Introduction:

A rendering of temporality—the state of being bound in time, yet simultaneously dislocated, seemingly lodged in the space between the past and the present. I vacuously gazed at the naïveté of his expressions, the dark features prominently illuminated against his porcelain skin, awaiting his brutal death. *Queer time:* the utter impossibility of witnessing my little brother being murdered on film, performing his role as District Three Tribute Boy in *The Hunger Games*, while sitting by his side. In a matter of a couple of minutes, it would all be over and the sharp snap of his neck suddenly sent him in a graceful tumble to the ground. I jerked my eyes from the screen and directed my gaze at the real Ian Nelson, the Ian Nelson in the here and now rather than the illusion of his person living in a dystopian world that would time and time again transform a global audience into a two hour “journey” into the future’s future. But how could I compartmentalize this experience in terms of normalized temporality? Was this the ‘queering’ of temporality: to witness the performativity of death with the very subject living, breathing, and thriving by my side? Or was this the dynamic intersection of the past, present, and the future posing a challenge to this respective notion of time, dismantling its stability as a mark of linear progression?

“*May the odds be ever in your favor.*” Before selecting the name of the tributes that will be forced to confront this sadistic game of chance, the announcer sings these words in a chilling,
piercing tone. Yet, the irony lies in the non-existent hope if in fact the young men and women are indeed selected as tributes. To fight the odds is to fight the domineering power that chains them to this vague, faint semblance of hope. This essay explores the deconstruction of the “odds” in the deployment of a new interpretation of this genre—as a symbol of defiance, marked by an escape from the restrictions of binarized thinking.

**Let the Games Begin:**

A darkly woven tale of dystopian love in a post-apocalyptic world where children are forced to play in a game of death to appease the power structure that chains them to a totalitarian state; this is no typical love story. But rather the complexity of the thematic notions of identity, power, desire, and time collectively work to capture the impossibility of locating this doomed romance. This narrative lends itself to the re-invention of a future society that parallels both the past and the present, propelling it into a future beyond contemporary consciousness.

Furthermore, by challenging the accepted representations of the hero, the rebel, and the lover, *The Hunger Games* creates a façade of novelty under the guise of tradition. Through the lens of metaphorical meaning the concept of the love story becomes defined by resistance to these themes of identity, power, desire, and time. In effect, this act of defiance, *The Hunger Games*, embodies the queering of culturally constructed sameness; it is to say, this is the portrayal of a “queer” love story.

Queer is “an identity without an essence,”¹ existing in its opposition to an established norm. Within this framework, queer cannot be limited to a set of words that solidify its trajectory, but instead suggests a sense of liberation and freedom from the rigidity of socially constructed systems of categorization.

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…queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality. As the very word implies, “queer” does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant… [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities… for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire.²

In the scope of this essay, queer functions as a demystification of ideological concepts that appear to be inventively clothed, while illuminating a departure from normativity. The queering of these categories, however, is not limited to only acts of desire and sexual practices. By broadening the effects of queerness, the influence of this particular discourse can provide for a closer analysis of the thematic elements.

As a result, categorizing queerness in the traditional binary of sameness versus difference becomes muddled, creating a third category that may or may not ultimately result in similar outcomes. In this third category, queerness arises, proving that the division between the two distinct categories creates a valuable and significant space of indefinibility. Eve Watson, highlights the dynamic, non-essentialist continuum that sustains the category and engages this framework in constructing a new reality:

[Desire] is not fixed and does not seek it’s own satisfaction, but rather its own continuance and furtherance. In this way, the traumatic unsayable real is not what ‘curves’ symbolic space, by introducing gaps and inconsistencies. Queer theory could gain much from a consideration of the real not as the terrifying primordial Thing that forever eludes our grasp, but as the distorting obstacle or screen that forever falsifies our relation to ‘reality.’³

² Halperin, Saint Foucault, 62.
Watson’s interpretation is an invitation to accept the intrinsic danger of queer: acknowledging that the illusion of this abstract symbolic space warps one’s understanding of that which is real by simultaneously imbuing the individual with boundless interpretations that can be constructed through the dismantling of reality. One gains freedom from the universalizing truths that assemble the concept of reality and with a ‘queering’ of these categorical truths, the subject can embrace the fulfillment of liberation from binarized thinking.⁴

Furthermore, according to this model, questioning certainty becomes a method of both knowing and exploring the scope of theories that have been previously cast aside as too heavily rooted in abstraction. While queer is a “contentious term and one that encompasses defiance, celebration, and refusal within its remit,”⁵ it is through this lens, that *The Hunger Games* is able to be re-interpreted as a site of defiance, a challenge to the tradition of normative thinking, and a departure from society’s flawed construction of reality. With this reading of the text, the former rigidity of such categories is deconstructed to signal and depict a constant fluidity and mutability. Thus, *The Hunger Games* appears to embrace queerness in both its greater symbolic meaning as well as within its representation of such ideals. Suzanne Collins has penned a novel that conceals this radical notion of rejection under the promise of a new symbolic order while also providing an alternative means of understanding the purpose and the legacy of a piece of literature rich in future possibilities.

**Panem:**

Seemingly dislocated in the future, Panem, the post-apocalyptic dystopian world that was once North America, becomes the backdrop of this queer love story. Although Panem is divided into districts, the Capital is the symbol of centralized power in a world, where dominance incites

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⁴ Watson, Eve, “Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer,” 119.
⁵ ibid, 119.
a constant wave of fear and domineering obedience. The faint memory of District Thirteen and the image of its utter destruction following the districts’ defeat in a gruesome civil war, serves as a terror-ridden reminder to the citizens of their state of oppression and the futility of further revolution. Each district is defined by its own economic character in addition to distinguishing itself on the basis of race and varying degrees of economic independence reflecting the gradient of their subjugation by the Capitol. However, the crux of the Capitol’s insurmountable power lies in administering the annual Hunger Games. Two tributes, a young woman and a young man between the ages of twelve and eighteen are chosen from each district in the greatly feared, Reaping ceremony. Once chosen, they embark immediately to the Capitol to be nourished, trained, and celebrated for their heroic bravery before stepping into an area to await their imminent death. Rather than turning away in a horrified daze, this glorified game of death is a mandatory form of “entertainment” for all of Panem, with wealthy Capitol citizens placing bets on the most promising tributes until the lone survivor is left standing.6

Katniss Everdeen, the female tribute and “heroic” protagonist from District Twelve is a symbol of strength and resilience in her quest for survival long before the Hunger Games. She resides in the decrepit, depressed coal-mining section of her district, The Seam, until she voluntarily joins the Hunger Games during the Reaping to replace her frail younger sister, Primrose, as the female tribute. Due to the Capitol’s employment of a totalitarian regime so as to further contain any potential collective forces of resistance, sustenance and resources are scarce. Katniss, however, exercises careful disobedience, honing her hunting skills in restricted territory

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as a means of supporting and providing for her mother and sister after their father is killed in a mining accident.

In the Games Katniss is joined by fellow District Twelve tribute, Peeta Mellark, the strong and stocky Baker’s son with blond hair and gentle features. Together, they are expected to represent an infinite amount of pride for their roots in District Twelve, celebrating a sense of unity whose contradictions are easily forgotten in the midst of the Capitol’s bloodbath, as this collective identity is mutilated due to each individual’s plight for survival. Peeta and Katniss, however, pose a great danger to the Gamemakers and the Capitol elite as the “star-crossed lovers” storyline adds an unprecedented emotional bind to the supposedly expected grim future of a young couple competing from the same district. Nevertheless, through direct and conscious manipulation of all of Panem, the emotional burden of their devoted partnership becomes a strategic survival tactic as their staged “suicide” attempt captivates the attention of the Capitol, challenging the previously uncontested structural hierarchal forces. The radical notions of this single pre-meditated act of resistance expose the raw vulnerability of an emotionally repressed society that while incapable of an assemblage of force, remains wholly intoxicated with young love. Thus, since the realization of the double suicide would effectively defy the totalitarian stronghold, producing a victorless Seventy-fourth Annual Bloodbath, the “star-crossed lovers” from District Twelve exit the arena as the first pair of any district to ever be crowned victors of the Hunger Games.

The Plight of the Children: The Panem Tributes

Each citizen of Panem is a pawn under the abusive command of the Capitol, but the children, aged twelve to eighteen, bear the significant burden as they fall victim to the sacrificial nature of the Hunger Games. The children are stripped of their innocence, either trained from
birth to be adept cold-hearted assassins in the wealthier districts or exploited and weakened in the impoverished districts by their more dominant counterparts. Although, both the wealthy and starving children have constrained agency, the power dynamics within the various districts are illuminated by their significantly greater potential to survive this annual sport of mass slaughtering. With a disproportional allocation of resources, the tributes exemplify the failure of a seemingly egalitarian meritocracy. Yet, while these children are sent to the arena on pretenses of honor and bravery, they are in fact preserving the totalitarian system, by solidifying the future of the Capitol’s uncontested brutal capacity to tear twenty-four children from their families each year to kill each other for entertainment. The tribute subject embodies both a submissive frailty and a strategic positioning of burgeoning influence to overthrow societal norms, which inadvertently serves as a microcosmic portrayal of Panem’s oppressive forces of power.

Therefore, the Capitol strategically exploits the image of the child in order to depict the Hunger Games as the positive byproduct of a devastating civil war that ravaged Panem seventy-four years prior. And thus, through the Hunger Games, the Capitol presents the loss of the current social order as more fateful than the perceived “anarchy” inherent in a free, democratic society. In theory, Panem operates under the inescapable powers of reproductive futurism, “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse” as a means of maintaining a “more desirable social order.”

The tributes and the rest of Panem’s young citizens shape the nature of political discourse by pitting all opposition or antagonism directed at the Capitol in terms of failing to secure a beneficial future for the children of the next generation. The sources of power in the Capitol cast a moral purity on these cruel, political undertakings under the façade of “the defender of children” so as to avoid another catastrophe resembling the civil war that ravaged

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Panem, culminating in the sheer obliteration of District Thirteen from this dystopian world.

Thus, the vile purpose of the tributes participating in the Games is merely so as to not disturb the cyclical perpetuation of fear and panic:

Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion. Whatever words they use, the real message is clear. “Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in District Thirteen.”

Yet, Katniss exposes the Capitol’s brutality and threatens their uncontrollable power through means of questioning their capacity to condone the slaughter of a young couple in love. By disrupting the deceptive notion that her participation in the Games will secure a “peaceful” future amidst a political tradition of enduring oppression, Katniss aggravates the power structure in assuming this oppositionality against habitual normalization. Edelman’s assertion that “queerness exposes the obliquity of our relation to what we experience in and as social reality, alerting us to the fantasies structurally necessary in order to sustain it and engaging those fantasies through the figural logics, the linguistic structures, that shape them” illustrates the Capitol’s considerable efforts to mask their illusory control in the fear tactic of the Hunger Games. The tributes, as the “image of the child,” unconsciously facilitate this exploitation and the mere fallacy of a futuristic fantasy infused with goodness.

**Projections of Power:**

In *The Hunger Games*, power is inseparable from the relationality of the oppressor and the oppressed, while simultaneously conditioning its regulatory control through acts of both

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surrender and resistance. For the purpose of this analysis, incorporating discourse into the examination of the construct of power refers to:

...ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the “nature” of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. 

This Foucauldian understanding lends itself to interpreting discourse as “both an instrument and an effect of power.” Although, Panem is portrayed as a symbol of totalitarianism, power does not root from one central location, but instead is all-pervading in various facets of the structural daily operations in each of the twelve districts. Michel Foucault illustrates this notion of power in his text, *The History of Sexuality*:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.

Whereas the Chief Gamemaker, Seneca Crane, undeniably crafts perilous obstacles for the tributes to overcome, casting fireballs at Katniss forcing her closer to the remaining tributes, or inserting Capitol-borne deadly mutations of animals into the arena with the resurgence of anticipatory action sequences for the audience’s pleasure, he is merely one causal link in the greater production of power.

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12 ibd, 93.
While his role in the employment and maintenance of power has direct implications on the tributes in the arena, even the Chief Gamemaker finds himself in a subordinate power relationship with President Snow for showing a hazy semblance of restraint in the unthinkable terrors he unleashes on the remaining tributes. And even in reference to the tributes themselves, for they are undoubtedly victimized by the multiplicity of elements that constitute this abusive power structure. As long as the widespread fear through Panem, continues to drive and sustain the Capitol’s power remains intact, the very mention of the Reaping will persist in delivering its intended surge of pure terror in the emanation of power.

Consequently, once they enter the arena, the tributes kill savagely, acknowledging that their very survival depends on this savagery. In accordance with Foucault’s assessment of the rationality of power, he stated that “the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them.” Perhaps, the distressing progression of this senseless “warfare” is a consequence of the cyclical relationality of power and control; regardless, the tragedies that occur in the arena are representative of power, but not reducible to one central source. When a fellow competitor kills Rue, Katniss’ ally, Katniss finally permits herself to embrace the emotional trauma that has consumed her since entering the Hunger Games: “To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in his death, seems inadequate. It’s the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.”

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14 Watson, Eve, “Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer,” 120.
15 Foucault, Michel, The History of Sexuality, 95.
16 Collins, Suzanne, The Hunger Games, 236.
crisis, power is untraceable, circulating around the Capitol, but almost as an obstruction of reason and logic that evades truth and certainty.

Although, it is conceivable that the tributes bear the brunt of the mechanistic torture, orchestrated by the Gamemakers and the other various powers residing in the Capitol, to disregard the benevolent victim ‘subject’ would expose a limitation of this discourse. Perhaps even the wealthy Capitol citizens are victimized as they are robbed of all agency to fully comprehend and internalize the utter sadistic nature of the Hunger Games; are they not manipulated as well to perceive their leadership as the guardian of harmony and stability while they engage in the “sport” of watching tributes take each others lives as if possessed by a brutal barbarous being? How can the mere existence of this cruel twist of fate be distinguished from the assemblage of power locatable in and of this world?

In fact, there is no recourse to resistance in Panem. With all the districts catering to the Capitol, supplying two tributes annually, forcibly producing their respective industry goods for the benefit of the wealthier districts, and finding every pre-mediated act of disobedience or recall met with an offensive of able bodied Capitol officers, revolutionary efforts are therefore effectively safeguarded from coming to fruition. Nonetheless, the physical space in the arena, exposes an undermining force of dire contradiction: while the tributes are constrained of all agency, appearing as pawns, the Capitol’s fortitude and credibility as the dominant aggressor lies in the tributes’ complete surrender and consequential compliance to the very construct that strips them of their power.

Therefore, in the case of the Seventy-Fourth Hunger Games, at the moment precisely before Katniss and Peeta bring the poisonous berries close to their lips, the two remaining tributes twist the odds in their favor, driving the Chief Gamemaker to revoke the hasty revision
permitting only one of the pair to be crowned victor. This fluid exchange of power reveals the mutability in the oppositionality between power and resistance in accordance with Foucault’s discourse analysis:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.\(^{17}\)

The production of power, while conceivably operating as a regulatory force, invokes the resurgence of a host of mechanisms that are in constant flux, re-arranging and re-defining the constitution of the “force relations.” Furthermore, this dynamic energy inherent in the affect of power and its consequent mobility depends on the natural state of relational inequality so as to generate a concrete conceptualization of these power relations. Foucault refers to an organization of the various power mechanisms or the condition of “disequilibrium” as the “crystallization of a relation of force”\(^{18}\) With this understanding of power’s capacity to be frozen in time, while retaining the possibility of shifting its relationality, the fraction of a second just prior to the Chief Gamemaker’s bellowing voice demanding that Katniss and Peeta not carry through with their double suicide, can be perceived as a queering of the production of power. In turn, this objective of queer “to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up—heteronormative practices and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and (in)form them”\(^{19}\) acts on the forces of power to engender a variation of

\(^{17}\) Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, 101.


\(^{19}\) Watson, Eve, “Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer,” 131.
the unexpected, unknown appearance of power. While oppressive and omnipresent, yet not reducible to a single subject or institution, power as portrayed in The Hunger Games depicts a lapse or discontinuity in the process of both the regulation and the production of “the force relations.”

**Heroine, Rebel, or Unintelligible:**

While it is certainly plausible that Katniss’ actions at the end of the novel with reference to the double suicide could be construed as purely rebellious, a closer analysis of her role in the Hunger Games deviates from this normatized expectation. Hailed as a refreshing departure from the prototypical male hero, Katniss embodies a persona of *female empowerment*, with stressed importance on her image as the antithesis of that which has previously defined the category of hero, or rather the characterization of a potential victor of the Hunger Games. Only killing as a defensive cautionary tactic, effectively surviving the bloodshed of the Games through the protection of the male tributes, and ostensibly endeavoring to profess her autonomy within a controlled patriarchal, totalitarian system renders her image as the “heroine” an optimistic deception. Is Katniss Everdeen a heroine by her own intrinsic qualities or heroine by virtue of circumstance? And if her role as the female protagonist is indeed diminished through the unveiling of circumstance, in what capacity is she redeemed of this robbed agency that confines her to survivor rather than feminist heroine? The moments in The Hunger Games that frame

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20 Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, 92.

Katniss as the quintessential heroine, are reactionary, while still unattainable if not in coexistence with the circumstances that condition and impel these heroic qualities to materialize. After all, was it not Rue, a fellow tribute, who aided Katniss in indirectly wiping out a couple competitors through injuries sustained by the Trackerjacker\textsuperscript{22} nest she dropped on the Career pack as they rested in a deep slumber? And for that matter, did Thresh not avoid murdering Katniss when given the opportunity as a result of her loyalty and companionship to Rue, the other District Eleven tribute?\textsuperscript{23} Finally, Peeta, her male district counterpart, is certainly protecting her at various points in the novel, whether he is professing his love for her with the aim of making her seem more desirable or directing the deadly Career pack away from her sanctuary, huddled high up in a tree.\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps, this very questioning provides insight into the plethora of pathways that power transcends in this dystopian world, offering an array of varying interpretations of the portrayal of both those fearless in combat and those fearless in compliance.

\textsuperscript{22} Trackerjacker is a hybrid, genetically modified species, ("muttation") resembling a wasp that were engineered by the Capitol as a mode of weaponry and inflicting pure terror in the days of the civil war. The injuries resulting from a trackerjacker are deadly and also cause hallucinations and induce madness if the victim is not killed immediately following. Collins, Suzanne, \textit{The Hunger Games}, 186-187.

Another aspect of this event that lends itself to the notion that Katniss is a heroine by circumstance is the fact that the trackerjacker nest was "inserted" into the Hunger Games by the Gamemakers. During the course of the Hunger Games, the Gamemakers are constantly manipulating the arena and adding "mutations" or other deadly obstacles to keep the rest of Panem entertained by the excitement and action sequences (perhaps euphemism for—keeping Panem engrossed in the glorified violence that results in the deaths of twenty-three tributes) Therefore, Katniss once again finds herself coerced into offensive mode by factors beyond her own determination.

\textsuperscript{23} "The Hunger Games Is A Sexist Fairy Tale, Sorry," \textit{The Last Psychiatrist}.

\textsuperscript{24} During the course of the Hunger Games, many tributes form alliances so as to join forces in killing the weaker tributes before they in turn must abandon their alliances and turn on each other. The Career pack typically consists of the wealthier, stronger, and more capably trained tributes from Districts One, Two, and Four that have been preparing for the Games in anticipation of their consequent involvement.
Yet, if Katniss’ role as heroine is inherently limited and her motives are not perceived as defining a trajectory into the realm of those fearless in compliance, then perhaps she is in fact the epitome of the feminist hero. At the Reaping, upon hearing her little sister’s name announced as the young female tribute chosen to compete, Katniss immediately volunteers to take her place in the Hunger Games, becoming the first tribute to ever volunteer from a district where competing in the bloodbath is essentially a quick spiral towards an untimely death. Although implausible that under a separate set of circumstances Katniss would have so readily sacrificed herself as tribute, the here and now of Katniss volunteering for her sister proves that regardless of future restraints that she will encounter in the arena, in this specific moment she is acting on her own volition, asserting herself into a game with one objective: survival.

Devoid of all emotions, Katniss regains her sanity through the meager hope that her survival ensures returning home to her mother and little sister, acknowledging that repressing her anger and inner anguish obstructs the Gamemakers’ sadistic pleasure of exposing the tributes as weak, vulnerable, and powerless subjects. In her own plight for survival, however, Katniss is confronted with the death of her faithful companion, Rue, inciting her revolutionary spirit. Instead of silencing her pain, she publicly mourns the death of her dear ally by adorning her with flowers, forcing all of Panem to mourn in return, expressing the shame resting in the inhumanity of the Hunger Games and of the oppressive powers that induce this torture on innocent young men and women.25 The true revolutionary spirit, however, is channeled through her direct rejection of the accepted notion of the de-sensitization of death as she signals her solidarity to Rue’s district:

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I… “Bye, Rue,” I whisper. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and hold them out in her direction. Then I walk away without looking back.  

By forming an alliance essentially founded on the premise of human connection and rejecting the perverse ritual of establishing alliances for the orchestration of more strategic killings, Katniss’ reveals the threatening potential capacity of a rebellion that exceeds beyond simply posing a challenge to normatization. In accordance with Michael Warner’s vision of queer as denouncing the “idea of normal behavior,” this sequence resists the accepted norm as well as deconstructing the framework that stabilizes this binarized relationality. Through her public mourning, Katniss sows the seeds of a revolution, but furthermore, as a result of this demonstration of solidarity with another impoverished district, she personifies the “open mesh of possibilities,” an assemblage of the heroine, rebel, victim, and disillusioned portrayal of the indefinable female protagonist.

A Woman Without a Name:

“I want the audience to recognize you when you’re in the arena,” says Cinna dreamily. “Katniss, the girl who was on fire.”

Katniss Everdeen, the “Girl on Fire,” is a fighter at the core, an adept hunter fighting for her family’s survival in the Seam before fighting for her life in the Hunger Games. And yet, her identity beyond this inexhaustible struggle remains an enigma: “No more fear of hunger. A new kind of freedom. But then… what? What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has

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27 Watson, Eve, “Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalysing Queer,” 123.
been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I’m not really sure who I am, what my identity is.”30 On the contrary, Peeta, her male district counterpart, is endearing and his calm, collected poise never fails to captivate an audience, exemplified through his interview with Caesar Flickerman and his ensuing love for Katniss in the arena. While the characterization of Peeta opposes the notion of idyllic masculinity with his compassion and boundless capacity for love and affection, as well as a resistance to kill in the Hunger Games, he is also able to transform Katniss into a subject of desire, from “I am no one at all,”31 to “star-crossed lovers.”

The interview scene, providing each tribute with an occasion to present the Capitol citizenry with a performance of their person, an assertion of their individuality and character within the context of a system that has stripped them of all but their lone survivor skills, inadvertently functions as the confessional for Katniss; it is through Peeta’s confession of love that a vision of femininity is cast upon her de-sexed32 or rather “unintelligible body.”33

Before the Games begin all of the tributes are manicured to conform to the Capitol’s foreseeable standards of beauty with respect to attire, appearance, and attitude, but also extending beyond the physical as to assess their ability to adequately portray their gender identity. In a sense, Katniss, as an outsider to the superficial, garishly, lavish Capitol lifestyle, finds herself irreducible and vacant while navigating this “cultural matrix.” It is with this perception of the standard Capitol citizenry that Katniss can be interpreted as an “unintelligible body:”

The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist” – that is, those in which gender does not

30 ibd, 311.
31 Collins, Suzanne, The Hunger Games, 118.
32 Seltzer, Sarah, "3 Great Reasons You Should Check Out 'The Hunger Games'," Alternet.
follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender….because certain kinds of “gender identities” appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities…”

As such, Katniss cannot portray the glamorous, picturesque femininity of fellow competitor, Glimmer or the angelic, ephemeral naïveté of Rue; she is radiant and strong, but ultimately, her costume, “engulfing her in flames” as the Girl on Fire shapes her identity as both a fearless young woman and the Female Tribute from District Twelve. Once Katniss fully embraces herself as the Girl on Fire, she assumes a feminine charm and performs, gracefully twirling to the enjoyment of the male interviewer and the rest of the Capitol audience.

In effect, while Katniss performs her role as the ideal female gendered subject, she subconsciously continues to re-insert herself into the “gaps opened up in regulatory norms” by resisting the process in the midst of passively agreeing to a portrayal deemed acceptable under the normative regulation of categorical gender. Judith Butler explains this due course of feminine gender performativity in her essay “Critically Queer:”

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm….”

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35 Collins, Suzanne, The Hunger Games, 128.
37 ibd, 23.
Katniss’ physical appearance, however, is only symptomatic of the truth that this manipulation continues to affirm of her identity. Given the understanding that gender is “neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as ‘internal’ and ‘hidden,’ nor is it reducible to a surface appearance” it can be inferred that this costuming of the “unintelligible” subject in order to prescribe to an explicit gender identity is a portrayal of drag. Can this departure from the epitomized feminine subject, while momentarily assuming this very rejection through a forcible gender performance, still then be understood as a variation of drag? Or does Katniss’ performativity in effect undermine comprehension of the category of gender, the ideal female, and even the model of heroine?

Nevertheless, her identity is not limited to solely this production of performativity. External forces such as Peeta’s declaration of unrequited love, a confession with indefinite, but critical ramifications, impose an image of Katniss as a “desirable” commodity for consumption by the masses in Panem. In an exchange with her mentor, Haymitch, both her resistance to this feminine depiction and to the very idea of the “star-crossed-lovers from District Twelve” is revealed:

“Do you think he hurt you? That boy just gave you something you could never achieve on your own.”
“He made me look weak!”
“He made you look desirable! And let’s face it, you use all the help you can get in that department. You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You’re all they’re talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!”
“But we’re not star-crossed lovers!”

38 ibd, 24.
39 This question is presented with the idea that gender is already a form of drag and since drag reiterates the meaning of gender, then perhaps the only question is whether or not the degree of the gender performativity affects how the category is re-defined through these performances and imitations.
40 Rosenberg, Alyssa, "The Odds are Never In Your Favor: 'The Hunger Games,' Winner-Take-All Economies and Commodity Fetishism," Think Progress.
“Who cares? It’s all a big show. It’s all how you’re perceived. The most I could say about you after your interview was that you were nice enough, although that in itself was a small miracle. Now I can say you’re a heartbreaker…. Which do you think will get you more sponsors?"  

With this very unveiling of the objectives behind Katniss’ coercive gender performance, a twofold presentation of her character is presented; while she embodies a blend of heroic and rebellious attributes, she is also confined to the feminized expressions that inadvertently produce the resulting gender identity. Therefore, must Katniss Everdeen symbolize the evolution of a “woman without a name” or that of an “unintelligible” subject?

A Queer Love Story:  

Intertwined within the sadistic storyline, a subplot emerges, relentlessly engaging in the female protagonist’s ongoing quest for survival. From the very moment that Peeta declares his unrequited love for Katniss during his pre-Hunger Games interview, Katniss becomes a sex symbol of her illusive performative gender, imbued with a dose of desire. Despite the deceptive nature, through this finely tuned ploy, the District Twelve tributes are able to manipulate the patriarchal forces under a guise of their own devices. Thus, rather than illuminating the innocence of young love as the site of a dire moral quandary, Katniss’ compliance with the love story, exposes by performative mechanisms, the true nature of the queering of this love story; her resulting liberalization from the incarceration of being merely a “piece in the games” casts a glare on the notion of a love story, accentuating its fundamental objective of dismantling the Capitol’s stronghold in Panem within the pre-existing framework. Love, like the image of the child, is the tool that is being exploited to safeguard these unarticulated tactics or rather the queer

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42 Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 34.

“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”
politics she invokes as a means of undermining the propositions of reproductive futurism and therefore, the maintenance of the normative social order.

Even in the midst of the deconstruction of the Capitol’s production of power, Katniss and Peeta’s performance of abundant infatuation remains bound to the confines of the regulatory systems of power. While Peeta expresses his desire to cling to a semblance of autonomy, he also acknowledges the apparent restrictions of such respective circumstances,

“Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to… to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games.”
“But you’re not. None of us are. That’s how the Games work.”
“Okay, but within the framework, there’s still you, there’s still me. Don’t you see?”

With this incorporation of the framework into its ultimate obliteration, a new interpretation surfaces: Is the conglomeration of forces incorporating the image of the child, gender performativity in the crafting of the seemingly “unintelligible” subject, regulatory forces in the production and maintenance of power, and the incorporation of a staged sequence of performed infatuation all simply inseparable from one another as they cultivate the queering of the love narrative? Regardless of the branding of this account, if in fact this novel is in keeping with the notions of queer, its significance is constituted from the transformative effect in becoming a symbol of resistance to the happily-ever-after framework rather than only through its classification.

Even as the novel reaches its conclusion and Katniss returns to the Capitol after surviving the Hunger Games, she is once more coerced into performing the role of the naïve feminine

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44 This theory is an application of Judith Butler’s incorporation of Nietzsche’s proclamation that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.” Butler, Judith *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 34.
subject while facing “the most dangerous part of the Hunger Games.” Supporting the alibi that the proposed double suicide at the finale was an act of irrational love fueled delirium rather than that of a deliberate attempt to thwart the Capitol’s authority. Whereas in the quintessential love story, the enlightened resolve of an unrequited or absent love renders the ending fixed in time, reminiscent of certainty and realization, this queer love story thrives on the impossibility of resolution and the indefinibility of its assemblage. It is this uncertainty and the process through which it evolves during the course of the novel that ultimately constructs difference among sameness, and a “façade of novelty under the guise of tradition.” As well as inhabiting the space created by challenging conventional binaries, this novel’s dynamic character and innovative methodology projects its potential for future intellectual inquiry. As a defiant narrative that only assumes its defiance from the very imprisonment in which it is constrained, *The Hunger Games* becomes its own dynamic, exceptional genre celebrating an “open mesh of possibilities” that acknowledges the here and now, but with a remarkable emphasis on its keen penchant for the future: the portrayal of a queer love story.

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45 Collins, Suzanne, *The Hunger Games*, 359. The alibi is referring to her proposed double suicide with the poisonous berries when the Gamemakers revoke the revision that two members from the same district may be crowned victors if they are the last two tributes in the arena. Ultimately, this revision is overturned by the perceived threat of no victors from the Seventy-Fourth annual Hunger Games, but Katniss must present a logical explanation for her actions for fear of the Capitol interpreting her actions as primarily revolutionary in nature. The significance in this statement, however, is how maintaining the appearance of the tale of the “star-crossed lover” is inherently more dangerous than her participation in the perverse murdering rampage of the Hunger Games. Also, even though Katniss may have been acting, Peeta was unaware that her display of affection during the Games was not reminiscent of her true emotional state. The “most dangerous part of the Hunger Games” also foreshadows the potential dangers she may face once she returns to the Seam in maintaining the illusion of “star-crossed lovers” from District Twelve in the midst of coping with President Snow and the rest of the Capitol’s suspicion of rebellious motives, as well as with her own doubts about caring for Peeta outside of the Games.

46 This exact phrasing also appears at the beginning of my essay under the heading “Let the Games Begin” so as to demonstrate the complexity of the categorization of both the thematic elements and the novel as a whole.
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