The Animated Turn: On Literature and Capital from *The Hunger Games*

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Abstract: What if performance is no longer the primary dominant trope for exploring the relationship between selves and capitalism? What if animation is now the trope in ascendance – spread by the cartoon figures gracing lunch boxes, patched onto people's backpacks, filling people's informal digital conversations as emoticons? Animation theory brings a new set of questions for understanding how people experience the labor of crafting self-representations and social unities, which we explore through an analysis of Suzanne Collins's Hunger Games trilogy. We frame the *Hunger Games* as a pedagogical text, one that instructs readers to use animation to explore the ways in which social and labor relations are mystified under contemporary capitalism, mystified along with the political forces that may constrain people's free will.

Keywords: Hunger Games; social unities; self-representation

Introduction

For those analyzing in Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, and Arlie Hochschild's wake, performance has often been taken as the dominant trope by which both scholars and people on the ground understand selves' relationships to capitalism. What if nowadays this is no longer the case? What if animation is becoming an increasingly prevalent trope – spread by the cartoon figures gracing lunch boxes, offered as avatars in people's online

gaming, dangling off of people's backpacks, filling people's informal digital conversations as emoticons – a trope which brings a new set of questions for understanding how people experience the labor of crafting self-representations and social unities. Can the lens of animation provide a new and productive set of analytical tools for assessing the social dynamics explored in cultural texts? In turning to animation as a trope for people on the ground and a heuristic for scholars, we draw inspirations from an expansive view of which cultural forms should be recognized as animation that includes not only cartoon strips, comic books, Claymation, cel animation, but also puppets and brands. The animation theory that finds people's interactions with these cultural forms especially generative was introduced in Teri Silvio's seminal 2010 article "Animation: The New Performance?" and developed further in her 2019 book, *Gods, Puppets and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan*. Silvio suggests that animation as a trope has become an ascendant rubric for expressing and interpreting contemporary experiences of capitalism, that animation enables every day social analysts to explore long-standing philosophical questions about the nature of free will, of materiality, of represented social unities. In doing so, she is building on a substantial literature in anime studies, linguistic anthropology, and ethnomethodology. Animation, also, is, of course, not new – puppets are centuries old. Yet Silvian animation theory offers to scholars new analytical foci, which is apparent in the underlying question Silvio poses, namely: how does animation in the contemporary moment re-formulate extant heuristics associated historically with animation to address people's current relationships to capitalism?

Most anthropologists inspired by Teri Silvio's work have begun to re-think how people experience congealed labor and the slippery misrecognitions that occur with single figures used to represent complex social unities. Silvian animation theory has enabled scholars to explore new takes on concepts of the self, on agency, and on labor. In doing so, they have turned ethnographically to cosplay, puppets, voice actors, playback singers, radio announcers, avatars and Facebook users, among others, as their object of study (See Fisher 2019; Manning and Gershon 2013; Nozawa 2013, 2021; Weidman 2021). In an attempt to extend the analytical purchase of this approach beyond anthropology, this article turns away from ethnographic sites and instead explores animation theory's applicability to the novel. By way of a case study, we turn to Suzanne Collins's popular Hunger Games trilogy, whose mass appeal makes it an apt example of the growing prevalence with which people engage with animation as a trope.

In triangulating animation theory, contemporary literature, and contemporary capital, we hope to achieve two objectives. We wish, for one, to invite scholars to begin asking what animation theory can offer literary analysis, and how it might supplement extant literary criticism that draws upon performance and performance theory. That is, we want to discuss how social analysis based on animation, and thus questions of how an icon

congeals the labor of many can supplement analyses based on performance, and thus questions of how an individual occupies a particular role. This, we stress, is about supplementing, not replacing, about shifting a focus on how interactions are structured, not discussing entirely new practices. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, we find that both performance and animation remain vital optics for assessing the ways in which characters understand themselves and their relationships with others.

We suggest that *The Hunger Games* has novelized other animated forms, that as Bakhtin suggests, the novel yet again has incorporated the surrounding elements of its genre ecology. Reading Collins's novels via animation theory also reveals telling formal parallels between literature and the broader range of animated texts, from graphic novels to gifs, available in the contemporary moment, that is, within the contemporary ecology of animation. This offers critical perspectives that performance alone cannot provide.

We wish to explore what animation theory might disclose about how the novel theorizes our current capitalist moment (Elliott 2013; Watt 1957). Reading through animation theory invites critics to bring under-appreciated components of the novels to the fore. It invites us to prioritize narrative elements that appear unreal, for instance, rather than those offering hyperbolized iterations of lived human or material relations. It likewise encourages us to focus on moments where characters appear as flat, taxonomic stereotypes rather than as cyphers for organic subject positions, resistant or otherwise. And finally, animation invites us to consider novelistic form, particularly as it intersects with the broader ecology of animated texts, rather than narrative content alone.

In our case study, Collins's series has typically been read as a dystopic exaggeration of the present. The trilogy pushes media and surveillance technologies, class and economic inequities, and political strife to some of their logical extremes in an effort to spin out the possible ramifications of leaving dire problems unchecked. When read through animation, however, we find that *The Hunger Games* does more than hyperbolize and forebode. We discover instead that Katniss Everdeen, the trilogy's sixteen-year-old protagonist, learns to interpret herself and her social relations through the logics of animation, exploring how certain characters' actions are best understood by taking them to be the visible or present nodes of a complex network of actants. In key moments of the novels, Katniss is juxtaposed with one of her love interests, Peeta, who operates far more in line with a performance rubric, bringing into sharper relief the distinctions between interpreting through an animation lens and a performance lens. Katniss is presupposing and uncovering a world filled with people who never act solely for themselves or on their own behalf, they are always nodes of others' congealed labor (and their own), representing various levels of scalable social unities. Peeta inhabits a world in which his labor is his own property, and his social personas are his own to occupy more or less persuasively.

This distinction also affects what kind of social analysis one does to understand why events unfold the ways that they do. Thus the books themselves invite readers to hone their own familiarity with animation as a trope. As Katniss struggles to employ an animated heuristic within an increasingly complex world, readers may step in to understand what she cannot.

We are framing *The Hunger Games* as a pedagogical text, one that instructs readers to use animation to explore the ways in which social and labor relations are mystified under contemporary capitalism, along with the political forces that may constrain people's free will. Rather than warning against the dystopic possibilities of tomorrow, *The Hunger Games* encourages an exploration of the connections between labor, community and political efficacy today (see also Sheldon 2015).

Animation Ascending

Silvio's opening position is to suggest that just as performance studies has as its ur-moment an actor fashioning a character, animation theory has at its conceptual core the trope of a character brought to animated life by many people: inkists, colorists, voice actors, as well as an audience's projection. These ur-moments become frameworks that shape the theoretical concerns that arise when using performance or animation to grapple with the social self. To develop a theory of social action based on performance's ur-moment is to concentrate on how an actor's skill brings a persona into observable being.[1] The actor engages with a script, or improvises. When employed as theory, performance encourages scholars to ask whether social actors recreate structures or break away from social scripts through spontaneous actions. Performance presumes a gap between the actor and the role, which allows one to focus on how fully the actor embodies the role, the relationship between reflexivity and agency, or how one's body can limit the identities that one inhabits. At the same time, actors are rarely alone on stage; they are interacting with others who are also performing, and thus wrestling with similar questions about scriptedness and improvisation, the back region self and the performing self (see also Goffman 1956; Butler 1990; McKenzie 2001).

For Silvio, performance offered an apropos trope for a Fordist capitalism, and animation better corresponds to neoliberal capitalism. While historically specific, then, animation as a trope does not replace performance entirely, but rather has become prevalent in part through its co-constitutive contrast with performance. Silvio is likewise careful to note that animation does not represent a radically new genre or analytical heuristic. Animation is better understood as a dominant cultural form, in Raymond Williams's sense of the term, that is as "a response to an extended social, economic and political system and a response to crisis within that system" (Williams 1975:21). Four points become relevant through this contrast: first, unlike performance, animation emphasizes that a unified

character is created by the work of many, and the work of many is not mystified, as it is from a performance vantage point (in which the make-up artist, costume designer, and scriptwriter are often invisible for those evaluating a performance). Second, animation interrogates how the audience's imagination helps construct the fantasy of a living, moving "organic totality." (Silvio 2010:430) Animated characters are often drawn with bold outlines and few details, underdetermined enough to encourage the audience to project a strong affective connection with the character. Third, asking about a self prior to the moment of performance becomes nonsensical under animation. "What is Snoopy's genuine self?" is a question grounded in a performance-based logic and applied inappropriately to an animated interaction.[2] Lastly, animation draws attention to the material form and the techniques involved in giving the illusion of life to an object. It is a question of ensoulment, of how a material body can become a vessel which many wills join together to animate. And thus manipulation in both the literal and figurative sense comes to a fore under animation. If the performance lens counterpoises agency to structure, animation counterpoises free will to control. In short, animation involves dichotomies between multiplicity and unity, "body and soul, manipulation and free will, objective reality and subjective imagination." (Silvio 2010:427)

If performance theory dominated readings of novels in the 80s and 90s, animation theory is poised to ascend in the present. Some novels written nowadays theorize how humans understand and represent themselves to each other and imagine the social as animations, not just performances of identity. In this article, we trace Katniss Everdeen's evolving social analysis over the course of the three novels to explore what Silvian animation theory has to offer semioticians and other scholars interested in the relations between the laboring self and contemporary capitalism. The narrative arc in Collins's trilogy not only portrays a protagonist who interprets her social interactions through an animation lens, but also imagines how a social analyst using animation logic to parse the world can grow in sophistication over the course of the three novels. We then explore the form of stereotyping that animation encourages and analyze how the social order that Katniss Everdeen navigates is one also structured along principles implicit in animation logic.

Hunger Games in the Ecology of Animation

The Hunger Games trilogy is told from the perspective of Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who has been her family's primary provider in a dystopian world in which a nation is carved into 12 known districts that are dominated by the Capital, a wealthy locus of government which requires Tributes chosen by lottery every year to compete against each other in a deadly game. The survivor(s) are given special status and privileges in a context where stark economic inequalities between the Capitol and the districts dominate. Katniss Everdeen chooses to compete in place of her younger sister, alongside the lottery selected male companion from her district, Peeta. The first book recounts how they win

the Games. The second book reveals the burgeoning rebellion, largely supported by a mysterious 13th district with scant resources whose functioning has its roots in Soviet-style resource allocation and civic logics. The third book charts how the ultimately successful rebellion unfolds, ostensibly led by Katniss Everdeen, who was established in the first book as a mediatized celebrity and icon of freedom.

To date, scholarship on *The Hunger Games* trilogy has addressed a bevy of issues drawn from the novels' narrative content. Critics typically frame the novels as adhering to science fiction's generic tendency to darkly reflect or exaggerate the present-day. Collins's dystopic world of Panem thus mirrors readers' minds ("it's about what's happening, right this minute, in the stormy psyche of the adolescent reader") along with their material surroundings (Miller 2010). These surroundings include contemporary forms of political oppression, exploitative economic conditions (Fisher 2012), or the omnipresence of surveillance technology and mediatized violence (Muller 2012).[3] Criticism has likewise interrogated the texts' engagement with gender and sexuality by identifying the characters and relationships that alternately buttress or resist normative behaviors and subjective identities.[4] The swishy, fashion-obsessed Capitol citizens and the gender queer Katniss, who prefers hunting to discussing clothing or emotions, alternately stand as figures of ideological rebellion or reinforcement.

Collins's depiction of Katniss's emotional interiority abjures the characteristics typically associated with psychological realist characterization. Whereas lifelike characters display intricate emotional lives, Katniss retains a striking ability to move rapidly between distinct emotional states. During her second stint in the Hunger Games arena, for instance, Katniss watches as two fellow Tributes sacrifice their lives to protect her and Peeta, her fellow tribute from District 12. Her subsequent feelings of confusion—one tribute's sacrifice "makes no sense at all"—and mourning quickly dissipate, however (Collins 2009:302). The following day she decides to play a prank on the rationale that "there's so little opportunity for fun left in my life" (Collins 2009:316). Katniss and a fellow tribute scare an unsuspecting Peeta awake, and "laugh [their] heads off" (Collins 2009:317). This unbridled laughter implies that the previous day's confusion and mourning have utterly dissipated.

Arguably, such hard emotional shifts could be chalked up to trauma, or, as likely, the repeated claims in the book about audience demands within the Hunger Games. Katniss regularly reminds herself that viewers and potential sponsors—who can send care packages into the arena—desire drama of every stripe. Brutality and affective intimacy accordingly must follow in quick succession. Nonetheless, even outside the Hunger Games proper Katniss typically appears as a series of "conventionalized [affective] signatures" similar to Japanese anime characters' affective signals (Silvio 2010: 430).

Indeed one hallmark of Katniss's character is her refusal to engage with complex emotions. Pure anger and defensiveness come easy, but she finds herself unwilling to engage with more intricate affective states. Her refusal to determine whether she desires friendship or romantic relationships with the novels' two male leads offers a case in point: "I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason Gale and Peeta do not coexist well together in my thoughts" (Collins 2008:197).

Collins's formal approach to portraying Katniss shares much with the simplified characterizations offered by such animated media as cartoon strips. If cartoons omit "much of the ambiguity and complex characterization which are the hallmarks of modern literature," (McCloud 1993:45) Scott McCloud argues, they compensate via "amplification through simplification" (McCloud 1993: 30). Katniss's intensity of character—the heat of her anger, the force of her bravery—reflects precisely this stripped down but heightened representation. McCloud posits that simplified characters likewise offer more universal appeal. Katniss's abrupt affective shifts, which compartmentalize emotions into singular affective moments, formally echo the gaps between animated cels. Viewers must either overlook or fill in these gaps to experience a holistic narrative, much as Collins's readers must do the work of experiencing Katniss as an organic totality. Readers are thus drawn into the very act of creating a character. Katniss's broad popularity among readers may thus stem not from her roundedness as a character, but from her flatness.

Much as she vivisects organic subjectivities into conventional affective components, so Collins reifies and flattens out common modes of economic production. In doing so she generates further resemblances to other contemporary forms of animation. Each district in Panem is synonymous with a means of production: District 4 is equated with fishing, District 11 with agriculture, District 12 with mining.[5] While all the districts can be represented through icons of production, the Capitol is both all consumption and all automation. Few seem to labor in the Capitol, which enjoys technology so sophisticated that it borders on the magical. "You need only whisper a type of food from a gigantic menu into a mouthpiece and it appears, hot and steamy, before you in less than a minute." Collins presents the national economy in broad brushstrokes, with no nuanced indication of how precisely trade is organized or how resources are distributed between districts and the Capitol. The flat equation between production and location is also projected onto the districts' representatives in the games. When the Tributes represent their districts in public, the costumes all refer to these cartoonish takes on the means of production. Their physical characteristics likewise index their native industries. The District 11 tribute from Book 1, Rue, leaps deftly across trees due to her district's expertise in arboreal agriculture. District, means of production, Tribute—all are inextricably woven together as a taxonomic form of stereotype.

Other forms of animation rely upon similar forms of reified personification, as Silvio points out (Silvio 2019). For an example, she draws readers' attention to the anime *Axis Hetalia*, first developed in 2006 by Hidekaz Himaruya, which offers a collection of not terribly well-connected vignettes of world history retold as the interactions of stereotypical personas. Germany is an uptight young man fixated on following rules and imposing order, and is constantly exasperated by but fond of Italy, a romantic, dramatically emotional, and careless younger friend. Similarly, America is portrayed as a teenager with a penchant for junk food who is often given unheeded advice by his older brother, England. Just as in *The Hunger Games*, where modes of production transform into allegorical representations endowed with few specifics, in *Axis Hetalia* the personified nations' historical relationships become the stuff of conventional stereotypes peppered with cartoonishly broad allusions to actual historical events (Silvio 2019).

Crucially, the animated stereotyping upon which Hunger Games draws is based on a taxonomic rather than a dyadic form of stereotype. In dyadic stereotypes, the Other is composed of abject qualities created through contrast with the self: the Self projects onto the Other all the qualities that the Self disavows. Not so for taxonomic stereotypes, which are not based on A and not-A contrasts but rather a set of positive contrasts (Silvio 2019). Different categories in a taxonomic classification may share the same qualities, both Germany personified and England personified might be lovers of order, or District 1 and District 2 might both produce Career Tributes for the Games. What makes a category distinctive is the precise way in which it combines a number of attributes; no stereotype in a taxonomic system duplicates the same set of qualities or attributes as another category. In *The Hunger Games*, just as both performance and animation co-exist, so too do dyadic and taxonomic forms of stereotypes. The Districts are in a dyadic relationship with the Capitol, forced upon them by the Capitol's imperial practices. Yet vis-à-vis each other, the Districts exist in a relationship of taxonomic stereotypes that center principally around modes of production.

Notably, the perspective presumed by taxonomic stereotyping resonates with the deconstructed form of subjectivity that Katniss embodies. Self-Other contrasts presume that one is occupying a perspective: one sees the Other from an oppositional vantage point.[6] Taxonomic stereotypes, by contrast, suggest an objective take. One views the possible stereotypes created in this system from a god's-eye view, as what it means to be a Pisces does not depend on whether the contrast is with a Libra or a Sagittarius. Although there are systems of complex oppositions underlying the construction of taxonomic systems such as Meyer-Briggs, astrology, or the Howe-Strauss take on generations, these interwoven oppositions are not how one socially mobilizes being an INTJ, a Pisces, or a millennial. Conversely, this is not to say that taxonomic stereotypes are inevitably a-perspectival when deployed in practice, merely that this is an implicit

structure of taxonomic forms. This means that when Collins's readers view Panem's taxonomic economy through Katniss's eyes, they gain no insight into Katniss's individual subjectivity. Instead they are encouraged to view her, along with the other District 12 inhabitants and indeed all characters in the series, as constituent members of stereotypical sociopolitical groups that are not oppositionally determined around absence.

Katniss as Animated Subject

Through its flat, stereotypical representations of characters and economies alike, *The Hunger Games* trilogy demonstrates a formal overlap with animated genres. Notably, these genres often deprioritize mimetic representation to instead encourage conceptual engagement. That is, animation's demonstrably derivative aesthetics prompt audiences to reflect not on "the world without" but "the world within," the world of thoughts and ideas (McCloud 1993:41). Beyond her novels' form, Collins invites such a conceptual engagement from readers by endowing her protagonist with an animated perspective. Katniss views herself and her social environment in animated terms; she also becomes a more adept social analyst as the trilogy proceeds. This development moves in fits and starts, and at times Katniss struggles to interpret her increasingly complex surroundings. At such moments, readers are invited to adopt the more refined animated perspective that rests just outside Katniss's grasp. In our conclusion, we reflect upon the relation between the didacticism inherent to Collins's novels—the ways in which they invite readers to hone their own animated outlooks—and literature's role in capitalist relations.

Katniss's inclination for viewing herself through animation surfaces most vividly in her relationship with her body. Katniss consistently approaches her body through a cautious reflexivity. The condition forced upon her by the Capitol encourages this distance between self and body. Her first spoken words in the novel, muttered outside the confines of the district walls—"District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety"—lead immediately to a reflection on surveillance, and the need to monitor constantly how one might appear to others, as even this muttering might be observed and repeated to the authorities (Collins 2008:5). This reflection leads to a description of how Katniss learned to transform her "features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts"[7] for political expediency (Collins 2008:6). From that point on, the reader is encouraged to track both how Katniss interprets her contexts and what she believes she is emoting, with signs that she is not as in control of how she is being interpreted as she might wish. Haymitch, a former Tribute and Hunger Games victor turned coach, among others repeatedly interacts with her as though she is surly and recalcitrant. Indeed, Haymitch goes as far as to inform her: "You've got about as much charm as a dead slug" (Collins 2008:117). Part of the interpretive puzzle and pleasure in deciphering *The Hunger Games* stems from paying attention to how Katniss animates her body strategically and occasionally ineptly in anticipation of her multiple audiences. Here the distinction between

a bad performer and an inadequate animator may seem to collapse – after all, bad performers also have the charm of a dead slug. For our purposes, the difference lies in how one interprets the inadequacy.

A performance-oriented analytic might keep the focus on Katniss's distance from her body, and thus highlight the actor-persona tension. An animation-oriented analytic would by contrast focus on Katniss's dawning consciousness of the ways in which others tangibly craft public image. Once she becomes a tribute, Katniss acquires a team of image-makers: a costume designer, makeup artists, a strategist, and so on. Katniss as the first person narrator draws attention to the ways in which these individuals render her into a symbol that captures both the Districts' and the Capitol's attention, regardless of how effectively she inhabits her own body. At the hands of her team she initially becomes The Girl on Fire—her customized clothing, dazzling makeup, and carefully selected speech all underscore her "fieriness"—and later the Mockingjay, a symbol of resistance and unity among Panem's districts. Both figures are distinct from Katniss Everdeen and available for others' affective projects. For most of the novels, in fact, Katniss's views her body as the accumulated product of others' labor, so much so that it is noteworthy in the third book when Katniss momentarily feels 'herself' again when looking at her body. Yet this self, the body that "looks like me," is a body replete, as she notes, with the traces of other's labor to preserve or monitor her – such as the scar given to her when a tracer was removed from her body (Collins 2010:76).

In the first novel Katniss evaluates others and chooses her alliances through an animation logic. Her commitments to others are deeply grounded in how her labor sustains them, and vice versa. Prim, her sister, first appears through her gift of goat cheese for Katniss—the first food item among many that Katniss almost invariably describes with a keen attention. Indeed, she maintains a laser focus on who does and does not sustain her bare life. "What would my life be like on a daily basis," she ponders later in the novel. "Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I'm not really sure who I am, what my identity is" (Collins 2008:310). Her deep-rooted frustration with her mother lies in the latter's inability to support her family after Katniss's father's death, an inability that forces Katniss to become a hunter and primary provider for her family.

Even as Katniss's social connections expand, they remain grounded in the exchange of labor, whether material and immaterial. This is most clearly delineated in the trajectory of her friendship with Gale, another District 12 inhabitant. After an initial live-and-let-live set of encounters in the woods, Gale and Katniss develop a deep friendship over several months. At the core of this relationship is mutual supportive labor: they hunt together and help the other provide for their families. "I showed him what plants to eat and eventually gave him one of our precious bows. And then one day, without either of us saying it, we

became a team. Dividing the work and the spoils" (Collins 2008:111). A successful team, Katniss implies, arises through the mutually beneficial exchange of labor and knowledge. The rest of District 12's inhabitants remain shadowy, uninteresting figures for Katniss. From her animated perspective, they are unremarkable and unimportant because, unlike Gale, they cannot provide the forms of knowledge and labor that materially compose her subjectivity.[8]

A narrative arc running throughout the trilogy traces Katniss's growing skill and confidence as an animated social analyst. She becomes increasingly adept at viewing others as condensed bundles of relationships and as representatives of social unities that are substantiated through labor and exchange. In the first novel, Katniss repeatedly expresses confusion regarding why people act the way that they do, uncertainty regarding how to categorize relationships, and perplexity when people outside her established social unities donate their labor to further her survival or interests. Thus when a classmate gives her a small gift, a mockingjay pin, to take to the Hunger Games, she is "left thinking that maybe Madge really has been my friend all along" (Collins 2008: 38). Only being given an object, and so being brought into a gift exchange relationship with Madge, allows Katniss to accept that their relationship has significance and depth.

Katniss relies upon her animation take on labor, and persists in using only this lens as the framework for assessing others. Within the controlled environments of Book 1, this restricted focus on material and bodily animation functions well for Katniss. Indeed Collins limits Katniss to the fenced-in District 12, the Hunger Games Training Center (itself surrounded by a magnetic force field), and to the Games themselves, which transpire within a closed, carefully monitored environment.[9] Katniss survives in each of these environments by maintaining a strict focus on preserving herself by defending those who safeguard her body. Beginning in Book 2, however, Collins exposes character and reader alike to a larger set of potential animating networks. As a Hunger Games victor, Katniss visits other districts for the first time. With these additional geographical areas come interactions with more diverse social, economic, and political networks. Along with gaining a more complete understanding of the Capitol's material oppression of other districts, Katniss glimpses a simmering political uprising just beginning to take hold in certain regions of Panem.

Within these enlarged confines, Katniss begins to better understand what unities others might represent, and which unities she herself is taken to represent. She gradually accepts her value as a political symbol, for instance. Early in the final novel she rattles off the various power players that had sought to animate her. These include the Capitol's Gamemakers and President Snow, who sought to use Katniss to quell the nascent resistance movement, along with the rebels and their leader, Coin—"another power player

who has decided to use me as a piece in her games"— who seek to present Katniss as the symbolic Mockingjay (Collins 2010:59). She agrees to serve as the rebels' political icon, and felicitously describes herself as "a puppet being manipulated" when she appears in their propaganda videos (Collins 2010:74). With her dawning political consciousness comes an increasingly robust capacity to identify animating networks, and to secure herself a comfortable place within them. At the same time, Katniss's skills as an animated social analyst repeatedly falter. After learning about the dawning revolution, Katniss encounters Plutarch Heavensbee, the government's Head Gamemaker, in the Capitol. Plutarch surreptitiously shows Katniss a curious pocket watch.

> For just a moment an image appears, glowing as if by candlelight. It's another mockingjay. Exactly like the pin on my dress. (Collins 2009:83)

Collins drops a not-too-subtle hint to readers that Plutarch has joined the revolutionary struggle, hence the iconic mockingjay on his watch. Plutarch's request for Katniss to keep his "secret" brings this alliance home. But Katniss interprets the event differently: "he probably paid a fortune for [the watch] and now he can't show it to anyone because he's afraid someone will make a cheap, knockoff version" (Collins 2009: 83). Here Katniss's animated perspective misdirects her attention away from political iconography and toward labor relations. Much as she focuses on the exchange of labor that constitutes her body in Book 1, Katniss reads the watch as a crucial component of Plutarch's socioeconomic identity. The "secret" mockingjay strikes her as a bit of cultural capital that separates the Gamemaker from the Capitol's less elite society.

In such scenes, Collins encourages keen-eyed readers to catch the animating networks that Katniss initially misses. The trilogy's second installment is in fact an extended exercise in honing readers' ability to make sense of labor and social unities that Katniss finds confusing. Thrust back into the Hunger Games arena, Katniss watches in amazement as other Tributes sacrifice themselves to keep her and Peeta alive. Much as she sloughs off the perusal of complicated emotions in Book 1, Katniss seems unwilling to probe the motivation behind their curious actions. She prefers instead to frame her relation to other Tributes in terms of material debts: "He saved Peeta and let Mags die and I don't know why. Only that I can never settle the balance owed between us" (Collins 2009:316). Katniss ultimately learns that the rebels had coordinated with other Tributes to extract her and Peeta from the arena due to their value as symbols of political resistance. Once the social unity formed through the labor of resistance emerges, the Tributes' actions become legible. While an infuriating revelation for Katniss—she seethes that the rebels used her "without consent, without knowledge"—for readers the rebel network

functions more as a puzzle to be unraveled by carefully interpreting such clues as Plutarch's watch (Collins 2009:385).

Even at the trilogy's close, blind spots persist for Katniss, which in turn further encourage audiences to explore the heuristic of animation. While she fumes at the rebels for incorporating her into their social unity without consent, for instance, her costume designer Cinna remains "brilliant" and "lovely" to the last (Collins 2010:12). Katniss seems to forget that Cinna, too, foisted her into the role of political symbol without her knowledge or permission. In Book 2 Cinna has Katniss wear a dress that unexpectedly transforms into the iconic mockingjay while on stage. Such a moment allows the novels' latent pedagogy to more intimately address issues of agency and control. Animation, by focusing on the ties that both constitute but also bind the individual, brings this dichotomy to the fore. Cinna's mild, compassionate demeanor vehemently shapes Katniss's relationship with her designer. She frames his costumes as thoughtful "gifts" that allow her to overcome her performative shortcomings, rather than as material constraints that tightly constrict her range of possible public actions. Readers must decide for themselves whether Cinna truly does enable and empower Katniss, or whether his costumes constitute a more subtle form of subjectification.[10]

When Performance and Animation Try to Fall in Love

As she hones her capacity to use animation logics, Katniss stands in increasingly sharp contrast with her fellow tribute and eventual love interest, Peeta Mellark. Unlike Katniss, Peeta is a consummate performer. The incompatibility of their perspectives explains in part why the two characters maintain an uneasy relationship throughout the trilogy. More broadly, their dynamic shows that animation is necessarily determined by performance, and vice versa. Animation and performance are mutually constitutive and mutually exclusive heuristics.

From the moment he is thrust into public view as a District 12 tribute, Peeta deftly manages a public and a private persona, a keystone of effective performance. Katniss repeatedly notices his masterful ability to present a natural, seemingly authentic façade, and to fluidly navigate performance's demands. Prior to their first Hunger Games, Peeta effortlessly follows Haymitch's mandate to appear friendly and likable when on camera. Peeta smiles and waves at gawking crowds; he "laughs and asks questions right on cue" when talking to Katniss. "He's much better at this than I am" she concludes (Collins 2008: 98). Katniss recognizes that Peeta can manipulate the gap between actor and persona so masterfully that observers are ultimately uncertain as to whether he is performing or not. In *The Hunger Games'* take on performance, this uncertainty is a mark of performative finesse.[11]

Peeta's adeptness at performativity means that he excels at improvisation and world-building as well.[12] When Capitol security forces unexpectedly arrive at Katniss's home, Peeta and Haymitch quickly allay their suspicions that Katniss has been trespassing outside District 12's confines by distracting them with playful banter. *"This is why they've made it this far,"* Katniss thinks to herself, *"Nothing throws them"* (Collins 2009:156, italics in original). Peeta's impeccable "wits" allow him not only to confidently improvise, but to craft an increasingly complex narrative about his life with Katniss (Collins 2009:256). Prior to their second Hunger Games, he cunningly explains to enraptured audiences that he has secretly married Katniss, who is pregnant with their child. This false but compelling narrative produces a reality that "even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can't ignore" (Collins 2009:256). The prospect of a young, recently wedded, and pregnant Katniss being slaughtered draws the prudence of the Hunger Games—the Capitol's most prominent ideological spectacle—into question. For her part, Katniss sees this narrative not as a story but as an alternative reality, something that "could be true now" if the Capitol had not made childbearing an unbearable burden (Collins 2009: 257). Peeta's performances thus resist hegemonic ideology, from Katniss's animation perspective, by conjuring spaces in which other worlds at least momentarily exist.

By contrast, smooth performance and effective improvisation forever lie outside Katniss's grasp. Her difficulties arise in the trilogy's first installment, when a live interview "seems to call for a big, dramatic speech, but all I get out is one almost inaudible sentence" (Collins 2009:369). While improvisational discourse stretches Katniss to her limits, sustained performance is nearly impossible. This becomes readily apparent when the rebel coalition attempts to place Katniss in a series of staged propaganda videos. The result fails utterly due to Katniss's flat, two-dimensional delivery. "I can't pull it off," she confesses to herself. "I can't stand in a television studio wearing a costume and makeup in a cloud of fake smoke and rally the districts to victory" (Collins 2010:73).

Given their diametric opposition, it is no wonder that Peeta consistently baffles Katniss and vice versa. Throughout their first Hunger Games Katniss oscillates between viewing Peeta as a deceptive threat and a comforting ally. The third book finds Peeta in a similar conundrum as he lists off the various terms—"Friend. Lover. Victor. Enemy. Fiancée."—with which he has attempted "to figure [Katniss] out" (Collins 2010:270). Using the performance/animation lens to unpack this trilogy suggests that that Katniss and Peeta are star-crossed lovers for the majority of the narrative because Peeta operates according to a performance-based logic and Katniss an animation one.

A reader determined to interpret Katniss through a performance lens might overlook this crucial contradiction, however. Such a reader might argue that Katniss *can* in fact perform,

but only through improvisation. And indeed, Katniss can deliver a rousing propaganda speech after watching the Capitol bomb a rebel hospital. Real combat motivates her in a way the soundstage's simulated warfare cannot.

> "I want to tell people that if you think for one second the Capitol will treat us fairly if there's a cease-figure, you're deluding yourself. Because you know who they are and what they do." My hands go out automatically, as if to indicate the whole horror around me. (Collins 2010:99)

This scene suggests that only the scripted half of the performance-based dichotomy between rehearsed and improvisational action lies outside Katniss's grasp. By contrast, a reader deploying an animation perspective would observe that the battlefield provides Katniss a suitable context in which to identify the people and objects linked to her through social labor. Collins invites such a reading by pointedly including Katniss's instinctive gesture toward "the whole horror"—the collapsed buildings, charred civilian bodies, and wounded rebels that surround her. Just before the bombing, it dawns on Katniss that these rebels and civilians form many of the "thousands and thousands of people from the districts at my side," key nodes in the animating networks that have kept her alive and the Capitol at bay (Collins 2010:90). These details invite readers to recognize Katniss as functioning best in environments that make animating networks readily legible.

Conclusion: Animation, The Novel, and Contemporary Capital

Reading novels as animated texts invites fresh critical perspectives on not only their characterization and internal mechanics, but on the relationship between contemporary literature and contemporary capital. By encouraging readers to adopt the hermeneutic of animation, we argue, *The Hunger Games* teaches its audience how to engage with economic relations at the turn of the century. We build upon the work of such literary historians as Deidre Lynch, Ian Baucom, and Mary Poovey, who underscore literature's long tradition of economic education. Lynch tellingly highlights the importance of characterization within didactic literature.[13] The flat characters of eighteenth century British novels are not hallmarks of inferior literary production for Lynch, but rather pedagogical devices that helped readers navigate a nascent consumer capitalism. The flat, stereotypical characters populating *The Hunger Games* trilogy hint at its comparable capacity for instruction. But what specific attitudes towards contemporary capitalism do Collins's novels invite?

In this article, we have suggested that animation encourages readers to engage with political economy in two ways that differ from those offered by performance. First, a performance lens might lead readers to focus on whether an event is repetitious or

transformative, in other words, does the performance reproduce social structures or create change? Animation shifts the focus away from this dichotomy of script versus improvisation, and interrogates instead the tension between free will and control. As a quintessential animation analyst, Katniss focuses on the degree to which others control her. She likewise constantly assesses the degree to which others can elicit action and alliance. The novels pointedly frame information as a central concern for the animated perspective on free will, aligning neatly with neoliberal emphasis on information as the core to market decisions. When Katniss knows the relations in which others are engaging, she believes she can interact with them via her own free will. She conversely interprets withheld information as the cornerstone of external control, hence her initial seething discontent at being "used without knowledge" by the rebels (Collins 2009: 385).

Animation also poses a social arena in which labor is not obscured, a perspective performance struggles to provide. Katniss does not embody celebrity in the classic sense wherein the labor that produces a public persona is obfuscated or fetishized.[14] On the contrary, she points directly to the labor that constructs certain types of social and political actors, including The Girl on Fire and the Mockingjay. And if Katniss develops her capacity for social analysis by learning to discern labor alliances, readers are expected to be even more competent. The books consistently invite audience to draw connections that Katniss does not recognize.[15] Moreover, this resistance to fetishism exists across scales in *The Hunger Games*. By casting a national economy as a legible set of taxonomic embodiments—and not as a complex, perplexing entity that only experts can grasp—the novels effectively resist contemporary narratives that ascribe agency to abstractions such as "the market" or "the economy."[16] Free from the fetishism of all stripes, the economy comes to a simplified but intelligible life.

Animation, in sum, represents a rigorous diagnostic. It offers an effective means of mapping the political and economic relations that striate a particular moment, particularly when control, free will, and obfuscation are dominant concerns. However, the trilogy's closing tableau decisively demonstrates animation's limits.

More than fifteen years after she helped topple both the totalitarian Capitol forces and the militaristic rebel government, Katniss resides in District 12 with Peeta and their children. She offers no insight into Panem's current economic, political, or social structures. She focuses on her new nuclear family, although she does mention in passing that the district's mines have closed and that a medicine factory was erected in their place. Collins thus brings Katniss full circle as the animating network of intimate familial relations once again dominates and orients her perspective. Katniss's telling return to her old district, along with her recreation of familiar kinship networks in the face of repeated declarations that she would never want children of her own, evinces an inability to imagine life otherwise.

This incapacity resonates with her take on control and free will as well. Once the novels' extant sites of political authority (the Capitol and the rebel coalition) dissipate, Katniss sees no other options but to return home. Readers are likewise left without a clear sense of how Panem's citizens might rebuild a more functional or equitable society in the wake of such collapse.

However fecund its diagnostic capacities, then, animation cannot offer the improvisatory world-building enabled by performance.[17] Its careful attention to a political economy's precise mechanics brings systemic shortcomings to light, but does not point to solutions. Similarly, animation deemphasizes the possibility of creating systemic social change through consensus by attending with such narrow focus to barriers to free will as well as social change that revolve primarily around resistance to control.

The stakes of this inability to fathom alternatives become clearer when we read the trilogy against its neoliberal moment. Released between 2008 and 2010, the trilogy and its animated perspective resonate with the dominant ideological tenets of capitalism in the early twentieth century. These include the assertion that neoliberal expertise alone can solve neoliberalism's problems (particularly those made evident by the 2008 financial crisis), along with the related claim that the now global reach of contemporary capitalism means that it has encompassed all other socioeconomic relations.[18] In its inability to prompt readers to imagine more salutary options, *The Hunger Games* reinforces the idea that there are no alternatives to contemporary capital.

By laying out its inherent limitations, we do not aim to undercut animation's potential as a critical hermeneutic. Instead, much as Katniss accepts that she needs Peeta at the trilogy's conclusion—he alone can provide "the dandelion in the spring," a recurrent symbol of optimism and propagation—we acknowledge that animation works best in tandem with performance (Collins 2010:388). Approaching performance and animation in this fashion—as two fields inherently defined and determined by one another—opens new critical avenues for literary and cultural critics, social scientists, and political economists alike.

Endnotes

1. Even in the moments when Goffman and other theorists of performance discuss how a role set or team is constructed, this relationship and/or gap between actor and persona remains central to the analysis, which is distinct from the animation take. This is most visible when Goffman discusses how teams collude in putatively bad behavior – lying or deviating from other broadly agreed upon norms. (see Goffman 1956: 54-56)↩

2. While theorists of performance, such as Goffman or Butler, might take issue with the possibility of ever finding anyone's genuine self, the performance perspective encourages social analysts on the ground to explore this question. For Goffman or Butler, the genuine self might be an endlessly deferred (yet desired) construct. From an animation perspective, there isn't even deferral, it is not a knowable possibility.↵

3. See also Don Latham and Jonathan M. Hollister's (2014) argument that the novels present information literacy as a vital aspect of effective political resistance.↵

4. Michelle Abate (2015) finds ambivalent representations of queerness in the trilogy. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls (2014) contend that within the film adaptation of the trilogy, Katniss embodies gendered and racial normativity when portrayed by the white actor Jennifer Lawrence.↵

5. Space limits don't allow a detailed discussion of the animation logic underlying branding, but see Silvio 2011, 2019.↵

6. Thus what it means to be white depends on what it means to be black. See Gal 2016 for a discussion of the a-perspectival quality of taxonomic stereotypes. ↵

7. Masks can operate both under a performance rubric and an animation rubric, since masks not only conceal the actor but also have the potential to turn the actor's costume into an object to be manipulated.↵

8. The only exceptions are individuals with whom Katniss trades for food, such as Greasy Sae, the black market soup-maker.↵

9. Katniss does regularly slip into the woods surrounding District 12.↵

10. Here we borrow from Judith Butler's work on performance and performativity, *Gender Trouble*, 1990. Butler rightly draws attention to performativity's gendered dynamics by emphasizing women's visible and strict repertoire of performances.↵

11. This echoes Richard Dyer's (1986) view of celebrity.↵

12. Here we evoke José Esteban Muñoz's crucial work on performance's productive capacities, particularly in *Disidentifications* (1999).↵

13. Baucom likewise links the "typical" characterization of eighteenth century novels with the rise of finance capitalism in the UK. Character types—the brigand, the merchant, and so on—offered simplified iterations of the subjects that readers might encounter in capitalism's socioeconomic networks.↵

14. This animated relationship to celebrity is true only of the novels, not of the movies. The movies encourage, especially on this front, far more of a performance-oriented perspective on these social interactions.↵

15. We see Katniss's blind spots as stemming from a lack of analytical competence or knowledge, not from a fetishized perspective.↵

16. Anthropologists such as Karen Ho (2009) and sociologists like Mitchel Y. Abolafia (2001) have made concerted efforts to combat such dislocations of agency through their ethnographies of contemporary financial institutions.↵

17. See Breger 2017 for a discussion of performance, narrative, and world-making.↵

18. Mark Fisher's *Capitalism Realism* (2009) explores capitalism's apparent universalism, while Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste* (2014) maps the stagnation of neoclassical economic thought along with neoliberalism's curious survival after the 2008 economic crisis. Both systems of thought, Mirowski notes, claim that they can provide the only workable solutions to the very disasters they helped create.↵

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