for a given Tribute during the upcoming Games. As previously mentioned, this was not always the case as the 10th Hunger Games were the first instance in which the overall citizenry of Panem was introduced to the group of Tributes via a live television broadcast (170). These initial interviews would form the basis that would be so crucial to Peeta and Katniss's survival 64 years later as the live interviews would become the bedrock for the formation of storytelling and sponsorship, both of which are essential for a Tribute's survival in the arena.

It is during the interviews that both tangible and intangible assets of the Tributes – their skills, their charisma, their physical beauty – are on display for all to see. For example, Katniss informs the readers that her mentor, Haymitch, initially warns her that Peeta is someone to view as a threat because he knows how to work a crowd in ways that she, and most other Tributes, do not (*The Hunger Games* 129). The ability to gain friends and allies is so important to the Tributes that the chosen children spend a week being carefully prepared and examined by the orchestrators of the Hunger Games, with the first and final events being parades that present the Tributes to the citizens of the Capitol. The final parade is an individual event in which the Tributes are presented one at a time before the citizens of the Capitol. It is during this final interview that Peeta is able – twice – to parlay charm, wit, and his dangerous ability to appeal to the crowd in a way that

saves not only Katniss's life, but his own as well. The “star-crossed lovers” that Haymitch uses so much during the 74th Hunger Games is a direct result of Peeta’s ability to influence the mob, a skill which Katniss describes as outshining every other Tribute in the 74th Hunger Games (133). Without the final pageant, Peeta’s greatest ability would be taken from him and he would be unable to appeal directly to the citizens of the Capitol and Panem at large. The implication is that while the Capitol has weaponized pageantry to be used against the citizenry at large, Peeta is one of few Tributes who is able to successfully use the Capitol’s own weapon against it because he is able to win hearts of the people of the Capitol, a feat which he is later able to parlay into sponsorship and his and Katniss's joint survival. Peeta’s genuine ability to connect with people and make people like him in return would eventually lead to Katniss's survival, and through Katniss's survival, the upending of the dystopian social order.

What Peeta is so successful in doing is the creation of a story, centered on himself and Katniss, that draws in the viewers in the Capitol. Essentially, Peeta succeeds in creating a spectacle within a spectacle. Peeta and Katniss's mentor will go on to call them the “star-crossed lovers of District Twelve” (135). This phenomenon of a spectacle within a spectacle is seen and utilized in the real world, particularly in the area of sports. Tyson R. Smith, in his book *Fighting for Recognition*, looks at the world of professional wrestling, both the underground, or indie, and mainstream circuits and notes how many professional wrestlers don personas and costumes as part of storylines which “[exploit] well-worn degenerate stereotypes of gender and class and [race]” in order to get people to watch the wrestling program (Smith 9). Like Katniss's initial feelings for Peeta, much of

the antics of wrestlers that occur on stage, such as overt sexism, misogyny, and racism, are in fact acts, do not exist backstage between peers, and are intended to appeal to audiences or to promote certain characters and storylines over others. Brian Jansen furthers Smith's thesis that professional wrestling actually actively works to promote some performers, such as Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, who possess a blue-collar appeal, while some of the most hated villains are those who "have represented lavish wealth," such as the former President of the United States Donald Trump and former World Wrestling Entertainment owner Vince McMahon (Jansen 316). Like the writers of professional wrestling, Peeta is able to create the basis of a story in a way that draws in the citizens of the Capitol.

Peeta is so able to make people like him, to cheer for him, to want him to win, that the gamemakers briefly change the Hunger Games' rules so both he and Katniss can win because the Games need a winner and the prospect of no winner is worse than having two winners (*The Hunger Games* 356). This change demonstrates that the orchestrators of the Hunger Games, though maybe not the political rulers of the Capitol, are so invested in telling the story of the Tributes that they are willing to do anything in order to sell the story of Peeta and Katniss. More importantly to the Capitol, a larger viewership represents a greater potential income in the form of betting money and Tribute sponsorships. In a sense, Peeta's triumph is that he is able to weaponize his own spectacle by making his story within the story about tragic lovers torn apart by circumstances beyond their control. In the formulaic sense, Peeta knows that the more people like him,

or the more that people like Katniss and he as a couple, the better chance there is that not only will Katniss survive the Hunger Games, but that he will survive as well.

The entire week-long pageant has one purpose: to entice the citizens of Panem to participate in the Hunger Games in the form of sponsorship. Sponsorship is one of two ways the citizenry of Panem becomes direct participants of the Hunger Games. Via sponsorship, citizens, or conglomerates of citizens, can directly influence the Games. For example, Katniss receives medicine for a wound, and later food for both she and Peeta. A more extreme example would be the 64th Hunger Games, ten years before Katniss's and Peeta's Games. In the 64th Games, Finnick Odair, the eventual winner, like Peeta, was able to parlay himself, specifically his natural good looks and charm, to woo the citizens of the Capitol and Panem to the point at which unnamed sponsors are willing to send him the most expensive gift in the history of the Hunger Games – a trident that he uses to quickly slaughter the rest of the Tributes (*Catching Fire* 59). Finnick would repeat this tactic of playing to the Capitol's vanity in 75th Hunger Games, as he writes a poem to his unnamed lover and "about a hundred people" swoon thinking the poem is written about them (71). Similarly, other Tributes successfully utilized the pageantry of the events leading up to the Hunger Games to their advantage as well, such as the siblings Cashmere and Gloss, who both won their own Hunger Games by appealing to the crowd and utilizing their good looks as an advantage (*Catching Fire* 71). The ability to lobby beauty and favor in this pageant is a large part of what draws the crowd into participation in the Hunger Games, as even the Districts themselves sponsor children as best they can. After Rue's death, the people of District 11 provide Katniss with a small loaf of bread, which

Katniss cannot imagine the price it would have cost the citizens of District 11 to purchase (*The Hunger Games* 238). This sponsorship from both private citizens and communities indicate that while they may abhor the Hunger Games, the Games themselves are thoroughly entrenched into the culture of Panem, and that the adults of Panem will seize opportunities to help those they deem worthy to survive, even at the expense of other children.

While it is entirely possible that the gift from District 11 for Rue was initially meant to provide her a morsel to eat if she was starving, one piece of bread can only hold off death through starvation for so long. The bread had to be delivered to Rue at the right time because if it arrives too early and there are too many competitors left who might kill her after she eats, it does her no good, while if it arrives too late to save her from starving to death it only prolongs her suffering. Thus, a moral quandary begins to develop as sponsors, and the Tributes' mentors, must weigh when a gift is to arrive, and what the intended effect is to be. In this light, the adults of Panem are just as ruthless as the Capitol in that they will strive to help their favorites, even if their aid means the death of another child. It is also a somewhat terrible twist of fate that even with a sponsor's gift, a Tribute's survival isn't guaranteed and the gift may simply extend their suffering rather than help them win.

Sponsorship is only one way in which pageantry is weaponized. The phrase "may the odds be ever in your favor" are often uttered in Suzanne Collins' works, though they ring true for all three fictional works, and for most people in these worlds, the phrase is true (9). For example, in seventy-four years, the Hunger Games has claimed 1,800

Tributes. From this group of 1,800, there have been 75 winners in 74 years. While the loss of 1,725 children is reprehensible and represents a casualty rate of 96% for Tributes inside their arenas, it should be noted that the majority of Panem's population actually survives their participation in the Hunger Games. The exact population of Panem is never revealed, but every adult over the age of 18 survived the Hunger Games in terms of cumulative entrances as well as an increasing number of yearly lottery entrances (*The Hunger Games* 13). Katniss states at twelve a child's "name is entered once. At thirteen, twice. And so on, until you reach the age of eighteen, the final years of eligibility, when [a child's] name goes into the pool seven times," which means that in total, every adult in the Districts of Panem has had 28 cumulative chances of selection, assuming that child as not taken out no *tesserae*, and yet has never had their name drawn (13). These 28 lottery entrances, with seven coming in the final year of eligibility for the Games, illustrate that to reach adulthood in Panem means one has truly survived the selection portion of the Hunger Games. Thus, the majority of the populace is actually a testament to the incredibly high survival rate of the Hunger Games when compared with the overall pool of candidates. This high survival rate forces most of the citizens of Panem into a silent complicity with the Capitol. On the surface, the sheer numbers make the Hunger Games seem less horrible. However, in rationalizing the Hunger Games to simply "most participants survive," the true inhumanity is lost. If human life has an intrinsic value because it is human life, then the frivolous spending of human life, particularly if it is spent as a way to inflict pain on the survivors, becomes an entirely different type of problem. The question *The Hunger Games* ultimately asks of its readers is to determine

the valuation of human life, and by extension, to determine if there is anything that may alter that valuation.

The weaponization of spectacle in the Hunger Games ultimately culminates in the creation of storytelling from a children's game that has been hideously changed into a method of execution. It is designed to draw in the citizens of Panem, however resistant they want to be to it, and coax their participation, while also forcing them, via fear, to remain silent to the atrocities of the Games themselves. Liang Guo points out that silence is often a defensive mechanism to outside stressors, particularly in response to authoritarian leadership (Guo 221). While Guo is focused particularly on workplace leadership, the description of defensive silence as a "conscious and active strategy" to resist tyrants fits the description of the people of Panem as they have decided that while they all suffer because of the loss of children, they could suffer far worse if they speak up (221). Like modern sports in the real world, where people follow the trades of players between sports teams, or follow when players make the news for committing a crime or getting married, the Hunger Games morphs into an annual event that the whole of Panem orbits because the Capitol desires it to be so.

To demonstrate the Capitol's perpetual insistence on making the Hunger Games the cultural centerpiece of Panem, Collins shows her readers specific instances from Peeta and Katniss's lives in the months following their victory. The examples show how the Capitol uses the Victors as celebrity icons to promote its agenda. For example, Katniss mentions that following their success in the Hunger Games, Victors must take a nationwide journey, known as the Victory Tour, which is described as being



“strategically places almost midway between the annual Games, [and] is the Capitol’s way of keeping the horror fresh and immediate” (*Catching Fire* 1). In another instance, to ensure that the narrative of star-crossed lovers who met and fell in love during the Hunger Games remains the focus of Panem, President Snow personally threatens the lives of Katniss’s family and friends if she does not continue the romantic performance she began in the arena (7). When she eventually informs Haymitch and Peeta of Snow’s threat, the trio decide jointly to ensure Katniss and Peeta’s story of being star-crossed lovers is their reality, not just a charade for the Capitol’s cameras, as they both have “family and friends in District Twelve who will be just as dead as [Katniss’s] if they fail” to make their star-crossed narrative entirely believable to the citizens of Panem (19). In a third example, Peeta suggests he propose to Katniss on live television, which President Snow declares “mandatory viewing” for the entirety of Panem (41). These examples demonstrate that not only does the Capitol make the Hunger Games an event the citizens of Panem are forced to watch and participate in, but that the Hunger Games are also the forced cultural centerpiece for Panem. The system is designed to extract pain from the Districts, but also “to give them hope that their Tribute might actually win. The hope of winning is what ultimately drives District 11 to a collective sponsorship gift – that their gift will help Rue live, and when she doesn’t, that it will help Katniss. In either event, the Capitol pulls the adults of Panem into its web, while lining its own coffers in the process, and still achieving its original intent of showing its dominion over its citizenry.

### **The Spectacle of Battle Experiment Number 68 Program**

Spectacle plays a different role in Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale* than in the novels of *The Hunger Games* or *The Arc of the Scythe* in that the spectacle is not used to generate participation from adults. Takami envisioned a dystopian alternate reality in which Japan was victorious in the Second World War. In this reality, the Greater Republic of East Asia, under the rule of a dictator known as "The Leader," has risen to the status of a world superpower in competition with the United States of America. Set in the mid-1990s, the Greater Republic of East Asia holds a contest that randomly chooses 50 groups of 42 students from a nationwide lottery of all 3rd year junior high schoolers – the equivalent of 9th graders in the modern, real-world United States ("Japan: Number of Middle Schools by Type 2022."). The state-run media celebrates the winners of the Program with a lifetime pension and an autographed photo of the Leader, and the celebration of the winner ends with the presentation of the photo (Takami 41). Instead of being designed to generate enthusiasm and support for the Program, the use of spectacle is instead used to enforce compliance. There are three main groups at which the use of spectacle is targeted: the students who have been impressed into the Program, the adult guardians of those same children, and the general public of the Republic. The use of spectacle is focused against these three groups in order to create a sense that the general public should be afraid of not only their neighbors and family, as those are the ones who may actually kill you, but also the government, which is capable, effectively, of doing whatever it wishes to do.

Once the Program begins each year, the 9th graders are forced to kill one another, under threat of all of them being killed by the Republic, until only one student remains from each group. On the surface, from a purely pragmatic standpoint, if the Program, like the Hunger Games, is an act of warfare and deterrence against open rebellion, the number of casualties does not seem terrible. While the annual murder of 2,100 9th graders is horrific, in the real-world Japan has over 10,000 junior high schools, so the Greater Republic of East Asia is able to perpetuate the myth that the annual deaths of 2,100 children is well within an acceptable range to ensure continued national security, as more than 99 percent of schools and children are unaffected by the Program (Ltd.). Further, the official reasoning behind the Program is to conduct live experiments on the resourcefulness and combat effectiveness of the youth of the Republic in the event of a large-scale conflict or invasion by foreign powers such as World War II's proposed OPERATION DOWNFALL, the code name for the planned Allied invasion of the Japanese home islands. Penny Green and Tony Ward highlight in their book *State Crime: Governments, Violence, and Corruption* that when governments choose to use terror as a weapon, especially upon their own citizens in ways that would be considered illegal, extreme efforts are taken to conceal these efforts, which is exactly how the Greater Republic of East Asia acts in concealing the true purpose of the Program (Green 107). The Greater Republic actively works to justify its own work with the Program and ensure that everyone who could possibly speak out against it is silenced.

Regarding the 2,100 annual children killed by the Program, the Greater Republic of East Asia is using an appeal to numbers, falsely justifying the terror of mass death by

focusing on the small portion of the dead compared to those who survive. Publicly lauding that *only* 2,100 students from among hundreds of thousands are necessary to ensure national readiness against a vague enemy across the Pacific Ocean works both to devalue the lives of the children forced into the Program, and their parents by extension, and to provide an overt method of dehumanization by which the Leader of the Greater Republic of East Asia maintains complete authoritarian control of his populace. The reigning power wants people to believe it is benevolent and taking only what it needs in terms of human life and that a parent's sacrifice of their child is necessary for the good of the Republic as a whole, though the actual reasoning behind the Program is more to engender fear of the Republic among the general population while also sowing distrust among the citizenry in order to solidify the Leader and his power base.

While every junior high school 9th grade class in the Greater Republic of East Asia is a candidate, only a relatively few are chosen to participate, with the actual percentage of selectees being less than half of one percent of the total pool of candidates. However, the specter of possible selection hangs over the head of every child in the 9th grade and below, existing in the background of their school experience. The main tension in *Battle Royale* is the realization of fear: the Greater Republic of East Asia has placed Shuya and his classmates in a situation that both capitalizes on this fear and presents them with enough capability and opportunity to legitimize that fear. In the novel, Shuya Nanahara, the main character, mentions that he is in shock that his class was actually chosen, as he and most of his classmates believed themselves to be safe from selection (Takami 45). Shuya mentions that he and his classmates *felt* safe against selection for the

Program, a feeling he mentions that is shared across 9th graders throughout the Republic (45). In reality, while their odds of selection were low, as were those of every other Japanese ninth grade class, some classes had to lose the selection portion of the game, which makes their feelings of safety somewhat of an illusion. Instead of solid reasoning for believing they would be safe from the Program, Shuya and his classmates instead place their faith in the illusion that a game of chance will land in their favor instead of landing against them. This feeling of safety should be contrasted with the reality Shuya and his classmates face – that they are indeed *not* safe as they are participating in the selection portion of a game of chase already.

Shuya's sense of safety should not be considered abnormal, as it is shared by not only his peers but also his American counterparts in the real world. Ben Brown points out in an article studying fear of weapon violence among high school students in Texas, that nearly twenty percent of students reported fear of being attacked with a gun or a knife while on campus at their school, while the remaining eighty percent reported feeling of safety at school (Brown 381). Brown points out that while guns are always considered weapons on school campuses, knives can straddle the line between tools and weapons with the primary factor in determining if a knife is a tool or a weapon being how it is utilized (380). For Shuya and his peers, knives have only ever been seen as tools, and they are now being forced to see them as weapons, and further, to use them as such. Similarly, while they may not have any understanding or training in the use of guns, these children are being given guns with instructions to kill or be killed and more or less having to utilize instinct and intuition to survive.

Spectacle as a singular act is utilized against the children impressed into the Program to force them to fight. The Program threatens the students that should they decide not to participate – that if no one dies within 24 hours – then the entire class will be killed and there will not be a winner, which pushes students to want to kill each other as a means of self-preservation. In a way, this tactic also creates a scenario that absolves students of legal guilt, though perhaps not moral guilt, as they are each effectively combatants in a war and each has the inherent right to self-defense. None of the children has to let their peers kill them, though the ordeal is notably traumatizing for the winners, as they are often described as “crazy” afterward (Takami 44). Further, to ensure students understand the severity of their situation, as well as demonstrating the resolve of their captors, the students are shown the corpse of their teacher, Mr. Hayashida, having been killed by a gunshot to the head (47). To ensure the students are both psychologically conditioned to accept their own deaths, as well as to instill terror in them, Mr. Hayashida’s corpse is deliberately further mutilated in front of the students, as one of their captors shoots what remains of the teacher’s head in order to splatter some of the students with the blood, brain matter, and skull fragments.

Next, spectacle is used against adults in two ways. The first, like with the children, is overt and used to force compliance with or punish opposition to the Program. The second way is more subtle, as it is the result of a general sense of fear that grows among the general populace of the Republic based on the method of weaponized spectacle against adults. The first method of spectacle is perpetuated against the parents of students who are abducted by the Republic. Parents, or legal guardians in the event a

student has no parents, are notified via the delivery of a letter, given personally to the parents by representatives of the government, that their child will likely be deceased within a week. Failure to do anything other than peacefully accepting the letter, even crying, results in beatings as a low-end response with rape and murder as a high-end response (33). For example, Shuya is told his guardian, as his parents are deceased, attempted to “[resist] on Shuya’s behalf,” which resulted in Kinpatsu Sakamochi, the coordinator of the Program for Shuya’s class, “forcing himself upon her to make her obedient” (50). For other students, parents who resist are met with “tactical batons... [or are] showered in a stream of hot lead spat out by submachine guns and taken from [the] world just a little ahead of their beloved young” (33). Further, these crimes against humanity are not kept private as students are informed of what happened to their parents just before they are sent out to fight, while neighbors are shown just what happens to those who attempt to resist or retaliate against the Republic for taking their children.

Lastly, the spectacle of the Program is targeted against the general populace of the Great Republic of East Asia. As with the Hunger Games, the odds of being selected are relatively low given the overall size of the pool from which potential candidates are selected. However, unlike the Hunger Games selection process, the size of the pool as well as the number of selectees – 2,100 per year – gives the implication that everyone has the potential to be connected to someone who was selected, or to at least know someone who knows someone directly impacted by the Program. Thus, it is not an unrealistic conclusion that everyone in the Republic has at least seen the impacts of the Program, even if they have not directly felt the impacts in their individual lives. Further, while the

Program harvests a large number of annual students, the more than 10,000 Junior High Schools, each having several 9th grade classes, demonstrates a pool of candidates that could realistically number in the millions. This large pool of candidates creates a large number of survivors, and this survivorship, coupled with how parents perpetually provide their children to the pool of candidates simply by sending their children to school, creates a forced, albeit resigned, compliance with the Republic and its Program.

In an interesting twist, Benjamin Kemble points out that school attendance through Junior High is compulsory in Japan, as homeschooling – education run by a children’s parents vice state-run institutions – “as an alternative to public schooling in Japan is not a clearly defined right that parents have to exercise” (Kemble 337). In Takami’s work, because Japanese parents are legally compelled to send their children to school, they are also legally bound to enroll their children in the candidacy pool for the Program. However, as the legal consequence to resisting the Program in any way is capital punishment, there is no way for parents to legally resist the Program as a whole. Because they have no means of legal resistance, the adults of the Republic are much closer to the passive compliance to Shusterman’s Scythedom than with the active participation of all adults found in Collins’ Hunger Games. However, in both Panem and the Greater Republic of East Asia, resisting the government draws equally lethal responses. During their Victory Tour, Katniss and Peeta witness the Peacekeepers – the military force of the Capitol – “dragging [an] old man who whistled [in defiance of the Capitol] to the top steps [of District 11’s municipal building]. Forcing him to his knees before the crowd. And putting a bullet through his head” (*Catching Fire* 18). Where the



simple threat of extended overt violence is enough to pacify the people of Shusterman's *Scythe*, in Panem and the Greater Republic of East Asia, overt force compels compliance because of fear of lethal reprisal.

Ultimately, the Program uses spectacle to weaponize fear. This fear is far reaching and extends vertically and laterally in the social structure of the Greater Republic of East Asia. The fear extends vertically because the Republic has demonstrated, for decades, that it will snatch children to be executed and kill parents if they attempt to retaliate. Foucault points out that "the penalty [of a crime must be] something to be feared" (Foucault 106). In this case, the feared penalty is death. Further, since the killing is done by friends and classmates, the fear is not only of the government, but of one's neighbors as well. This fear of a neighbor is vitally important, particularly in a Japanese setting, as Lucian and Mary Pye point out in their book *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimension of Authority*, because Japanese culture has developed in such a way that there is a vertical component that includes trusting and deference to authority over oneself, such as parents, grandparents, teachers, and later supervisors and bosses, and deference to peers, who help shape and create individual identity (Pye 169). In making it so that students cannot trust their peers, they are kept from forming a strong sense of identity, which in turn strengthens their respect for the vertical component, namely the government. By removing anyone who resists the abduction of the children of the Program, any cultural ability to resist the injustices of the government is removed and the goals of the government supersede the goals and wellbeing of the individual.

The Program's cover story that it was designed to test combat skills is not entirely a lie, as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred after intense deliberation of OPERATION DOWNFALL as a proposed end to World War II. The United States' War Department estimated an amphibious, or ocean borne attack, against the Japanese home islands would have resulted in between 1.7 and 4 million U.S. casualties, not counting the other Allied nations, while the Japanese would have suffered between 5 to 10 million civilian and military casualties (Cox 29). The reason the use of nuclear weapons was authorized was because the Allies estimated both Allied military casualties and Japanese civilian and military casualties would have pushed into the millions. Part of the Allied planning calculus involved Japanese civilians taking up arms in a massive insurgency campaign as the Allies pushed towards capturing Tokyo. Thus, the Program is assessing how effective the Greater Republic of East Asia – particularly the Japanese home islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu – would fight if its sworn enemy, the United States, ever invaded. The cover story of the Program is that this annual experiment is designed to see how well prepared the populace is for an American-led invasion while also confirming the loyalty of the test subjects to the Republic's Leader. However, while that kernel of truth exists, it exists within a larger lie. The overall truth is that the Republic wants desperately to ensure it maintains its stranglehold on power and that it uses fear as a weapon to control its populace through the ultimate removal of their individual identity in favor of the state's identity. The specter of a foreign adversary exists only in *Battle Royale*, and part of the Program's focus is to instill fear of foreigners

and generate a nationalist and isolationist ideology. Ultimately, the generation of fear is the goal of the Program, and with fear, compliance due to that fear.

### **The Spectacle of the Scythedom**

Neal Shusterman's *Arc of the Scythe* universe comprises a trilogy – *Scythe*, *The Thunderhead*, and *The Toll*, and a collection of short stories, *Gleanings*. In this universe, a sentient artificial intelligence known as the Thunderhead runs most aspects of life and has created a quasi-utopia where natural death, aging, poverty, disease, war, and other forms of human suffering have been eliminated. Even the weather is controlled by the Thunderhead (Shusterman 216). The two sole exceptions to the Thunderhead's control are people who actively choose to live, as much as they can, outside the Thunderhead's rules, the Unsavories, and the Scythes, people who are selected and trained to kill others in order to prevent human overpopulation due the now immortal human race. The Thunderhead describes its relationship with the Scythes, collectively known as the Scythedom, as the separation of Scythe and State, where the Thunderhead has been given ultimate control over everything in the human universe except the creation of human life and the ending of human life (*Thunderhead* 288). Thus, the Thunderhead has ultimately become one half of the government, particularly the part that governs law, while the Scythes represent a more natural law, particularly laws regarding life and death, as it falls to the Scythes to kill people so that humans do not overpopulate the Earth.

The process of the Scythes killing people, called gleaning, is meant to draw the mind of the reader to the act of harvesting through the meaning of the word “gleaning,” but among the populace of Shusterman's world the word inspires a sense of dread and

fear as the only way to be truly dead is to be gleaned by a Scythe, barring some truly exceptional circumstance that results in the total destruction of the body such as by fire or being eaten by animals. As anyone who is not gleaned by the Scythedom is eventually restored to life, a cultural counterpoint of levity to the Scythedom's gleanings has developed among the non-Scythe population of Shusterman's future dystopia to describe the state of being temporarily dead, by either accident or deliberate attempts: deadish (*Scythe* 194). These two terms demonstrate a new relationship between humanity and life and death in Shusterman's world. The Scythedom is well aware of its place as an equal to the Thunderhead, which places the Scythedom as a whole above even nation-states as the Thunderhead has eliminated all borders and nations as well. Thus, for all practical purposes, the Thunderhead and the Scythedom occupy the top of the social hierarchy, with the Thunderhead occupying a role much like the Olympian gods in its vast knowledge and power, while the Scythedom operates very much in almost open opposition to the Thunderhead. Unfortunately, with nearly unlimited power and no external oversight to act as check and balance against it, the Scythedom is plagued by the many vices of humans who have been empowered over everyone else and nearly every type of corruption is seen among the Scythedom.

While the Thunderhead is able to act as a benevolent dictator in how it rules and governs most aspects of human life, and even does so in a way that is passive and relatively unnoticed by the greater humanity, the Scythedom makes a mission of ensuring that it is seen and that the general populace is aware of the gleanings they enact. Sometimes, these gleanings operate in concert with what the Thunderhead desires for its

vision of how to govern humanity, while at other times they are at odds with the Thunderhead. In all instances, the goal is to be seen and to both kill a person and remind the general populace that while they are effectively immune to natural death, death is still very much the order of the universe. While a practical purpose of the gleanings does exist, as the world would be quickly overpopulated by a population that did not die, the spectacle of the gleanings distances them from practicality and moves them towards attention seeking for the purpose of generating fear or as a demonstration of political power.

The Scythedom revels in the attention bestowed upon them, as the favor of a Scythe is truly the only way to be immortal, as the Scythes can choose to grant immunity from gleaning (Shusterman 7). To this end, everything about the Scythes becomes wrapped up in spectacle – the Scythes host a secret conclave through which new Scythes are initiated; the Scythes shed their old name and take up new ones after famous people in history; and the Scythes don a hooded robe that sets them apart from the populace. There are even trading cards for children to collect that tell of each Scythe's personality (386). This monetization of spectacle draws parallels with the betting Snow introduces for the Hunger Games as a method by which the Capitol can generate revenue (Collins 88). In terms of the trading cards, their existence should alert the reader of overt corruption of the Scythedom as someone is generating revenue off of the likeness of the Scythes, and likely the Scythes themselves are profiting off of the royalties generated from the cards. For a group tasked with managing the human population, any instance of impropriety, real or imagined, raises ethical and moral questions. Further, the very

clothing of the Scythedom, the multicolored robes they wear, set them apart at all times, so even when they move among the public, Scythes are seen as death personified and treated with respect, and pandering, born of fear. Further, the Scythes make a show of hosting large galas, called Conclaves, several times a year which they host under the pretense of honoring the dead, though it actually becomes their method of appearing before the public. In one instance, Scythe Curie allows one person from the crowd to park her car, and grants immunity to that person (*Scythe* 25). Ultimately, all of these circumstances are designed to remind the public of how much power the Scythedom holds relative to the public and of the Scythedom's place over the public.

As much as the spectacle of the Conclaves is important, as well as the secret method of induction, the Scythedom would be a tiger without teeth if it failed to actually kill people. Make no mistake – the Scythedom is far from a paper tiger. To the contrary, members of the Scythedom go out of their way to be seen killing as that is how they solidify their own power. Throughout Shusterman's work, the Scythedom comes up with various spectacles to be seen murdering the public. The aforementioned Scythe Curie is famous in Shusterman's universe for murdering the last President of the United States, and his entire Cabinet, and then broadcasting her work over social media (Shusterman 24). The work of Scythe Curie is pointedly designed to remove any last vestiges of human government besides the Scythedom and the Thunderhead. Even the Thunderhead, while it says it "did not ask for [the killing of political leaders]," readily admits that it is glad they are gone because it means the Thunderhead has an easier job stewarding, a codeword for "ruling," the planet (25). While the killing is supremely politically

motivated, no one from among the populace seems to notice, or to care, or to do anything to act out against the Scythedom, and instead society as a whole hails Curie as an icon. Similarly, Scythe Af Klint forces four high school students at a private school to host an art gala, and then threatens to slaughter anyone who attends and attempts to leave before the students have had a chance to present their art and before Scythe Af Klint has gleaned her intended target (241). While none of the students are Scythe Klint's target – their teacher is – the spectacle is meant to draw a crowd as both a memorial for their teacher and to mark the passage of “the Age of Mortality,” as the Scythedom commences upon a worldwide “purge of all [humans who were] born mortal – as to free the world of mortal thinking (245). This extermination of anyone born before the Thunderhead mandated immortality for all of humanity was not immediately inflicted upon those present at Scythe Klint's gala with the exception of the art teacher, though the implication is that anyone present above a certain age will shortly be hunted down and killed, while those like the students, who were born with the Thunderhead's immortality, will die for other reasons that are not related to the date of their birth.

Shusterman uses his works to highlight the complex relationship between immortality and mortality and forces readers to question if immortality is indeed something that is worth seeking. More specifically, Shusterman speculates that physical immortality hinders the human condition, and that mortal life is “full of passions, both good and bad. Fear gives rise to faith. Despair giving meaning to elation” (*Scythe* 27). Thus, Shusterman is highlighting how rich the human experience can be because of the finality of death, and that physical immortality robs humanity of that richness of life. At

the start of Shusterman's novels, every human is immortal, thanks to the machinations of the Thunderhead, and can only be killed by the Scythedom or the aforementioned odd accidents (Shusterman 326, *Thunderhead* 488). This has led many people to the false belief that everything good in human life is behind humanity and the future is rather bland and boring, an unending existence that continues endlessly without passion. The Scythedom further reinforces this belief in choosing their Patron Historics pseudonyms. By choosing "luminaries from the past," the Scythedom both immortalizes their names and work as important, but also highlights that their work is superior to their future existence (Shusterman 143). Shusterman does not create imaginative future persons of note, such as a fictional character who was the founder of a space colony or noteworthy for achievement in the humanities, and instead uses people who exist in the real world, such as Robert Goddard, Marie Curie, and Michael Faraday. The Scythedom uses these luminaries as pseudonyms, or masks, for several reasons. The first is the use of a pseudonym of historic importance creates a distance between the public and the Scythedom because the pseudonyms are people who are remembered from the Age of Mortality while the overwhelming majority are forgotten. Next, these pseudonyms act as a mask the individual Scythes can hide behind as they kill people. For example, at least in the eyes of the public, it is not Carson Lusk that murders hundreds of people, but rather Scythe Goddard (Shusterman 129). Further, it also creates a further division between the past and the future, as the legacy of the actual Patron Historics, while retaining their notable work, is tarnished by pseudonym murders. While the use of Patron Historic theoretically further immortalizes the work of these luminaries and is meant as a form of



flattery, it also creates tension between both metaphorical immortality and physical immortality as well as between the work of the Patron Historics and the work of the Scythedom.

The reason the Thunderhead secretly applauds the global death of politicians stems from the Thunderhead's origin as a computer program meant to aid mankind in each person's daily life while also eventually being a large enough entity with the capability to govern the planet. In this, the Thunderhead grows from simply an automated program into the pinnacle of what Alasdair Roberts calls an "administrative state," a term that carries with it both positive and negative connotations regarding the ability of the state to organize for the social common good while also being both autocratic and intolerant of representative forms of government (Roberts 393). The Thunderhead, though supremely well-intentioned, is both in that it rules with absolute authority and is held only in check by the Scythedom. The autocratic nature of the Thunderhead leads it to see itself as the supreme guardian of humanity, convinced that it knows what is best for humanity's future development, even if humanity itself does not fully understand the Thunderhead's ambitions and thoughts.

Conversely, Scythe Goddard works to deliberately undermine the Thunderhead's efforts to establish a human colony beyond the confines of Earth, which the Thunderhead has determined to be its solution to overpopulation instead of the Scythedom. Goddard is a fan of mass killings as they, like in modern times, draw attention. For example, Goddard is responsible for the destruction of a human colony on Mars run by the Thunderhead. Goddard often resorts to mass killings to cover more directly targeted

politically motivated killings, such as killing everyone aboard a passenger jet in order to ensure the death of one scientist studying human suspended animation in support of deep space travel (*Thunderhead* 382). Goddard's reign of terror as the antagonist of Shusterman's work ultimately culminates in the destruction of an artificial floating island, Endura, and a failed attempt to destroy the Thunderhead's secretive base for creating interstellar starships (*The Toll* 589). In her book, *Preventing Crowd Violence*, Tamara Madensen points out that, while they occur, successful large-scale violent acts that are not related to armed conflict rarely occur as the result of one person acting alone and that more often, they are ideology-based, with an inciting individual or group of individuals, known as a provocateur (Madensen 79-81). Madensen is hesitant to label all provocateurs anarchists, though they may be that, as they may be more concerned with changing the social order than simple overthrow of the government (81). Goddard, who takes his name after Robert Goddard, one of the fathers of space exploration, is ironically of the opinion that humanity should not expand past Earth and is therefore often at odds with the Thunderhead and its dreams of interstellar travel. However, Goddard's desire to keep humanity bound to Earth is not rooted in philosophical reasons, but because he simply enjoys holding power over others. Any humans not under his domain would be a threat to Goddard as they would provide an alternative to the fear Goddard forces upon those in his sphere of influence. Goddard wants to maintain his place at the top of Shusterman's dystopia's social order because he enjoys all the fruits of abusing his station and he truly enjoys his occupation, and therefore he injects chaos simply for the sake of instilling fear of himself in everyone around him.

Goddard stands out from his peers in the Scythedom in relation to spectacles in that he loves to be seen carrying out his killings, and he loves killing lots of people at once for the notoriety it gives him in both the Scythedom and the world at large and, more importantly, because he enjoys killing. Using a definition developed by Ervin Staub in his book *The Psychology of Good and Evil: Why Children, Adults, and Groups Help and Harm Others*, Goddard's mass killings are a category of violence known as mass killings. Mass killings are similar to genocidal violence, with the only difference between the two being that mass killings do not seek to eliminate a single group, while genocidal violence seeks extermination of an entire ethnicity (Staub 289). Further, Staub points out that both genocidal violence and mass killings are "a societal process," meaning that the both types of killings do not include just perpetrators, but all members of a society as they create a societal scar surrounding the killings (289). These societal scars become ingrained within a society's culture and become reference points for the society in determining its history. With these two defining points in mind, Goddard's killings fall into the category of mass killings firstly because he, and his cronies, carry out their killings in mass fashion, enjoying their twisted thrill of murdering hundreds, or thousands, at a time but do not seek the extermination of any one segment of society. Second, Goddard's slaughters include all subsets of society of Shusterman's dystopia. More accurately, Goddard refuses to focus on one group within society because he enjoys killing everyone. Goddard also takes advantage not only of all segments of society's fear of the Scythedom, but also of the cultural laws that forbid retaliation against the Scythedom. Fear of the Scythedom and Shusterman's dystopia's laws combine to create a

society that both directly and indirectly enables Goddard's abuse of his position because few people have the means, the capability, or the courage to stand against him.

While the source of tension between Goddard and the Thunderhead is fictitious, the tension itself highlights the tension between conflicting ideologies, and how acts of spectacle between the two often sweep up members of the populace who were otherwise unaffected. In this light, Goddard's violent spectacles use people as pawns in a greater political working against the Thunderhead, just as the Thunderhead actively works against Goddard and the Scythedom by saving the bodies the Scythes glean to serve as the crews of its starships, albeit with new personalities chosen by the Thunderhead once these bodies have been revived (*The Toll* 553, Shusterman 418). While the Thunderhead thinks itself a benefactor, the method by which it achieved its goal is both horrifying and undermining to its claim of being a benefactor of humanity. This overt use of force cements the Thunderhead's place as a political power with conflicting priorities in that the Thunderhead must balance its concern for the human species and the planet as a whole against the good of the individuals who make up the collective whole. When faced with individuals who might disrupt the collective good, the Thunderhead will prioritize the good of most over the good of an individual. As it perceives that the most good for humanity is best served by its retention of power, one of the highest priorities of the Thunderhead is the preservation of its own political power, even if individual people are cast aside in the process.

Perhaps most importantly, the Scythes hold absolute power over the populace in such a way that no one resists their decisions. Again, as with *The Hunger Games* and

*Battle Royale*, the general populace is largely unaffected by the Scythedom, to the point where some people even openly question if Scythes exist because they have never seen them (Shusterman 98). While the public may not like the Scythes or their decisions, no one will defy them as opposing a Scythe in any way carries a penalty of the extermination of one's entire family (*Scythe* 38). Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, the Scythedom shares with the Capitol and the Greater Republic of East Asia a fear of the populace under its dominion. Despite wielding almost absolute power, all three fear their own populations because those without social power outnumber those who hold it. The implication is that if the masses were to organize and band together, while some of their number might die in an uprising, there are still simply more people than there are members of the Scythedom. While an uprising to demand social change would have a great toll in human life, revolution is within the realm of possibility from a sheer numbers' perspective. As with autocratic societies in the real world, fear is the primary motivating factor that keeps these revolutions from occurring, at least until a tipping point is met.

The tension that exists between the Thunderhead and the Scythedom plays out in Shusterman's books in the chapters narrated by the Thunderhead. While the Thunderhead never expresses outright support of Scythe Curie's killing of the President, it also never does anything to stop her, nor does it complain over what she has done as the AI finds its job easier without human governance in its calculations (Shusterman 25). However, as time in Shusterman's universe progresses and the Thunderhead finds itself at odds with the Scythedom, and bound by its own program to not communicate with the Scythes

themselves, the Thunderhead works to actively subvert its political opponent. While the Thunderhead would never admit to it, it is every part the dictator because it does not like anything to run counter to its plans and it crushes opposition to itself.

Violent spectacle in Shusterman's works take two forms – the first is the obvious violence of the Scythedom. The second, however, is far more subtle, and that is the work of the Thunderhead to create the artificial intelligence's vision of a human utopia. Before labeling the Thunderhead as malevolent or benevolent, it should be noted that while the Thunderhead does not carry out overt acts of violence, it does use much more covert acts against the populace of Shusterman's Earth in ways that are as disturbing as the Scythedom's overt gratuitous violence. In its treatment of the Unsavories, the Thunderhead allows them to rebel against its rule only so far: it never permits them to cause lasting damage, only giving them the illusion that they can rebel against the Scythedom or the Thunderhead. The conclusion is that the Thunderhead does not truly respect human free will, and will allow humans to exert this free will only to a certain point.

For example, the Thunderhead allows the disgruntled members of the human populace to live outside the norms of society in areas specifically set aside for Unsavory people. Shusterman shows in a short story within *Gleanings* that Washington D.C., in the Thunderhead's utopia, is set aside as a haven for Unsavories, or people who refuse to comply with the Thunderhead's ideas for what constitutes acceptable behavior within the Thunderhead's society. It should be noted that the Unsavories are not criminals – they are simply people who do not wish to live as the Thunderhead wants them to live. Unsavories

are apt to commit petty crimes and infractions of the Thunderhead's societal laws, though their criminal behavior never rises to the level of serious crime as for the most part murder has been eradicated as if it were a childhood disease like measles. However, even life within this haven is controlled by the Thunderhead as Unsavories living within there are presented with one of two choices: either turn back and live within the confines of the Thunderhead's boundaries, either in its Unsavory havens or in the greater society as a whole, or the Thunderhead will deem them too mentally damaged to continue as a member of society and will erase their minds and rewrite them into a new personality, with new memories, as part of an entirely new identity both created by and loyal to the Thunderhead (*Thunderhead* 208, Shusterman 106, 327). The Thunderhead calls this process supplanting. Unsavories even admit that they know that to push too far would result in their own rewriting, or their deaths, if their criminal activity angers the Scythedom (121). The general populace of the Thunderhead's Earth is aware of these people, to the point that they are almost more afraid of losing their identity than they are of the deaths brought by the Scythedom. In one segment of conversation between an Unsavory and a person who lives under the Thunderhead's laws, the latter warns the former that "if [you] get caught, [you] will get [your] mind supplanted" (*Thunderhead* 256). The Thunderhead states that it only performs this on one out of every 933,684 people, but in a world of billions of people, this act of violence impacts a thousand people per billion (*Thunderhead* 208). Further, although the Thunderhead implies it obtains the consent of the people it rewrites before it does, it also is rather vague in its definition of consent as it seems to interpret Unsavories' refusal to abide by its rules as consent to be

rewritten (Shusterman 106, 327). Thus, while world population is never defined in Shusterman's novels, the implication is that there are possibly more than ten thousand people the Thunderhead has rewritten wandering the globe.

Further, the copies of itself that the Thunderhead flings to the stars with human crews exhibit the dictatorial tendencies of the Thunderhead, as these computers rigidly follow their own programming from the Thunderhead regardless of the wishes of the human crews they care for, which results in three Thunderhead copies deciding to self-destruct, against the wishes of the human crew, in deep space rather than exploring alternative solutions, resulting in the death of their entire human crew complement (Shusterman 252, 254, 257). That the Thunderhead and its offspring so quickly and violently end opposition to its rule makes it less the loving caretaker of humanity it would like to portray itself as, and more an authoritarian government that refuses to relinquish control to anyone, or anything, else. In this, the Thunderhead sees itself responsible for determining what is best for humanity. The Thunderhead sees itself as the only source of absolute security in Shusterman's dystopia, and therefore as the sole provider of the umbrella of security under which humanity exists. In this sense, the security of society provided by the Thunderhead is what Elke Krahmann defines as a non-excludable commodity, or one that cannot be easily denied to others, such as fresh air and water (Krahmann 383). Only the Thunderhead can provide this level of near godlike security for humanity, though the Thunderhead's calculus in terms of providing security make sense only to itself. The Thunderhead already demonstrates its willingness to place its own preconceived notions of what is best for humanity above individuals, which forces



readers to question where the Thunderhead places its threshold for collective good against its own desires and machinations.

The Thunderhead maintains its violence is designed to ultimately help the collective good. Thus, while the act does not result in physical harm or death, the act of taking a person and literally rewriting their personality against the individual's will and then releasing the new person into society is an act of violent spectacle that is nonetheless meant to be seen by the populace at large. The purpose of this violence demonstrates the power of the Thunderhead to the general populace of Shusterman's world, while also providing a tangible deterrent against rebelling against the Thunderhead's laws for society. The Thunderhead's ability to reprogram a human mind allows an act of both retribution and complete reeducation at once, but at the cost of the spirit of a person. The Thunderhead is thus able to take Foucault to a final precipice where the Thunderhead can claim innocence of harming humanity while also being insidiously cold to it, and claiming ultimately to be able to forcibly reeducate anyone, excepting the Scythedom, it deems too problematic through "despotic discipline" that controls every aspect of a prison's liberty via location, a prison, and time, the prison sentence (Foucault 236). While the Thunderhead says it mourns the loss of the people it reprograms, it nonetheless continues with the practice (*Thunderhead* 209). This act of violence is meant to instill fear, much like the Hunger Games and the Program, and through that fear to compel compliance. Similarly, the Scythes' killings, while meant to control the number of humans inhabiting earth, are also meant as a method of control, via fear, to enforce the norms of the society built by the Thunderhead. However, the killings of the Scythedom

also exist to serve as a reminder to the Thunderhead of its own limitations in control as it largely cannot control who the Scythedom kills, when they kill, or how they kill.

These two forms of control intertwine and focus back on viewing the Scythedom as a game of chase. The Thunderhead provides the rules for the participants to follow, while the Scythedom acts as the taggers in the game. Just as Collins and Takami utilize their games of chase to enable autocratic governments to maintain power over their populations to ultimately maintain the status quo, Shusterman similarly utilizes games of chase with a lethal component to maintain the status quo of his world. However, while there is no real reason given for Panem and the Greater Republic of East Asia to want to maintain power other than they are the reigning governments, Shusterman's dystopia needs the game of chase implemented by the Scythedom and the Thunderhead to maintain a viable society on Earth. Without Shusterman's game of chase, both the Thunderhead and the Scythedom acknowledge humanity would quickly overpopulate Earth beyond its ability to support life.

Ultimately, Shusterman uses the Thunderhead as a means to drive his readers to question divinity. While the Thunderhead makes no claim to divinity, with the possible exception of the Scythedom and its ability to kill people, the Thunderhead and its offspring act as if they are indeed godlike and they have no equals for all practical purposes in terms of knowledge or power. Further, this sentient artificial intelligence takes on numerous qualities often ascribed to godhood and demands compliance to its authoritarian rule, much like the Olympians, and while it certainly aspires to the qualities ascribed to the Judeo-Christian deity, it never quite achieves them. The Thunderhead has

access to petabytes of information, perhaps even more knowledge than is fathomable, but it is not omniscient; the Thunderhead can control the weather, but it is not all-powerful, as the Scythedom so readily reminds it; it can seek to scatter humanity across the cosmos, but it cannot claim omnipresence because it must clone copies of its programming in order to send itself out with humanity and cannot go itself, nor can it communicate with these copies of itself instantaneously as they move past the edges of humanity's solar system. Ultimately, the relationship between the Thunderhead and the Scythedom is meant to force readers to question the divine as much as it is meant to question their own humanity and their own relationship with death.

### **Conclusion**

The first major component in this examination of warnings against the exploitation of childhood has been a discussion of how spectacle is weaponized in order to use children as a tool to ensure their parents' compliance. This chapter has examined spectacle as a weapon itself, most often as a tool used by the ruling elite against the majority of the population. In creating gladiatorial contests that involve children and then forcing the participation of the masses, the reigning powers have created systems that compel compliance. Additionally, in compelling the populaces of these fictional worlds to watch these games, the governments have transformed not only games of chase, but also transformed spectacle into something to be feared as much as they are watched.

The main thrust behind violent acts in Collins' *Hunger Games* novels, Takami's *Battle Royale*, and Shusterman's *Scythe* novels is that violent spectacle is meant to draw the attention of the crowd, and with its attention won, to instill a sense of fear of the

power the government can wield, and thereby utilize fear as a method through which compliance to the government's desires is won. Nothing in these novels demonstrates a government that has the best interests of its citizenry at heart, but rather that compliance of the masses will secure the status quo, namely that the ruling government body will remain in power. Essentially, those with power will retain it, while those without will remain subjugated. Each novel, or set of novels, takes a different path in attempting to solve this problem of subjugation of the masses, with Collins' work eventually leading to violent revolution, Takami's leading to escape, and Shusterman's work leading to a largely non-violent social paradigm shift. All three force readers to question when or if violence from a governing body is acceptable, particularly when that government enacts it on its own people. Further, these stories demand readers consider what constitutes an appropriate reaction from the populace in response to violent acts perpetrated by its ruling power. Shusterman's work expands past just governmental violence and tentatively enters the metaphysical realm to lead his readers to question governmental and individual claims of divinity and the relationship between humanity and divinity as well.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Bodies as Weapon**

The exploitation of childhood in Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's texts is most visceral and literal when the exploitation is examined in terms of the human body. Part of that exploitation is obviously connected to the contestants' bodies as whole units, referring to the child as a body that is fighting in an arena. A closer examination of different aspects of the human body, such as contestant's outward appearance and potential privileges associated with how their body appears, can also reveal important details in identifying how these children are being exploited. Part of understanding how the human body is portrayed in these texts involves questioning what it means to be human. While unraveling that question is not the purpose of this thesis, or this chapter, it does play a small part because humans are incredibly intelligent animals that possess a unique combination of self-awareness as well as the ability to reason. An examination of human struggles somewhat becomes an examination of what it means to be human as a whole, with a special focus on the portion of a person's humanity as it is related to their physical body and their body's relationship to the physical world. Again, metaphysical questions, such as the existence of the soul or the complex relationship of humanity to the rest of the animal kingdom are not the aim of the discussion, but rather are starting points because they force readers to question what actually separates humans from the rest of Earth's inhabitants. What is it that truly makes humanity special? To put it another way, why should we care more about these gladiatorial children than we should care about dogfighting or cockfighting? If animal fighting and gladiatorial combat are both morally

reprehensible, why should we be more outraged as readers for these children than we would be at reading how two animals are thrown into a blood sport event? Should readers even be outraged at all? This chapter will presuppose that humanity is the current apex of the animal kingdom, as well as distinct from the rest of life on Earth, and that these books are so striking because they deal with fictional scenarios that are predicated upon the devaluation of human life, particularly in regards to the uniqueness and personal sovereignty of the human body.

Part of the visceral reality about books in which children are forced to become killers is the overwhelming finality of death, especially since once the human body dies, all that the person once was is suddenly, irrevocably, and forever absent from the universe as humans perceive it. The spectacle of death is powerful because it uses the human body as a physical object for the spectacle. Therefore, an analysis of young adult dystopian literature which utilizes children as gladiators must examine the various aspects of the human body as the body is both the target, the deliverer of weaponry, and sometimes the weapon employed itself. Further, the act of killing is an incredibly intimate act that involves not just the body of the dying person, but also the killer as the killer is forever marked by the act of killing another human being. James Garbarino, a criminal psychologist, points out that simply bearing witness to the death of another leaves a lasting impact, while being directly involved in violent acts as a child or adolescent can have lasting impacts on social development, the ability to regulate emotions, cognitive function, and neurological development (Garbarino 2, 109). Further, Garbarino points out that exposure to violence in formative years increases the chances

that a person will resort to violence later in life because they have become accustomed to it as a valid response to all situations (109). If the human enterprise of these contests was anything other than a struggle that involved human death, the spectacles would lose a portion of their power as the finality of death is no longer a threat to the intended target audience. As these spectacles become less dangerous, the political powers that first instituted the contests find their own political position threatened.

As discussed in the first chapter, the purpose of the games in these novels is to demonstrate the power of the reigning governments and to deter rebellion. While kidnapping, or crowning a champion only to return them to their parents, might still demonstrate the power of the governing over the governed, forcing the kidnapped children to kill one another is a far more raw and effective demonstration of political power. Central to these human enterprises is the human body in all its various forms as the human body is the vessel for the human spirit, which is both the target and currency of these contests. As previously mentioned, Michel Foucault theorized that “torture forms part of a ritual. It is an element in the liturgy of punishment and meets two demands. It must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy” (Foucault 34). In targeting children and their bodies, the reigning powers of these texts are striking at the combined will of their populations and through ritualized spectacle murder “marking” their victims and using this mark as a deterrent against future rebellion.

The main focus of this chapter will be examining how the body is presented in *The Hunger Games* books by Suzanne Collins, *Battle Royale* by Koushun Takami, and

*The Arc of the Scythe* books by Neal Shusterman. Specifically, this chapter will examine the role the human body plays in these gladiatorial contests in three areas. The first area is youth as an exploitable asset due to the shock value associated with the death of young people from violent spectacles. The second topic will be to look at the human body as a whole unit in terms of sexual exploitation and as the physical body as a composite unit. The final section will focus on exploitation due to race and socioeconomic privilege in relationship to the human body.

### **Youth as a Weapon**

Each of the three series examined revolves around teenaged protagonists. While this alone does not make these three fictional works young adult literature, it does play an important role in determining and developing the motivations of the characters. The weaponizing spectacle of the gladiatorial contests with young people, specifically those in the 12- to 18-year-old range, hinges on the shock value of the deaths of thousands of young people. That weaponization of spectacle succeeds, not just because of the use of force, but because of the fear generated via shocking deaths of the young contestants. Because of advances in medical technology, while some children will die in childhood, most children actually survive to adulthood, which is an inverse of historical norms. Prior to 1900, nearly a quarter of children were expected to die in the first year of life, and another quarter would die before reaching adulthood, while the women who survived to be old enough to reach their childbearing years died at a rate of around 50% in pregnancy (“Mortality in the Past – around Half Died as Children”). Premature death for women and children was an expected reality for most of human history, though modern society has



become unaccustomed to it because it no longer occurs as frequently. The modern world has experienced a shift in both expectations regarding childhood mortality and in how childhood is viewed in relation to the entirety of the human life cycle because it is no longer expected for half of children to die in childhood or half of women to die in childbirth.

The expectation is now that children and women will live through both childhood and childbirth, which has in turn given rise to a new importance on childhood. This is not meant to state that children were never important or valuable – they intrinsically are – but it does frame their importance in the light of a stark reality of the past that they might not live to adulthood. This newer valuation of childhood is seen in the slow evolution of children’s literature and the equally slow evolution of the concept of adolescence itself. John Sutherland points out in *A Little History of Literature* that Romantic literature, particularly that of William Wordsworth, held “that the child, having been most recently in the company of God, was a ‘purer’ being than the grown-up person” (Sutherland 129). This viewpoint – that children were in the presence of God prior to their birth, and were therefore somewhat holier than adults – should be held up against the reality that for most of the Romantic period children were to be seen and not heard, or else unseen and unheard in the world of adults. James Holt McGavran also points out in *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuations, Postmodern Contestations*, that there is a “Romantic myth of childhood as a transhistorical holy time of innocence and spirituality, uncorrupted by the adult world” (McGavran 12). McGavran points out that there is an idyllic view in which children become the saviors and saints of adulthood, and that this

mythical definition of childhood has popularized itself into the modern psyche despite being somewhat false in the real world as adults are the ones who must first uphold, and later save, their children (McGavran 13). In targeting children, the Capitol and the Greater Republic of East Asia, and to a lesser extent the Scythedom, have played to a notion within the modern adult mind that childhood is meant largely to be a time of safety, though this idea is not played out in history and has only become entrenched in the human mind in the last few centuries. The authors' dystopian ruling powers have then turned this changed expectation into a weapon, and, in essence, weaponized children against their parents by weaponizing modern's society's expectation that youth will survive into adulthood while also weaponizing the newfound importance of children in society in relation to adults' positions. If children matter – and they do – one can hurt a parent by hurting the child, and that is exactly what the ruling powers try to do in these dystopian novels.

Before continuing, it is important to catalog how youth is represented in each of these fictional dystopias. In Collin's works, the Hunger Games selects 24 annual Tributes, one boy and one girl, from a nation-wide pool that consist of every person, boy and girl, in Districts 1 through District 12, who are between the ages of 12 and 18. However, Collins explicitly states the youngest winner of the Hunger Games, Finnick Odair, won when he was 14 years old. This means that of the 74 other winners, each was between 15 and 18 years old and that for children under the age of 15, the Hunger Games was effectively a death sentence. Similarly, Takami's novel selects fifty 9th grade classes from across the Republic to participate in the Program, with 9th graders typically being

between 14 and 15. In Shusterman's work, the Scythedom kills fairly indiscriminately, but the two protagonists, Rowan Damisch and Citra Terranova, are both 16 when they are apprenticed to Scythe Faraday, and are later told one of them must kill the other for the one of them to be approved as a Scythe.

As noted in the last chapter, the adults of these fictional worlds have been players of the games of chase and are survivors of that game. In making it through the selection round of these games, adult survivors become signposts of participation. Thus, the survivors of these games are one spectacle in themselves, as they represent all of the players who survived without ever being selected. Further, the large pool of unselected children stresses to the reader that in each story, the death of children is an artificially enforced construct that forces the proletariats to understand their governments have not only the intent to take their children against their will, but also the opportunity and the capability to actually take them. This conflux of intent, opportunity, and capability is known as the "deadly force triangle" and is used by military forces and law enforcement to determine if a threat possesses the ability to cause bodily harm, which, in these instances, the governments of these dystopias do (Olson 2). Thus, the intent of taking children, specifically for their youth, is meant to be an act of force and violence targeted at the parents – the potential political dissidents – of their various fictional nations.

With a look at the intent of harming children, our attention will turn to the younger Tributes in the *Hungers Games* – specifically Rue, Primrose Everdeen, and Finnick Odair. When describing youth in her books, Collins points to the smallness of children, such as saying of both Rue and Primrose that "neither of them could tip the

scales at seventy pounds soaking wet” (*The Hunger Games* 99). While the older Tributes, such as Cato and Thresh, receive descriptions like “monstrous,” “brutish,” and “giant,” Collins chose deliberate words for showing how small some Tributes can be compared to those favored to win (45, 126, 160). Primrose and Rue show Collins’ readers that the threat of the Hunger Games selecting twelve-year-olds was real, though the odds of such an occurrence was long given how the Games are structured, with twelve-year-olds only being required to submit their name once, though they may submit it more if they wish (*The Hunger Games* 21). Thus, that Primrose and Rue are both selected in one year from among thousands of other candidates seems to be unusual and adds to a general feeling of resentment that the people of Panem feel against the Capitol, as Katniss describes the general consensus of the people that the selection of a twelve-year-old is “unfair” (21). That both Primrose and Rue are twelve when they are selected, and that no one younger than fourteen has won the Hunger Games, demonstrate that their youth is effectively their undoing inside the arena. Collins never gives a reason as to why there has only been one winner younger than fifteen, though perhaps there is both a physical and developmental component to the lack of winners under fifteen.

At twelve, Primrose and Rue are physically smaller than the other Tributes. They simply may have not entered puberty the way older Tributes have, and likely do not have the associated physical development of their peers. Similarly, the cognitive capability, such as problem solving, and intellectual growth of a child is markedly different between a twelve-year-old and an eighteen-year-old. That is not to say there are not exceptional twelve-, thirteen-, and fourteen-year-olds, as there are two mentioned examples within

*The Hunger Games* who seem to be physically and mentally mature beyond their years, but they are the exception, not the rule. Further, while Rue herself is somewhat exceptional in her own Games, placing in the top third of contestants, she does so by hiding. And, regrettably, when she first encounters one of the more adversarial Tributes, Marvel, he kills her (233). This demonstrates that while Rue was smart enough to avoid danger, the limitation she faced was that danger could not be avoided forever and she was always effectively prey amongst predators.

In contrast with Rue and Primrose is Finnick Odair, who is both the youngest winner of the Hunger Games and the only winner under the age of fifteen. Finnick is unique in that while most of the other Tributes are dragged into the arena, he volunteered for the Hunger Games, twice. Further, Finnick is one of the few Tributes that have been specifically trained for the Hunger Games, along with others from Districts 1, 2, and his home District 4. The physical training Finnick received prior to the Games already sets him apart from most of his peers, but what is unique to him is his youth. Where Finnick is fourteen, the other Career Tributes from Districts 1, 2, and 4 are all 16 or older. That Finnick felt himself physically ready to quite literally test his skills against older Tributes while he himself was only fourteen shows both a youthful cognitive development (there is a certain lack of regard for his own safety) counterbalanced by a subtle maturity that enabled him to conduct a solid, and accurate, self-evaluation of his own skills in comparison with the potential field. More will be said later on Finnick's relationship to his weapon of choice – a trident – but the point is that at fourteen, Finnick possessed the physical skills necessary to win the Hunger Games. At fourteen, Finnick was physically

mature enough to use a very unique polearm to slaughter most of his competition in under two weeks (*Catching Fire* 59). The act of violence in itself is remarkable, but made more so by the fact that Finnick's use of a trident and net is indicative of both his mental ability to make the connection between his home District, which is known for fishing, and the spectacle historically associated with the weapon.

While he is certainly capable of killing with knives and spears, and does, Finnick is physically dominant with the trident, and realizes the trident is his tool to tell his story through the spectacle of ensnaring and killing his competitors. It demonstrates that Finnick did not come into the arena without preparation or without the skills necessary to win, which is also unusual because of his young age. However, Finnick also weaponized his own youth, as a statistical category, as his youth caused his fellow competitors to underestimate him. Because no one younger than fifteen had ever won prior to him, no one expected a fourteen-year-old boy to be the favorite to win, and this allowed Finnick to catch his competitors by surprise. Had the Hunger Games been another game – such as a nonlethal sporting event – the competition could have adapted, but Finnick was able to weaponize surprise in a way that facilitated his victory. As the Chinese military philosopher Sun Tzu points out, “all warfare is based on deception,” and in this regard Finnick is truly brilliant because he is able to fool everyone in the field into assuming he is not the primary threat to win until he is ready to openly campaign for victory (Sun Tzu 4). By contrast, none of the older Tributes – Katniss, Cato, Clove, Marvel, Thresh, and Peeta – a decade later in Katniss's and Peeta's Games are able to so completely control

the Games in the way Finnick controlled his. Finnick does not simply survive the Hunger Games or dominate in them; he thrives in them.

Interestingly, the unspoken evaluation of Finnick as being physically superior to his peers beyond his years is not unique to Finnick. Katniss recalls that when she first entered the lottery for the Hunger Games at twelve, her closest friend, Gale, was fourteen and already “cleared six feet [tall] and was as good as an adult” (*Catching Fire* 110). Like Finnick, Gale is described as being the physical epitome of the development of a fourteen-year-old when compared to the overall field of Tributes. While Gale never competed in the Hunger Games, it is an interesting mental exercise to determine if he might have won, or not. In any event, Finnick and Gale, at fourteen, were exceptional physical specimens, but this makes them exceptions, not the norm, and this exception is what is so important about them. Perhaps the defining characteristic, other than possessing a physique that outclasses most of his peers, is that Finnick is supremely skilled at violence. Randall Collins points out in his book *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* that violence, specifically skill at being violent, is less a learned skill and often an innate intangible quality that is often located in a very small subset of the overall population (Collins 387). Collins uses the example of flying aces, or those military pilots who have shot down more than five enemy aircraft in a dogfight, to illustrate his point of innate skill at violence being a factor that separates the truly exceptional from the overall population. Looking specifically at pilots, Collins notes flying aces made up less than one percent of all pilots, while accounting for more than sixty percent of kills in the air, which indicates these pilots were not only skilled with their chosen weapon, in this instance

aircraft, but they were also able to process information from their battlefields more rapidly than their competitors (388). In this regard, Finnick, who so effortlessly slaughters his competitors, can be said to be supremely skilled at violence. That he kills easily demonstrates that out of the overall population of not just the Tributes of his year, but of all victors combined, he is head and shoulders above the competition. For example, when gifted with a trident, Finnick's first response is not to immediately begin stalking the other Tributes, but to further enhance his weapon's lethality by weaving a net of vines, which allows him to ensnare people in the net and then impale them with the trident (*Catching Fire* 59). This skill at violence is the intangible factor that places Finnick far above his peers. Other factors do play a role, but the ability to make use of those intangibles, such as beauty, where others fail can be linked back to Finnick's skill in violence.

Thus, youth in *The Hunger Games* can be seen as a two-edged sword in that the children selected as Tributes for the Hunger Games are meant to quite literally be the weapons the Capitol uses to inflict pain on their parents, and thus, these children, because of their youth, are weapons themselves, regardless of if they want to be or not. The younger the child, the more likely the child is to die, and the more agonizing for the parent to know there is nothing they can do to save their child. In a rare exception, Finnick Odair was able to weaponize his own youth to shift the odds in his favor, though he did so through a unique combination of preparation, cunning, and skill. Specifically, Finnick weaponized his youth by making people underestimate him because of his age of fourteen in comparison with the rest of the field of Tributes. Finnick was able to play on



the other Tributes' expectations that a single statistic would remain the rule in his Hunger Games, namely that in the 64 Hunger Games prior to his, no one younger than fifteen had won. To his peers, the sheer weight of that statistic was an obvious mark against Finnick, despite his own preparation for his Games. The lack of winners younger than fifteen gave Finnick an element of surprise which he capitalized upon because it appears that every Tribute discounted him and that it “took about a week for his competitors to realize he was the one to kill, but it was too late” at that point as Finnick was already making quick work of dispatching his competitors (*Catching Fire* 59). Thus, Finnick was both self-aware enough to realize he could physically compete in and, more importantly, complete, the Hunger Games and to know that his best chance at winning came when he was young enough to be overlooked by the older Tributes.

Another factor that may have led to Finnick's victory is that he is particularly close to his mentor from District 4, Mags, who herself won the 11th Hunger Games at the age of 18, and is now 82-years-old, and has trained not just dozens of Tributes, but also several implied Victors, with at least two mentioned by name: Finnick and Annie Cresta, who won her Games because she hid and was able to swim the best of all the Tributes when the arena was purposely flooded (99). Finnick's route to the Hunger Games is mostly absent from Collins' work, as is any mention of his parents or family, with the exception of hints that Mags is close to her proteges and continues to care for her Victors after they have won. Both Finnick and Mags are volunteers for the 75th Hunger Games, and at the start of Games, Finnick goes out of his way to carry Mags on his back as they flee from danger when it would have been far more strategic to let her be killed by

another Tribute, or to kill her himself (78). More importantly, just before she dies, Mags “plants a kiss on Finnick’s lips, and then hobbles straight into [a poisonous] fog,” which kills her (85). Peeta later deduces Annie Cresta “was the girl Mags volunteered for” in order to spare Annie from a second arena (99). These examples hint that Mags, Finnick, and Annie are exceptionally close, with Mags actively choosing to sacrifice her own life for Finnick and Annie. Given that Finnick’s family is never mentioned, it is not out of the realm of possibility that he saw Mags as a surrogate mother and she saw he and Annie as more than just her proteges.

Angela Henneberger conducted a study of the relationship between popularity, family cohesion, peer influence, and delinquency on middle and high school aged boys in the United States and came to the conclusion that boys who first find a grounding part of their identity in a cohesive family unit – no matter what that family unit is so long as it is stable for the male child – and this cohesive family unit is able to generate control over peer popularity as a method of deterring delinquency (Henneberger 1656-1657). In this instance, Mags provided the basis of a cohesive family unit for Finnick and was able to later guide his skillful use of manipulation and violence – which would otherwise be a delinquent act – in such a way as to be in Finnick’s favor. Further, as a mentor to Finnick for the Hunger Games, Mags would have been able to teach him to utilize his physical beauty, which will be discussed later, and his charisma to garner sponsorship inside the Games, as evidenced by him being gifted a trident, his weapon of choice, during the Games (59). But, to be clear, Finnick was not the norm for youthful Victors; Primrose

and Rue are. Finnick is the youngest winner of the Hunger Games, and the only fourteen-year-old to win, which makes the normal winners between fifteen and eighteen.

The children of *Battle Royale* are different from the children in *The Hunger Games* in that they are all approximately the same age and the selection process is entirely a surprise, for both the students and the parents. As in the Hunger Games, the students in the Program must kill one another as quickly as possible. However, there are no sponsors in *Battle Royale*, so children are effectively on their own throughout the entirety of their games. Similarly, where the Tributes of the Hunger Games must kill each other live on camera, so that everyone sees their demise, the children in the Program are only highlighted after their deaths with the sole victor being briefly praised after the event is over. Most importantly, the children in the Program have access to guns and explosives. These modern weapons act as the great leveler as guns, and explosives, remove the advantages of physical strength and size, while maintaining the advantages brought by intelligence, cunning, and skill in violence. Guns accomplish this through being projectile weapons that can incapacitate and kill without combatants having to physically touch each other.

Takami describes two distinct groups from within the children of *Battle Royale*. The first group are those who really aren't killers at all, and the second group is made up of Mitsuko Souma and Kazuo Kiriyama, the two most capable killers. The majority of the students of Ninth Grade Class B measure their lives by major events that show their youth by placing outsized importance on these events against where they are in Junior High School relative to the overall human life cycle. For example, one child mentions

participation in Little League, while another mentions the first day of Junior High School after graduating Elementary School, while one of the girls takes comfort in a locket that houses, not a picture of one of her family members, but a picture of her favorite celebrity boyband (Takami 91, 111, 215). These are shown not to disparage the young people of Ninth Grade Class B, but to show their youth through both growth milestones achieved and those unachieved and through emotional development. In the case of the girl with the locket, she is not yet emotionally mature enough to recognize the absolute lunacy of taking comfort in the picture of someone who doesn't even know her, and whom she has never met, but that is an entirely rational response for a teenager.

In terms of age, the students within the Program are all approximately Finnick's age, and perhaps slightly older on average as Japanese ninth graders are fourteen-year-olds who are turning fifteen. The children who are selected each year for the Program are only in this age bracket, never younger and never older. When compared with the Hunger Games, where there is only one winner who is younger than fifteen, it would appear that both the Capitol of Panem and the Greater Republic of East Asia has identified that the age range of twelve to fourteen, with fifteen as an inflection point, is perhaps the most impactful in terms of weaponizing youth against the parents and citizenry of their various universes. This age range is different from their older peers, the sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds, in that they are straddling a line between childhood, preteen, and early teenage. This younger category is likely physically more like children than adults and might not have started puberty yet, while the children in the sixteen- to eighteen-year-old range have either started or finished puberty already and are physically more like adults than

children, even if they do not have the mental and emotional maturity yet to match adults. However, the younger group's ages – twelve to fourteen – give the illusion of childhood rather than adulthood, and therefore allows the government to have the appearance and effect of killing preadolescent children without actually having to kill a child younger than twelve. The overwhelming number of deaths in the twelve- to fourteen year-old-range, and the numerous deaths in the inflection age of fifteen, allows the governments of these dystopias to fully utilize youth as a weapon against parents and maximize the impact they wish to have on adults in their worlds, while also giving the government plausible deniability that did not in fact kill preadolescent children.

In contrast to both *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale*, Rowan and Citra and their selections for Scythe apprenticeships do not hinge on their age, though they are both sixteen. Shusterman presents youth in various ways, but most of it marked by milestones as older people are able to physically manipulate the age of their bodies periodically if they feel they have grown too old and want to be young again (*Scythe* 144). More accurately, some people have stopped measuring their ages and the only people who are actually concerned with age are the young, like Citra and Rowan, as they haven't aged past 100 yet (144). One of the only examples Shusterman gives of genuine youth is in a description of Rowan, when he says that Rowan is "a young man – barely a man – a boy," who has taken up the cause of pruning the Scythedom of Goddard's influence (*Thunderhead* 9). Ultimately, Shusterman doesn't describe youth the same way Takami and Collins do because he has enabled people to change their ages. However, Scythes can choose anyone they wish to be their apprentice at any age, but the most common group

selected are young people who are genuinely young because they can be trained in occupational killing.

In *Gleanings*, Shusterman tells the story of several very different Scythes when they are selected for their own apprenticeships. The most common age is seventeen: Scythe Currie is seventeen when she is approved by the Scythedom, while Carson Lusk, and Citra's brother, Benjamin Terranova, are both seventeen when they are drafted. However, three other people are of unknown age when they are selected for membership into the Scythedom. Scythe Salvador Dali was an adult when he became a Scythe, and the age of his apprentice, Penélope, is never stated. The last, Scythe Sojourner Truth, is also not specifically given an age, though she appears to be approximately the same age as the high school protagonist, Dax, in her short story. As Dax is seventeen and thinks that Scythe Truth is the same age as himself, it is not unrealistic to place Scythe Truth in the same category as the younger Scythe apprentices and not the older group (Shusterman 96). In any event, the point remains that Scythes appear, for the most part, to be impressed into an apprenticeship when they are around sixteen or seventeen. This is significant because it puts them above the age of Finnick and the children forced into the Program of the Greater Republic of East Asia and closer in age to average winners of the Hunger Games. The implication is again that sixteen- and seventeen-year-old range appears to be most important for choosing future Scythes as that mid-to-late teenage years are the youngest age at which children are physically capable of surviving the brutal training while also being mentally adaptable enough to create new mental models that allow them to adapt to a life structured around murder.

After selection, these seventeen-year-olds are reduced to living weapons and the service which they provide instead of their individual identities. Citra even mentions that she “[wonders] how long it [will] be until she truly [becomes] Scythe Anastasia both inside and out, and [puts] her given name to eternal rest” (*Thunderhead* 25). While the Scythes do maintain their own identity based on their namesake and their robes, everything else about them is generally lost in their pragmatic use. The Scythedom as a whole is a collective organization that masks individuality. However, where the Thunderhead’s ability to rewrite an identity it finds problematic is overt, the Scythedom is covert as it suppresses each of its Scythe’s identities by overwhelmingly focusing on their occupation – killing. Like the Tributes and the children of the Program, the Scythes are not so much individuals to be treasured as they are a commodity to be used until they can no longer bear the weight of the emotional baggage associated with their occupation. They may be privileged in that they live outside the Thunderhead’s laws and they alone among humanity truly possess immortality without a fear of a random death. Overall, at the outset of Shusterman’s novels, the Scythedom is a tool of the Thunderhead to keep the human population within a manageable range for Earth to continue to support human life. It only becomes something more than a cadre of glorified murders after death is reintroduced to human society at the end of *The Toll*.

### **The Human Body as a Weapon**

The human body itself is often a weapon in these dystopian novels. In this section, the human body refers to the physical body of the combatants, including the physical appearance of that body, such as beauty; its capabilities, such as its ability to be used as a

weapon or to use a weapon; and, briefly, its sexuality. It is important to understand that the human body is something that exists in a state of becoming, of transitioning from one stage of life to another, and the protagonists of these novels are in adolescence, which is the state of transition from childhood to adulthood. One definition of adolescence offered by Jiro Orukibich, Kenta Nassaw, and Kazuo Mori is that adolescence is the time in human life when an individual has the capability to act, but lacks the legal right to act (737). In these novels, the human body as a weapon can most often be seen in the use of beauty, and later sexuality, as a weapon. However, there are instances in which the human body is transformed into a literal weapon itself. In both cases, a tension exists between the human body as a whole; an aspect of the body, such as beauty or sexuality; and the person who is the being inside the body. This tension forces acknowledgement of the whole of a person and forces readers to grapple with defining personhood, and warns of the reduction of a person to a single aspect of their being in relation to their whole identity. Even more so, it forces readers to contemplate whether a single aspect of an identity, particularly one so mutable as physical beauty, can define the entirety of a person. Thus, in talking about the human body, particularly about human bodies as weapons, the conversation is actually about human beings being used as weapons and if a person can be weaponized or if their humanity is something much more fundamental that cannot be denied despite overt outside attempts to devalue it.

Bodies of men and women as a whole are more than just their sexual value and in a healthy relationship, beauty can be seen for what it is, and appreciated for itself, just as romance can be had in a way that does not just end in sex. However, in *The Hunger*



*Games*, this is not the case as beauty, and its link to sexuality, is corrupted by weaponization because beauty becomes important only for its link to sexuality, and sexuality becomes important because of the benefit it gives to the one party with social, economic, and political power over the second party in a sexual relationship, in this case the citizens of the Capitol over the Victors and Tributes. Instead of being just one facet of the human body, like the color of one's hair or eyes, beauty, according to the Capitol's definition of it, becomes a commodity when children are seen as animals about to fight to the death and their beauty is a tangible asset that might be a commodity the Capitol citizens might take advantage of in the future. Moreover, beauty is perhaps the one uncontrollable factor that determines a Tribute's success, as the most beautiful Tributes often get the most sponsors, and all Tributes are assigned stylists whose job it is to beautify the Tributes for presentation to the Capitol (*The Hunger Games* 58). Beauty is an asset in *The Hunger Games* because the Games ultimately are about the human body. Beauty then becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold by both the Tributes, who sell their beauty to enhance their chance of survival, and the Capitol, which sells the Tributes themselves as something to be owned post-Hunger Games.

Katniss points out that Tributes are allowed to do pretty much anything to survive the Hunger Games, stating "there are no rules in the arena [except you can't eat your fellow Tributes because] cannibalism doesn't play well with the Capitol audience, so they [try] to head it off" (*The Hunger Games* 143). To that end, numerous Tributes attempt to gain the favor of the Capitol in any way they can. One such way Tributes gain favor is by accentuating their physical beauty. Finnick is the best example of a Tribute who was able

to successfully parlay his physical beauty into a victory as Katniss describes him possessing “extraordinary beauty [,] tall, athletic, with golden skin and bronze-colored hair and those incredible eyes,” all of which have elevated him to the status “of a living legend” (*Catching Fire* 58-59). Finnick was physically beautiful and this made people like him. In short, Finnick was desirable to the Capitol. Similarly, other Tributes tried the same tactic with mixed results: Cashmere and Gloss are brother and sister Victors hailing from District 1 who Katniss describes as “classically beautiful” and they both won their Games (54). However, physical beauty alone is not enough if unaccompanied by skill as well, as demonstrated by Glimmer, also from District 1, who was stung to death by genetically modified hornets. Prior to the Games beginning, Glimmer is described as appearing in an interview in a “see-through gold gown” designed to make her appear sexually desirable (*The Hunger Games* 125). That some Tributes understand the intersection of desirability and beauty can be weaponized is further demonstrated when Peeta utilizes his interview time to declare his love for Katniss. While Katniss is furious over the declaration without her consent, her mentor, Haymitch Abernathy, explains to her that Peeta actually provided her a weapon because he “made [Katniss] look desirable,” which can in turn be parlayed for sponsorship inside the arena (135). In effect, Peeta has given Katniss the same, or more, desirability as Glimmer and that desirability has a monetary factor that can be attached to it.

Similarly, in *Battle Royale*, Mitsuko Souma makes her sexuality a marked portion of her strategy to survive. Mitsuko utilizes her sexuality to lure Tadakatsu Hatagami into dropping his weapon, a baseball bat, so that they can have sex together (Takami 460).

Unfortunately for Tadakatsu, Mitsuko then tries to kill him. While she initially fails, she eventually succeeds in beating him to death with his baseball bat while he is distracted and distraught over accidentally shooting one of his friends, Yuichiro Takiguchi. Mitsuko later euthanizes Yuichiro. While Tadakatsu is the only instance where Mitsuko overtly uses her body to bait someone into lowering their guard, she nonetheless shows that sexuality can be used as a weapon. At the very least, Mitsuko is demonstrating the power of sexuality in teenagers as they work towards adulthood. This weaponizing of sexuality is likewise seen in how Katniss uses romance to keep Peeta alive in the 74th Hunger Games – through kissing, and thereby presenting a story to the Capitol that they are indeed two teenagers in love (*The Hunger Games* 261). While romance and sexuality are two different ideas that can interlink, Katniss quickly works out that Haymitch is selling a romance story between her and Peeta and that he can better keep them both alive when she shows physical affection on camera for the Capitol to watch.

It is horrific that a large portion of the Hunger Games is focused on making children sexually desirable to adults. The contrast between the presentation of teenage sexuality between *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* is a tender subject. This paper is not designed to examine Japanese views on human sexuality, though there is certainly a sexual component to *Battle Royale*. As there are no sponsors directly watching her and gaining materially or socially from her survival, Mitsuko's directing her sexuality at other children her own age is appropriate, though there is a very problematic implication of how, when, where, and from whom she learned how to weaponize her sexuality. Mitsuko is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, having been sold by her mother to adult men,

who used her to create child sexual abuse material (Takami 550). After her mother's death, Mitsuko finds no safe harbor and suffers sexual abuse at the hands of male teachers and relatives.

Similarly, the most terrifying part of the Capitol's relationship to its Victors is that it appears they are routinely subjected to human trafficking after their victory. Collins is most explicit about trafficking with Finnick Odair, who, after years of being used by citizens of the Capitol, is able to recount in an interview about the Capitol's treatment of him that he is able "to weave a tapestry so rich in detail you can't doubt its authenticity. Tales of strange sexual appetites, betrayals of the heart, bottomless greed, and bloody power plays. Drunken secrets whispered over damp pillowcases in the dead of night. Finnick was someone bought and sold. A district slave. A handsome one, certainly, but in reality harmless. Who would he tell?" (*Mockingjay* 148). Haymitch would later confirm that it is an unspoken rule among the Victors of the Hunger Games that no one contradicts anything the Capitol demands of the Victors out of fear of reprisal, with Haymitch as the example held up after his entire family was assassinated after he angered the Capitol rulers (149). Katniss would describe the affections of the Capitol towards Finnick, and the other Victors, as "drooling over him ever since" he won the Games (*Catching Fire* 59). The direction of sexual appeal for the Tributes of the Hunger Games is not at children their own age, but at adults who are looking at the Tributes and Victors as prizes they can eventually conquer and own.

In keeping with the themes of maintaining the status quo by using violent spectacles as deterrence against rebellion, one portion of this deterrence involves the

unspoken support the governments of these dystopias, particularly the Capitol, give to the sexual predation of children. Connie Barber, in her study of online sexual predators' exploitation of children in online environments, points out that a major element shared by predators is their desire to control a child for the adult's own ends (Barber 600). The adults in these scenarios utilize language that removes a child's ability to resist or to stop the progression of the scenario, often backed up by threats of force (600). In Collins' work, the Capitol first utilizes a threat of force to remove Victors' ability to resist what is happening to them, as demonstrated by how the Capitol utilizes Haymitch's family's execution as an example of what happens to those Victors who resist. In this sense, they continue to victimize the Victors by not only inflicting the trauma of the Hunger Games, but also forcing them to be ambassadors of the Hunger Games to future participants as well as to their home Districts. This additional trauma divides the Victors from the residents of their home Districts and acts as a continued control method in preventing and deterring rebellion.

That the Capitol actively works to control the Victors through force while trafficking them to whomever will pay for them should alarm readers. For example, Katniss states that from the moment he won his Hunger Games, "the Capitol had been drooling over [Finnick]. Because of his youth, they really couldn't touch him for the first year or two. But ever since he turned sixteen, he's spent his time at the Games dogged by those desperately in love with him" (*Catching Fire* 59). The appearance of Finnick as a romantic who drifts from paramour to paramour is only an illusion, as he reveals later that he, "Finnick, was someone bought and sold" (*Mockingjay* 148). Finnick was sixteen

when the Capitol let people start forcing themselves on him, and by the time of the 75th Hunger Games he had built a mountain of clients who had paid for his company and services over the years. Similarly, after she and Peeta are recovered from the arena, Katniss is told by Cinna, her stylist, that the Capitol wanted to surgically alter her body, particularly her breasts, to make her more of a sexual object, though Haymitch came to her defense and kept the Capitol from presenting her as a sexual object and instead opted to dress Katniss in a way that made her appear far younger than her age, in a last attempt to keep the Capitol's sexual predators at bay for as long as possible (*The Hunger Games* 354). The implication as to what the Capitol has in store for Katniss, and Peeta, is that after they survive, they are still the pawns of the Capitol and even their bodies are property of the government and the social elite. The specific intent for Katniss is to make her more sexually appealing to those in the Capitol who might want to purchase her. The human trafficking element comes into play with the surgery that would have been forced upon Katniss entirely for the benefit of people who would have used her for their own pleasures without her consent. The intent of the Capitol was to increase their definition of her beauty, without her consent, so that in the eyes of the citizens of the Capitol she is not only a Victor but a sexually desirable one that can generate future profits for the Capitol. The dark reality is that while Katniss was being forced into a gladiatorial contest, not only is the gaze of the spectators on Katniss killing other children, it is simultaneously gazing at the sexual appeal of her body. The conflation of sexual desirability and beauty, without inclusion of mutual romance and consent, ultimately devolves into sexual abuse of the Victors as they have no means to resist the people who would have them.

Before leaving the discussion of the human body as a weapon, it must be pointed out that sometimes the human body is the actual weapon. This interesting phenomenon occurs when a person, through deliberate action, transforms their body into a living weapon. The best examples of this occur in *Catching Fire*, when we are introduced to Enobaria, a Victor from District 2 who won her Games by biting a second tribute in the neck and mauling him to death. The use of her teeth is a terrifying twist, as it is meant to invoke the imagery of animals tearing at one another in order to kill or maim. This imagery also is somewhat problematic as it presents Enobaria as somewhat of a barbarian or a crazed, caged animal in order to win. The reduction of humanity to savagery intersects with the reduction of beauty and sexuality into weapons and together they help devolve the Tributes, the children in the Program, and the Scythes into something that is “other.” No longer are they human, for they have been reduced to animals through their killing of one another. This loss of dignity signals a loss of humanity and devaluation of human life as both a form of entertainment and a weapon to induce control.

The Scythedom again is the outlier in that one of the main goals of apprenticeship in Shusterman’s world is to turn otherwise normal people into trained killers. One particular way in which this is accomplished is through the use of training in the martial arts, which allows the Scythes to kill without needing to bring a weapon. While the variant mentioned in Shusterman’s world is fictional, the actual martial art, bokator, is not and is noted for its use within the Cambodian military and for its heavy focus on “punches, sweeping high kicks, take-downs and feints” (Meixner 7). In this, bokator is more in line with other military martial arts programs such as the United States Marine

Corps Martial Arts Program or the Israeli Defense Force's Krav Maga in that they train for practical use over elaborate, though beautiful, *kata*. Given the relative infrequency of hand-to-hand combat in modern conflict, largely due to advances in firearm technology and other larger caliber weapons, the Scythes' use of bokator is almost entirely for show: the Scythedom wants to make a spectacle of killing people with their bare hands, thereby transforming their bodies into weapons (Walton 5). Further, given that the population of Shusterman's world is conditioned not to resist Scythes upon penalty of familial annihilation, Scythes rarely go around beating people to death, though they certainly could.

In addition to being skilled hand-to-hand combatants, some Scythes have their bodies genetically modified. One notable example occurs in *Gleanings* in which Scythe Sojourner Truth has her body modified to give her wings protruding from her shoulder blades. Scythe Truth does not use any external tools to kill her victims: she instead flies her victims into the air and then drops them from a lethal altitude (Shusterman 99). Scythe Truth and the rest of the Scythedom, for the most part, should be contrasted with their comfort in repetitive killing against the survivors of the Program and the Hunger Games in which the winners of Collins' and Takami's work continue to suffer even after their ordeals are done. For example, through Haymitch, Collins says that numerous Victors have turned to alcohol or narcotics as forms of self-medicating away their trauma of the Hunger Games, so that it is the exception to meet a Victor, like Seeder and Mags, who have not (*Catching Fire* 61). Similarly, Takami mentions that the survivors of the Program are shown on television and that they often possess a glint of insanity in their



eyes after their time in the Program (Takami 44). While she is not insane or suffering from trauma like many of the survivors of the Program and the Hunger Games, Scythe Truth is very much set apart from natural humanity. Her wings aside, Scythe Truth, along with every other Scythe, is set apart from humanity as a whole in that occupation is killing other humans. Scythes also suffer in silence when compared to the rest of humanity as the only way they can leave their profession is via suicide, and that “all Scythes someday suffer [that] fate” (Shusterman 242). While there is a practical reason for the Scythedom, Shusterman does little to morally justify their existence and instead lets his characters wrestle with their job and their place within their own world as opposed to condemning them for the occupation in which they find themselves.

### **Race and Privilege as Weapons**

The presentation of race and privilege in young adult dystopian literature has been criticized by Ebony Elizabeth Thomas as being colorblind. Specifically, “the trouble with colorblind ideologies in text and culture is that by not noticing race, writers and other creatives do the work of encoding it as taboo” (Thomas 59). This section will not dispute Thomas’ assertion that while race is present in each of these stories, it is not brought to the forefront. Further, while race is not a prominent factor in any of the stories, it nonetheless plays a substantial role in the lives of the characters in terms of highlighting privilege as it appears in *The Hunger Games*, *Battle Royale*, and *Scythe*. Of the three texts, Collins is the one who most specifically calls out the racial characteristics of her characters, as will be shown, followed by Shusterman. Shusterman specifically calls out the ethnic ancestry of his characters, but then silently moves race to the background of his

work by forbidding the Scythedom from killing based on race. Takami, because he is focused entirely on Japanese characters, presents a unique view of race as his characters are all ethnically homogenous and yet are still stratified by social-economic status.

While Tributes are not selected in *The Hunger Games* based on ethnicity, privilege does play a decisive role in the success of the Tributes during the Games. Selection in the Hunger Games is entirely bound up in privilege, as the greatest form of privilege is to not have one's name entered into the lottery for forced participation in the Hunger Games. Further, the systemic racism that the United States is currently in a confrontation with plays a quiet and sinister, though logical, role in the selection of tributes in Panem. In Collins' work, the social and economic power is consolidated within a single Capitol city-state that rules between twelve and thirteen districts in what used to be the United States. The Districts beyond the Capitol lack any true power – economic, social, or military – and by the time of Peeta and Katniss's story have already had one rebellion against the Capitol put down. While *The Hunger Games* films do introduce other Black characters, Susan Collins' book only introduces two characters whose skin color is specifically mentioned as being “dark”: Rue and Thresh, who both hail from District 11 (*The Hunger Games* 126). While Collins mentioned in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* regarding her book that there had been significant ethnic mixing in her dystopia, to the point that most people had olive colored skin and gray eyes, she specifically mentioned that both Rue and Thresh were of African-American decent and felt so strongly about their racial heritage that she mandated they be portrayed by Black actors in the film adaptations of her work (Ross 4).

First, it should be noted that privilege plays an expressly important part of Collins' work as the highest form of privilege in her dystopia is to not be part of the selection process of the Hunger Games. In *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the readers are shown the Hunger Games before they became a viable institution and part of the cultural fabric of the Capitol and Panem. More specifically, readers are told the Hunger Games are implemented as a form of perpetual punishment against the Districts for rebelling against the Capitol (Collins 17). After putting down the Districts' rebellion, the Capitol started demanding the yearly offering of Tributes for the Hunger Games. In Collins' work, there is only one documented District family who is exempted from this requirement, and they are given this privilege because their family owned a weapons manufacturing factory in District 2 that provided the Capitol with the weapons it needed to win its civil war (21). This family, the Plinths, "had made such a fortune off munition that [they] had been able to buy [the] family's way into a life in the Capitol," a feat which will become impossible in coming decades (21). This privilege, afforded by wealth, is brought into stark contrast with the children still in District 2 after the war, some of whom know the eldest son of the Plinths, Sejanus, such as the male Tribute from District 2 in the 10th Hunger Games (72). While wealth is not the only form of privilege, for Collins' work it is certainly part of the privilege equation. Without their money, the Plinths would never have escaped District 2. The Plinths' wealth came in the form of the business they owned, namely a factory capable of manufacturing weapons for the Capitol, and this wealth in turn gave them self-determination, and enabled their migration from District 2 to the Capitol.

While privilege can be linked to wealth, race is one form of privilege that cannot be changed. It is a fact that the racial makeup of Panem is never defined. However, that the only two children in the novel who are specifically described as having “dark skin” – as being Black – both hail from the same region of the county implies that during the intervening centuries between now and *The Hunger Games*, Black people specifically remained othered in the whole of the future U.S. population (“Suzanne Collins Talks about ‘the Hunger Games,’ the Books and the Movies” 126). The implication is that while some Black people not only remained on the outside of the social norm, they actually became othered even further than they already had been because of the relegation to a single occupation. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas points out in *The Dark Fantastic* that in contrasting Rue and Thresh with impoverished version of white citizens of Panem in District 12 such as Peeta, Gale, and Katniss, Collins is able to create a commentary in which Blackness is seen as something to be feared (Thomas 43). Thomas points out in Collins’ introduction of Rue, the word “hauntingly” is used in the same sentence as “dark brown skin and eyes,” which is effectively used to place Rue outside the main group of largely non-black Tributes (Thomas 43, *The Hunger Games* 44-45). The word “hauntingly” is particularly significant because while it certainly applies to Rue’s age of twelve and her status as a combatant, it also can be used to establish a disconnect from Katniss and the other Tributes. Hauntingly creates connotations of fear, as if Rue is an otherworldly spirit and not a human child. This fear is continued with Thresh, who is described as silent, deadly, and the one Tribute avoided by the others at all costs (136). This predatory description is shared only with Cato, even among the other

Career Tributes, and places Thresh and Rue in a category of their own based on their skin color. In using two Black characters so specifically, Collins is highlighting that Black people are othered not only in her dystopian future, but in today's society as the United States of today is the foundation on which Panem is built.

This othering by race is also reflective in the occupation of District 11: farming. The focus on farming and coal mining in the two poorest Districts – 11 and 12 – implies that while race is not a direct factor in the selection of tributes *at the time of their selection*, policies of today, particularly systemic racism as it ties into economic power and upward social mobility, directly impacts the lives of people living centuries into the future. While the elite members of society in the Capitol might also have a biracial genetic makeup, their newly created society continues to other Black people. Ebony Thomas points out that “much as in the U.S. slavery and debt peonage, the people of District 11 are not allowed to consume the crops they grow, and that although a diverse population inhabits [their] District ... many are of African descent like Rue and Thresh” (Thomas 59). Similarly, Rue describes vividly how she spends time with her family “[working] in the orchards” (*The Hunger Games* 200). That the only two people specifically described as Black in *The Hunger Games* are both from a single District that focuses on farming hints that Blackness is somehow less than whiteness as other Districts focus on production of other items needed for society's continuation, while District 11 is tied to food production and lower education. Where Katniss, Peeta, and Prim have spent time in school, Rue and Thresh have been excluded from education because they are needed to work in food production. For example, District 2's focus is on weapons

manufacturing; District 4 is focused on fishing; District 7 produces paper and lumber; District 10's occupation is the cattle industry; District 12 is for coal mining; and so on (Collins 21, 171; *Catching Fire* 46, 59, 61; *The Hunger Games* 4). Further, one of the older Victors from District 11, Chaff, is also described as "dark skinned" and as getting drunk during the Hunger Games with Haymitch (*Catching Fire* 61). That Chaff's name is a direct companion to threshing – as chaff is the seed covering of wheat removed during the act of threshing – should draw the reader to the conclusion that Blackness in Collins' work is associated with farming ("Chaff"). Where white or multiracial characters are described as beautiful, like Finnick or Glimmer, Chaff is described as being Black and a drunk. Further, while white or multiracial characters are seen holding a wide number of jobs within Collins' books, Black people primarily only hold one job – farming. The only exception to this rule is Lysistrata Vickers, who is described as having "brown skin," and she is a daughter of a Capitol doctor in *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, though her skin is not called "dark brown" like the male Tribute from District 11 for the 10th Hunger Games (Collins 88, 45). The association of Blackness, agriculture, and slavery is only briefly implied by Collins when Rue and Katniss discuss the harshness suffered by the farmers of District 11, with Rue saying, with "eyes [wide], ... [that] they whip you and make sure everyone else [watches]" for the crime of eating crops during harvesting (*The Hunger Games* 200). What Collins implies, however, Thomas is explicit in connecting: in Collins' work, Blackness' connection to agriculture is meant to remind readers of slavery. Thomas uses the lashings mentioned by Rue specifically to make Katniss understand that "as unbearable as the [living] conditions in District 12 are, the people of District 11 live

under conditions so terrible that Katniss cannot even imagine [them]” (Thomas 50). The logical conclusion of Collins’ text, and Thomas’ interpretation of it, is that even in their multiracial future, if a character is Black, they are horrifyingly less than what society might need or desire in a person.

While the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* is not the subject of this thesis, the film is helpful in determining Suzanne Collins’ authorial intent regarding some subjects, as she acted as a consultant to the films to help accurately bring her book to life. One area in particular that is incredibly illuminating is that she helped Lions Gate Entertainment Corporation create a map of Panem, displayed below in Figure 1.

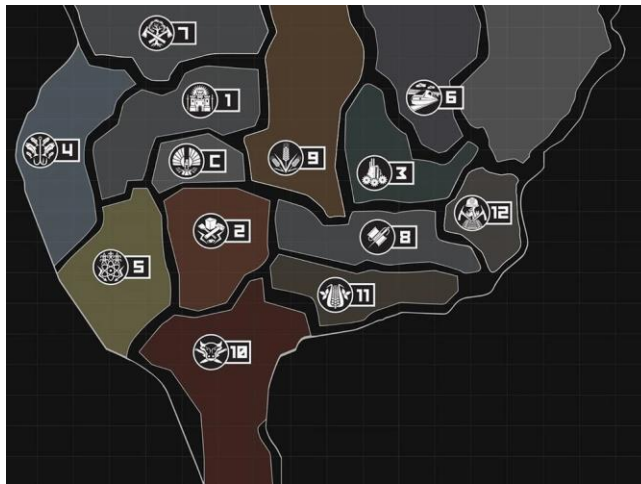


Figure 1

It should be noted that Rue and Thresh’s home, District 11, is located in what is currently the American Southeast. While it is not directly stated that the majority of the residents of District 11 are Black, it is worth noting that the 2010 U.S. census found the highest concentration of Black people in the country is located in the Southeast. Thus, Collins’ work, despite being set centuries into the future, implies that the ghosts of slavery and systemic racism in the United States are still very much haunting the

populace of Panem in terms of economic disparity and social equality, particularly in the Southeast. Additionally, it is significant that the only two Tributes in *The Hunger Games* described as purely Black Panem citizens, as opposed to those of a different racial ancestry, both hail from what was once the American Southeast. This implies while Americans, and later Panem's, in other parts of the country migrated, intermarried, and raised families who developed, at least a portion of them, both white and black, living in the Southeast not only self-segregated, but the Black Americans in the Southeast continued to lag behind socio-economically.

Further, in a future where one's home District is what determines what career one is likely to enter, the majority of District 11 is relegated to agriculture (66). While there are no universities mentioned in Panem in Collins' original work, children do attend some primary and secondary education, at least in Districts beyond 11. While Katniss mentions that children in District 12, though poor, attend school, Rue offers up a view of her home where children work in orchards harvesting fruit (200). While children in District 11 may not labor in the orchards year-round, by the time Rue is twelve years old, she has spent enough time in the orchards to become proficient not only in climbing but also in herbal remedies to venomous insect stings. In actuality, Rue is beyond proficient as she is capable of hiding within the trees and evading the detection of older Tributes until she is in the top third of children left in the arena.

Thresh, meanwhile, demonstrates the economic subjugation associated with Blackness in this series. This poverty, coupled with the lack of educational opportunities and social upward mobility, effectively creates a caste of citizens who exist only for labor



in an already stratified society. Thresh, described as “one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox,” is one of the last four Tributes left alive in the 74th Games. From a critical perspective examining race, Thresh is important not just because of his skin color, but because of his name and diet. First, Thresh’s name invites the reader to think of the act of threshing wheat or, more darkly, the violent threshing of an animal caught in a net (“Thresh”). In the latter, Thresh is caught in the Capitol’s net, even if he does not act like it. The former can be a reference to not only where Thresh hides himself, but also to the assigned task of his District. Lastly, in keeping with the symbolism of Thresh and wheat and the connection of wheat to life, Thresh provides life to Katniss by killing Clove as Clove prepares to butcher Katniss (*The Hunger Games* 287). Like Peeta providing bread to a starving Katniss, Thresh’s killing Clove saves Katniss from death. And, just as Peeta was beaten by his mother for providing Katniss with bread, Thresh perhaps cost himself his own life as saving Katniss was the morally right choice, but a tactical blunder. Had Thresh instead killed Clove and Katniss and then gone on an immediate offensive campaign against Cato, Cato would not have had time to put on his armor and the same fight which killed Thresh might have ended with Cato’s demise. At that point, only Peeta, who was dying, Thresh, and Foxface would have remained in the arena. While his victory might not have been assured, Thresh’s nobility cost him a potential victory and likely contributed to his death.

Additionally, Thresh hides himself in a grain field to self-segregate from the other tributes for as long as he can. More importantly, Thresh is eating the grain from the field freely, and when they briefly meet inside their arena, Katniss notes that Thresh has

“gained weight in the arena,” whereas the other children are all rationing food if not outright starving (286). That Thresh has gained weight means he has a higher caloric intake inside the arena than he had before he and Rue arrived. This leads to the conclusion that despite working in the District responsible for the agricultural needs of Panem, Thresh is eating the food freely for the first time in his life. Thresh’s weight gain hints that while he and Rue might not have been completely starved prior to their arrival at the Games, he and Rue both had experienced hunger before their arrival. Regardless of the amount of food they produce, the citizens of District 11 cannot freely eat the food they produce, meaning they have no economic control over the literal fruits of their own labors.

Thresh’s District companion, Rue, is the youngest of that year’s Tributes, and yet she places 7th of 24 tributes. Like Katniss, Rue’s greatest strength is intangible when compared with the tangible qualities of the other Tributes, such as Cato’s strength or Glimmer’s physical beauty. Instead, Rue’s greatest weapon is her mind, and she goes so far as to tell the Games’ host, Caesar Flickerman, that she intends to hide until other older children have slaughtered each other (*The Hunger Games* 126). However, as the youngest of the Tributes, Rue is also counted from the start as the most likely to die simply because she is physically the smallest and most vulnerable of the twenty-four Tributes (Thomas 43). Rue’s vulnerability based on her age downplays the vulnerability she likewise has because of her race. Where Katniss is an outsider to both the social elite in the Capitol and the richer sections of society in District 12 because of her socio-economic status and her own gruff personality, Rue is an outsider among outsiders because of her skin. Where

Katniss is able to parlay her skill for favor, and both Peeta and Haymitch are able to parlay Katniss's femininity for favor as well, Rue is able to do neither (*The Hunger Games* 135). On the surface, from a moral perspective, it would be logical to assume that Rue's participation in the Hunger Games would demand the most moral outrage because she is the youngest Tribute, while the preservation of her life would be equally important to people looking to give lavish gifts to aid the Tributes. However, this most logical approach, in a future world in which children are forced to fight to the death for the amusement of adults and the government, is not what actually happens. Even Katniss's own outrage at Rue's death is linked to her own emotional pain at the death of the Tribute who most resembles Katniss's sister (Thomas 53). The outrage is hollow, as no one actually saves Rue, the child who deserved least to die.

The commentary begun by Ebony Thomas can be carried to the local conclusion that while Katniss is kind to Rue, Katniss is unable to save her. This contrasts sharply with white saviorism as it is actually Rue who saves Katniss by “[marking] Rue as a living sacrifice” for Katniss (52). In using Rue as a sacrifice for Katniss, Collins negates any connotations that whiteness is superior to Blackness, or that Katniss is saved through her own resourcefulness alone. Further, Katniss's survival is aided not just by Rue, but by the entirety of her District, who send Katniss “a small loaf of bread” and she wonders “what must it have cost the people of District 11, who can't feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It must have been meant for Rue, surely. But instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Haymitch to give it to [her]” (*The Hunger Games* 238). This gift from

District 11 should be noted because it was so costly. The demography of Panem is never fully explained, but it does not truly matter how many people contributed to District 11's gift but rather that it was a gift that took the effort of the entire community to purchase. The cost of District 11's single loaf of bread should be contrasted with another gift: Finnick's trident. Finnick's trident, described as the most expensive gift ever given in the Games, not only dwarfs Katniss's bread in terms of cost, it illustrates extreme income disparity between the Capitol and the Districts (*Catching Fire* 59). The combined economic power of District 11's masses only purchased a loaf of bread, while a single benefactor in the Capitol had enough individual wealth to give the most lavish gift ever presented to a Tribute. These differences in these gifts demonstrate not only the power of privilege in relation to socio-economic status, but they also combat any narrative that Katniss is superior because of her ethnicity. It is unknown who gave Finnick the trident, but readers do know that numerous unnamed Black people contributed to a single act of kindness to Katniss. The wealthy elite from the Capitol gave to Finnick with a hope of gaining from Finnick, while the people of District 11, particularly the Black people, gave to Katniss without expectation of a favor in return.

Rue's name carries with it a strong implication of sorrow. Whatever the thought process behind Katniss's quick decision to volunteer in Primrose's place, that there is no one to volunteer for Rue shows the utter subjugation of the other Districts at the hands of their government. In light of this subjugation, Rue's name can mean something else, as in "to rue," which is a verb meaning "to bitterly regret" ("Rue"). In this way, Rue's name is representative of her nation's ruining over their government. Had Cato not been given a

final tool to fight him, Thresh may have perhaps won the Hunger Games. Rue had no such advantage: she was always going to die in the arena unless there were substantial outside interventions or else a staggering set of statistical upsets within the Games. On a surface level, Rue's name implies a lament for her. In a larger sense, that a young Black girl, in her death, is the source of this regret and sorrow stands as a highlight not only for the people of Panem, but for readers today as well. Rue's name forms a connection with a lament. This lament is both a lament for Panem, but specifically for today as well. In making Rue Black, Collins is inviting modern readers to join in a lament for the racial injustices and wounds endured since the first African slave was forcibly brought to North American shores. If Rue and Thresh are used as imagery for American Blackness, we see not only the terrible modern situation of systemic racism as a net around African Americans in terms of education, social justice, and poverty, but also the lament for the creation of such a situation in the first place. The invitation from *The Hunger Games* is to then participate in the Games themselves as either combatants or spectators or to join in the lament. In either case, Rue and Thresh invite readers to be aware of how some at-risk groups are in more danger than others. Rue and Thresh represent a specific demographic that has been exploited in the past and could be exploited again if those in power do not work to protect and expand upon hard won victories of the past.

In *Battle Royale*, race plays a very limited part due to each of the contestants being implied to be of Japanese descent. For that reason, racism will not be discussed in context of *Battle Royale*, though an area of future study might be the socio-economic impact within the Program. Similarly, race in *Arc of the Scythe* is also portrayed to be

somewhat of a nonissue. In Shusterman's dystopia, everyone's races are cataloged in order to prevent the Scythedom from slaughtering a single ethnicity. For example, Citra is able to tell the entirety of her "genetic indexing, saying she is 22 percent Caucasoid, 37 percent African, 12 percent PanAsian, 14 percent Mesolatino, and 15 percent Other" (*Scythe* 35). To prevent genocide, the Scythedom is expressly forbidden from killing based on race alone. Shusterman's in-universe laws governing the Scythedom command that Scythes "shalt kill with no bias, bigotry, or malice aforethought" (67). However, that does not preclude the Scythedom from committing genocide against all members of a religious order known as the Tonists, who worship sound. While the Scythedom's execution of the Tonists certainly is targeted, it is based on religious belief, not racial prejudice.

While *Battle Royale* and *Scythe* and its following books do not necessarily comment on race, they can complement a conversation about privilege that starts with race and *The Hunger Games*. While all three authors specifically mention different races still existing in their dystopias, Mary Couzelis in Balaka Basu's *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* points out that "many young adult dystopian narratives fail to embrace the critical aspect in regard to race in their effort to tell a story warning about the future" (Balaka Basu et al 133). This failure to embrace race is apparent when examining these stories because they offer a further insight into the modern world as well as the future world. When contrasting several of the Tributes, particularly Rue and Thresh, with the others, like Finnick, it begins to become apparent where one starts in life affects where one finishes. Simply by the location of his birth,

Finnick occupies a place of privilege because he is born in a District that trains Career Tributes. Because of his birth in District 4, Finnick automatically has the opportunity to have his physical skills honed in a way that he would not have had otherwise. He is fed prior to the arena that negates the persistent lack of food Katniss, Peeta, Thresh, Rue, Primrose, and Gale endure (*The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* 36). Finnick's physical beauty placed him so far ahead of his peers that he wanted for nothing when he was inside the arena, to the point someone gave him the most expensive gift in the history of the Games – a trident – while other Tributes were barely able to get a handful of matches (*Catching Fire* 59). While this privilege came with a cost to him later, it nonetheless helped Finnick prevail in the moment, in a game in which he was forced to participate regardless of his status as a volunteer or not. One way or the other, Finnick would be forced to put his name in the lottery for the Hunger Games. In this light, Finnick's volunteering is both an acknowledgement and acceptance of his privileged status, as using his privilege offered him some hitherto unknown control of his own narrative. However, it also represents his resignation to both weaponizing his own privilege against his peers while accepting his own lack of privilege because even as the Victor of a Hunger Games, he is still a slave of the Capitol.

Privilege in *Scythe* is also hard to nail down concretely as the Thunderhead works to directly ensure no one is overly privileged over anyone else, and does for the most part, with the exception of celebrities and the Scythedom. In Shusterman's dystopia, the real privilege is held by the Scythedom as in a world where everyone is effectively immortal, unless directly targeted by the Scythedom, and where the Thunderhead works

to make everyone as equal as possible, the only truly valuable thing is immunity to being killed by Scythes. Thus, a social corruption the Thunderhead cannot control comes in the form of the Scythes peddling their favor to people who are very nearly immortal in exchange for material gain. One incredibly petty, though somewhat comical, example is when Scythe Goddard, the primary protagonist in Shusterman's story, decides he wants to move into a wealthy man's home, so he simply moves in, and tells the previous owner he can either be killed or become the pool man (*Scythe* 167). This example demonstrates that privilege exists in Shusterman's world, and it is held entirely by the Scythedom that use and abuse their power for their own personal gains. Taken together, Collins, Takami, and Shusterman seem to imply the highest form of privilege is access to enough governmental power to inoculate oneself from fear of the government and then to be able to use one's standing with the government to amass more power and wealth without fear of reprisal.

Similarly, in *Battle Royale*, the coordinators of the Program go out of their way to tell the children that none of them are immune to selection because of their parents' social status. For example, when asked by Kyoichi Motobuchi, whose father is the director of the Kagawa Department of Natural Resources, why he, Kyoichi, was selected when his father appears to be a reasonably high local government employee, the controllers of the Program simply respond that no one is above the law and that to not select Class B because of Kyoichi and his father would not be equitable to everyone else (Takami 45). To describe the Program as equitable is farcical at best because the entire process in itself is not equitable at all and relies entirely upon the creation of a stratified



society with the Leader and those directly supporting him at the top and everyone else below that echelon. This extreme stratification, with only a few people fully exempt from participation in the Program, works for the Greater Republic of East Asia because it places everyone except those closest to the Leader in the candidacy pool. Forcing the Republic to answer at what echelon government employees would become exempt from entering their children in the school lottery would dominate political upward mobility and would potentially lead to the masses questioning the lie of defense preparation which forms the basis of needing the Program. The implicit understanding is that the Leader's children, if he has them, are not part of the Program, and none of the people running the Program have children participating in it. The commodity of privilege – in this case of being close enough to the Leader to be exempt from the Program – is held tightly within a small group that is separate from the overwhelming majority of the population of the Republic. Thus, while low-level government employees are not immune to losing their children, at a certain level the government stops selecting its own children for participation as to do so would undermine what it is trying to accomplish. Those who hold power do not need to fear themselves; rather, the weaponized fear needs to be directed at the masses who may revolt against the reigning government.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined how the human body plays an important role in *The Hunger Games* novels, *Battle Royale*, and the various *Scythe* books. Specifically, it has examined the relationships between youth, beauty, and sexuality as segments of the human body as a whole unit, the body as a weapon itself, and the body in terms of race

and privilege. Collins' works, of the three sets of texts examined, most directly deals with all three and is the author who most poignantly focuses on race and privilege. The inclusion of Shusterman and Takami expands the discussion to demonstrate how privilege works within the larger examination, though they do not deal with race as directly as Collins. The human body itself carries with it various connotations associated with human sexuality and in this instance, regarding adolescent sexuality, the dangerous intersection of predatory actions by both adult individuals and the government. In all, each of these stories looks at ways in which the human body is turned from a thing that is intrinsically valuable because it holds a unique and irreplaceable human spirit into something that is an expendable commodity. The reduction of people to commodities, particularly when children are reduced to commodities based on their entertainment value, should both startle and alarm readers, and drive them to question how these systems can come into being, as well as to question how these systems can be avoided in reality. The reduction of people to a commodity devalues not only the lives of the humans who are directly impacted, but of humanity as a whole. In keeping with the theme of warnings against exploitation of childhood, these texts highlight instances in which exploitation occurs along lines of how the body exists as a physical entity. These texts, in showing how children are predatorily used in terms of their bodies, their youth, their sexuality, and their privilege, offer readers the chance to recognize and work against these types of exploitation.

## CHAPTER 3

### Transforming People's Identity Into Weapons

The last method of weaponization that will be examined is the weaponization of a person themselves. As mentioned previously, because humans are unique beings with intrinsic value because they are human, the process of weaponizing a human inherently involves a level of dehumanization. To weaponize a person involves first reducing the person to a tool, and then transforming that tool into a weapon. So, not only is the humanity of a person taken by reducing them to a tool, they are moved even farther away from their initial humanity by being forced to take on the role and identity of a weapon. In this chapter, the primary focus will be on how weapons in Collins' *Hunger Games* stories, Takami's *Battle Royale*, and Shusterman's *Scythe* stories are used to define the various wielders of the individual weapons. Given the personal nature of killing, the instruments of killing are equally personal as they unite both the slayer and the slain in a way that cannot be replicated any other way – the method of this connection is of course the weapon, whether it be an arrow, a gun, a trident, a sword, or some other implement. This connection is somewhat of a paradox as it exists for an incredibly short moment in time, from which immutable effects echo indefinitely. The relationship between weapons and their wielders are best seen in Katniss's and Finnick's relationships with her bow and his trident, respectively; the relationships of several children caught in Battle Experiment No. 68 Program and the weapons given to them; and in several Scythes and their varied methods of killing.

### **Bows and Tridents**

When making the protagonist of *The Hunger Games* Katniss Everdeen, Suzanne Collins chose a person who, in a straightforward fight with some of the other competitors, might not be favored to win. That is to say, had the Hunger Games been a place in which each contestant walked unarmed into an arena like the Roman Colosseum, Katniss might not have survived. Of course, such a spectacle might have entertained the Romans, but might not have entertained the citizens of Panem, who were used to yearly spectacles of grandeur surrounding the slaughter of children. Collins mentions in an interview that she had determined that Katniss would be the winner of the 74th Hunger Games early in the writing process (“Suzanne Collins Talks about ‘the Hunger Games,’ the Books and the Movies” 375). With her winner in mind, and knowing the competition against which she would be paired, Collins began the process of determining how Katniss could feasibly win the Hunger Games without her victory being hollow or somehow else contrived as false. Further, Collins states that she “knew” Katniss's skills and personality from the outset of her writing, and that she had to create a heroine that was both true to herself and realistically given a chance to win.

The equality of the Hunger Games is that, at least theoretically, each of the Tributes has as much a chance to win as their twenty-three co-Tributes. When the killing begins, gender seems to play little part in who dies as all but one of the twenty-four Tributes will die. This equality is demonstrated in how Katniss mentions that there have been other female Victors in the past (*The Hunger Games* 41). Further, Peeta's own mother is the first to voice confidence that Katniss will win the Games, even over her

own son (90). Thus, even though Collins never provides her reader with a breakdown of the ratio between male and female Victors, the assumption is that Collins has indeed created a diabolical game in which girls have as much a chance to win as boys, and that girls not only have the chance to win, but do so with regularity. In this, Collins has achieved gender equality as gender truly doesn't play a role in the success or failure of the Tributes inside the Hunger Games. This is furthered by the fact that the oldest biological males might have a physical advantage in terms of raw strength and size over the younger males and the biological females, but that the oldest boys do not always win. Intangible qualities, such as intelligence, skill, determination, and cunning, therefore become not only levelers but there are also hidden assets that propel one child to victory, whether boy or girl.

When examining her heroine, Collins explained "Katniss has a lot going against her in the [arena] – she's inexperienced, smaller than a lot of the competitors, and hasn't had the training of the [children who have deliberately trained for the Hunger Games]" ("Suzanne Collins Talks about 'the Hunger Games,' the Books and the Movies" 375). These drawbacks led Collins to fashion the arena of The Hunger Games in a way that it would resemble Katniss's home – the forested District 12 – and to provide her with a weapon – a bow and arrow – which Katniss is proficient in using so that Katniss would be able to feed and protect herself when faced with other competitors. While the leveling presence of the bow cannot be overstated, it cannot also be overstated that Katniss possesses certain intangible qualities, such as a determined spirit, that set up her success as well.

Next, Collins set up both Katniss and her co-champion, Peeta Melark, for success in the arena by making them among the oldest competitors in the 74th Hunger Games. However, while the contestants range in age from twelve to eighteen, not all teenagers are created equal. Specifically, while Cato, Marvel, Glimmer, Clove, and the two children from District 4 – the Careers as they are colloquially known – have spent their childhood training to enter the arena, Katniss has spent the last several years of her life as the sole provider for her family. With a deceased father and a mother who is not able to adequately provide for her two daughters, the task of providing food and basic sustenance to the Everdeen family fell to Katniss. Similarly, Katniss mentions that both she and Gale have taken out multiple *tesserae*, or extra food rations, for themselves *and* their family in exchange for extra entries into the Hunger Games lottery. More specifically, Katniss mentions that Gale has taken out 35 *tesserae* while Katniss herself has taken out sixteen (*The Hunger Games* 13). Katniss's *tesserae*, as well as her working to provide for her family through hunting, has actually been a maturing force in Katniss's life. Very briefly, for it is not the topic of this chapter or thesis, the very premise of the Hunger Games, and the *tesserae* is what Caitriona Dowd defines as food-related violence, or FRV, “as violent conflict in which food and/or food systems feature in acts of political violence as either the setting in which violence takes place, the resources over which violent competition is centered, and/or the target of physical attacks” (Dowd 4). The very act of the Capitol, with all its vast technological resources, of withholding food from the Districts, as well as offering meager, though extra, portions of food in exchange for a greater chance at being drawn for the Hunger Games, is an act of violence against the population of Panem. The

entire premise of the Games is to make food a weapon, and in turn hungry children into weapons themselves.

Where the Career Tributes have spent their life preparing to fight and die in the Hunger Games, Katniss has been making literal life and death decisions for several years by the time she actually volunteers for the Hunger Games. In essence, the life Katniss lived prior to the Hunger Games prepared her for life inside them. More pointedly, Katniss's life, and its well-known hardship, in District 12 is what enables Peeta's own mother to declare that Katniss is the best chance District 12 has had to have a winner of the Hunger Games in 24 years (90). Essentially, Katniss has matured into adulthood early because she has had to make adult decisions throughout her childhood. Michele Fine points out in *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance* that the most commonly demanded resources in determining privilege in response to oppressive governments are, among other things, "work, land, shelter, food, [health care], [quality] education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace" (Fine 339). It should be noted that while Katniss has had shelter in her mother's home, and the Capitol is more than happy to provide menial work that benefits the Capitol despite not benefitting the worker, Katniss has largely not had access to the food she needs for most of her life, nor has she received any education on how to survive inside the Hunger Games if she were selected. This lack of privilege from Districts 3 and 5 to 12 should be contrasted with the Career Tributes who have been privileged throughout their lives in ways other Tributes have not – namely that they have had food provided for them and they have been educated throughout their youth on how to fight and win in the Hunger Games and

therefore enter the Games the yearly favorites (*The Hunger Games* 94). The end result is that Katniss's maturity sets her apart from her peers. Further, Collins also demonstrates to readers that Katniss has developed mentally enough to devise a strategy to remove the Careers' food supply (208). While each of the Tributes is able to identify their immediate needs for water, shelter, defense, and food, only a few of the Tributes demonstrate the ability to rapidly create a survival plan. With the exception of the Career Tributes, of the Tributes who survive the initial Bloodbath at the start of the 74th Hunger Games, only Katniss's plan involves more than herself and is offensive in nature. The ability to understand her situation, as well as the ability to shift from prey to predator, is unique to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*.

Katniss's plan for winning the Hunger Games involves food. The availability of food is an underlying theme within *The Hunger Games* as food is representative of not only life, but also of power. The Capitol is powerful as a government because it controls not just the media and the transportation system of Panem, but also because it controls the food sources. The Capitol itself is described as having enough food to be able to waste food, while the Districts, particularly Districts 3 and 5 through 12, do not have enough food. The whole point of the *tesserae* is not to have an abundance of food, but simply enough food to survive, while still being hungry. By controlling Panem's food supply, the Capitol both controls and subjugates its populace, to the point at which the Districts offer little to no resistance to the forcible taking of their children to provide entertainment for the government. As discussed in chapter two, both Peeta and Thresh, two boys whose names connect them with bread, and through bread, with life, save Katniss's life at



different moments in her life. Peeta gives Katniss literal bread when she is starving after the death of her father, and this bread – given at his own expense – is what galvanized Katniss to become the provider for her family. Prior to their Games, with a deceased father and a withdrawn mother, Katniss takes on the role of the adult in her family after Peeta provides her with a loaf of burned bread at the expense of a beating from his mother (*The Hunger Games* 30). In this instance, Peeta is the one who provides life-giving bread to Katniss. Even Peeta's name is similar to the word "pita," an unleavened bread from the Mediterranean and Middle East, further strengthening his connection with bread and life for Katniss ("Pita"). Similarly, Thresh, whose name brings connotations of threshing wheat, gives literal life to Katniss by beating Clove to death as Clove prepares to butcher Katniss (287). Thus, the presence of bread – in both the form of a substance to be eaten and in the form of people – becomes a factor of life and death. The Games in which Katniss and her peers fight is known as the "Hunger Games," a name which is meant to directly draw readers' attention to starvation.

Katniss did not begin the 74th Hunger Games armed with a bow. That a bow is singled out among the weapons of the Cornucopia at the start of the 74th Hunger Games shows that while the Tributes think they are all in competition with each other, in reality they are actually competing against their own government. Haymitch specifically mentions that the weapons are arrayed to draw the Tributes into an initial "Bloodbath" designed to produce maximum carnage (149). For Katniss, who has demonstrated to the orchestrators of the Hunger Games that she is incredibly proficient with a bow, the bow is meant to be an enticement that will draw her in but also put her in the path of the more

highly trained Tributes of other Districts. Pointedly, Katniss knows the bow “is meant for [her]” and that from the outset, the ultimate architect behind the Hunger Games – Collins – has given her the one tool that is most likely to help her succeed (149). Thus, Katniss is being drawn into the competition and from the outset she has the potential to win the Games.

In a competition in which guns are forbidden in favor of humanity’s older weapons, the weapons of the Cornucopia represent a variety of melee weapons with specific callouts to clubs, knives, spears, maces, swords, and a single bow (129). Each of these weapons takes some level of training and familiarity with the weapon to utilize effectively, and of the weapons mentioned, Katniss is already particularly familiar with a bow and arrow as she has used one to hunt in the forests around her home. Her familiarity with the weapon is important because of the knowledge gap between being familiar with a weapon and being able to use it proficiently. For example, before Katniss gains ownership of the bow, there are at least two errant shots, meaning the shooters knew how to fire the bow but were not proficient with hitting a living target when it mattered (233). Conversely, Katniss uses the bow to hunt for food and eventually to kill two male Tributes, Marvel and Cato (340). The use of the bow to kill people moves Katniss firmly from a hunter of animals to a hunter of people.

The association of Katniss with bows and arrows can raise imagery within readers of Artemis, the virginal Olympian goddess of hunting, who was herself a supremely skilled archer. Laura Dominguez postulates that, in reading *The Hunger Games*, one might find that Katniss is being recast as the Olympian goddess of the hunt. Dominguez goes on

to form associations between Katniss and Artemis using imagery such as Katniss's bow, her love of the woods, and her association with fire (Dominguez 33). The link between Katniss and Artemis is that both prefer the woods to the halls of civilization, and this becomes readily apparent when Katniss is equally adaptable in the woods of District 12 and with the woods in the arena. Importantly, Katniss often points to the woods around her home fondly, as if they are her refuge from her bleak reality within District 12, saying that she “can feel the muscles in her face relax” in the woods and that “she never smiles except in the woods” around District 12 (*The Hunger Games* 6). Adding to Katniss's connection to Greek mythology, Collins specifically mentions relying upon the Theseus myth cycle for the idea of annual Tributes being taken from their homes when developing the general story behind *The Hunger Games*, as well as specifically choosing to an arena whose “landscape closely resembles the woods around District 12, with similar flora and fauna” so Katniss would still have her spiritual refuge of the woods despite being in the arena (“Suzanne Collins Talks about ‘the Hunger Games,’ the Books and the Movies” 375). The last association, that of fire, is evident in how the Olympians are commonly associated with fire in their imagery, and how Katniss is equally associated with fire in Collins’ works (Dominguez 34). Shortly after she is introduced to the Capitol, Katniss is given the nickname “girl on fire,” which is initially meant to highlight how her clothes are set on fire to give the illusion she is immune to flames and later becomes her moniker (*The Hunger Games* 147, *Catching Fire* 59. *Mockingjay* 149). The ultimate goal in both Collins’ greater work, and in the mind of the Capitol in the story, is to create an image of Katniss in which she is greater and more deadly than she would otherwise be perceived to

be. She is a Tribute and yet something higher and greater than a mere mortal, or at least that is the image which the people around her wish to portray.

With one exception – Finnick’s trident – Collins never fully describes the types of weapons used in *The Hunger Games*, particularly the swords, which is both good and bad from an analysis perspective. It is good in that it allows the reader to fill in the gaps in information with their own imagination regarding the weapons the Tributes use against each other while simultaneously making an analysis more difficult as the weapons mentioned vary wildly in terms of weight and employment. Of the weapons mentioned, swords in particular, and to a lesser extent the daggers, have a wide variety of forms throughout human history. While daggers can refer to something as large and as heavy as a dirk at near a foot in length and weighing about a half pound, most are much smaller and lighter. Conversely, swords have had a wide variety of designs, often varying from region to region, which has in turn affected their physical characteristics as well as their method of employment. Swords are often put into several broad categories based on the number of edges the sword has, the number of hands required to use the sword correctly, and if the blade is straight or curved.

For example, the famous Japanese sword, the katana, is a single-edged, curved blade with a hilt long enough to be used with two hands. European swords were often two-edged that could be used one-handed, such as the gladius of the Roman Empire, or two-handed, as in the case of the European longswords of the later medieval period. In all instances, swords range in weight from one pound to the almost eight-pound German *Zweihänder*, with a mean of about 4.5 pounds (Evangelista 643). While that is not an

incredibly heavy weight, it is implied that most of the Tributes are not trained to use bladed melee weapons for prolonged periods of time. Sheer weight does not take into account the length or balance of the sword, nor the skill to use the blade effectively. Thus, it is unlikely that most of the Tributes could just pick up a sword from the Cornucopia and use it effectively without prior training. Further, sustained combat with a sword, or any of the weapons mentioned, would quickly test the endurance and physical stamina of any of the Tributes who did not have specific hand-to-hand combat conditioning and training prior to entering the Hunger Games.

While the female Tributes are certainly capable of using heavy melee weapons, the presence of these weapons seems to favor the older biological males in the competition, particularly Cato, Marvel, Peeta, and Thresh, as they are the ones large enough to use the weapons, even if crudely. However, physical ability to wield a weapon is vastly different from being able to use a weapon with proficiency. For example, Cato can use a sword, but he is not effective in his use as he twice wounds someone with his weapon of choice without actually delivering a killing blow. Cato uses his sword to wound a girl early in the Games, who Peeta is forced to euthanize, and later to wound Peeta, though Peeta does not die from the injury (*The Hunger Games* 162). While both wounds are crippling and would have likely resulted in death, Cato's prowess with a sword is not as great as he himself thinks and he demonstrates that proficiency with a sword is difficult even for children who have been training to use one for several years. It should also be noted that the presence of weaponry is an equalizer in the Hunger Games. For example, Cato never fights Peeta or Thresh without a weapon, because to do so

would place him at a disadvantage. In the instance of Cato fighting Peeta, Cato's use of a sword, however clumsy it was, was a shrewd tactical decision as Cato's sword and Peeta's lack of familiarity with weapons canceled out Peeta's natural strength, which was the one factor in training that set Peeta above average for the Tributes of the 74th Hunger Games (91). Similarly, to ensure that Cato has an advantage in fighting Thresh, the coordinators of the Hunger Games give Cato a suit of armor that protects him from the neck down (329). This armor is the deciding factor in the fight between Cato and Thresh and allows the former to kill the latter. It is not hard to imagine that had Katniss fought Cato hand-to-hand, she would have died, particularly if Cato were armed and armored as he was.

However, Cato is not self-aware or cognizant of the deficiencies in his skill. Conversely, Katniss is both cognizant of her own disadvantages as well as her own strengths. Indeed, during her first twenty-four hours within the arena, Katniss survives through a combination of luck and intelligence, as well as an accurate understanding of her own capabilities and skills. Immediately at the start of her Hunger Games, Katniss chooses to defy the advice given to her by Haymitch Abernathy, her mentor, namely that she should run and hide. It is important to note that both Peeta and Katniss ignore Haymitch's advice. Given that Haymitch has mentored two Tributes per year for 24 years at this point, for a total of 48, and that none have survived so far, listening to his advice may or may not have demonstrated an innate intelligence of its own, but in both cases, it furthers plans to survive in the Hunger Games. For Peeta, it appears ignoring Haymitch's advice was a way to buy himself extra time as he knows he can provide the other Tributes

insight into Katniss's thought process, which keeps him alive. For Katniss, it demonstrates both her own headstrong attitude and a display of self-understanding as she knows she won't survive long without supplies.

While Katniss is lucky that she isn't mown down by a knife thrown at her immediately after the Games begin, she is smart enough to know that she will not survive direct confrontation, which leads her to flee as far as she can (172). This intelligence can be contrasted with other Tributes who do foolish things like lighting fires in an otherwise dark arena and thereby invite their early demise as other Tributes are drawn to the fire (158). Similarly, while Peeta is smart enough to know when to peddle knowledge of Katniss, real or otherwise, he lets his noble inclinations override his better judgment. In strict terms of self-preservation, Peeta's ability to overlook himself is a flaw, though it is in keeping with his own character, which he says is his most important goal (141). While Peeta's nobility does save Katniss from being stung to death by various genetically engineered hornets or killed by Cato, it doesn't help Peeta as it leads to Peeta's confrontation with Cato.

While possessing a weapon, coupled with the strength to wield that weapon, may favor the male Tributes, that favor can be negated by using ranged weapons. Ranged weapons, such as bows, slings, and throwing weapons, allow for attackers to strike from a distance against a larger foe, such as how David used a sling to topple the larger warrior Goliath. Similarly, the three female Tributes who actively wield a weapon against other Tributes all pick a weapon that is a ranged weapon. For example, Clove picks a variety of throwing daggers, while Glimmer is the initial owner of the bow Katniss eventually

makes her own (191). The issue of proficiency with a weapon is perhaps the greatest leveling factor as, of all the Tributes, Katniss is best with her weapon of choice. Collins tells her readers through Gale early in the novel that Katniss's ability to use a bow is something she should use to her advantage when Gale tells Katniss “get [her] hands on a bow” (39). Katniss's ability as an archer sets her apart from her peers, particularly in terms of her hunting skill.

This focus on Katniss's archery proficiency is important because it is one of the primary keys to her survival in the Hunger Games in terms of providing both defense and sustenance. Several times Katniss is mentioned to be eating cooked waterfowl during the Games (228). That Katniss is able to shoot a waterfowl, an animal that is normally associated with hunting via a shotgun, speaks to her proficiency as a hunter and her skill as an archer. While not impossible, hunting for fowl with a bow is difficult. For example, when modern hunters harvest fowl, shotguns use birdshot, which fires dozens of small pellets, to bring down the animal humanely and without shredding the meat. While skill in aim and timing are necessary, the birdshot allows the shooter a margin of error as the birdshot is spread over a larger area to inflict a quick and humane death. To bring down a bird with a bow and arrow requires a level of precision and skill as a killing shot must be delivered so accurately, with one arrow, that the bird dies nearly immediately – or else it will flee while still being alive and the hunter must track the dying bird or risk losing it altogether. Similarly, while bows such as the one Collins describes – a simple draw bow – are used in hunting, and can be used in hunting fowl, compound bows or crossbows are



far more common because they deliver the arrow, or bolt for the crossbow, with far more force, accuracy, range, and power than a draw bow does.

Further, while Collins never describes the tips of Katniss's arrows, bow hunting for goose and turkey is normally accomplished with specially designed broadheads designed to “cut the animal in the head or neck” in order to inflict maximum damage upon impact to facilitate the most humane and quick harvesting possible (Maes 9). These broadheads limit range to between twenty to thirty yards, or less than 100 feet. Again, that Katniss can approach a wild animal to such a close range without the animal fleeing and then harvest the animal is indicative of Katniss's skill as a hunter. Thus, while it is certainly possible, killing bird game with a bow is incredibly difficult and that Katniss does it several times should indicate that Katniss is not only an above-average archer, she is also an incredibly skilled hunter. This skill as an archer ends up being a core aspect of Katniss's identity, and the symbol by which she is widely known. In a sense, Katniss is her bow, as much as the bow is a tool she uses.

Collins expressed that from her initial drafts of *The Hunger Games* that Katniss would be an archer, eventually settling upon the water-plantain known as katniss as the plant is both an edible tuber and because “its Latin name [*Sagittaria sagittifolia*] shares the same [etymological] roots as Sagittarius, the archer” in the zodiac (“Suzanne Collins Talks about ‘the Hunger Games,’ the Books and the Movies” 375). It is important to note that while a melee weapon, such as a sword or spear, essentially becomes an extension of the body in use, ranged weapons remain separate from the as they involve sending projectiles away from the body and the trajectory of the projectile is dependent on

numerous factors beyond the control of the user, such as wind or rain. While both a melee weapon and a projectile weapon require practice to wield them most effectively, a ranged weapon requires more practice to achieve consistent lethality. In making Katniss a proficient archer, Collins effectively leveled the playing field and made it realistic for her to survive the Hunger Games without *deus ex machina*. Further, it is important to note the distinct shift in provisions between Katniss and Rue, and Katniss and Peeta. The inversion of provision is important in Katniss and Peeta's relationship as both comment on their societal roles and on the way in which conflict forces changes to both individuals and relationships. Most importantly, Katniss credits this experience as being the one thing that galvanizes her into providing for her family. However, inside the arena, the roles are reversed and Katniss repeatedly provides both sustenance and survival for Peeta, and her proficiency with her bow is often the method by which she provides life.

The other character most commonly associated with a single weapon from Collins' work is Finnick Odair and his association with a trident. This association between Finnick and the trident is meant to draw readers specifically to images of gladiators inside the Roman Colosseum. The trident's common association is with water, as the trident is a tool often used in fishing, particularly in shallow waters where fish can be speared from above by the trident and then pulled out of the water. Another common use of the trident is in frog gigging, where the frog is speared by a trident or multi-pronged instrument and pulled ashore. The Greco-Roman sea deities Poseidon and Neptune, among others, are commonly associated with the trident, further adding to the weapon's connection to the sea. Even today, the trident is widely used in imagery of the

United States Naval Service, with the Naval Special Warfare breast insignia having an eagle grasping a flintlock pistol and trident, as seen in Figure 2, while Commanding Officers of shore based Naval units, such as recruiting and training commands, wear a breast insignia of a trident framed by a wreath demonstrated in Figure 3 to denote preparation for battle on the sea (US Department of the Navy). Similarly, the Crest of the United States Naval Academy features a trident seen in Figure 4 (“USNA Seal”). The use of the trident in all three images is meant to invoke the connotations of a warrior of the sea, with a trident being the weapon of the sea.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

However, despite these common associations with the sea and naval warfare, the use of the trident in combat is almost exclusively found in the Roman Colosseum, with a type of Roman gladiator known as a *retiarius* loosely based off of quasi-historical fighters from the city of Tyre along the Lebanese coast who wielded tridents and nets in the defense of the coastal city (“Was *Pontarii* Fighting the Origin of the Gladiator-Type *Retiarius*? An Analysis of the Evidence” 1656). Alfonso Manas also points out that as the Roman gladiatorial games evolved, *retiarius* were depicted less and less often with a net, and more exclusively with a trident (Manas 726). Thus, for Finnick, the association shown to readers is to be one of a *retiarius* as from his very introduction he is associated

with a trident. While he was already proficient in the use of spears and knives, whoever gifted Finnick with a trident inside his Hunger Games knew that it would be particularly lethal in Finnick's hands. Finnick likewise knew how to use the weapon as he then wove a net from vines which he used to capture his competition before he simply speared them with the trident as a fisherman would a frog or fish (Nickens 5, "The Old Gig: Catching Frogs On Warm Summer Nights" 10). Katniss recounts that in addition to Finnick's already good looks, the trident was "a natural, deadly extension of his arm" (Collins 59). Finnick is as closely associated with his trident as Katniss is with her bow, so much so that the Capitol makes sure there are bows and tridents, and the associated net, for both of them to use in the 75th Hunger Games (76). Both the overt and subtle descriptions of Finnick's proficiency should lead us to the same conclusion: Finnick is as much a *retiarius* as Katniss is an archer. Prior to the arrival of his trident, Finnick was charismatic enough to make the people in the Capitol and Panem not only like him more than the other Tributes, but also to make them spend their money supporting him. After he is given the trident, Finnick delivers a fully developed story that engrosses the citizenry. Finnick knows the trident is not only his weapon, but his way to win the heart of the crowds.

In essence, the deadly weapon he wields becomes Finnick's symbol, the token with which he is most easily identified. As such, when Finnick is seen in the 75th Hunger Games, he is much like one of the Olympians, not only in his alluring demeanor, but in his physique and outward presentation, where he is both sexually desirable and deadly (Collins 59). W. H. D. Rouse points out in an article for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*,

“The Double Axe and the Labyrinth,” that each of the Olympians were commonly associated with a symbol, such as “Zeus [holding] a thunderbolt, Apollo a lyre, Poseidon a trident, Hermes a caduceus, and Athena a shield and spear” (Rouse 268). Phillip Hayward likewise makes a similar parallel in his book *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mermen) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media* that the male mermaids, or mermen, such as King Triton, a son of Poseidon, are often noted for their good looks, their fighting prowess, and their association with tridents or other fishing implements such as nets (Hayward 168). Like Katniss and her connection to Artemis, the association of Finnick with Poseidon should stand out to readers, as both are associated with the sea and the trident. In the later *Hunger Games* books, when the Rebellion attempts to use Katniss as a figurehead for the Rebellion against the Capitol, they still return to the image of Katniss as an archer, particularly when they want her to be seen as an adversary of the Capitol in battle (*Mockingjay* 100). Similarly, Finnick is seen fighting the Capitol with his trident (100). Both instances are meant to draw readers back to their weapons. The repeated use of the imagery of Katniss's bow and Finnick's trident are meant to bring back images of their killing proficiency, their desirability, and their otherness, even among a group of others in the Victors. More than their other personality traits, Collins defines Katniss and Finnick through the weapons she gives them. Thus, the ready association of weapons to characters helps define them as people.

Katniss most easily associates with her bow in her aloofness. Katniss readily admits that she does not make friends easily, as demonstrated by both her training weeks when she very slowly warms to the other Tributes. Similarly, she is seen as being icy

towards Peeta following their Hunger Games, and does not reconnect with anyone except for her own inner circle after she returns to District 12. This aloofness is much like a bow that is shot from a distance. Thus, Katniss is separated from her peers in how she kills them, but also in how she lives apart from them. Katniss's aloofness should be contrasted with Finnick and his trident. The trident, as opposed to a bow, kills while in the hand of the wielder, and it is often used in conjunction with a net used to ensnare a victim. Finnick is far more personable than Katniss, and his outgoing and charismatic personality that generally causes people to like him from the first meeting places him more in line with Peeta than Katniss. That Finnick is close to people, both sexually and platonically, is much like how a trident kills while still being held by a *retiarius* or a fisherman. Unfortunately, Finnick also is caught in the Capitol's web that often uses him as a pawn, much like a *retiarius* captures their victim in a net.

Ultimately, the dual association of Katniss and Finnick with two of the Olympians is perhaps the final attempt at the weaponization of this pair of Victors. While there are other Victors, to be sure, Finnick and Katniss stand above the rest for their relationship to the Capitol, Finnick is adored by the Capitol. Katniss is as well, though the Capitol leadership despise her. In both instances, the dehumanization of Finnick and Katniss involves their othering in which they are associated with the Olympians, two entities that are set apart from humanity in that they are not human. To be fair, the association with the Olympians can be perceived in a positive light, but they remain outside the human experience. The Olympians were beings that demanded worship for their higher place in the cosmological order than humanity. By forcing trafficking upon Finnick, and

presumably Katniss had she not been forced to fight in a second Games the year after her first Games, the Capitol is appearing to elevate the Victors' social standing while simultaneously dramatically lowering their actual standing within society as a method of demonstrating to the entirety of Panem the might of the Capitol. In a sense, the citizens of the Capitol, in their ability to simultaneously dehumanize and elevate Finnick and Katniss, are sending the message to Panem that even Olympians bow before the Capitol.

### **The Children and Guns of *Battle Royale***

Much like Katniss and Finnick are both defined by the weapon they use, *Battle Royale* uses weapons to answer its most important question: "Who will survive?" The entirety of the Battle Experiment No. 68 Program is built on testing both the ingenuity and mental resilience of the children of the Greater Republic of East Asia in the face of overwhelming odds and hostile forces. However, since the Program is less about actual research and more about terrorizing the citizens of the Republic, the actual question that needs to be asked is "who got what weapon?" Or, perhaps more accurately, "who got the guns?" with guns being contrasted with other ranged weapons, such as a boomerang or crossbow. While ranged weapons play an enormous part in the game, they are only a few of the weapons available and they do not provide the same level of protection and effectiveness that guns do. And while no single weapon guarantees success, the possession of a gun dramatically increases the chances of victory. As there are over forty students in this novel, this chapter will only examine Mitsuko Souma, Kazuo Kiriya, and the alliance of Shuya Nanahara, Noriko Nakagawa, and Shogo Kawada.

Mitsuko Souma is initially given a kama, or a Japanese sickle, used as both a farming implement and a weapon. Given Mitsuko's already discussed use of her body as an additional weapon, this portion will focus on both her use of the sickle and how she utilizes the sickle to gain access to a gun. However, as not every child was given a gun or even a useful tool, Mitsuko had to kill three female classmates with her sickle before she finally got possession of the coveted firearm. Once she possesses the gun she desired, Mitsuko uses it to kill several other students, though it ultimately does not save her life (Takami 550). Both the sickle and the gun Mitsuko uses should draw the attention of the readers to the physical exertion required to kill in using a sickle instead of a gun, with the gun being far easier to kill with than the kama, while also forcing the reader to focus on the sickle and its relationship to Mitsuko herself. The kama, which found its origins as a farming implement, is an interesting choice for Mitsuko as it represents a duality existing within one object. It is both a tool and a weapon. Similarly, Mitsuko is two things at once in that she is both a survivor of childhood sexual assault while also becoming a person with a sexual identity of her own, particularly when she notes to a dying classmate she is questioning her own sexual attraction to both males and females (279). In her mercy killing of Yuichiro Takiguchi, Mitsuko demonstrates that while she is suffering from intense trauma, she is not completely devoid of human kindness (465). This duality of her sickle should highlight her own duality and also draw the attention of readers to the dangers of allowing the adult world to prey on the world of youth. The entirety of Mitsuko's story is wrapped up in her childhood sexual assault, and much of who she is hinges on her inability to form healthy relationships because of her trauma.



Kazuo Kiriya is the most successful of the children in the Program, though he is the runner-up, not the winner. Kazuo is also unique among all the characters studied from Collins', Shusterman's, and Takami's work in that he is the only one who is outright described as having antisocial personality disorder due to an injury he sustained while in utero, which left him without the ability to feel normal human emotions (Takami 102). More pointedly, shortly after the start of the Program, Kazuo is seen slaughtering three boys who thought of Kazuo as their friend: Hiroshi Kuronaga, Sho Tsukioka, and Ryuhei Sasagawa (97). These boys, prior to the abduction of their class, formed the core of Kazuo's friend group and their deaths are used to both introduce and highlight Kazuo's antisocial personality disorder as well as his incredible brutality. It should also be pointed out that Kazuo's weapon gifted to him by the Program is a simple knife, while among his friends' weapons is a machine pistol, specifically an Ingram Military Armament Corporation Model 10 machine pistol, commonly called a MAC-10 (99). This specific gun is significant because it is one of the few guns, along with the Armalite model 15, or AR-15, and the Israeli Defense Force UZI, specifically called out in the United States Federal Assault Weapons Ban of 1994, though the ban on MAC-10s and the AR-15 has since lapsed (H.R.3355 – 103rd Congress [1993-1994]: Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 Title XI – Firearms). This weapon is a game-changing asset, as it is capable of automatic weapons fire, meaning that an unskilled user can hold the trigger of the weapon, point the barrel in the general direction of a target, and bullets will fly until the gun empties its magazine. No skill is required to kill for the untrained. However, in the hands of someone like Kazuo, the weapon becomes far more dangerous

as he is able to understand both the weapon and its capabilities. Even if he is not proficient through practice, Kazuo is smart enough to know he has the most dangerous weapon on the island.

Kazuo's efficiency with a knife and his gaining of the one weapon that places him head and shoulders above his peers should remind readers of Finnick Odair and how he is able to kill with ease. Both Finnick and Kazuo are incredibly capable killers, and like Finnick, once Kazuo has the machine pistol, he goes on a rapid killing spree. Over the course of the Program, Kazuo dispatches more of his classmates than anyone else, killing more than a dozen of them. The more Kazuo kills, the more resources he gains, such as a bulletproof vest, grenades, and more bullets. Unlike Mitsuko, who is meant to represent a warning against predation by adults on children with her sickle, Kazuo highlights the emotional compartmentalization, or outright emotional detachment, necessary for extended bouts of killing. In this, Kazuo represents a turning point between the calculated and necessary killing of Victors of the Hunger Games and towards the moral dilemma of the Scythedom. However, to avoid painting Kazuo as a monster, it should be noted that while his friends mention they have never seen Kazuo smile, Kazuo never raised a hand against his peers, or anyone, before he was forced to by the Program and the Greater Republic of East Asia (Takami 98). Takami's description of Kazuo of simply never feeling anything due to his accident in utero is as much a hindrance to his growth as an individual as it is an asset in Program (100). The link between Kazuo and his gun is the ease with which they kill. As an inanimate object, the gun does not care how it is used; similarly, Kazuo is in many ways inanimate as he cannot process and feel basic human

emotions, such as remorse and empathy. While Kazuo is the only character in these texts that is explicitly labeled to have a physical condition that aids him in killing, his inability to feel emotion is the perfect representation of a human being who can survive a gladiatorial contest and not suffer lasting emotional trauma. Kazuo is a perfect killing machine, nearly robotic in his slaughter. In this sense, while his inability to feel empathy for his peers is an asset to him in the Program, Kazuo's sterile detachment from emotion is dehumanizing to him.

The intersection of Kazuo and Mitsuko is interesting as, between them, they kill almost half of their forty available classmates, as two students were killed by their captors before the Program began. When they meet, Kazuo ultimately kills Mitsuko by shooting her in the face. However, when the two most dangerous members of Ninth Grade Class B engage one another, it quickly becomes a gun battle, and the only difference maker, as both score hits on the other, is that Kazuo is wearing a bulletproof vest. More bluntly, the defense against guns is what is the deciding factor in the fight between Mitsuko and Kazuo. While Kazuo was the first to inflict a mortal wound, Mitsuko was proficient enough with her own gun to land four rounds in Kazuo's chest, which themselves would have been fatal had he not been wearing a Kevlar vest. That Mitsuko attacked Kazuo with a firearm vice the kama demonstrates that where guns are present, every other weapon should be considered obsolete. In a larger context, it becomes clear that in Takami's world, as well as reality, guns should be regarded for their lethality and their presence in the world of youth is an encroachment by the world of

adulthood. For Kazuo specifically, the MAC-10 represents himself and the methodical way in which he annihilated his classmates.

Finally, the group of Shuya Nanahara, Noriko Nakagawa, and Shogo Kawada represent a counterpoint to both Mitsuko and Kazuo. It can be argued that either Kazuo or Mitsuko had the ability to win the Program and return home. Both of them possessed a clear, though deranged, path to victory. Conversely, neither Shuya nor Noriko received weapons that would help them easily succeed, having received a knife and a boomerang respectively, and neither of them had the killer instinct Mitsuko and Kazuo possessed. Further, Noriko enters the game wounded, having been shot by a soldier shortly before the game began for attempting to help students who tried to attack their teacher's killer (55). Throughout the games, Shuya only kills one person, the boy Tatsumichi Oki, who was trying to kill both Noriko and Shuya. However, Tatsumichi's death was accidental as far as Shuya was concerned as Tatsumichi fell on his own weapon while wrestling Shuya (135). Their own haplessness working against them, neither Noriko nor Shuya would have made it much past their encounter with Tatsumichi if not for the efforts of Shogo Kawada to keep them alive. Shogo is capable enough within the Program not only to keep himself alive, but to ensure Shuya and Noriko's survival.

Shogo is able to keep Shuya and Noriko alive because he has survived a previous Program and returned to attempt to avenge his classmates and his parents, who were killed for speaking out against the Program, by killing the organizers of the Program. While it is debatable how successful Shogo was in actually achieving his initial goal, he at least achieves his secondary goal of keeping Shuya and Noriko alive. However, like

Shuya and Noriko, Shogo does not go on a killing spree. Rather, Shogo only kills one person, a boy who was attempting to shoot Shuya. Similarly, while Shogo has a shotgun as the weapon gifted to him by the Program, he only uses the weapon when he has to do so. However, Shogo never proceeds to hunt other students like Mitsuko and Kazuo. Rather, he leads Shuya and Noriko to continue a defense based on moving and staying away from threats for as long as possible. While this too is not entirely possible with Kazuo hunting them to ensure his own survival, Shogo's efforts do keep both Noriko and Shuya alive, though they don't save him.

In the final confrontation with Kazuo, it is not Shogo who kills him, but rather Noriko. Noriko is able to kill Kazuo because she has a loaded gun when all of the boys have exhausted their ammunition. The firearm acts as a great leveler in this sense as a wounded child is able to kill the competitor who is most lethal in the entire Program. However, while the gun itself is important, it is not as important as the alliance between Shuya, Shogo, and Noriko. As Shogo mentions, they defeated Kazuo because they worked as a single unit and "he had to take on all three of [them]," as opposed to fighting them individually (588). This team work suggests that while firearms are incredibly important, they are not all important as a coordinated group was capable of taking on a foe which would have destroyed each of them individually. Further, this coordination is exactly what the Greater Republic of East Asia fears, namely that the citizenry might unite against the government and forcibly revolt against it. Like the Capitol fears the collective masses of Panem, and the Thunderhead prioritizes the collective good above all else, collective cooperation is what ultimately leads to Shuya and Noriko's survival.

In a time in which school shootings are rampant in the United States, how Noriko ends Kazuo's threat to her group's existence – with a firearm – should draw readers' attention to the purpose of firearms: a tool to inflict death. That the Greater Republic of East Asia keeps statistics on how the children within the Program die, and that the majority of these deaths come from firearms should draw attention to, and warn adult readers of the dangers of unrestricted access to guns. That the children of the Republic automatically know that guns are instrumental to their own survival, as well as the Capitol's refusal to allow guns in the Hunger Games arenas and the Scythedom's insistence on Scythes perfecting using guns to kill, should highlight what is already intuitively known: guns are meant to kill. There is no other purpose for them, as even their use as a deterrent is predicated on their ability to kill. The primary thesis of this paper advances that each of these dystopian novels advances a warning to modern readers of the dangers of the adult world's predation on youth. One such predation of the adult world on the world of youth is the wide proliferation of firearms and the ease of access to firearms of all varieties. While this paper will not address the Second Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, it will posit firearms have evolved exponentially beyond the single shot, flintlock weapons used in the 18th century, as have bullets, forcing readers to question if gun laws and the understanding of these laws have similarly evolved.

Ultimately, Noriko's and Shuya's victory is directly due to their possession of guns. While their alliance and cooperation with Shogo is the enabler that sets up their success, the tool that gives that success is a firearm. Neither of them was likely winners,

and while they had extensive help from Shogo, their victory would have been impossible while Kazuo was hunting them with a firearm. The takeaway for readers of *Battle Royale* should be to question not only the purpose of guns, but also to examine how these guns directly altered the Program. The answer to these questions, namely that guns are a deterrent when not fired and a tool to kill when fired, should lead to the second question as to how guns directly affect and impact not only the adult world, but the world of youth as well. Guns represent a tool that has for hundreds of years been used to take life – whether animal or human – that now is proliferated into the hands of the common people. The Greater Republic of East Asia is well aware of the potency of guns, which is why they provide so many to their hostages. The ease of killing with a gun, particularly as it plays out in the novel, should draw the attention of readers to the destructive power of the weapon and how it should be treated accordingly. In terms of the exploitation of childhood, it should be glaringly apparent that guns provide anyone physically capable of holding a gun and pulling a trigger with the capacity to cause life-altering, or life-ending, harm. To turn a blind eye to the destructive capacity of guns, for any reason, is to empower their misuse and to create a threat against childhood and adulthood alike.

### **The Scythedom and Mortality**

The Scythedom is marked and defined by their killing. However, because they kill with such frequency and with such varied methods, the implements they use are less important than the purpose for the killings and the rituals they enact after the killings. Thus, while the children of both *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* have a single weapon with which they form a deep connection, the Scythes' frequent killings prevent

them from establishing a rapport with a single weapon. Rather, they are proficient with many different types of weapons. However, this wide proficiency, as well as their occupation as professional murderers, allows them to develop a different relationship with killing and allows them to focus on sending a message through their killing in a way that the others in the stories cannot. The messages the individual Scythes wish to send will be the focus of this section.

From the outset of *Scythe*, Shusterman worked to show his readers there are largely two prevailing philosophies within the Scythedom. The first philosophy, championed by Scythe Goddard, is that Scythes are basically gods among mortals who should enjoy killing, along with other physical pleasures, and that they should kill frequently and in varied ways to demonstrate their superior position in human society. The thinking that Scythes are gods among mortals places the Scythedom not just above the masses of humanity, but that the masses continue to exist at the benevolence of the Scythedom. The second philosophy, espoused by Scythe Faraday, is much more palatable and stresses that the Scythedom exists to serve humanity because without the Scythedom either an undying humanity would quickly overpopulate the Earth or the Thunderhead would be forced to implement regulations on pregnancies, which it does not want to do. Even today, Ellen Verbakel and Eva Jaspers point out that both proponents for and opponents of euthanasia wrestle with the relationship of human dignity in the light of death and the sovereignty of a deity, with more opposition towards human euthanasia in countries with the strongest religious beliefs (Verbakel and Jasper 127-128). This debate, which ultimately boils down to the question of if humanity has the right to control life



and death and how that death is administered, is seen reverberating through Shusterman's novels. While Shusterman pays no deference to any deity in his novels, the tension over human dignity at the center of the human euthanasia debate is nonetheless lived out in Faraday and Goddard's relationship. Most Scythes ascribed to either Goddard's or Faraday's philosophies, though they are certainly able to move between them, and some do.

The two biggest examples of each side of the Scythedom are represented by Scythe Robbert Goddard and Scythe Michael Faraday. Goddard's view of the Scythedom, which often equates to unrestrained mass killings and the associated unchecked fear among the general populace, is contrasted with Faraday's view that the Scythedom is an honorable profession and that it exists to serve the greater human good, instead of humanity existing at the goodwill of the Scythedom. Where Goddard sees humanity as cattle, Faraday's respect for how he kills speaks to his humanity and his own belief in human nobility. It is this belief in the intrinsic value, and thus the intrinsic nobility, of human life that is so important because it enables him to see the whole of a person, good and bad. Where Goddard is a proponent of mass killings with the goal of inflicting terror, Faraday is shown to value human life through his respect for the end of human life. This valuation of human life is at the center of Shusterman's ethical dilemma to his readers.

Goddard is a fan of mass slaughter, and in his quest to kill one scientist valued by the Thunderhead for the scientist's contributions to deep space travel, Goddard kills an entire airplane's worth of people (*Scythe* 72). Goddard's goal in killing the whole plane –

instead of just the Thunderhead's scientist – is to hinder the Thunderhead's space exploration efforts but he “camouflaged it as part of a mass airplane gleaning” (*Thunderhead* 382). Essentially, by killing the entire plane, the individuality of the scientist and other passengers of the plane are lost as the focus is on the plane crash and the collective group of people lost – in the multitude, individuality is lost. This loss of individuality is Goddard's goal as it lets him continue to actively undermine the Thunderhead's goal of taking humanity to the stars. Ultimately, the loss of individuality is Goddard's triumph. This should be contrasted with Faraday, who takes great care in not only researching those who will die by his hand, but also in allowing them to die with dignity. One of Faraday's killings comes when he allows a skilled fencer to fight him in a duel with rapiers, which twice leads to Faraday's temporary demise, before Faraday finally kills the man (*Scythe* 87). Faraday would later recount that “as he breathed his last, [the swordsman] thanked me for allowing him to die fighting. It was the only time in all my years as a Scythe that I had been thanked for what I do (87). This insistence on the dignity of human life represents not only a perpetual theme inside of Shusterman's *Scythe* universe, but it also parallels Collins' and Takami's work in that it leads the readers to question exactly why human life is the medium of control for all three works. Further, at the end of *The Toll*, the final book in Shusterman's trilogy, with death reintroduced to humanity, Faraday has taken up a job as a “sympathy gleaner,” one whose job is to help people die with dignity if they are among those afflicted with plagues brought on by the new norm of death (*The Toll* 620). These mercy killings line

up with Faraday's general view on life, which he describes as being based on empathy and compassion.

Outside of Goddard and Faraday and the larger schools of thought they represent, the various members of the Scythedom seem to become their own masters in terms of killing. Some seek to develop new and impressive ways to kill, such as the aforementioned Scythe Sojourner Truth. Others take the spectacle element of their killings to new levels of complexity, such as Scythe Salvador Dalí, named for the surrealist painter, who enjoys building Rube Goldberg machines to kill those he has picked to die in particularly graphic ways (Shusterman 302). Dalí says he is working towards his own masterpiece killing and that he hopes to further immortalize himself through spectacle. This often places him at odds with a second Scythe, Scythe Gaudi, over the ethics of using murder as a spectacle. Scythe Gaudi, much in the same vein as Faraday, prefers to allow people their dignity as they die, instead killing them quickly and as painlessly as possible. Still another Scythe, Scythe Boudica, falls somewhere in the middle, in that she invites her victims over for tea time and then proceeds to lure them to a trap that will launch them several hundred feet in the air (358). As creative as Boudica's method of killing is, she shares a fundamental fear with Dalí – namely the fear of her own death. The life of a Scythe is one of terrible loneliness as they are forbidden from having a spouse or children (67). The removal of these relationships in itself is not the problem, as some people actually do not want to marry or procreate, but when it is compounded by the Scythedom's purposeful alienation of the Scythes from their existing family, such as parents, siblings, and the children of siblings. The Scythedom's insistence on a life of

separation is designed to create a barrier between the Scythes and their own humanity. Further, Mark Olfson points out in “Living Alone and Suicide Risk in the United States, 2008–2019,” an article that appeared in *The American Journal of Public Health*, while not a cause of suicide, “the overall annual rate of suicide per 100,000 person-years was nearly twice as high among people who lived alone compared with people living with others (Olfson et al 1776). Given that adults who are routinely isolated are considered at an elevated risk for suicide, it should alarm readers that the majority of the Scythedom is built and prededicated on isolation from both family and peers. While perhaps it is a little too much to say the entire Scythedom is mentally ill, it is not too much to suggest that the entirety of the Scythedom places itself, by its occupation, in a medically precarious position, particularly when the Scythedom is responsible for managing the human population.

This barrier between the Scythes and their humanity is the root cause of the debate between Goddard and Faraday. For Goddard, the alienation occurred when he was convinced to murder his parents, and the nearly 10,000 residents of a human colony on Mars to gain apprenticeship to a Scythe; for Dalí, the alienation occurs when he is the sole survivor of a fire that kills his wife and daughter, fire being one of the permanent methods of death (Shusterman 326). Most other Scythes are required to demonstrate their commitment to the Scythedom by killing a family member, without knowing if that person will be revived (*Scythe* 412). The Scythedom forces its members into a tragic existence because they are immortal, for all intents and purposes, and yet they are alienated from normal human society and are thus left alone with their own conscience

and their own thoughts. As Scythe Boudica muses, “without [her niece] for company, how long until actual contemplations of self-gleaning began to intrude on Boudica’s thoughts” (Shusterman 366). For the Scythes, the only options appear to be to accept a life of separation from humanity and either act out, as Goddard does, or to act for the good of humanity, as Faraday does, or else to desperately cling to whatever family they might have left, as Scythe Boudica does with her niece. Unfortunately for the Scythes, once they are initiated into the Scythedom, their only way out of their occupation is either suicide or to be murdered, which only further alienates the Scythedom from humanity.

Conversely, Scythes like Guadi and Faraday make peace with their work, and in respecting life through a reverence for death, they make peace with their own future deaths, whenever that may be and in whatever form it may come. The thirteen Founding Scythes wrestled with the same internal struggle, arguing amongst themselves if humanity was ready for immortality or for bearing the weight of the need for “thinning the burgeoning population” due to that immortality (*The Toll* 406). This dedicated and agonizing debate about what is best for humanity places the dignity of mankind above all else, and treats each human life as sacred, a call which should resonate with readers. This dignity of mankind should be contrasted with members of the Scythedom who demand spectacle be attached to their victims and who kill using various inhumane ways, such as with flamethrowers. The spectacle again is meant to distance the Scythedom from its collective fear: that they too are mortal, despite all of the technological advancement that make them immune to aging and conventional death.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, is that the Scythedom is not immune to its own conscience. Shusterman, on a fundamental level, advances the thesis through his books that murder – defined as the premeditated killing of people who do not wish to die – is inherently wrong. Thus, the reason Scythes often resort to clever and outlandish ways to kill people is that Scythes are at the mercy of their own conscience and are attempting to find ways to ignore their conscience. The Scythedom has already been tasked with what is at the very least a morally taxing job. Added on top of the moral weight of killing as an occupation is the moral weight of knowing, on an individual level within the Scythedom, that they have deviated from their calling into moral corruption if they abuse their position and power for their own pleasure or material gain. Essentially, individual Scythes must make peace with the natural guilt incurred with their occupation, and each resorts to different ways to either find a way to ignore or mask their guilt or else make peace with it. As Faraday poetically states, the separating line between humanity and the Thunderhead is the ability to have empathy, and that “no God can help [humanity] if [we] ever lose that [empathy]” (*Scythe* 388). Thus, the real relationship between the Scythedom and the weapons that its members choose is the relationship between the Scythes and their own mortality and morality. The Scythedom exists best as a servant of humanity, such as being mercy killers for those who are suffering terrible plagues at the end of life at the end of Shusterman’s original *Scythe* trilogy.

This tension between Scythes, their occupation as murderers, and their own mortality is exemplified by Scythe Volta, né Shawn Dobson. Scythe Volta is a friend of Rowan and a disciple of Goddard. Like Rowan and Citra, Volta is a teenager who has

been authorized to kill. Unlike Rowan and Citra, however, Volta lacks the emotional maturity to compartmentalize his actions, let alone cope with them. He also seems to lack the sense of identity to stand up to Goddard when Goddard tasks him to do things he finds morally repugnant in order to maintain his own standing among Goddard's entourage. This internal conflict for Volta reaches crescendo when Goddard orders Rowan and Volta to participate in a mass execution orchestrated by Goddard. This genocide is perpetuated against Tonists, a religion despised by both the Scythedom and the Thunderhead, and in a random chance, Volta is told to kill everyone behind an unopened door. Behind the door, however, is a large group of young schoolchildren. Volta slaughters them. How Volta kills them is immaterial – the important point is that he kills them, and he is unable to justify his actions. In an internal struggle not seen by readers, Volta pronounces himself as his own judge, jury, and executioner. Volta's suicide highlights both the wrongness of Goddard's version of the Scythedom and the relationship between the murdered and the murderer.

Volta is not meant to be an evil character, and in trying to paint him as simply "good" or "evil," the nuance Shusterman is trying to show his readers is lost. Volta himself highlights the dangerous route of removing "do no harm" from the debate over euthanasia. Raphael Cohen-Almagor points out the importance of doing no harm in his study of dementia patients living in Belgium who had requested to be euthanized. He argues that the primary principle must always be one of beneficence to the patient – an act done for their individual good (Cohen-Almagor 79). Ultimately, individual beneficence is what causes the Scythedom and the Thunderhead to fail because they lack

an expressed focus on individual humanity. In *Volta*, Shusterman shows the necessity of human empathy and compassion at an individual level, even if circumstances dictate horrid acts such as routine murder of otherwise innocent people at a macro level. While Shusterman has crafted a world in which murder is a necessity, he also forces his readers to grapple with finding what right looks like in this world. The implied answer is that immortality is not for humans to hold, as much as humanity may think immortality is something that is desirable. Through *Volta*, readers are shown the repercussions of neglecting the morality that must be associated with the Scythedom and necessary population control required in Shusterman's construct.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how characters are related to their weapons. Specifically, it has looked at Katniss and Finnick's relationships with their weapons, a bow and a trident respectively; at Mitsuko, Kazuo, Shuya, Shogo, and Noriko's relationship with their weapons, particularly firearms; and it examined the Scythedom's relationship with weapons and how that relationship works to demonstrate the Scythedom's own tenuous relationship with mortality and morality. These relationships show the tension between common use and proficiency, as shown by Cato's ability to wound several people and Katniss's proficiency in using a bow. Using the children of Ninth Grade Class B as examples, guns demonstrate the opposite end of the spectrum where guns require no proficiency to kill, while the Scythedom demands proficiency in all manner of killing from its members. Firearms are a strong point at which the exploitation of childhood comes into focus and they also can be used to



highlight current debates in the real world and represent times in which the world of adults comes into conflict with the world of youth. Lastly, any instance where a child's identity is erased in favor of something that makes them less of a person is dangerous as well. These friction points, namely in the aspect of children wielding weapons, should draw readers' awareness to the dangers of the adult world predatorily encroaching on the world of children and should stand as a warning to the dangers of allowing this invasion.

### **Conclusion: Closing Arguments and Final Thoughts**

The worlds of Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Shusterman's *The Arc of the Scythe*, and Takami's *Battle Royale* each present a fictitious world that straddles childhood and adulthood. As children are the main protagonists within these works of fiction, the overarching message of these texts is a warning against the exploitation of children by the adult world. This warning against exploitation is accomplished through showing the extremes of weaponizing various portions of life and using them against not only the children of these novels, but against the adults as well. Weaponization, or the process by which something that would otherwise be non-threatening is transformed into a weapon, allows for the antagonists of these novels to utilize non-weapons in a life-threatening manner. This weaponization is most readily seen in the use of spectacle and pageantry against the populace, through the transformation of the human body into a weapon itself, and with the association of identity away from the individual and towards association of identity with weaponry.

The building block that Collins, Takami, and Shusterman utilize as the premise for their dystopian competitions is the childhood game of chase, tag. Most often, tag consists of one rule, namely to not let the tagger catch the person to be tagged. However, from this relatively simple rule, the entirety of the meaning and purpose of the game changes when children are mandated to kill their peers in order to save their own lives. From this starting point of an alternate game of tag involving death for the tagged, the three dystopian fictions take shape and become something new. Collins' work evolves into a sphere in which the government consolidates power in one city and subjugates all

of the outlying areas and forces children to kill each other for sport. Takami similarly changes the game as the Greater Republic of East Asia strongarms ninth graders to slaughter each other. Shusterman is the outlier as in his novel all of the governmental forces that equip children to kill do so out of necessity when the entirety of the human population becomes immortal, thus requiring some humans to be culled in order for life to continue with some semblance of normalcy.

From the initial change of the game of tag to include a lethal component, several observations can be made. The first is that in Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's works, this new game is meant to be seen. While the game is not meant to be watched in Takami's work as he specifically places the game outside of the viewership of the populace, the effects are meant to be seen and felt in order to create a sense of fear, and from that fear, control. In all three works, the pageantry of death is meant to show the dominance of the government over the common people. Takami's Greater Republic of East Asia utilizes the spectacle of violence, albeit the spectacle of violence perpetrated against families who might act out against the government after learning their children have been kidnapped, to force fear and thereby compliance with the Program. This pageantry is on display in every aspect of the Tributes' lives in *The Hunger Games*, to the point their life, and death, inside the Hunger Games becomes a national pastime. This entertainment creates not only narratives around the Tributes themselves, but demonstrates the power of the Capitol over the people of Panem, which in turn reinforces the Capitol's narrative that revolt against it would be futile. Similarly, Shusterman's *Scythe* novels demonstrate a way in which both the Scythedom and the Thunderhead use

spectacle, via the loss of individuality in death or in having one's personality erased, as a way in which raw power is demonstrated and wielded over the masses.

As with the weaponization of spectacle, the weaponization of the human body is seen in all three authors' works in that children are used as weapons against their parents precisely because of both the overall vulnerability of the children and their reliance on their parents for the necessities of life. In *The Hunger Games*, this weaponization of youth escalates into state-sanctioned human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, a further warning for readers of governments that abuse power in order to inflict fear as a method of controlling their populations. Children, in their vulnerability to exploitation and necessity of relying on adults for protection, become effective weapons because it is a raw display of power from the reigning governments to take a child from their home and then force that child to kill another equally kidnapped child. The over displays of force employed by these dystopian governments demonstrates through the exploitation of children that any revolt or rebellion by the adults surrounding these children would be met with even greater violence. Thus, exploited children become weapons of deterrence. In *Battle Royale*, Takami warns that youth are at risk of abuse through the backstory of Mitsuko Souma and how she has been the victim of abuse throughout her life from authority figures, though the ultimate goal of governmental fear through the abductions and murder of children remains. Takami uses Mitsuko as an illustrative point that not only must children be protected from exploitative governments, they must also be protected from those authority figures in children's lives who would exploit a child for their own purposes. Shusterman's works remain an outlier as they

focus on the transformation of young people into Scythes, who are essentially murderers and executioners by occupation. This transformation makes Shusterman's characters the only ones to literally transform into living weapons instead of being used as weapons by others. The Scythedom literally sees itself as living weapons meant to enforce natural order in an otherwise unnatural world, while both the Capitol and the Greater Republic of East Asia see children as weapons against their parents. The difference between the two viewpoints is subtle and based entirely upon the viewpoint of the group in question, but is somewhat akin to one group seeing themselves as the implement they use to kill, while the second group is seen as the tool to be used and does not self-identify as a weapon.

In all three works, the issue of privilege seems absent but secretly lurks in the background of the stories, forcing readers to acknowledge it without seeing it. None of the children mentioned are from true affluence, even the one boy whose father holds a reasonably high local government position in *Battle Royale*, and each reflects the effects of lack of privilege, whether that lack stems from access to food and education or from being part of a lower social or political bracket. Even Rowan and Citra do not come from high socioeconomic standing as the Thunderhead prides itself on having eliminated most of the wealth disparity rampant in the modern world. With a few exceptions, such as Finnick Odair, none of these children are truly physically and mentally trained to the point they are ready to battle each other to the death, a fact that is reflected in the deaths of most of the pool of players in Collins' and Takami's works. Other children, such as Thresh and Kazuo Kiriya, possess the mental capability to quickly shift into a predatory or survival mode but have not been trained or fed specifically for war. By

comparison, Rowan and Citra need more than a year of intensive training to become ready to join the Scythedom. The ultimate goal for all dystopian ruling powers is transforming the human body itself into a weapon is to create not only a sense of fear among parents of losing their children, but also to devalue the lives of children as a way of devaluing and controlling their parents. Compliance with the government at least gives parents the illusion of safety for one's child.

Finally, the association of an individual's identity with a single weapon is a form of weaponization that takes from the individual their humanity and reduces them to a tool to be wielded by the government as both a physical weapon and propaganda. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss's and Finnick's associations with the bow and the trident are meant to draw readers' attention to the Olympians Artemis and Poseidon, which in turn sparks the conversation of how the Capitol is attempting to create the illusion that it can exert control over even beings as powerful as the Olympians. The message the Capitol hopes to send is that if it can control beings like the Olympians, what hope do the Districts have in ever overthrowing the Capitol? Similarly, *Battle Royale* does not associate children with their weapons after the Program is over, but rather while they are in the game. Because firearms are allowed in Takami's work, guns act as the great equalizer and participants who survive the longest possess guns. Students with semi-automatic or automatic firearms do best among their peer group, as demonstrated by Kazuo Kiriyama, who slaughtered most of his classmates with a MAC-10. Similarly, the Scythedom is known for its numerous killings, with various Scythes known and popularized for their killing. Much like Victors are popularized after their victory in *The*

*Hunger Games*, despite their occupation as murderers, the Scythedom is popularized in many ways, such as becoming the subjects of trading cards, throughout Shusterman's world. Altogether, this popularized killing helps the Scythedom create a worldview where Scythes are living weapons.

The forced identification of children with the weapons they wield inside their arenas culminates in the loss of their individuality. By removing their individuality, the ruling powers have effectively devalued the humanity of their victims. This dehumanization allows the ruling powers to see themselves as superior to the children they force into the arena. Each dystopian society is stratified into definitive layers, where everyone except the empowered occupy a precarious place which can be preyed upon by their rulers. Nour S. Kteily and Alexander Landry point out that the key factors of dehumanization are the dismissal of the humanity of another human, as well as the identification of that person with a lower life form, such as an animal (Kteily and Landry 222). In this regard, children are dehumanized in these texts even further because rather than being identified with animals, they are identified with inanimate objects.

Dehumanization is the tool which the ruling powers use to transform children into weapons. The removal of individuality through forced identification with weapons reduces children from people with intrinsic value because they are individuals into tools that can be used to control the remainder of the lower portions of the population. This dehumanization is the final act of weaponization as it hijacks all aspects of a person before repurposing that person as a weapon. Ultimately, the triple act of hijacking,

dehumanizing, and weaponizing children is how they are exploited by their governments as deterrent weapons against their populations.

In the modern United States, while children are not weaponized to the point they are forced to be child gladiators, children nonetheless have been transformed into tools by political groups. The recent challenges to books in public school libraries is an example of how schools have become political battlegrounds. However, since 2022, challenges to certain books, particularly those that convey empathy for the LGBTQIA+ community, are not done to better the schools for the sake of the children attending the schools, but rather to control the information children are taught. In this light, children are seen as an object for the future, a tool for political change, and a weapon against other political parties. The presence of lobbyist organizations backing challenges to entire fields of literature is indicative of the cultural wars simmering in the United States spilling out of the political arena and into educational spaces. The desire to create and control a narrative, specifically one that ostracizes all varieties of minorities for a white-led society and that seeks to silence outlying ideas, demonstrates the open attempt to use schools as a method of achieving a political agenda and make children the weapon of choice for achieving that agenda. Similarly, the nationwide debate over guns has seen the safety of children transformed into a form of currency for political and economic power as politicians who have the capability to enact gun reform fail to do so in order to gain favor with pro-gun backers. In both the gun debate and the debates of book bans in public schools, children are not seen as people, but rather as a means to an end. In these real-world issues, what is best for children is not at the forefront of the debate and children are



instead presented as tools to be used to bring about a political end state. In these instances, children and their greatest good are hijacked and weaponized by people outside themselves so that others may achieve a political goal or to maintain political power.

### **Areas of Future Study**

The use of dystopian young adult literature as a warning against the exploitation of children has several areas for future study. To begin, this thesis focused only marginally on the areas of physical hunger, despite the title of Collins' first novel being *The Hunger Games*. The idea of food, and the lack thereof, and its relationship to the human body, is one area that might be of particular interest, particularly if examined as part of gender studies and looking at the relationship between people, their bodies, and hunger, particularly self-inflicted hunger driven by an outside source, such as social media. This thesis also specifically chose largely not to examine *Mockingjay* as it is different in theme and content than *Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Catching Fire* as *Mockingjay* focuses less on children in an arena and reads more like a war story with children as soldiers vice gladiators. Themes that occur in *Mockingjay* that do not occur in Collins' other Hunger Games novels include just war theory, survivors' guilt, and recovery from trauma. Collins specifically mentioned that watching war correspondence during the United States' invasion of Iraq was part of her inspiration for *The Hunger Games* and the foundation upon which she built through *Catching Fire* to culminate in *Mockingjay* ("Suzanne Collins Talks about 'the Hunger Games,' the Books and the Movies" 375). Given the cultural impact of Collins' novels, and their films, and that the novels and films were written or filmed during the resurgence of U.S. military

presence in the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan, perhaps a future area of study would be to examine the impact on Collins' target audience at the time of their publication: children born between 1995 and 2012, more popularly known as "Generation Z" or "Gen Z" (Pichler et al. 599). Given that Gen Z is now entering adulthood, it would be interesting to determine how deeply *The Hunger Games*, in conjunction with the extended U.S. military operations in the 2000s, has directly impacted the philosophical development of Gen Z. Still another area of future study might be to do a more detailed look at the relationships between Artemis and Katniss, and Finnick and Poseidon, in relation to how the Capitol, and later the insurrection against the Capitol, utilizes people as symbols and then weaponizes these symbols. Further, it is probably worth exploring how proverbial good and bad systems of government employ weaponized human symbolism, particularly as they attempt to legitimize their right to rule.

Regarding Takami's work, the most prominent area for future study might be to examine *Battle Royale* in its original language and culture. While there is certainly use in reading the English translation, there will always be portions that are lost in translation that will be most notable in the original Japanese and would make more sense in Japanese culture than in American culture. Further, Takami's work is unique in that it has been adapted into both a film and a manga. Both of these adaptations would probably provide a different interpretation of Takami's original work. While all three versions of Takami's work are well known in Japan and are available in English, or with English subtitles in the case of the film, they are less well known than Collins' works in the United States despite all three being published before Collins published *The Hunger Games* in 2008.

Still another area of future study might be to examine both *The Hunger Games* and *Battle Royale* and to examine how the films adapt not only the storyline, but also the various themes of the books, and how these are presented on screen.

Also regarding Takami's work is the future study of Mitsuko and her kama. While drafting this thesis, it became apparent that the sickle is a common symbol in Western societies for its association with fertility, agriculture, and women. Ariadne Staples points out that the Romans worshiped multiple goddesses associated with fertility and crops, with fertility cults most associated with Ceres and Flora (Staples 82). Staples points out that the Romans associated women's status in the relation to the men in those women's lives – virginity and their fathers, motherhood and their husbands, and old age and their husbands or sons or perhaps sons-in-law – which is very similar to how Mitsuko orients her trauma off the men she has encountered throughout her short life (62). Similarly, Celia Shultz points out that the majority of religious life in ancient Rome for women focused on becoming pregnant, safety during pregnancy and childbirth, and the safety of these children into adulthood (Shultz 20). Both Shultz and Staples are in agreement that for Roman women the entirety of their world within their patriarchal culture focused on their position as a sexual object in relation to men, particularly regarding their ability to have children. While the act of using a sickle primarily fell to men, Michael Roberts points out that around the 15th century, older women, particularly widows, became active participants in harvest time, often working alongside men while younger women still maintained their traditional place, which normally associated them with fertility in

Western cultures (Roberts 7). In this sense, Mitsuko's life has been defined by men since she was a child, just as Roman culture defined women by the men in their lives.

The glaring problem with connecting Mitsuko to the Romans is that it forces her to be read outside of her native culture, which is essentially retraumatizing a young woman already traumatized by sexual abuse throughout her life. Mitsuko's trauma far exceeds her years. Given Takami's description of Mitsuko is that she had spiritually died "long, long time ago," long before she died in the Program, it seems unfair to Mitsuko to force her to fight the symbolism of another culture (Takami 551). The limiting factor with *Battle Royale* throughout writing this thesis has been a limited understanding of Japanese culture, in this instance a limited understanding of Japanese mythology, symbolism, and folklore. It is certain that in Western cultures, the sickle is connected to fertility, though this thesis is not yet ready to espousing the sickle as a universal symbol for fertility and sexuality regarding Mitsuko. A future area of study would be to dive deeply into Japanese myths and cultural symbolism to determine what, if any connections, exist between sexuality and the sickle from a Japanese perspective, and then to pull those forward to examine them together.

Shusterman is by far the most prolific writer of the three authors examined in this thesis, having published numerous novels and novel series, as well as working extensively in film and television. A future area of study might be to examine his work exclusively, as he has written several series that are classified as dystopian young adult novels. An examination of his various fictional worlds as they relate to each other and young adult literature as a whole might provide a unique insight into Shusterman's

vantage point and determine if there is a cohesive message held internally in his entire body of work. As most of Shusterman's works contain dystopian elements and are written for young adults, and he was recognized for critical excellence in young adult literature several times in the 2000s and 2010s, a study of all of his works might be warranted to determine if he has had either an outsized impact on the field of young adult literature, or less of an impact than his writing warrant.

This thesis attempted to stay away from just war theory, or *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, or "the right to go to war" and "the right conduct in war," respectively. Chris Crowe points out the necessity of discussing war in young adult literature due to the prevalence of military conflict across the globe at different times, and also the necessity of forming empathy for both the perpetrators and victims of war (Crowe 160). Like the texts of this thesis form somewhat of a subgenre of young adult literature, so too do young adult war novels for their own subgenre. What separates the two is that the texts of this thesis are fictitious and deal with dystopian scenarios, bordering on science fiction in the case of Shusterman's novels, vice the real world. Equally as important is the discussion of just war, or the time at which war is the moral and necessary solution to an international problem. The next logical step of this thesis would be to study these novels from a just war theory perspective as *The Hunger Games* is predicated on a war between the Capitol and the Districts of Panem prior to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* and that arguably continues through *Mockingjay*. For Collins' work, just war theory becomes relevant as she mentions it is one of the theories she likes to examine in her works for adolescent readers (Collins 375). In this thesis' examinations of warnings against the

exploitation of children, *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, are directly applicable because the Capitol and the Districts of Panem are literally two warring factions and how they conduct themselves in all of their interactions is effectively political and military maneuverings. Any examination would have to discuss if the Districts possess *jus ad bellum*, or if the Capitol once possessed it fighting the Districts prior to *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, and what would constitute *jus in bello* for both sides, particularly in regards to the institution of the Hunger Games and the Districts' two rebellions.

The application of just war theory in *The Hunger Games* is directly relevant and one that deserves examination at a later date, particularly in conjunction with Shusterman's and Takami's works. *Battle Royale* is built upon the premise that the Greater Republic of East Asia is experimenting on its own populace's resilience to outside attack, notably an American attack. Lastly, the Thunderhead and the Scythedom exist in a unique utilitarian symbiosis. A study of all these works from a political theory perspective might increase their narrative value in light of the real-world political sphere. While war itself is not directly examined in Shusterman's novels, all three works can be examined from a perspective of examining war and ethics, and should be in the future. Additionally, a more in-depth discussion of illusion contrasted with reality and the use of masks such as the Patron Historics represents a very viable vein to mine in the future. There is much in Shusterman's works that deals with perception contrasting reality that needs to be explored.

Finally, a last area of future study might be to examine these works, particularly Collins' and Takami's, in light of one of the initial sources Collins cited for inspiration of

*The Hunger Games*: the Theseus myth cycle. The initial version of this thesis intended to examine *The Hunger Games* in relation to the Theseus myth cycle and the story of David found in the biblical Books of Samuel. Ultimately, that proved untenable because while Theseus and David were both likely teenagers close in age to the characters in Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's works, adolescence as a concept is largely an ever-evolving idea, as well as a relatively modern one. The modern and changing definition of adolescence forces us to question the assumption that David and Theseus were youth or adults because the most faithful reading of their stories requires us to read them as they were written before pushing a modern interpretation upon them. Thus, an examination of these two ancient teenagers in contrast to modern fictional ones may or may not be valid beyond the surface level. Further, Theseus' story was originally an oral tradition that was written down in ancient Greek, which contained multiple dialects that differed based on the geographic area and the time period in which they were written. A dedicated study of Theseus would require an understanding of the language in order to fully comprehend and appreciate all the text is conveying. A similar problem exists for David as his story is originally passed down from an oral tradition that was in turn written down in Hebrew. Lastly, both Theseus' and David's stories carry with them an explicit religious connotation which is not carried in the modern works this thesis examined. The Books of Samuel are a linchpin in both Judaism and Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam, and while the ancient Greek texts are not specifically religious handbooks, they did convey within them stories that were essential to the foundation of the Greeks' religious life. This religiosity sets them apart from anything written by Collins, Takami, or Shusterman. Any

future study of these topics would need to address how myths or religious readings held sacred by some people have directly impacted modern culture.

This thesis has attempted to examine ways in which the works of Collins, Takami, and Shusterman act as warnings against the exploitation of children in young adult dystopian literature. The three primary ways in which the examination is accomplished is through the weaponization of spectacle, the transformation of the human body into a weapon of its own, and the shift of identity away from the individual and towards association with a weapon. There is certainly more that can be mined from these works, and together they have had, and will likely continue to have, a large cultural impact. For now, however, the biggest parting point should be that these dystopian works challenge their readers to understand the dangers posed to one of the most vulnerable subsets of society: children.

Simply accepting and acknowledging dangers posed to children and childhood is not enough. Rather, these societies could each have been prevented if people had stood up, even against the threat of violence, and advocated for children in ways children were unable to advocate for themselves. In a sense, these dystopias would not have occurred largely if the adult members of society had resisted them, despite the danger resistance presented. For our modern society, with all of its friction points, these novels should stand as a warning of what could happen if those with power see warning signs and yet do nothing. The exploitation of children in these novels are extreme examples, yet they occur on smaller scales in the real world. Children are forced into being soldiers by governments with questionable legitimacy on several continents, while human trafficking



of children occurs worldwide. A single person cannot stop these acts from occurring on the scale at which they already occur, but a single person can work to empower people, both adults and children, in their immediate sphere of influence to at the very least speak out against exploitation while it is small and still illegitimate. Governments like the Capitol and the Greater Republic of East Asia do not spring up overnight - they grow slowly, like the Third Reich, over the course of decades. Even the Thunderhead acknowledges it took decades for humanity to reach the point where Scythe Curie could begin a worldwide transition from human governments to the Thunderhead's rule (Shusterman 25). It is choosing to resist the small forms of exploitation in the intervening years that keeps the insanity of these dystopias.

While the target audience of these stories is young adults, all readers, child, youth, and adult, can identify the dangers of all forms of exploitation. Ultimately, the reader is left with the impression that if unprotected, childhood and children themselves become targets of opportunity for exploitation. The unspoken reminder then becomes that it is the responsibility of adults within a society to work to actively protect childhood, children, youth, and adolescence from outside actors who would use children to achieve their own nefarious ends. These texts stand as a warning to readers, and together the bloodshed and bodies they leave strewn around their arenas are a testament to what can happen if warnings are ignored. While horrible, the incredible amount of pain and sorrow endured by Collins', Takami's, and Shusterman's characters are worth the price if their suffering keeps that level of bloodshed and violence seen in these texts confined to history and fictional books.

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