

**IMAGINING RACE AND NEOLIBERALISM IN YOUNG ADULT DYSTOPIAN  
CINEMA**

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## Abstract

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a unique surge of young adult dystopian media from Hollywood and other popular entertainment industries. Trending after the release of *The Hunger Games*, the genre would continue to produce film and television series towards the turn of the decade. This thesis explores the intersection of politics, film, and television, and examines how young adult dystopian media transcoded tumultuous discourse of race, colonialism, capitalism, and neoliberalism which were circulating at the time. By reading three popular media texts, *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, and the television series *The 100*, I suggest that these cultural artifacts, and the young adult dystopian genre as a whole, provides a spaces for exploring issues of concern in our own society by projecting them on the landscape of a dystopian future.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### YA Dystopian Cinema

In 2012, Lions Gate Entertainment released the screen adaptation for the first installment of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* book trilogy, which became an instant success. Directed by Gary Ross, *The Hunger Games* (2012) film banked a whopping \$691.2 million worldwide (IMDB, 2017) and served as a watershed moment for the film industry that opened the floodgates to Hollywood for the next big cinematic craze - young adult (YA) dystopian cinema. Dovetailing the success of *The Hunger Games*, a cascade of YA dystopia would emerge as some of the most popular tent-pole entertainment to be released in recent years. The *Hunger Games* would go on to produce three more sequels; *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay Part 1* (2014) and *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015). Similar to *The Hunger Games* novels, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy has been adopted into the *Divergent Series* franchise spurring three films: *Divergent* (2014), *Insurgent* (2015) and *Allegiant* (2016). Straying slightly from formulaic production, *The Maze Runner* franchise – the only series to feature a male, albeit still a white lead – has also seen commercial and financial success with two films currently released and a third well under production; *The Maze Runner* (2014), *Scorch Trials* (2015) and *The Death Cure* (2018). The genre has also found success with standalone films like *City of Ember* (2008), *Never Let Me Go* (2010), *Enders Game* (2013), *The Host* (2013), *The Giver* (2014), *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave* (2016) and the popular television series *The 100* (2014-present). Although these cultural artifacts vary slightly from one to another, they all have basic themes, motifs, and plot points that find young people wrestling with authoritarianism, military state apparatus, environmental collapse, alien colonization, and

harsh, unsavory social organization.

Perhaps YA dystopia's most defining characteristic is that it features children under the age of 18 in a post-apocalyptic world that slightly resembles the one in which we are currently living. Functioning as a "warning sign" for where we may be headed, in these dystopian futures, young people are represented as being vanguards of seismic political and social revolutions. For example, in *Divergent*, 16-year-old Tris Prior (Shailene Woodley) is identified as being 'divergent' and leads a charge to challenge and upend the faction system, which permanently places citizens within a social and political hierarchy. In *The Giver*, Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) begins to dismantle the oppressive uniformity imposed on citizens by the state. In *The Host*, Melanie (Saoirse Ronan) embarks on a mission to end colonial oppression from body-snatching aliens. For the most part, these films are routinely celebrated as offering a platform which collectively expresses the plight of young people and which offers a blueprint for acts of political resistance (surely it is no coincidence that these films found incredible popularity in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy movement, and during a time when the U.S. government's Orwellian surveillance-apparatus became the new cultural norm). However, this thesis does not see popular YA dystopian films, and the discourse inscribed in them, as a new or completely unique cultural phenomenon. Of course, several YA dystopian films borrow from seminal literary and cinematic texts which preceded them. For example, where the grotesque imagery of young people killing each other can be traced back to *Lord of the Flies*, fears of a hyper-authoritarian-surveillance dystopian state can be found in Orwell's *1984*.

The subject matter of this thesis was chosen due to the popularity of the genre,



and because it was so often cited and discussed as highly political subject matter. Yet, I found a startling disjuncture between the revolutionary gusto stoked by YA dystopian films and the political tragedy befalling many young people to which the films were targeted. For example, I could not separate my thoughts about the epidemic of youth suicide attempts on Canadian reservations while watching the neocolonial fantasies in *The 100*. Nor could I detach the images and videos of young people of colour, like Tamir Rice and Michael Brown, being gunned down by police while watching young people spark a revolution against the police state in *The Hunger Games*. Unfortunately, neither of these cases seemed to be adequately represented in and by these media texts. By linking the predicaments of young people to the meaning, messages, and images that these films purport to represent, I found that these texts required an intervention, one that opens an avenue of discussion to examine how racial politics and neoliberalism are wielded in these films to better suit a dominant social order.

## **Literature Review**

In relation to scholarly inquiry, most academic literature which focuses on the YA dystopian texts that are highlighted in this thesis is very limited to examinations of the first installment of *The Hunger Games* series. Both the film and the novel have received scholarly analysis that has used various theories and methods to draw out unique perspectives of the narrative. For example, Park and Yamashiro (2015) have examined the role of food in *The Hunger Games*, arguing that cuisine serves as a foil by which power, politics, and privilege are expressed. Unsurprisingly though, an overwhelming

amount of literature on *The Hunger Games* has been dedicated to the ways in which *Games* works to subvert gender norms, stereotypes, and the tension that arises when transgressive gender politics are undercut by heteronormativity. Wholoshyn, Taber and Lane (2013) have discussed the various ways in which main characters in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* book trilogy (Katniss, Gale, and Peeta) embody and challenge gender norms and heteronormative behavior. Essentially outlining that although the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is situated as a strong female protagonist, she is still constrained to cis-gender and heteronormative behavior. Continuing with the examination of gender construction, Taber, Woloshyn and Lane (2013) documented the experience of four young girls who were struggling readers and their embodied experiences of becoming aware of, and critiquing, gender norms while reading *The Hunger Games*. What they found was that structured engagement with the text persuaded critical thinking and recognition of sociocultural gender issues that pertained to the young readers. Stepping away from embodied experience while engaging with a more hermeneutical discussion of gender, Kirby (2015) has argued that the protagonist in *The Hunger Games* films is a contemporary female action hero that serves as a "progressive" model for feminism. By a similar token, Oliver (2014) argues that Katniss is an "extravagant girl" whose ambivalent gender identity allows for new possibilities to find gender identity.

Violence in YA dystopia literature and film has also been explored to a certain degree. Latham & Hollister (2013) have deconstructed *The Hunger Games* book trilogy and its correlation between media literacy and militant insurgency. Also, the contextualization of child soldiers and dying children has been taken into account. Rosen

& Rosen (2012) situate children and young people as child soldiers in *The Hunger Games* within a broader humanitarian discourse of children, while McGuire (2015) examines the cultural fixation of dead and dying children in a wider context of public mass shooting involving children. These points are explored to a similar extent by Shau Ming Tan's (2013) study of children and young people's sacrifice of innocence in the name of violent entertainment and revolution. Further, Sloan, Sawyer, Warner & Jones (2014) question the extent to which YA dystopia serves as violence training for contemporary youth. In part, these examples highlight the abundance of attention that has been placed on gender and violence pertaining to YA dystopia within academic literature.

However, analysis of racial politics within YA dystopia is relatively absent from scholarly analysis, though there are some notable exceptions to this omission. Gilbert-Hickey (2014) has addressed this omission within the literature with a critical analysis of the outcry that was experienced after the release of the first *Hunger Games* film, which cast a young, biracial actress, Amandla Stenberg, as Rue. Stenberg's casting, despite following explicit characteristics in the novel, was met with vehement protest by fans on Twitter who expressed their distaste at Stenberg's casting. Dubrofsky & Ryalls (2014), Kinney (2013), Moore and Coleman (2015), and Brown (2015) have all analyzed and contextualized how race is structured in the film. However, where these analyses have addressed the politics of racial representations, an intersectional and contextual reading of race and labour in the films has yet to be addressed from a scholarly perspective.

Moreover, where *The Hunger Games* has been subject to various studies and analysis, there appears to be an absence of scholarly work done on *The 100* and *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*. By focussing on *The Hunger Games* franchise, *The 100* televisions

series, and *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, I intend to analyze how media culture transcodes existing political struggles through representation that, in turn, consent to political positions through image, spectacle, discourse, and narrative. Such a critique is of the utmost importance considering that benevolent multiculturalism, post-racist, and colorblind rhetoric is an exchange with deadly police brutality and potential fascist leadership, exemplified by the Donald Trump presidential campaign, in a post-Obama era.

Yet, at the onset of collecting research for this project, I came across YA dystopian literature by the Afrofuturist writer Octavia Butler, particularly the two novels in her *Parable* series, *Parable of a Sower* and *Parable of a Talent*. Set in the not-too-distant future of the 2020s, the novels follow an African American girl, Lauren Olamina, who voyages to build a community based on the foundation of her new religion, Earth Seed, grounded in a version of the United States that is collapsing due in part to climate change, extreme wealth inequality, and immeasurable corporate greed. I was especially drawn to how the novels weaved the complexities of racism, authoritarianism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and capitalism as complementary forces that paint a dystopic horizon. In Butler's world, Lauren was just as likely to die by rape and sexual violence as she was due to a lack of social security provided by the government, racially motivated acts of violence, by the gun of a police officer, malnutrition and dehydration due to the decay of the environment, or as a debt-slave indentured to one of a few mega-corporations that own most of the U.S. Because of the sharp nuances of her political commentary, I was incredibly surprised that Butler's work had not been adapted for a big-budget film treatment, or even a television series, during the YA dystopian film

boom. If given a proper script treatment, a decent budget, and a skilled cast and crew, a *Parable* film would surely be a hit! Unfortunately, however, Butler's work has been somewhat relegated to the margins of popular culture, living mostly through podcast discussions, book clubs, shout-outs in Hip-Hop songs, and a litany of scholarly literature<sup>1</sup>.

In almost every respect though, Butler's two novels fit the conventions of the YA dystopian genre. The major difference being that Butler paid due care and attention to intersectionality. In what is arguably the YA dystopian master text, *Parable of a Talents* foregrounds authoritarianism *and* identity politics, so much so that Butler's dealings with the complex nexus of authoritarianism, race, gender, and class have unbelievable and profound resonance today. In *Talents*, a demagogue, Andrew Steele Jarret, ascends to power based on a white supremacist, monoreligious platform. Butler's description of Jarret is both prescient, chilling, and worth quoting here at length:

Jarret supporters have been known, now and then to form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches. Witches! In 2023! A witch, in their view tends to be a Moslem [sic], a Jew, a Hindu, a Buddhist, or, in some parts of the country, a Mormon, a Jehovah's Witness, or even a Catholic. A witch may also be an atheist, a "cultist", or well-to-do eccentric. Well-to-do eccentrics often have no protectors or much that's worth stealing. And "cultists" is a catchall term for anyone who fits into no other large category, and yet does not quite match Jarret's version of Christianity. Jarret's people have been known to beat or drive out Unitarians, for goodness' sake. Jarret condemns the burnings, but does so in such a mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear. As for the beatings, the tarring and feathering, and the destruction of "heathen houses of devil-worship", he has a simple answer: "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and become one of us. Help us make America great again. (Butler, 1998, p. 19-20)

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Miller (1998), Dubey (1999), Phillips (2002), Stillman (2003), Allen (2009), Parker (2012), Outterson (2008).

Surely, we can see how Butler's work can offer a resounding meditation on the current political landscape in the United States, perhaps more so than many popular YA dystopian texts released shortly before the 2016 presidential election. If indeed dystopian fiction is meant to hold a mirror to our society, and expose the logical conclusions of dangerous politics, I noticed that the complex nuances that appear in Butler's writing are noticeably absent from much of the popular YA dystopian media entertainment.

As a result of this absence, a broad question that this thesis seeks to ask is how do YA dystopian texts ideologically fail? How do they function as a site of contestation and struggle that calls into question some politics, while depoliticizing others? A common theme which this thesis investigates is the ways in which contemporary forms of racism and white supremacy are recycled, reinvented, and represented on the silver screen. A second question that this project seeks to answer is how can media culture be contextualized within a wider social, cultural and political economy? Finally, this thesis addresses why is it so important to study these particular texts in the first place. For many conservative pundits, a truly democratic society, where economic equality and multiculturalism take priority over neoliberal ideology, is exactly what a dystopia would look like. For young people today, having critical literacy for such political discussions will be imperative for measures of resistance to implementing positive social change.

While the genre has been politicized by the popular media as a lightning rod for informing young people's critical consciousness (this is especially true for *The Hunger Games*), and has also been subject to various scholarly inquiries, there are several media artifacts that have yet to be situated in a broader social and political context. For instance, where some films like *The Host* call colonialism into question, they do so in a

conservative manner that does not address the social power of whiteness, the indignities experienced by many Indigenous people in North America, and the continued effects of European colonialism today. The conservative discourse that the film operationalizes is even more pronounced and problematic considering that the film was released during the height of the Indigenous-led Idle No More movement.

Similar to how *The Host* can be read as a problematic text, both contextually and politically, the following thesis takes this comprehensive contextual cultural studies approach to deconstruct the various politics found in a series of media texts. Throughout the research for this project, I found that the lack of intersectionality that we can find in *Parable* and *Talents*, and the ideological failing that we might find in *The Host* was quite pervasive in the three YA dystopian texts that are the focus of this thesis; *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, and the first season of the television series, *The 100*. Each of these will be read as a *text* which does cultural work to embed and transcode meaning within social relations and the political environment within which they were produced, distributed and received. In effect, each text will be examined in conjunction with the subtextual theme that it grapples with the most.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research will be informed by a poststructural theoretical framework, which underscores how meanings of the world around us is socially constructed rather than “natural” or innate. Here, language and representation via film are treated as a contested terrain where various narratives of bodies in a dystopia are politically and purposefully

situated; they are not benevolent reflections of a pre-linguistic or pre-social truth. As Munslow (2006) suggests, poststructuralism helps us read language as “an infinity of free-flowing signifiers” (p. 32), where meaning becomes a site of “disunity and conflict” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21). A poststructural theoretical framework, then, supports the critical and analytical inquiry into the multiple ways in which one can view film; on one hand, a movie is a docile apolitical site of entertainment, on the other hand, a film is shaped by and reflects widely held dominant relations of power. It will also allow for a more politicized perspective to navigate the discursive terrain and raise questions about YA dystopian themes and their relation to contemporary social issues. Popular media outlets, in their discussion of YA dystopia, present the film phenomena in ways that are informative but lack extensive political critique that contextualizes the intersectionality between current debates of the political agency of young people, social stratification by divisions of race, and the pitfalls of capitalism.

Take for example, two articles in the *Atlantic* that critique *The Hunger Games*; “The Hunger Games’ Crosses Child Warfare With Class Warfare” (Allan, 2012) which addresses Katniss as the populist hero that the Occupy movement could not muster, and “The Topics Dystopian Films Won’t Touch” (Siddiquee, 2014), which questions a future where racism seems to evaporate and disappear. Although both of these critiques are extremely relevant, either point cannot be adequately addressed without discussion of the other. To this end, I believe that all YA dystopia can be read as a collective “social text”, a form of what Giroux (1999) calls “edutainment” (p. 43), that conveys meaning in a multicultural, late capitalist milieu. Here, the aim is to read these films as coded social commentary and flesh out their life beyond the boundaries of the text itself.



However, when I discuss “race” in this thesis, I should make clear which epistemological position I am coming from. When I use the term “race”, I am not referring to the supposed biological differences between whites, Asians, and blacks, for instance. Instead, I am referring to the sociological signifiers of race that both construct and socially produce notions of difference and otherness. Throughout this work, race is understood as a sociohistorical technology which was developed through systems of power and domination to justify racial subjugation and colonial conquest, not a biological fact about differences in bodies and cultures.

Finally, to extract the political possibilities of YA dystopia, I will turn to sociological critiques and critical cultural studies of film, and by extension, young people’s entertainment. Indeed, entertainment targeted at young people, specifically cinema and film, has been subject to much cultural critique in the past. The ways in which the politics of representation play a pivotal role in shaping constructions of race in Disney films, for example, is not to be underestimated. From evil, cackling hyenas that embody obvious markers of Chicano and black street, or “hood”, language dialects in *The Lion King* (1994), to the overtly racist musical themes in *Aladdin* (1992) (Picker, 2002), Disney’s past is rampant with questionable methods of representation. Culturally coded messages of race and class are not only exclusive to Disney’s past but can be found in contemporary popular youth culture as well. For example, Brayton’s (2012) textual analysis maps the various ways in which labour is tied to migrant Latin American identity in *Handy Manny* (2006-present). Further, Giroux’s (1999) book *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and The End of Innocence* lays out, among other facets, that any attempt to dismiss children’s film as “just a movie” is to be dishonest about the immense power they

have in shaping the ideas of race, class, and gender. In short, Disney, and by extension all forms of youth media entertainment, has a means of packaging and wrapping notions of “doing” socially constructed norms and selling them to children (Media Education Foundation, 2001).

The juxtaposition of a Disney cartoon’s iconography alongside the grounded and gritty aesthetics of YA dystopia do seem haphazard at first; the militarized packaging of violence and the aesthetics of urban decay and disaster found in YA dystopia will most likely never be seen in the romanticized and fantastic renditions of a Disney film. For example, it is not uncommon for YAs to sport machine guns and engage in deadly, military-style assaults within the streets of decrepit urban environments. However, these two opposing genres share one salient ingredient: they are both forms of media entertainment targeted to and made almost exclusively for youth consumption. Nevertheless, in order to contextualize the political possibilities of YA dystopia, we can turn to a key ingredient that simultaneously attempts to bridge and separate the insidious politics of a children’s cartoon from the more politically charged narratives within popular culture. This is done by means of exploring the social context of science fiction (sf) thematic motifs.

Sf is capable of being both a parable of liberal and/or insidiously conservative ideals that can be read against a sociopolitical backdrop (Nama, 2008). Take, for example, Franklin J. Schaffner’s *Planet of the Apes* (1968), that told a cautionary tale of the potential impacts of nuclear war and also served as allegory for the deleterious consequences of a formerly oppressed group (the apes) to restructure social order and usher in a new age of slave/owner terror. In order to contextualize the significance of the

time in which *Apes* was released, we can look to the culturally significant moments in history that defined the 60s as a decade of racial turmoil in America. On April 4, 1968, one day after *Apes* hit the silver screen to wild financial and critical success, Martin Luther King Jr., a leader who served as a pillar of the Civil Rights movement, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. A similar contextualization can be applied to more recent sf films. For instance, Neil Blomkamp's dystopia *Elysium* (2013), served as a Marxist social critique of gross wealth inequality, immigration politics and the privatization of healthcare. Ironically, the emotional weight of the film is experienced through a white, cis-male protagonist, Max, played by Matt Damon. Nevertheless, at the time of the release of *Elysium*, such politicized topics fueled debates regarding the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Obama-care health reforms in the U.S. To be clear, I am under no belief that there is a direct causality between sf film, political assassinations, and government policy. I do, however, wish to state that it would be intellectually dishonest to conceptualize the release of *Apes*, *Elysium*, and by extension all sf cinema, as an autonomous text, free from the effects of the cultural climate in which it was produced. Outside of *Apes* and *Elysium*, scholars have examined sf at great length for its coded commentary on social minimization. Whether it be cautionary tales about radiation and nuclear war (Newman, 1999) or problematic multicultural representations denouncing and normalizing the end of the world as we know it (Brayton, 2011; Kakoudaki, 2011; Joo, 2015; Nama, 2008, Blaim & Gruszweska-Blaim, 2011), sf can give critical insight to cultural praxis of the time.

What, then, can be said about YA dystopia today? It would appear that YA dystopia operates in a murky place where the ubiquitous, unquestionable fantasies of

youth entertainment mix with politically charged motifs of sf (black vs. white, immigrant vs. citizen, etc.). Here, the conflict of uncertain, (im)perfect futures, where real world problems like the devastating effects of an ecological crisis, routinized unstable economic conditions, and crippling global wealth inequality are pitted against – and sold to – young people. However, in our contemporary society, we have seen the emergence of violent action directed at racial minorities, as seen by horrific and deadly forms of white supremacy and police brutality in the U.S., where many of the perpetrators have been judicially exonerated even in the face of mass protest. George Zimmerman’s acquittal of the cold-blooded murder of 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin is one example, of many, where minority children and young adults have experienced racially motivated abuse. Yet this is a point that has not been addressed in these films. On the other hand, however, challenging the financial tyranny of corporatism and the state, or what Giroux (2013, p. 515) calls “Neoliberal Terror” has been tackled at great lengths. In *The Hunger Games*, the antagonist is The Capitol - a moniker that serves as a euphemism for both the head of state and centralized control of wealth distribution. In *The Maze Runner*, the evil organization WCKD (World Catastrophe Killzone Department) is an amalgamation of all the world governments and corporations, whose last-ditch effort to find a cure for ‘the flair’ is by means of harvesting young people. To this end, cultural and sociological critique provides a poststructuralist lens through which YA dystopia can be analyzed for the importance of its allegory of neoliberalism and its commentary on race and multiculturalism.

For political theorists and social scientists, neoliberalism is generally described as a political and social reform structured to impose austerity programs that wither away the

social state to make way for private interest and individual capital accumulation. For Kingfisher (2008), neoliberalism is a process of cultural formations which remake the subject, reassert class relations, and reconfigure relations of governance (p.118). Not only is the neoliberal epoch responsible for redefining individual “freedom” as freedom to participate in the market, but it is also allowed for reimagining the ethos of identity politics. Kingfisher might say that neoliberalism has changed dominant understandings of race because neoliberalism is itself a “cultural formation” and a “set of cultural meanings and practices related to the constitution of proper personhood” (p. 120). This (re)constitution of personhood has been incredibly impactful for how race is treated socially and politically, and how it has been treated in popular culture. A quick scan of the popular cultural landscape might incline us to assert that, perhaps, racial representation in pop culture is no longer a problem. Surely various television series created by Shonda Rhimes like *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*, would suggest that post-racial, “colour blind” casting of characters of colour has rendered issues of racial representation a moot point. However, what critical racial scholars suggest is that post-raciality, colour blind casting, and the occasional multicultural head-nod “masks the centrality of race and racism to neoliberalism” (Melamed, 2006, p. 1).

Neoliberalism, for instance, functions on various levels in many ways throughout the entire genre. Monetarily speaking, films like *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner* incline us to question the economic politics of neoliberalism, or what David Harvey (2005) describes as “a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (p. 19). Surely Katniss’ drive

to bring down The Capitol in *The Hunger Games*, and Thomas' desire to stop WCKD in *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* is symbolic of the ways in which neoliberalism might be rejected or at least challenged in many of these films. However, this rejection of neoliberalism is also accompanied by a much more sinister way in which neoliberalism can be embraced.

As postcolonial theorists have suggested, the undue absence of tackling racism head-on is an effective way by which racism functions and flourishes, particularly in Hollywood and the culture industry. What Goldberg (2009) calls "Racial Neoliberalism" (p. 236) is the way in which social issues concerning race (like colour blind casting in film) are easily ignored or accepted without question because the social dynamics that underpin the issues are not identified in the first place. Because colour blind casting can somehow make the issue of proper representation inadmissible, "Racism is just as much a cause as it is an effect" (p. 237). This is how racism functions via racial neoliberalism in popular Hollywood films, "it makes possible the not asking . . . the grounds for ignoring the indivisible, and by extension the refusal to address deep social inequalities which aren't recognized as iniquitous precisely because they aren't recognized at all" (p. 237).

## **Methodology**

The central analyses of this project will be guided by what Kellner calls a "contextual cultural studies" (1995, p. 103) approach using what media theorists refer to as a critical discourse analysis (CDA). For Kellner, a cultural text, like film, for instance, is encoded with ideological meaning that is situated in a broader political and social

context (p. 103). At this intersection, a text becomes a kaleidoscope that reflects and refracts changing cultural patterns of social and political power, as well as forms of representation that work to create circulating discourse on a topic. In other words, a contextual cultural study uses what is called a “transdisciplinary perspective” (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 22). Transdisciplinary refers to an academic practice that collapses disciplinary boundaries and uses a variety of theories and methods to produce critique and analysis. Where a literary centrist approach may focus on literary interpretations, and strictly political approaches may examine the politics of culture, a transdisciplinary approach uses sociological theory, political critique, and literary analysis to *read* media culture as both a political and pedagogical project.

If a contextual cultural studies approach will be used to read a media text against a backdrop of the dominant social order, then the tool that will be used to dissect YA dystopia entertainment will be that of a critical discourse analysis. Following the work of media theorist Norman Fairclough (1995, 2003), this project will approach discourse as a set of rules and regulations that govern what and how we think about a particular topic. Using a critical discourse analysis, as Fairclough (1995) argues, helps to highlight how, “connections between the use of language and the excessive of power are often not clear to people, yet appear on closer examination to be vitally important to the workings of power” (p. 54). However, discourse is not only bound to the play of language and meaning. As Fairclough (1995) illustrates, a critical discourse analysis is useful for an examination of film since discourse can also be produced through semiotic activity, “such as visual images (photography, film, video, diagrams) and non-verbal communication (e.g. gestures)” (p. 54). Moreover, so long as a text is constitutive of social identities,

social relations and systems of knowledge, “any text can make its own contribution to shaping aspects of culture and society” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 55). In this sense, discourse is used as an extension for connecting meaning to language and vice versa.

Stuart Hall defines discourse when he says that it is, “the framework of understanding and interpretation” to “make full sense of the world” (MEF, 1997). By deconstructing the representational politics of film, this contextual cultural study will read discourses as produced by signs, symbols, and signifiers found in popular YA dystopian media. Treating language, signs, and objects as a method of communicating meaning may also be referred to as “*semiotic* approach” to “reading” popular culture (Hall, 1997, p. 36). Methodological approaches to discourse have been examined in depth by several scholars (Scott, 1991; Mills, 1997) to articulate the various ways in which meaning is made and confined, by and through, language and discourse. To put it more simply, discourse constructs the “horizon of intelligibility” (Hall, 1997) that informs and regulates the ways in which we think, speak and give meaning to objects in existence (p. 44). This meaning-making includes notions of race, class, and nationhood. Such conceptualizations of discourse can be reliant on a poststructuralist thought that assumes that without language, meaning could not be exchanged.

As Kellner (1995) reminds us, media culture both effects and is affected by dominant ideology. On one hand, dominant ideology can affect popular culture by mobilizing sentiment, affection and widely held beliefs about core assumptions about or social life (i.e. rugged individualism, freedom, or the “post” colonial or “post” racial society, and so on), thereby inducing consent to a dominant social order (p. 58). On the other hand, however, popular culture can also be responsive to dominant ideology,



challenging beliefs about core assumptions surrounding race, sexuality, gender, and empire, which circulate in our society at any given moment. Regardless, it would be too simple to say that popular culture is strictly reactive or productive to dominant ideology, only commenting on or reproducing the complexities dominant social order. Instead, popular cultural takes up a central medium, whereby it is just as much a part of making culture as it is responsible for commenting on it.

In any case, Hollywood films are powerful vehicles of discourse and ideology since they are hugely popular and easily accessible components of mass media and consumer culture. Scott (1991) believes this to be true when she says, “the project of making experience *visible* [emphasis added] precludes critical examination of the workings of ideological systems itself, its categories of representation . . . its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause” (p. 778). Although *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent Series*, and *The Maze Runner* are all film adaptations of books, the examination of YA dystopia film requires a more holistic approach to understanding cinema as a *visible* marker for the socially constructed and constituted idioms of representation for several reasons. First, although these films stand as tent-poles in popular cultural cinema, their representational practices bleed outside the cinema, seeping into the public sphere, normalizing their aesthetics and rendering their images commonplace; these films are always advertised via viral marketing campaigns that take the form of print, image, and video. Second, these media texts do not only come to fruition in the form of film and advertising, they are established in comics, graphic novels, video games, social media chat forums, clothing, and toys; In the case of *The Hunger Games*, commodity fetishism of YA dystopia, and all

that it represents, has manifested in the form of Barbie dolls. After watching the film, one can own and play with the embodiment of YA dystopia for a mere \$32. In addition, a contextual cultural studies approach recognizes that Hollywood films are especially illuminating for cultural politics because of how they fit into the political economy. Major motion pictures require a tremendous initial investment, and in order to make a return on those investments, studios, producers, and casting directors need to make films relevant and accessible to the current politics of the era. These auxiliary factors (media advertising, commodity products, and public discussion) are important contributions to a cultural studies approach because they are essential cogs that serve to promote and maintain the products of cultural machines. As Kellner (1995) notes, “media culture in the United States and most capitalist countries is largely a commercial form of culture.” (p. 16). For Kellner, media, consumer and commercial culture are inseparable. Thus, a critical examination of a film also requires an examination into the consumer and commercial sphere that it was produced in and by to understand the complex relationship between film, political economy, and meaning making.

## **Methods**

The central media texts under analysis for this project went through repeated viewings. During viewing sessions, the films and television series underwent in-depth recording of dialogue, and frame-by-frame analysis of what was shown on screen. The screen analysis of the *mise-en-scène* included the casting of actors, actor position on screen, costumes, props, lighting, camera angles, camera movement, sound and music,

editing, cinematography, diegesis, and major set pieces. After several viewings of the media, commentaries were collected online and stored on a personal computer. The files were then accessed when needed during the writing of the main analysis chapters

This project focuses primarily on YA dystopian film and television released in North America between 2012 – 2015. Although I employ examples from many popular cultural texts like books, television series, video games, and advertisements, this thesis focuses exclusively on three YA dystopian media artifacts: *The 100*, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, and *The Hunger Games* film series. I chose to focus on *The 100* because of the apparent absence of scholarly investigation dedicated to the text. Although there exists a rich body of work that reads and contextualizes colonialism and postcolonialism in popular culture, *The 100* has yet to be investigated in relation to postcolonial scholarly literature. *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* was chosen for a similar reason. Since the text functions to promote more leftist discourse than the rest of the films in the genre, I found that *Scorch Trials* has yet to be contextualized within a political economy of neoliberal capitalism. Finally, I chose to read *The Hunger Games* franchise as a collective text for several reasons. First, although the first film in the series, *The Hunger Games*, has been subject to scholarly analysis, there is a startling absence of literature which examines the sequels *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay 1*, and *Mockingjay 2*. Since the entire narrative can be read as a “collective text”, I found that an analysis which included the sequels also allowed the series to be contextualized over a longer time period, therefore offering insight into the shift in political discourse which occurred as the films were being released.

Along with the three central texts under investigation, this project also relied on

media commentaries to help illustrate a discursive framework in which each text is situated. Many of the critical media commentaries and reviews cited in this project offer cues as to how the texts were received, whether they were liked or disliked, politicized or depoliticized, and criticized or celebrated. In addition to popular media commentaries, this project also drew on open access message forums, social media, and online communities to help sketch a more inclusive and sound framework to situate the text. Since many of these YA dystopian media artifacts have become popular in a hyper-media age, their almost infinite accessibility is matched only by the many ways in which the internet has provided a platform to allow audiences a voice to respond and connect with culture. In order to navigate popular culture, cinema, and television, critical cultural studies must now include audience's voices, perspectives, and opinions, along with popular media reviews, as an effective contributor to the production of discourse.

The method I used to pick each text was organic and depended upon the results I found at the end of each analysis. I noticed, for the most part, that although these texts fit within the same genre, they each speak to different cultural politics. As I completed one analysis, I noticed that my results lacked a certain broadness that was needed to discuss the breadth of what I found at work in the genre as a whole, that is, the various dimensions of neoliberalism. For instance, although *The 100* is a worthy vehicle for discussions surrounding race and colonialism, it lacks textual elements which speak to the politics of capitalism. The reverse can be said for *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, which serves as allegory for metaphors of capitalism, but says very little about the politics of race and colonialism that we find in *The 100* or *The Hunger Games*, for example. As such, each text was read with a specific point of analysis in mind since it

would have been disingenuous to forcefully read in a text what was clearly not present in the first place.

The three main texts for this project were retrieved from the streaming service, Netflix, or rented via home video. Any other film or television series mentioned or cited in the project was obtained in the same manner. All media commentaries or reviews were retrieved from popular news outlets, pop culture websites, and social media forums. The main news outlets used to retrieve commentaries include *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, *Democracy Now!*, *The Intercept*, *YouTube*, and the far-right leaning news outlet *Brietbart*. Commentaries retrieved from popular culture websites include *Collider*, *ScreenRant*, *Variety*, *Vulture*, *IMDB*, and *YouTube*. Discussions and debates obtained from social media include the platforms Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter. All scholarly literature cited in this study was retrieved online or from a personal library.

## **Format**

The following analysis chapters consist of three standalone papers that use the same theoretical framework and methodology mentioned above. Although each paper offers an individual intervention, they serve a collective purpose of denaturalizing the discursive effects of a media text while situating a particular film contextually within the dominant social order and cultural landscape. Moreover, even though each paper focuses on different but complementary themes, the following chapters will reiterate my theoretical and methodological approach to allow each to more fully stand on its own. I

have chosen to construct this thesis in such a particular manner to better draw out reoccurring themes and notable absences that persist throughout the YA dystopian genre. For instance, a common theme shared by Chapter Two and Three is the reimagining of whiteness. As I discuss in my analysis of *The Hunger Games* in Chapter Two, and *The 100* in Chapter Three, classically racist and colonial practices are reimagined and renamed while avoiding more upfront racist or white supremacist representations. Conforming to the prototypical neoliberal model of privatizing racism (along with everything else), David Theo Goldberg might call the renditions of whiteness found in these two texts a rallying cry of “the impending impotence of whiteness” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 337). Where Chapters Two and Three examine the working of race and representation in a neoliberal model of racial politics, Chapter Four seeks to assess the more concrete way of representing neoliberal capitalism by way of monstrous metaphors. By offering individual, but different readings on three separate text, the following chapters exist in conversations with one another by unfolding and unpacking politics of race and neoliberalism that we might find in a film. The chapters are laid out in this particular order to illustrate the different realms in which neoliberalism functions, including neocolonialism, capitalism, and benevolent racism.

In Chapter Two, I suggest that *The 100* is a YA dystopian series that is fundamentally about colonialism. However, because the series is released at a moment that we might call “postcolonial”, it works with the narrative structural conventions that Ono (2009) identifies as “neocolonialism”. In other words, what we often conceptualize as white European colonialism in now a unique postmodern phenomenon that has continuance in North American society, and that can manifest in forms of popular culture,

like television, for instance. Using a neocolonial framework, I argue that *The 100* is a unique YA dystopia media artifact because it is the only series in the YA dystopian genre that registers as what I call a *neocolonial dystopia*. By that, I mean that the series' dystopian, or frightening future is consistently underscored by colonial anxieties, including settling the "final frontier", miscegenation with the "other", fear of "terrorist", or a general apprehension towards "dark" people. Along with the dominant themes in the series, I contextualize *The 100* within the "color blind" Obama era politics of race in neoliberalism and contemporary acts of anticolonial resistance.

In Chapter Three, I read *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* as a left-wing polemic of capitalism. Unlike many films in the genre, *Scorch Trials* is a unique YA dystopian film in that it indicts a corporation as an antagonism within the narrative while also incorporating horror/zombie elements. Where recurring genre motifs stoke anxieties of "big government", or a socialist planned society, rarely do YA dystopian films question how corporate control has political influence in neoliberalism, and how a future governed by the corporate model of the cut-throat gains by any means necessary may be far more frightening than an over planned society. In addition, where the central antagonist, WCKD (World Catastrophe Kill Zone Department), invites us to question neurosis of corporate capitalism, the use of zombies (called Cranks in the film), fits with a genre trend of using monsters of the market as a metaphor to illustrate the horrors of consumer capitalism.

In the final chapter, which focuses on *The Hunger Games* films as a self-contained collective text, I read the assorted ways in which whiteness is represented, injured, restructured, and reimagined. More specifically, I examine the contradictory

ways in which the films represented whiteness. By situating race in relation to class, or whiteness and labor, the films work to aggressively construct a “post-white” subject by offering color blind exigencies for cross-racial alliances in opposition to clearly less benevolent white subjectivity. This is most evident by the main character, Katniss Everdeen, and her “bi-racial buddy” partnerships. In the film, many of her black “buddies” serve as a foil by which white identity can become unburdened from the constituencies of racial difference, and her poor working class whiteness allows her to be *different* than other, more malevolent whites in the series. By contextualizing whiteness within a culture of Black Lives Matter, and the current crisis of the coal industry, I offer a unique reading to add to an already large body of work on *The Hunger Games* films.

Like the Western or Blaxploitation film genre, YA dystopia has solidified itself as a cultural signpost. As a relatively unique stylistic genre of cinema that was fetishized and now only smolders, YA dystopia is rich with insight regarding cultural hopes, fears, anxieties, and concerns surrounding race, colonialism, and authoritarianism and neoliberal capitalism.

The goal of this thesis is to provide a study by which readers can gain critical media literacy skills. My personal hope with this project is to develop personal media literacy skills enough to continue to engage with critical pedagogical approaches to popular culture in the public sector. Although interviews and personal encounters do not fit with the theoretical and methodological approach of this study, research and writing for this project were paired with numerous encounters with dozens of young people, many of whom have watched, enjoyed, and are invested in the films and television shows under analysis in what follows. While I cannot speak on their behalf, I found that many of



the young folks that have consumed YA dystopian media culture, did so from a hegemonic subject-position that allowed for a continuance of the invisibility of capitalism, the white liberal racial project, or the “Great Forgetting” of North American colonial conquest.

By means of a poststructuralist discourse analysis, this research seeks to analyze the various ways in which YA dystopia reflects and responds to our current cultural landscape. In a sense, this research takes the responsibility to deconstruct normalized images and messages often taken for granted in popular culture and cinema. As such, this study rejects the notion that popular film may be “just a movie” and that popular culture is a political project well beyond the confines of entertainment. In short, I would like to provide a compass that will help navigate our contemporary political terrain in the hopes of promoting critical media literacy skills. As such, this project agrees that films affect culture just as much as they are affected by culture. As bell hooks (1997) writes, “movies do not merely offer us the opportunity to reimagine the culture we most intimately know on screen, they make culture” (p. 12).

## Chapter Two

### **New Places, New Races: Mapping Racial Formation and Neocolonialism in *The 100***

In the first episode of the dystopian science fiction (sf) television series, *The 100*, viewers are introduced to earth through a foggy, dream-like sequence which positions the distant blue and green planet as something unknown, to yearn for, to fantasize about, to obtain. “The ground”, says Clarke (Eliza Taylor) in the opening minutes of the series, “that’s the dream.” In this short introduction, the earth is predetermined as a new, uninhabited frontier that Clarke and the other patrons of the orbiting spacecraft, called The Ark, seek to explore and reclaim. By initially (re)imagining the earth *terra incognita*, and later exploring the “final frontier” throughout the first season, *The 100* invites us to understand relations of power, identity, and politics through colonizer/colonized relations. More specifically, the series encourages us to understand identity as it pertains to power, racial formation, and Manichaeic dichotomies of good and evil. Moreover, it is quite adept at utilizing colonial tropes of phallic masculinity, sexuality, domination via technological prowess, fantasies of white women who need to be saved from “dark” men, and imagining anticolonial resistance as “terrorism.” Yet, these troubling aspects of the series operate mostly on the periphery from episode to episode, often obscured and overshadowed by a series which prioritizes overcoming the obstacles of a biochemically tainted, post-nuclear apocalyptic world rather than reflecting on the systemic effects of settler colonialism.

The first season of *The 100* is explicit about the horrors of nuclear war, the troubles of population control, the plight of young people in authoritative regimes, and the dangers of ecological catastrophe (radiation, mutated animals, poisoned smog, etc.),

but neglects to draw direct attention to other atrocities and horrors that humanity has, continues to, and may continue to inflict and endure. The series emboldens some critical ideological and philosophical questions about the project of humanity and its continued existence, encouraging viewers of the series to wonder, “What would happen to humanity and the environment if nuclear warfare did ensue?” or “How would we cope with this potential catastrophe?” Read subtextually, however, *The 100* also poses some interesting questions regarding the (re)settling of the planet. More specifically, the series raises pertinent questions such as “What if *we* are met with resistance when *we* stake our claim on the land?” Or, “What if *we* are not wanted or welcomed?” By exposing *The 100* to these questions, I intend to open the text to a unique reading, which has yet to be addressed by scholarly analysis and media commentaries. In this essay, I argue that *The 100* is a young adult dystopic neocolonial text, which both reflects and reinvents systemic colonial exploitation by imagining innovative methods of race-thinking through its narrative themes. As a result, *The 100* is a text that is able to both mirror and comment on anticolonial struggles currently waged in the culture in which it is situated. The goal of this chapter is to offer a blueprint to examine how a media artefact, like a sf television series, can function as both a site of entertainment, learning, and ideological struggle that reflects and helps shape discourse, identity, politics, and culture.

## **Background**

*The 100* (hereafter referred to as *100*) is produced by The CW network, a division of Time Warner and CBS, and is targeted primarily at young adult (YA) audiences. Like

film adaptations for *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and many other YA properties, *100* is based on a novel series of the same name written by Kass Morgan. Although the series first aired on a cable television network, it is situated in an era of technological media ubiquity, where laptops, smartphones and other media devices make it readily available to anyone who has an internet connection and a subscription to Netflix. Due to the success of the first season in 2014, the series has since been renewed for second, third and fourth seasons. Because the main conflict of the series varies from season to season, and because popular television seasons can be read independently if they are not renewed by the producing network, this analysis will be focused exclusively on the first season of *100*, consisting of thirteen episodes. Although this essay seeks to situate the series against a backdrop of colonial themes and imagery, I do not assert that this reading is the only way *100* can be explored. A critical cultural studies approach sees media texts as polysemic, meaning they have a capacity for multiple meanings, and are sites of various struggles and contestation regarding representational practices. As a result, they may have contradictory social and political effects that may privilege and normalize a variety of discourses. For example, *100* may be read with a feminist lens, since the series, in some instances, seems to be both post-apocalyptic and post-patriarchal. Conversely, the series could be read as an ableist text, privileging normative, “desirable”, abled bodies. Although I will use evidence to support my argument, it should be noted that the series works in such a way that it does not intend on being read as a neocolonial narrative, and much of the popular media reporting sustains this position. The ship-wrecked iconography, multiracial casting, introduction imagery, dialogue, and various media critiques of *100* indicate and assert that the text intends to be read as, “a brisk tale of post-

apocalyptic survival” (Ryan, 2014, par. 3) in the image of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, and of course, a truncated young adult love affair reminiscent of the drab *Twilight Saga*. Many media commentaries contribute to the discursive omission, acting as effective mechanisms which obscure the colonial subtext of the series in popular discourse.

Hale (2014) of *The New York Times* declared that *100* is similar to *Lord of the Flies* meets *Lost in Space*, or *The Hunger Games* meets *Battle Star Galactica*, with bits of *Terra Nova* and *Lost* thrown in (par. 1). In addition, some media reports insist that *100* is very much a political text that addresses questions of lawlessness, oppressive regimes, and righteous revolts, stating *100*, “takes on a political narrative right away” (Lyons, 2014, par. 3). However, although the series seems to be guided by what popular reporting would decree as clearly politicized messages, whenever *100* is discussed in relation to colonialism (if at all) it becomes sanitized, minimalized, and completely depoliticized. For instance, in Lowry’s (2014) review of the series, the politics of colonialism and racism become trivial, if not comical, and are only mentioned in passing in the commentary. This was particularly noticeable when the author encouraged audiences to, “Think of the colonist as the expendables, only with acne instead of an AARP [retirement] plan” (par. 3). In other words, we should conceptualize our historical understanding of “discovering” the “new world” by replacing middle aged white men with multiracial young people. Similarly, when the theme of “full-scale re-colonization” on a planetary level is mentioned (Lowry, 2014b, par. 2), it is without critical discussion, continued elaboration and contextualization.

Yet, while the discursive omission regarding the politics of colonialism persist in

mainstream media outlets, *100* is not beyond reproach when it comes to fan criticisms of the series. Although avid support and adoration for the series is readily found on social media outlets like Twitter and Reddit, many dissenting fans have denounced the show in chatrooms, message boards, blog posts, and fandom websites as insidiously racist (Ashley, 2016). Disparaging the series as racist has been identified most in the writing treatment of white and non-white characters. For instance, while the first season presents a dynamic duo and “biracial buddies” in Jasper (Devin Bostick) and Monty (South Korean born actor Christopher Larkin), the series continues to develop Jasper while sidelining Monty, who remains asexual, underdeveloped, and nothing more than an indicator of market multiculturalism. In any case, conversations regarding racism in the series have been very polarized. On one hand, *100* is often celebrated as a Benetton multicultural text which casts non-white characters like Jaha (Isaiah Washington) and Anya (Dichen Lachman) in prominent roles (alltheworldsinmyhead, 2017). On the other hand, however, some fan reflections have mentioned the nuances and complexities of a text which purports to be “postracial” and progressive while continuing to indulge in problematic representations (Fandoms Hate People of Color, 2017; RACISM IN THE 100, 2017; not\_a\_throwaway, 2016; Schaaf, 2015). Altogether though, both colonialism and racism in *100* are seldom discussed as agents that rely on, and react against, one another.

Since *100* is hailed as a young adult dystopian text, it does share some similarities with *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* in that none of these YA media texts explicitly address racism in their narratives as a dynamic of power that could contribute to various experiences in a dystopia. However, *100* is drastically different in

that it is not a dystopia about an authoritarian or totalitarian autocracy, the amalgamation of world corporations with world governments, social (im)mobility, or even nuclear apocalypse. Rather, I see *100* embodying several themes which explore a dystopic context mostly through conventions of colonialism. Essentially, *100* imagines a neocolonial dystopia that begins with a “voyage of discovery”, positions an indigenous tribe as the “bad” protagonists, and eventually ends with a group of multiracial young people (re)settling and (re)colonizing the planet. Although post-colonial theorists have suggested that “neocolonialism” refers explicitly to the imperial control of ex-colonies (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffins, 1998, p. 134), I will use a more contextual cultural studies approach to better understand how colonialism may be re-experienced and reinvigorated through narrative in media culture. Therefore, I will use Ono’s (2009) definition of “neocolonialism” as the present form colonialism takes in media representations (i.e. film and television), as well as the strategies and means by which contemporary and historical colonialism are “repressed” and “masked” in the media and popular cultural sphere (p. 2). In effect, as Ono (2009) insists, neocolonialism in media culture adapts tools and conventions to make colonial discourse more palatable for contemporary conditions and malleable cultural demands to, “fit with the reigning concerns of our times” (p. 2) as they pertain to colonialism. For example, a neocolonial text does not have to be a simulacrum of how colonialism is imagined historically: a white, male, European project of expansionism and imperialism. Instead, a neocolonial media text appropriates tropes, themes, narrative techniques, and ideological positions to revisit systems of domination, differentiation, racialization, and mechanisms of authority. Furthermore, since we live in a “post” colonial context, a neocolonial text can always be read contextually in regards to

sociocultural trends and the dominant political landscapes Here, Ono (2009) may help us better understand this connection between context and text, as well as how neocolonialism as a concept can be applicable to *100*, when he writes:

Not only is overt representations of colonialism important, but also significant is what is not overtly shown or said and what is intentionally or unintentionally masked. Non-overt representations of colonialism do not strenuously and vigorously call attention to that which they may, in fact, refer. They exist as manifestations of a contemporary colonial consciousness unaware that colonialism continues. In this way colonialism appears as a subtext within culture; the colonial meaning exists metaphorically, just under the threshold of perceptibility, and therefore needs to be unearthed. . . . Since colonialism is generally not apparent, because it is repressed, colonialism persist through traces, markers, or symptoms, all of which register colonialism continued presence (Ono, 2009, p. 12).

As such, neocolonialism can be found in a myriad of media artifacts. Some include: rising xenophobia and anxiety surrounding dark bodies in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ('97 – '03); radical insurgencies motivated by race relations like the 1992 Los Angeles riots reflected in *Power Rangers* ('93 – '98); and the preoccupation with domestic terrorism in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* ('87 – '94) (Ono, 2009).

These textual projects can be applied to a pantheon of media artefacts in a purported *post*-colonial society. In this fashion, I seek to explore how colonialism underscores the main conflict of the first season of *100* by reproducing, reconstructing and reimagining colonial conquest, and how it may be envisioned through media culture directed at young people. Further, by incorporating themes of postracial politics as a project that occurs within the text, I seek to explore how this series reproduces the invaders/natives conflict by de-emphasizing the colour line - and race as we know it - to construct Otherness. In doing so, I see the text as relying on various other motifs of colonial tropes to justify the protagonists' often violent and derogatory agenda of



resettling earth.

This analysis will rely on what Kellner (1995) calls a “critical multicultural approach” (p. 95). For Kellner, this approach involves an analysis of domination, oppression, and stereotypes, as well as the struggle for some groups of people to represent themselves in a manner that counters distorted imagery and representations (p. 95). Inasmuch, this is guided by a transhistorical perspective which sees that colonialism did not completely end (the settlers mission prevailed and endured) and thus can manifest in and be reproduced by various discourses in media culture and television. As the work of Fairclough (1995) makes clear, media artifacts are communicative text that are often capable of speaking towards sociocultural context beyond their intended meaning. The interruption of the chain of meaning within these texts is imperative to prevent the reproduction of discourse which simultaneously affects and is affected by media narratives. He notes that televisions must be viewed in a “wider contextual matrix” as it both shapes discourse practices and is itself shaped by them (p. 50). The wider cultural matrix that I am attempting to identify is found at the intersection of sf in media culture, the politics of representation, and their reflection in a wider sociocultural landscape. Barthes (2012) may call this critical cultural approach to a neocolonial text the dismantlement of a “mythology” (p. 218). In short, understanding how colonialism is reproduced is integral to understanding how neocolonialism functions in a purported post-colonial milieu and a media saturated culture.

Revealed through this critical lens, the spectre of colonialism can be found in many forms of entertainment, especially those targeted at young people. For example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or the MCU, includes films like the *Iron Man* (2008; 2010;

2013), *Captain America* (2011; 2014; 2015) and *Doctor Strange* (2016), along with the tie-in television series, *Agents of Shield* (2013-present). Many of the artifacts that build the MCU embody a certain colonial and imperial agenda in that they all assume the successful enforcement of white, American, masculine, heterosexual dominance on a global scale. Likewise, remnants of colonialism can also be found in films like the revamped *Star Trek* franchise (2008; 2013; 2016), *Pacific Rim* (2013), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) *Avatar* (2009), the popular remake *Planet of the Apes* (2011; 2014; 2017), and *Legend of Tarzan* (2016). Alternatively, TV shows like the YA properties *The Shannara Chronicles* (2016 - present), and *Shadow Hunters: The Mortal Instruments* (2016 - present) (a series also produced by the CW), along with *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008 – 2014), *Colony* (2016 – present) and, of course, the never-ending recycling of the “white negro” in Netflix’s animated adaptation *Tarzan and Jane* (2016 - present) share many colonial motifs. Consequently, many forms of media cultural objects can entertain a certain preoccupation with establishing hierarchies, domination, racialization, and other aspects of colonialism through signification and coding.

These examples considered, a hegemonic reading of *100* fits with a trend of dismissing the complex ways in which colonialism can continue to function in the present, and petrifying the specter of colonialism as a historical fact that only exists in the *past*, unworthy of urgent and current political recognition. Unfortunately, the efficacy of *100* conforms to this pattern, de-emphasizing the politics of colonialism by way of what Stuart Hall (2007) calls, “*dominant or preferred meanings*” (p. 483). For Hall (2007), a preferred reading is embedded in a dominant cultural/political/ideological/institutional order where the different areas of social life are mapped and organized through discursive

domains (p. 483). The analytical framework developed by Hall can be helpful for both reading and situating this YA series. Simply put, the dominant discourse and meaning that is produced in and by *100* is indicative of a media text that seeks to repress the cultural politics of what I see as a colonial narrative. Therefore, by decoding the acuteness or irrelevance of colonialism, *100* effectively glosses over, or even outright neglects, a critical allegory on how colonialism continues to function today, whether it be in (re)imaginings in media culture, or in real-world anticolonial struggles. Thus, this reading of *100* will be a reading against the grain, meaning that it is not a reading most vociferously advocated by the text itself. By working through what Hall (2007) calls an, “*oppositional code*” (p. 487), the goal of this essay is to map out and better understand how neocolonialism functions in a media artefact, and “de-naturalize” the ways in which media engages in ideological struggles that may be contradictory, often privileging and perpetuating hegemonic discourses of colonialism, race, and racism.

### **Narrative Summary**

The first episode, “Pilot”, begins aboard the Ark, a space station that has been orbiting the earth for almost a century, which - we are lead to believe - houses the last remnants of the human species. The Ark is governed by a small council headed by Chancellor Thelonious Jaha (Isaiah Washington), and includes Dr. Abigail Griffin (Paige Turco), and Marcus Kane (Henry Ian Cusick). Due to the limited amount of resources aboard the Ark, those who are found guilty of crimes, and who are above the age of 18, are subject to execution by “floating” (parlance for suffocating in space) on word of the

Council, while those who are under the age of 18 are imprisoned until they are of a legal age to be tried or floated.

Clarke (Eliza Taylor), the main protagonist, is imprisoned and set to be floated for her crimes of anarchic political meddling. Instead of condemning Clarke, and 99 other young delinquents to execution, the council agrees that it would be an opportune moment to wager the lives of “The 100” to see if the earth is now habitable for full-scale planetary re-colonization after a century of recuperation from the nuclear holocaust. Initiating the first steps of the contingency plan “Project Exodus”, where humanity can “return” to earth, the 100 are fitted with tracking bracelets, confined to a small ship, and projected towards earth to survey the ground. It is towards the end of “Pilot” that the neocolonial imperative of *100* begins to gain traction. Once the delinquents make it to the ground, they are instructed by the council on the Ark to gather resources, build shelter and find a nuclear bunker located within Mount Weather (named after the FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) relocation site for U.S. government officials in case of national disaster). “Pilot” ends when a member of the Mount Weather search party, Jasper (Devon Bostick), is suddenly impaled by a projectile spear that appears to be man-made, quickly snowballing the narrative with colonial zeal. Narrated by Clarke in the final moments of the episode, she gasps, “We’re not alone”.

Following “Pilot”, a series of events in the subsequent episodes, “Earth Skills”, “Earth Kills”, “Twilight’s Last Gleaming”, “His Sister’s Keeper”, “Contents Under Pressure”, and “Unity Day” ideologically work to construct a binary opposition between the 100 delinquents and the “Other” that conforms to latent tropes of colonialism. In “Earth Skills”, while fleeing the scene of Jasper’s attack and kidnapping, the search party

stumbles upon a grotesque pile of skeletal remains including a prehistoric or pre-*homo* ape like skull. This scene is key in that it is the first moment we encounter the Other (albeit, a post-mortem contact) that lays the foundation for understanding the Other as, in fact, different, particularly on a biological level. Through the incredibly racist scientific colonial practice of phrenology (the study of human skulls to justify racial hierarchies), this observation is made intelligible. While holding the skull, Clarke responds to a question of “Who are they?” with, “*What* are they?” After the biological difference is made fact, the series continues to express neocolonial motifs; once Clarke and the search party return to camp, they insist on either making weapons or erecting a separation wall to keep the Other out. By the end of “Earth Skills” we finally get a glimpse of the Other when a looming figure emerges from atop a tree above the 100’s camp. Clad in heavy leathers and a tribal mask, face painted black, and remaining utterly voiceless, he exists only as a metaphoric and literal “dark” character that is soon referred to, normatively and even derogatively, as a “Grounder”<sup>2</sup>. Despite being recognized as humans, they are dehumanized through a racialized otherness. In the text, Grounders are representative as the Otherness within, the threat of difference, and a “new race” in a postracial narrative. Completely marginalized as the clear antagonists in *100*, Grounders are treated as redundancies that will either submit, leave, or die.

Although this is the focus of my critique, the colonial imperative of *100* is not the

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<sup>2</sup> The depiction of Grounders conforms to the colonial racialization of evil-as-darkness of the Other. They are always marginalized and coded as dark characters not only because they lack a collective voice and are considered “bad”, but also because they wear dark, tribal like clothing, dark face make up, and heavy eye-liner. Furthermore, the two Grounders whom have the most dialogue on the show, Anya (Dichen Lechman) and Lincoln (Ricky Wittle), are both characters with darker skin. For the remainder of this analysis, “dark bodies” will refer to the racialization of Grounders.

only conflict. Various power and leadership struggles in the new colony, the logistics of (re)settling the remaining Ark population on earth, and even the various love triangles of the young take precedents over the colonial themes. The neocolonial agenda, however, exists all the same. In other words, *100* evocatively participates in a colonial narrative as if it is not problematic or troubling, but is rather unintentional and natural. Episode to episode, colonialism functions peripherally or in the background, operating to construct the bulk of the diegesis or as a side narrative (which is most notable in a plot concerning Octavia (Marie Avgeropoulos) and Lincoln (Ricky Whittle) that I will explain later). The untroubled perception of colonialism within the narrative becomes increasingly problematic when, in various points in the first season, new racism emerges (we can call this *Grounders-ism*), and slews of *Grounders* are often justifiably massacred while acts of resistance from the *Grounders* themselves is framed as vile acts of terrorism or barbaric customary traditions.

### **A Neocolonial Dystopia**

Before centralizing *100*, it would be appropriate to consider that science fiction, be it dystopian or otherwise, has always had a close and intimate relationship with colonialism. As such, *100* can be read textually within this tradition. The apocalypse of an alien invasion, the procurement of land, sexually fetishized scientific archeological observation (“probing”), the forceful assimilation or extermination of indigenous populations (be they alien or human), the construction of systems of differentiation (*alien-nation*), and/or the accumulation of wealth through human exploitation (*a la* the

slave trade) are all science fiction conventions that are grounded substantially in the politics of colonial domination and resistance that have been identified widely by post-colonial theorists (Rieder, 2008; Langer, 2011; Abbott, 2006; Mafe, 2015; Veracini, 2011). For example, as Womack (2013) notes on her extensive bibliography of Afrofuturism - a branch of science fiction which imagines sf from a black diaspora perspective - the construction of blackness as Otherness during African colonization and the slave trade was like something out of science fiction. Africans may not have hailed from a planet in another solar system, but they were from another world, with mysterious lands and customs that were devalued and dehumanized by colonists to justify the colonial project and the subjugation of human beings as currency and chattel (p. 31). This same perspective can be applied to all former and currently colonized countries and people. As a result, Africa and rest of the world that was formally colonized by European expansionism, can very much be considered post-apocalyptic societies which have already experienced the invasion, the doomsday, and the collapse, therefore serving as the model for many sf narratives.

Like *100*, many of these colonial themes have guided some contemporary YA dystopian media, most notably through the films *Enders Game*, *The Host* and *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave*. In *Enders Game*, viewers are encouraged to justify complete species genocide at the expense of American expansionism, even though the protagonist, Ender, feels remorse. Similarly, in both *The Host* and *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave*, audiences are encouraged to rally behind resistance to invasion, extermination, and carefully modulated and systematic waves of genocide, which seem to be targeted almost exclusively at white, heteronormative bodies. In *The 5th Wave*, the five waves of alien colonization mark the

beginning stages of colonialism which engulf the planet so that body-snatcher like aliens can conquer and settle the globe. *The Host*, on the other hand, takes place well into the colonizing process where a few starving cells of humanity are left to fend off complete genocide from body snatching aliens. What is most problematic about *Host* and *Wave* are the ways in which globalized colonization appears to be reserved almost exclusively for middle to upper class “normal” white women.

With the persistence of the colonial narrative in young adult dystopia media, popular responses on neocolonial (young adult) dystopia have followed in tow. For instance, Noah Berlatsky has questioned the extent to which sf in popular culture directed at young people continues to imagine the subjugation of white people prepositioned as *de facto* colonial tales, that result in contradictory meanings, while insisting on the almost banal distress signal, “what, oh what would happen if someone, somewhere, treated us the way we treated them?” (Berlatsky, 2016, par. 1). As Berlatsky (2014) points out, parables of colonialism in media culture serve a dual allegorical function. “On one hand . . . these reverse colonial stories in sf can be used as a way to sympathize with those who suffer under colonialism”, putting imperialist in the place of the colonized, asking, “*this could be you, how can you justify your violence?*” (par. 12). These coded narratives may have a more insidious and problematic effect in that they “mask” the politics of colonialism by appropriating certain themes and re-centering whiteness by colonizing the imaginative space that could be realized by non-white bodies. As a result, media that incorporate these reverse colonial stories can become more palatable for popular cultural



consumption, and may be more likely to get produced, distributed, and celebrated<sup>3</sup>. As Berlatsky (2014) mentions, “reverse colonial stories can erase those who are at the business end of imperial terror, positioning white European colonizers as the threatened victim in a genocidal race war” (par. 12). Although Berlatsky calls into question explicitly how European identity and whiteness are central to reverse colonial sf narratives in media culture (a point which the *100* slightly diverges from and which I will explain later), for our purposes here, it is necessary to point out that *100* in no way facilitates a sympathetic gaze for those who are subject to the pressure of colonialism. Rather, the series fosters a sense of necessity, or even manifest destiny, towards the colonial practices of the 100 settlers. However, *100* does do ideological work to erase the experiences of those who have been on the “business end” of colonialism in the past, in the present, and potentially in the future. As such, *100* is both neocolonial and dystopic. Neocolonial in that it consistently marginalizes Grounders (or, Indigenous people), and dystopic in that the marginalized people pose the greatest threat to the development of the protagonist (the colonist), thereby building the main conflict of the first season. Thus, the series aligns itself with, takes the position of, and encourages support for the 100 young adult colonists. In sum, whether it be burden of colonial labour (*100, Enders Game*), or being on the “business end” of the colonist (*The Host, The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave*), what these YA

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<sup>3</sup> Although it is not a YA text, the dystopian television show *Colony* (2016 - present) draws heavily on the reverse colonial narrative and re-centering of whiteness by appropriating and ignoring those who may be on the “business end” of anticolonial struggles. In a dystopia where Lost Angeles has been colonized by aliens, the leader of a predominantly all white resistance is named Geronimo, after the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial Native American Apache leader of the same name. Throughout the season, “resistance” propaganda is interspersed in various scenes, reading “You Are Geronimo” and clearly appropriating Native American dress and iconography. The designer of the propaganda, and various marketing posters, is quoted as saying that the producers of the show, “wanted some of that Native American flavour” (Keene, 2016).

properties all have in common is that they are all neocolonial narratives which invite an understanding of the dystopic realities of colonial relations.

As such, for this essay, I rely on Ono's (2009) definition of neocolonialism (as mentioned above) as well as Baccolini & Moylan's (2003) definition of dystopia. For Baccolini & Moylan, a dystopia is as a new map of current social and political concerns that imagines a society located in time and space that is considerably worse than the present (p. 2). In addition, a dystopia is ethically and politically concerned with warning us of the terrible sociopolitical outcomes that, "could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside" (p. 2). For Jon Pike, a dystopia is a measuring stick by which we can evaluate our own society. In many respects, a dystopia is a kind of literary tool which structures an overarching model for narrative that poses hypothetical realizations of the nature of existence, often the more frightening aspects of social and political existence (dystopia, 2007). If a dystopia illuminates a horizon in the future that is considerably worse than the present, framed within a colonial context, what undesirable parable is *100* navigating regarding colonialism in the future?

To contextualize *100* and examine how it functions as a neocolonial dystopia, we can look to the apocalyptic cries of pundits who view Indigenous acts of resistance to neocolonial-capitalist practices of "progress" and "civilization" as, potentially, signaling the end of the world as we currently know it. My personal experiences with discussions regarding Aboriginal land claims, treaty rights, civil rights, reparations and other issues concerning previously colonized people and the historic ramifications of colonialism have often ended with concern, worries and cries of impossibilities: "money will not fix

the problem” and “we can’t just give land back” often follow question regarding what exactly reconciliations looks like and how exactly reparations in a post-colonial context can occur. In sum, the redistribution of capital and land - and the complete reworking of settler societies as we know it - may be frightening, if not horrific, in a “post” colonial context. Recently, this type of doomsday discourse of resistance to the legacy of colonial practices was particularly noticeable in the rhetoric surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline.

During the time of this writing, Indigenous people from across North America, along with various allied organizations, have been mobilizing at the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota to protest the development of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) and the initial plan to dig under the Missouri river at Lake Oahe (Levin, 2016). The peaceful protestors, who call themselves Water Protectors, at the front lines of the resistance, have been subject to brutal assaults by attack dogs, and besieged by a highly-militarized police force who have used water cannons in sub-zero temperatures, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and concussion grenades which have injured 300 people, one protestor so badly that she is in danger of losing her arm (DemocracyNow!, 2016). Although it is unclear whether the pipeline will be built, many far-right media pundits and outlets have adjudicated the prospect of allowing Indigenous people the merit of self-determination as nothing short of a catastrophe, liking it to the horror and disaster common to sf narratives. For example, Tomi Lahren of *The Blaze* described the protestors as mongrel savages who are, “trespassing and damaging private land, vandalizing equipment, and graves . . . harassing ranchers and farmers, slaughtering live stock, and burning tires in fields!” (Lahren, 2016). Similarly, *Breitbart News*, a far-right leaning

outlet founded by the neofascist Steve Bannon, has published articles titled “Militant Native American Protesters Attack Pipeline Crew” (Churchwell, 2016), and “More Police Requested to Contain ‘Violent’ Pipeline Protests” (Breitbart Texas, 2016) while covering the resistance in North Dakota. Despite these commentaries being overinflated in the interest of vilifying protesters, in these few examples, the insurgency of a predominantly Aboriginal resistance is framed as the beginning of the rapture of a postmodern society. Read collectively, these previously mentioned media commentaries frame anti-colonial resistance as a signal for the impending apocalypse; the iron cages in the realm of utopia’s underside indeed. Although contemporary acts of resistance to neocolonial practices, and the doomsday response from right wing pundits may not be enough to instantiate the connection between *100* and colonialism that I am trying to make, to further elaborate, we can look to a more metaphorical example that draws striking parallels between the dystopia of *100* and the slow crawl of neocolonial practices in postmodernity.

The encroachment of Israel on Palestine, or what Goldberg (2009) calls, “the race-making web of modernizing statehood” (p. 109) serves as a lucid example. Although the formation of Israel is a long and complex historical process, one that is well beyond the scope of this thesis, I am most concerned with drawing the connection between how the elements concerning the construction of difference and the establishment of hierarchies in *100* is quite similar to Israel’s occupation of Palestine. To begin with, we can look to the biblical connotations of the mothership, The Ark, which houses the survivors of a global apocalypse. Furthermore, the Sky People and the Grounders can be juxtaposed in many ways to the racialization of Israelis and Palestinians. The Sky People

are a technologically advanced, space traveling (mobile) group, who figuratively and literally have “high” culture, and who are journeying to their “promised land” after executing “Project Exodus”. Conversely, Grounders represent antiquity, cultural immaturity, and backwardness. All this considered, the Israel and Palestinian comparison becomes increasingly noteworthy. For postcolonial theorist David Theo` Goldberg (2009), “Israel represents modernization, progress, industry and industriousness” which is, “looking to a bright future” and is the, “civilizing mission of the best”. On the other hand, “Palestine represents the past, failed effort where effort at all”, in which their home territory is an “antique land still tilled by hand and the perennial failure of governance, a place constantly in the grip of its *time past and passed* [emphasis added]” (p. 109). Although this comparison may not have been an intentional outcome of the series, imagery, props, and set pieces which are used to describe and differentiate groups of people in the series make this connection even more pronounced.

Like the construction of nationhood in Israel, in *100*, modernization, industrialization, organized militarism, and political domination are all leitmotifs championed foremost by the protagonists, the Sky People. The series allows for much of this proximity to the machines of modernity to occur accidentally, if not serendipitously, throughout the entire first season. For example, this is vivid in the way that the show begins the journey of colonisation. When the 100 arrive on earth, they set up house around their drop ship, a phallic-like cylindrical spacecraft which penetrates the earth’s surface in “Pilot” and stands erect for the entire first season. The proximity to advanced technology is, what anchors the settlers to the earth, coding them as advanced and superior. Similarly, the 100 have hi-tech communication devices that allow them to

communicate with (and be surveilled by) the earth-orbiting Ark. In episode eight, “Day Trip”, Clarke and Bellamy accidentally stumble upon hidden assault rifles that the Grounders seemingly lacked the exploratory ambition to find. In episode nine, “Unity Day”, the weapons are used to kill Grounders when Jasper shoots a centurion out of suspicion during what was intended to be a peace negotiation. Before the collapse of the peace talks due to Jasper’s trigger-happy prejudice, in an exchange with the Grounder leader Anya, Clarke makes the will to dominate through technological prowess along with the irony and double standard of the civilizing mission clear when she remarks, “If you fire the first shot, those people coming down [citizens of the Ark] won’t bother negotiating. Our technology [pause] . . . they will wipe you out”. In episode 10, “I Am Become Death”, the tech-savvy mechanic, Raven (Lindsey Morgan), builds a makeshift bomb out of left over gun power and rocket fuel. Later in the episode, the bomb is used to destroy a bridge along with dozens of Grounders. What is most interesting about these encounters in *100*, is how invited to favour outcomes which disproportionately favour the 100 delinquents. In other words, the series suggests that only genocide of deplorable, uncivilized people, who are prone to domination, is the optimal conclusion of any conflict. Overall, through notions of cultural maturity, and pursuit of a mission out of necessity, the series encourages certain empathy towards what appears to be an overall puritan ethos, perpetuated through self-legitimization. In short, colonization is justified as a natural and necessary process. Like in the series, where Israeli acts of war are labeled as acts of defense, Palestinian resistance is only recognized as “terrorism” (Greenwald, 2016). As such, the overall undermining of Grounder culture entices a certain antipathy towards the residue of perennial failures of the past, in need of the civilizing mission,

removal, or complete annihilation.

Conversely, the anti-technological (d)evolved, uncivilized and culturally (im)mature iconography of the Grounders works to fit them within a demeaning historical tradition of colonist imagery, conforming to the Third World Othering paradigm of “underdevelopment” and the demonization of “savagery” and “primitivism”. For instance, Grounders often occupy the margins of various scenes as stoic, bow and arrow wielding or spear carrying sentinels. In addition, they are represented as voiceless, stealthy, animalistic stalkers, signifying their stuck-back-in-time culture in a futuristic narrative. In scenes where they do speak, they have very little dialogue, if any at all, existing mostly as physical subjects without agency. Alternatively, like in episode 12, “We Are Grounders Part II”, they are also depicted as unintelligible hordes whose war cries, hollers and ‘yips’ veer uncomfortably close to the racist representation of Native Americans in Western genre films. Moreover, the bodies of the Grounders are often subject to the power of the eroticized imperial gaze. In episode seven, “Contents Under Pressure”, Lincoln is captured, held by ropes in a bondage position in the drop ship and stripped of his torso clothing, revealing full-body tribal tattoos and a glossy, sculpted musculature. Since Lincoln is unwilling to cooperate with his captors by remaining silent, he is repeatedly whipped by Bellamy in what could be conceived of as homoerotic, sadomasochistic torture for the purpose of re-establishing masculine and patriarchal authority over the Other. What this scene draws attention to is the use of sexually suggestive themes to coordinate hierarchies through sexual domination of Otherness. Furthermore, because Lincoln is racially ambiguous, but still a “dark body”, the episode develops an eerie reminder of the homoerotic fascination with, and castration of, the

black male phallus. Although this connection may reside outside of a memetic representation of lynching during American Reconstructionism (since the series serves as allegory for colonial domination more generally), this scene is underscored by an economy of sexuality, masculinity, and a socio-symbolic imagery of phallic power that Weigman (1995) indicates is a with mechanisms of control and differentiation. While Lincoln's mutilated body comes to signify a "site of normativity" and "sanctioned desire" (p. 81), he also stands as a representative for the, "monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return" (Weigman, 1995, p. 81) at least ideologically and metaphorically. In other words, while Lincoln is symbolically "castrated" and rendered limp or impotent (since he is now incapable of existing as a physical threat), Bellamy stands erect with re-establish masculine, sexual prowess.

When Grounders do speak they use the language called "Trigedasleng", a heavily accented dialect of English, which is utterly incomprehensible, often encouraging xenophobic sympathy or backlash from non-Trigedasleng speaking characters in the series. Also, the Grounders believe in remedial and "savage" cultural practices of corporeal punishment where the crime of manslaughter or murder should be met with equal punishment: "blood will have blood" or "death by one thousand cuts". This chastising of Grounder culture by the Sky People becomes incredibly ironic when the body count of the Grounders greatly surpasses that of the 100 by the end of the season (which I elaborate on later). For the most part, though, the series works to distance the intellectual, emotional, and logical capacities between the Sky People and the Grounders. Where Grounders have been unable to recuperate scientific and technological



development (despite being on earth for almost a century), Sky People maintain a sound understanding of scientific and technological processes. Where Grounder's *naturally* act upon primordial instincts, Sky People only engage in similar carnal delights (like torture) when it is *necessary*. Where Grounders are best at mobilizing (from the series perspective at least) unintelligible hordes, Sky People are readily able to coordinate effective tactical military attacks and defense operations. This is not to say, however, that there is no slippage where the agency of one group can come to resemble the other. For instance, there are moments when Grounder leadership seems very capable of out-maneuvering the Sky People, and there are several instances where members of the Sky People, like Murphy (Richard Harmon), are much more malefic than the Grounders. In addition to how characters behave and act on the series, the text is chock-full of inconsistencies and contradiction. These slippages are especially noticeable in how characters are racialized and how colonial tropes are dramatized (all of which I explain later) Regardless of the scenario in which these contradictions occur, the slippages found in the text often work to fit the textual conventions of neocolonialism.

In effect, this neocolonial dystopia is underscored by the doomsday, threat and ascendancy of "Grounder peril", as it may be called. Yet, the main conflict of the series is based on a distinction of identity politics that does not lend itself to a binary opposition of race – as we know it – much like the "dark" Palestinian Arab/Muslim and the "white" Israeli Jew, or the archaic polarity between Blacks and Whites that have guided modern conceptualization of inherent differentness of the human species. In many respects, the series elides and transcends what W.E.D. Du Bois identified as "the problem with the twentieth century" (1994, p. v). In this sf dystopian future, the boundaries of race, or "the

colour line” as Du Bois (1994, p. v) called it, has been erased and rewritten. In effect, *100* does some ideological work, instigating a well-behaved “postracial” liberalism where the colour line and the veil of racism that Du Bois spoke of no longer exists in a post-apocalyptic America. For example, not only are the Sky People racially diverse, but so too are the Grounders. Even though Grounders are coded as “dark bodies”, the series insists on reaffirming a postracial and postracist agenda when characters like Lincoln, Anya, and various other supporting characters, many of whom are white, amalgamate to build a diverse body politic that is multiracial. Though the two Grounders that the series focusses on, Anya (Dichen) and Lincoln (Whittle), both have skin of darker hues (Ricky Whittle is a British actor of West Indian decent and Dichen Lachman is a Nepali-born actress of Tibetan and German descent), the Grounders clearly reflect a multiracial mosaic. The postlapsarian multiracial make-up of the Grounders is confirmed in episode 11, “The Calm”. In the episode, Anya forces Clarke to give medical attention to a young girl who was injured in a prior Grounder/Sky People conflict. Although the girl remains voiceless, unconscious, dirty, shaded, and from the same “tribe” as Anya, she is clearly white. This is the first clue that indicates a multiracial body politic of the Grounders which invites us to understand the series, racially at least, as a liberal text.

Perhaps inadvertently, *100* problematized identity politics by the disassociation of “race” as a viable Othering factor, instead constituting identity through forms of representation that rely on various key tropes of classical colonial topos, along with the convenient displacement of racial politics. Specifically, through the use of postracial fantasies and cinematic techniques, *100* projects various tropes of empire like the “mythical frontier”, the emergence of systems of differentiation, rape and the rescue

fantasy, “dark” men who are infatuated with white women, and the domestication of terrorism to instantiate difference and ground the narrative within a dystopic context. Inasmuch, the social and political concern in *100* can be read as a cautionary tale regarding the impermanency of (now multiracial/multicultural) settler colonial societies. However, since the series does not rely on constructs of “race”, as we know it, what is there to make of the simultaneously articulation and eradication of binary opposition (us/them, Grounder/Sky People, our people/their people, etc.) despite all factions and people on the series being bilateral descendants of the multiracial/multiethnic, post-globalized, pre-apocalyptic world? In order to disseminate how *100* builds new ethnicities, it is essential to understand how colonialism and race are reliant upon each other in contemporary neocolonial narratives.

### **Almost Racial**

For Ono (2009) any critical inquiry of a neocolonial text needs to be understood in relation to the formation of raciology and racism, as both colonialism and racism are intertwined while they continue to be remodeled in media and popular culture. As he notes, “however central race and racism are to social relations, understanding them as integrally interconnected with colonialism produces a theory with greater exploratory potential”, and that race and racism are “both an encompassing and extensive structure and signifying process that supports colonialism” (p. 15). I would go as far to say that such an intersectional approach to understanding colonialism and race can be extended to any reimagining of colonialism and racializing in sf narratives.

However, when I use the term “race”, I do not mean an esoteric essence, imagined identity, or a purely ideological or social construction. Rather, I am referring to a multifaceted, omnipresent category that informs and is informed by historical processes, social organizations and political struggles. Omi & Winant (1994) best describe this floating signification of subject identity that relies on multiple and interdependent factors a “*racial formation*” (p. 55). For Omi & Winant, a racial formation is a project in which the human body is codified and categorized through social structures and cultural representations. This project of a “racial formation” is the modus operandi of *100*. However, the blueprint for the project in the series is not simply to reproduce “race” and colonialism with on-the-nose stereotypes; casting all Aboriginal or black actors as Grounders and all white actors as Sky People would be an unlikely situation as it would indeed be *too* racist. Instead the text ideologically works to abandon and demolish typical racial formations to build new ones. This is quite notable on two levels. The first level can be found in the postracial logic of conventional representations of race. By using multiculturalism to differ any likeness to old racial formations that is evident in the troubling of the color line, the series flattens the racial landscape – imagine a melting-pot society, or a “benevolent multicultural invader” (Melamed, 2006, p. 1) united on a postracist frontier. The second method by which this racial renovation occurs is via a new ethnicization through the colonial methods of Othering (which I will address in the next section) which inevitably work to center whiteness and lightness. In this respect, *100* embraces a kind of planetary humanism, or postracist multiculturalism, by dismantling conventional forms of race-think, seemingly overcoming the indefinite shifting signification of race. Such a reading can be found through an analysis of characters in the

series whom are reminiscent of harbinger of discourse of postrace during the time of *100*'s release.

However, to adequately contextualize racial formation as reflected in the text, a brief understanding of the contemporary landscape of racial politics is required. By attempting to alleviate itself from strict racial binaries, the series serves a full entree of racial contradiction that reflects what postcolonial theorist Jodi Melamed (2006) calls “neoliberal multiculturalism” (p. 13). Although, as Melamed (2006) notes, neoliberal multiculturalism has distinct economic dimensions, for our purposes here, I would like to focus on the significance of race *as represented* in neoliberal multiculturalism, and draw attention to how “diversity” in *100* works to manage racial contradictions that hinder calling the persistence and existence of colonialism into question. Indeed, one could ask how, if at all, does neocolonialism function in *100* if the series does not subscribe to normative cultural models of race? To address this question, the complexities of our current multiracial/multicultural settler colonial societies that do not neatly coincide with the “color line” should be taken in to consideration. Melamed’s (2006) description of neoliberal multiculturalism would be useful to quote, here, at length. For Melamed (2006), the process of neoliberal multiculturalism is one where race “appears as disappearing” (p. 3), yet is still pervasive in politics of “new racism” that “displaces conventional racial reference” by employing various measures “to produce lesser personhoods, laying these new categories of privilege and stigma across conventional racial categories, fracturing them into differential status groups” (p. 14). Because these new privileged and stigmatized identities do not sit equally on the colour line, recognizable racial identities (Arab, Jew, Black, Asian, etc.) can now occupy both sides,

be they colonizer or colonized. In short, the proclivities of neoliberal multiculturalism and the complexities of “new racism” are essential tools to building a neocolonial dystopian series that reflects contemporary dynamics of racial politics.

New racial formations, or neoliberal multiculturalism, is a marquee ingredient to the series. More specifically, in one respect, the *100* incorporates a barely disguised reflection of Obama’s presidency through the character Theolnious Jaha (Isaiah Washington). A metonym for the first black president is quite appropriate for the series since Obama may be the most prominent president in living memory to the many young people whom are the target audience of the series. Furthermore, much like the racial dynamics in *100*, for young people, Obama may stand as an edifice for a society that is no longer imbricated in the politics of anti-black racism (since, of course, a man of colour can ascend all the way to the White House). These points considered, the series is ripe with reflections and critiques that engender a more nuanced discussion of what multicultural neocolonialism means and how it may be represented in sf media culture. Being the head council member of The Ark, Jaha is a poised, charismatic, optimistic and thoughtful leader, one that is just as malefic as he is benevolent, and one that seems to be just as loathed as he is celebrated by council members and Ark citizens. Jaha is also a black man. Along with superseding institutional racism, Jaha’s character draws similar parallels to some of the other legacies of the Obama administration. Particularly Obama’s imbrication in the construction of the hyper-surveillance state apparatus and his disdain for whistleblowers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In episode one, “Pilot”, Jaha is introduced in Orwellian-fashion as a disembodied “Big Brother” in a TV monitor where he justifies and rationalizes shipping the 100 “expendables” to earth. Likewise, later in the series we learn that Jaha’s son, Wells (Eli Goree), was sentence to lockup for threatening to expose Jaha’s covert 100 mission, and Clarke was sentenced to juvenile lockup for “leaking” her father’s video warning

Although this contextual reading of *100* is based on what I see in the text, Isaiah Washington himself has hinted at a similar stance. In an interview to prepare for the release of the first season, Washington played with the relationship between the textual portraying black leadership and its epochal significance. Although he never mentions Obama specifically, Washington claims that he imagined his role in black leadership as both topical and pushing the envelope of diversity beyond his prior work. As he candidly remarks in a reticent tone, “I am most interested to see, *yet again*, how humanity, how the world responds to *his* voice. And, if I’m right, then, it will be bigger than anything I have ever done [emphasis added]” (ShowbizJunkies, 2013). Since Washington did not make clear exactly of whom he spoke, and since the laundry list of his prior work has never seen him portray a character like Jaha/Obama, the sheer grandiosity of the ambivalent “his” in Washington’s statement can be considered in respect to either Jaha’s or Obama’s voice. Furthermore, what is most notable about Washington’s statement is the ways in which we are encouraged to understand the sheer importance of his character without explicitly acknowledging racial politics, a theme that persists in many ways throughout the first season.

A theoretical model that can help explain the estrangement of race from racial politics (like the antiseptic representation of Jaha/Obama) can be found in the works of postcolonial theorist who identify the liberal embrace of multiculturalism as a discourse

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of the impending oxygen crisis on The Ark. By calling into question Jaha’s perfunctory rejection of transparent politics, *100* invites an examination of the conventional treatment of whistleblowers. Where government surveillance and anxieties of political meddling, treason and whistleblowing go hand in hand with national security, this story thread of a black commander-in-chief who preserves law and order to prevent an open and transparent democracy mirrors Obama’s approach to handling whistleblowers like Thomas Drake, Jeffrey Sterling, and Edward Snowden. As Mass (2016) notes, one of the most insidious domestic legacies of the Obama administration is the crackdown on people who attempted to expose policies and issues that the government wanted to keep secret (par. 4).

that both “powerfully evokes” and “erases” histories and dynamics of race and racism (Ahmed, 2000, p. 95). Ahmed’s (2000) deconstruction of the body politic that both requires the proximity of “strangers” (p. 97) in-place and at-a-distance is worth further elaboration as it is a sound model by which to examine how *100* rewrites racial formation that reflect contemporary politics. As she illustrates

racial difference, already constructed as ethnic difference, is redefined in terms of cultural diversity, that is, in terms that erase any distinction between groups. The ‘acceptance’ of difference actually serves to conceal those differences which cannot be reduced to ‘cultural diversity’ (Ahmed, 2000, p. 95)

In other words, the series uses the distinction between groups as a means to be post-racial. As such, *postrace* serves as resounding logos that helps to shape the neocolonial dystopic narrative of *100*. Therefore, colonialism is not only masked through narrative techniques, but also through the ambivalence of race. What the *100* suggests is that race is no longer a social vector worthy of mention, analysis, or critique. In this dystopic future, colonialism affects *any-body* despite race or ethnicity, and signifiers of blackness can be relieved of any formality of raciology and racism (like questions of birtherism, origin, and suspicion of otherness based on name). Simply put, despite having characters of colour, the series attempts to be completely postracial. As Goldberg (2015) says, this reformation and reinvention is the main avenue by which postraciality is mobilized. As he notes, “postraciality, it could be said, is the end of race as we know it” (p. 5). However, Goldberg also notes that such universal statement runs the risk of being dismissive and that, “[postraciality] emphatically does not declare that race, let alone racism, has reached its end” (p. 5). In other words, although the text attempts to be postracial in casting choices of diverse actors, like Washington, Morley, Avgeropoulos,



and Lachman, it is not post-racist in how it handles and reflects domination and the preservation of hierarchies based on difference. Furthermore, the series continues to preserve the sanctity and ubiquity, if not superiority, of whiteness and white bodies through various lighting and editing techniques.

This is a reason that *100* can be viewed through a taxonomy that is *almost racial*. Race exist, but only superficially. It *appears as disappearing*, as Melamed (2006) would say. In turn, all indicators and logics of racial politics become secondary to the more nuanced way that race is treated via the technical apparatus of television. This is most notable in how whiteness/lightness is treated cinematically. For example, along with the almost racial textual analogous representations of president Obama, the series sets racial hierarchies through cinematic techniques, lighting, and space instead of skin colour, social mobility, labour, wealth and other indicators of race in late capitalism. This dichotomy of almost-racialization can be seen in the contrast between the literally high Ark and low earth. Throughout the first season, The Ark is presented as the height of fairness, justice, law and order, and altruism, and is always filtered, through filming and editing, to saturate and privilege lightness and brightness. Conversely, the earth regularly embodies a tonality of darkness and tungsten hues where Grounders and Sky people alike are always dirty, more savage, primordial, lawless and seemingly more violent.

Throughout the series, The Ark is routinely revisited to either display how the council on The Ark is communicating with the 100 on the earth, or through flashbacks that show why and how some of the 100 delinquents were detained in the first place. In either case, people on the Ark always glow with the angelic hue of heroism and virtue, as opposed the grimy aesthetics and anti-altruism experienced by the same characters when

they are on the ground. Although the technicality of cinematography may seem unsubstantial beyond highlighting what is meant to be focused on most in any given scene, Dyer (1997) notes how lighting and other cinematic apparatuses have always been key in framing, and of course, privileging whiteness on film and television through what he calls, “a culture of light” (p. 103). Although the “culture of light” is apparent throughout the series and can be traced through various character stories, it is perhaps best exemplified in episode six, “His Sisters Keeper”. In the episode, the camera cuts from the present to the past, recounting how the siblings Bellamy and Octavia became incarcerated on the Ark, while simultaneously narrating the rescue mission for Octavia who has been captured and shackled by the Grounder, Lincoln. Taken within the context of colonialism, and considering that the Others are the antagonist and antithesis in the series, while temporarily phasing from past to present, the representations of Octavia and Bellamy are narratively and cinematically suggestive of racialization, especially since the manner in which they are represented conforms to colonial themes. By reading characters in relation to the environment in which they are depicted, the series works to code lightness as whiteness.

In “My Sisters Keeper”, when we are introduced to Belamy and Octavia on the Ark, the technical manner by which they are represented encourages us to understand pre-settler Belamy and Octavia as different from post-settler Belamy and Octavia. While narrating their origin stories, we learn that Octavia was a second born offspring and that her existence was completely illegal on the Ark, resulting in her detention. Bellamy, on the other hand, became responsible for entertaining, and caring for his illegal sister who was not allowed to leave the confines of their tiny living quarters. Bellamy was detained

because of his complicity in fostering Octavia's existence. Belamy's misdemeanor upon The Ark was attempting to allow his sister to partake in a party where she was likely not to be noticed, but inevitably was. When revisiting their backstories, there are notable differences that distinguish on-the-ground siblings from on-The Ark siblings. First, they both become more carnal and primordial. While on The Ark, Octavia was depicted as the embodiment of feminine Victorian metaphors: white, virgin, pure, innocent, cleanliness, and Belamy was framed as selfless, altruistic and forgiving. Conversely, when they reach the ground, Octavia instantly becomes promiscuous, inundated by "jungle fever" (as we later come to see with her relationship with Lincoln), and apparently more concerned with sexual intimacy than she is with survival. In "Pilot", she exclaims to her brother, "I need to have fun, Bel. I need to just do something crazy just because I can". Belamy, on the other hand, becomes an authoritative, self-proclaimed sheriff of the wild frontier, more a despot than a diplomat. Although the series, media discourse, and marketing material invites us to see the representation of unbridled, young adult angst as a response to the absence of adults (as well as the shock-factor intended to attract young audiences), I am reluctant to dismiss these proclivities as simply apolitical since they continue to coincide with a reading of neocolonialism. Moreover, along with change in character demeanor, the second factor that conforms to colonial imagery is the way in which the pair are either shaded or over-saturated with light.

While on The Ark, both characters are illuminated with halo-like silver linings around their entire bodies. This is particularly noticeable with Octavia who wears a low-cut tank-top which exposes her chest, shoulders and arms. In the series, while revisiting backstories on The Ark, lightness situates tonality *as* morality and prolific innocence in

the case of Bellamy and Octavia respectively. In both these instances, these sanctimonious virtues are expressed exclusively through white bodies on the Ark, (Jaha being the exception who remains on the Ark for the entirety of the first season, but is also illuminated and is nevertheless a signifier of postrace multiculturalism). In the previous mentioned examples, embodied whiteness is not experienced as skin colour but through representation *of* skin colour. Whiteness, in this sense, is almost racial in that it is only suggested through signification and representation; sanctimonious morality, prolific innocence, even virgin purity. Where being white, as opposed to being “dark”, seems to be irrelevant to the hierarchy of Sky People over the Grounder (since both sects are racially diverse), shading, tone, and lighting is very relevant. The use of colour-coding as race-coding is a regulatory structure by which visual narratives sets hierarchical relations among characters in media culture. For Ono (2009), color-coding as racial coding helps to communicate colonial relationships; especially shading, which determines the degree of marginality in neocolonial narratives (p. 145). To appropriate Homi Bhabha’s (1984) phrase regarding colonial mimicry, whiteness becomes a litmus test where characters on the ground lose their position of moral innocence and virtuous superiority, and are *almost light, but not quite*. In this regard, colour is more of a description of difference, not a definition of it. In any case, light-whiteness is presented as normal, becoming the default for any “good” rendition of the future of society. How, then, is corporeal and physical difference conceptualized in the series?

## **Tropes of Empire**

Where multiculturalism and postracialism work to *obscure* a system of differentiation, and the use of technical elements like cinematherapy and lighting are used to *signal* racial hierarchies, the series invites us to understand and *experience* physical difference between Grounders and Sky People through the fears, anxieties, and apprehensions motivated by colonial myths, stereotypes, and “tropes of empire” (Shohat and Stam, 2014, p. 137; See Ono, 2009). These tropes include the exploration of the “final frontier”, the Manichean construction of good and evil, rape and the rescue fantasy, “going native” in the new world, the “noble savage”, sex and miscegenation, and the domestication of terrorism – all of which are particularly noticeable in the story threads that follow Octavia and Lincoln, which I will explain shortly. However, for the moment, I would like to address how these tropes that invite audiences to experience systems of colonial differentiation are, in themselves, informed by the very homogenizing processes described earlier. In effect, we can come to conceptualize these tropes of empire as working within a system of “*différence*” (Derrida, 1982; Hall, 1994).

*Différence* is a literary and philosophical tool used to understand the simultaneous articulation and eradication of difference. Hall (1994) describes *différence* as a “word in motion to new meanings without erasing the *trace* of its other meanings” (p. 397). In other words, *100* invites us to suspend belief about race while simultaneously using those very systems of dividing racialized identities, a system born from colonial practices, to develop its narrative. Finding new meaning without erasing traces of its other meaning is quite pertinent for a neocolonial series that establishes a multiracial society that still relies on what Hall calls the “arbitrary stop or “cut” of identity” (p. 379). The system of *différence*, which naturalizes colonial tropes within the diegesis, is noticeably coded

throughout episode 5, “Twilight’s Last Gleaming”, 6, “His Sisters Keeper”, 7, “Contents Under Pressure”, and 8, “Day Trip”, and 13, “We Are Grounders Part II” and most apparent in story arcs that follow Octavia and Lincoln. I chose to focus on these episodes because they exemplify a particular colonial motif all while underscoring a much wider lexicon of neocolonialism experienced throughout the first season of *100*. The signification experienced through Octavia and Lincoln’s story arc is perhaps the most consistent and reoccurring example of colonial imagery in the series.

In episode 5, “Twilights Last Gleaming”, the diegetic logics of the series calls for a naturalization of the rape and the rescue fantasy, almost to obscenity since it is so incredibly on-the-nose. In the episode, Octavia trips and falls down a hill, rendering her unconscious. When the episode revisits her at the end, she awakens in a fright to see Lincoln, desaturated with shadow and dressed in his tribal gear and dark face paint, looming over her in an inquisitive yet threatening posture. Because the series works to marginalize Lincoln as a voiceless, “dark”, and threatening, we are only compelled to think of his presence as malevolent; he exists, in this instance, as both a physical and sexual threat for the coveted white women. Following the beginning stages of this colonial fantasy, the trope develops substantially in the following episodes.

In the beginning of episode 6, “His Sisters Keeper”, Octavia awakes, again in fright and surprise, with an undefined leg injury, in what appears to be Lincoln’s cave dwelling. What follows is quick, yet chock-full of semiotic meaning and sexual imagery. After Octavia’s second awakening, Lincoln enters the cave, wielding a phallic like dagger with a glowing tip and forces Octavia into a position of submission while she screams in protest. The scene ends when Lincoln raises the dagger and “penetrates” Octavia with it

(apparently, since it occurs off screen) while she continues to scream. When the episode returns to Octavia, she finds success in her attempt to escape the cave during her captor's absence. Although Octavia is successful, she is recaptured by Lincoln and returned to the cave where she is chained to the cave wall amidst further screams of dissent. The episode ends when Belamy, and his search party render Lincoln unconscious and return Octavia to the drop ship.

Although Octavia's "rape" does not explicitly occur, it does so symbolically. In effect, "Twilight's Last Gleaming" and "His Sister's Keeper" conform to mythologies of colonial discourse which articulates that white women, who are representative of "the purity of white culture" (Ono, 2009, p. 52), are susceptible to capture, just as "dark" men have relentless infatuations with white women, and have a propensity to capture and rape. This trope is magnified when considering Lincoln's double-coded racial identity. Not only is Ricky Whittle, the actor that plays Lincoln, a black man, but he is also Indigenous in the context of the series. In this example, Lincoln is the complete embodiment of the racialized sexual threat; the mythical black rapist and the savage Native American (See: Guerrero, 1993; Shohat and Stam, 2014; Ono, 2009). As Shohat and Stam (2014) note, many media artifacts perpetuate the trope of the rape and the rescue fantasy where white women are rescued from dark men, in many instances galvanizing the role of the white liberator - who is typically a white man - especially since the axioms within colonial discourses of sexuality delineate that the interaction between dark men and white women can only involve rape (since white women cannot possibly desire dark men) (p. 156).

This (im)possibility of desiring masculine otherness is persistent throughout the series. In many ways, the series works to distance or denaturalize interracial relations

between dark men and white women, coding such interactions as improbable or improper. In the beginning of the series, Jaha's son, Wells (Eli Goree), is the only developed black character who is part of the 100 settlers. The series gives strong clues that Wells is romantically interested in Clarke, and through dialogue and flashbacks, we learn that Wells and Clarke have been close friends since they were children. However, Clarke continually stonewalls his affection. When he is murdered in episode 3, "Earth Kills", he is quickly forgotten by Clarke, and the narrative continues as if his story thread was extraneous. Wells' quick dismissal by Clarke is made even easier since Wells was extremely disliked by the 100 due to his familial bonds with Jaha. Although the Wells/Clarke pairing is intentionally coded as being somewhat different from the savage/pristine Lincoln/Octavia coupling, both relationships sketch similar parallels that ossify the anxieties about dark men and white women within colonial axioms of desirability. When Octavia shows empathy to Lincoln, whom she later engages in consensual sex with in "Unity Day", she is deemed what Wiegman (1999) calls a "race traitor" (p. 126) for her sexual miscegenation with the Other. In episode 11, "The Calm", she is berated by fellow settlers, referred to derogatively as a "Grounder-pounder" for her inter-"peoples" affair with the racialized sexual threat.

However, the narrative does not facilitate the same reluctances for white men and dark women. In "The Calm", Raven (played by biracial Mexican/Irish actress Lindsey Morgan) and Bellamy<sup>5</sup> also engage in impromptu intercourse. By reading Octavia and Clarke's feminine whiteness paired with Lincoln and Well's masculine darkness, in

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<sup>5</sup> Belamy is played by biracial Philippino/Australian actor, Bob Morley. Although Morley identifies as biracial, he does not exist within the economy of visibility that renders him non-white to the same extent as Thelonious, Raven, Montey and Wells. In short, Morley appears white and is coded as such through a "culture of light" (Dyer, 1997, p. 103).



comparison with Bellamy's masculine whiteness and Raven's feminine darkness, the text suggests contradictory meanings. Though the series may have a liberal agenda in respect to the interracial coupling of Raven and Bellamy, it still suggests that interracial (or inter- "people") relations between dark men and white women is not permitted, thus re-establishing white (or, light) patriarchal authority and heteronormativity.

And although, dark men and white women is framed as taboo, the series works to find redemption in still problematic ways. Where Wells is redeemed via his absence (*a la* his death), Lincoln redeems himself and reifies his relationship with Octavia by becoming the "noble savage". His nobility is instated when he becomes sympathetic with the 100 and their goal of defending themselves by any means necessary, particularly with the use of weapons of mass destruction, against the incoming Grounder attack. Ono (2009) argues that neocolonial media culture which incorporates the noble savage serves a double function. On one hand, the noble savage is an *othered* subject, while on the other hand, he is a "soothing tonic" (p. 93), one that serves as a foil which helps locate the "good will" (p. 91) of colonial conquest. For example, towards the end of the series, Lincoln becomes empathetic only when he begins to embrace the objectives and goals of the 100. In this transformative process, his agency resembles that of the main character in Disney's 1992 film, *Pocahontas*, where a colonized subject views colonialism as "a benevolent and emancipatory process" (Ono, 2009, 95).

A second trope which becomes evident in the *100* is what Ono (2009) identifies as "domesticating terrorism" (p. 133). For Ono, the domestication of terrorism is a neocolonial process of mimesis where the struggle to assert ideological control is waged on the front of representation. The domestication of terrorism can occur on multiple

planes, both the physical and the representational. Ono notes that, “the colonizers no longer exert physical control over the land. Instead, the contemporary form of colonization, neocolonialization, entails ideological/pedagogical control over the visual space of representation” (p. 133) like television and sf narratives. The domestication of terrorism is successful in denying the terrorist as Self, where the initiation and continuation of colonialism is rendered natural and anticolonial activism and rhetoric is framed as extremism or terrorism. This perverse method of justifying who lives and who dies was evident in the final two episodes of the season, “We Are Grounders: Part 1” and “We Are Grounders Part: 2”.

The two episodes narrate an incoming Grounder attack that seeks to supplant the 100’s settlement. However, with their wit and high-tech weaponry, the 100 draw the Grounders into their camp, while they find protection in their drop ship, and ignite the rocket boosters for the ship which set ablaze the camp and the entire Grounder army. Although the scale of the massacre does not appear to be completely senseless violence, I would like to draw attention to the ways in which the text justifies an incredibly uneven act of deadly retaliation that is in direct contradiction with the moral standard that the 100 set for themselves. In many instances, the Grounders are berated for their archaic cultural method of pro quo exchanges for breaking their laws, thus audiences are led to believe that “blood will have blood” is averse to a civilized moral compass. According to Shohat & Stam (2014), this perversion of justifying settler life as worth more than colonized life is typical of text imbricated by the politics of colonialism. In other words, Grounder life, like that of colonized subjects, comes cheap. The film obeys the “colonial proportion” (p. 122) equation in regards to the body count: for every Sky Person that is killed, scores of

Grounders can be killed in retaliation. Characters in *100* are fond of revisiting the body count equivalency throughout the series. By the end of season one, we are well aware that 54 Sky People remained alive, meaning that 46 had died, mostly – but not exclusively – as a result of attacks by Grounders. However, the body count of the Grounders well surpasses that of the 100. According to my close inspection of the season, approximately 20 Grounders are killed on screen in various conflicts from episode to episode. This does not include the 300 that died due to the rocket blast in the final episode, “We Are Grounders Part II”, putting the total body count of Grounders at approximately 320 plus. In this respect, the text suffers from what Shohat & Stam (2014) call the ““make my day” syndrome”, which results in, “a desire for an outrage to justify even greater violence” (p. 130). Where the Sky People are coded as normative bodies, Grounders exist only as the pre-emptive “to be eradicated”.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, *100* imagines a dystopia through neocolonialism. What is most problematic about *100*, as a neocolonial text, are the ways in which it engages in the voyeuristic pleasure of re-enacting and establishing hierarchies without acknowledging them as problematic or symptomatic of relations of power and domination resulting from colonial engagement. Furthermore, although a media text may attempt to be “liberal” or even apolitical, it is still interwoven in the complex fabric of entertainment, along with the politics of informing and educating, or what Giroux & Pollock (2010) call the primary site of “public pedagogy” (p. 1). Many of my interactions with young people who enjoy

consuming YA fiction, and whom are invested in the series, see the politics of colonialism as virtually non-existent, if not completely absent, from any contextualized understanding of the series. In many ways, the text does cultural work to naturalize the ways in which neocolonialism is experienced. As a result, many viewers of *100* may be inclined to see resistance to colonialism, in any manifestation, be it in the series or in anti-colonial struggles in our contemporary moment - like civil disobedience, social unrest, or even violent uprising - as evil, bad, and antithetical to progress and civilization.

Coming to popularity at the peak of YA-hype along with *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and the *Maze Runner*, the first season of *100* is a notable distinction from its other media counterparts. Where popular YA dystopian media typically situates tyrannical leaders and oppressive governments as the overriding antagonist, *100* imagines a dystopic future where settler colonisation is perpetually under threat, both geographically and discursively. However, while a vision of baroque colonial settlement and resistance would require an intersectional look at race and racism (as we know it), the series avoids active criticisms concerning racial politics because of the diverse cast of young adult delinquents, as well as an opulent, charismatic, black leader. In many respects *100* is incredibly contradictory – it purports to be past racializing (as race is no longer a social vector of power) but it is not past race making, as the Grounders are racialized themselves. In attempting to embody benevolent multiculturalism and postracialism inherent to the Obama era, the series invites viewers to participate in a postrace fantasy all while indulging in the thrill of new settlement in which Indigenous people are forced out, or in some cases, brutally exterminated through militant technological superiority. As a result, the series relies heavily on both tropes and

techniques to justify the plot. To convey the meaning of race in empire, the series prioritizes “rape and the rescue fantasy” in the narrative concerning Octavia’s kidnapping, her retrieval, and Lincoln’s subsequent torture and escape. However, while postracial fantasies seem to be a proclivity of text, even while immersing itself within imagery of colonialism, elements of the *mis-en-scene* like space, shading, and lighting work to re-center whiteness as lightness, thereby establishing new racial hierarchies. As such, *100* is a communicative text with wider sociocultural implications that privileges and perpetuates colonial domination as natural and normal. Although the series neglects a discussion based on colonialism and race, it embraces a neocolonial agenda by reproducing social binary, hierarchy through domination, racism (or Grounderism), and tropes of colonialism, all while inviting viewers to participate in the project through passive consumption.

## Chapter Three

### **WCKD Politics and Consuming Cranks: Finding Capitalism and Neoliberal Terror in *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials***

The second film in *The Maze Runner* trilogy, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, begins amidst a cacophony of confusion, shrieks, and the shadow of corporate malevolence. In a key scene which opens the film, a group of young people are pursued by a horde of zombies and haunted by a postlapsarian, transnational mega-corporation run by mad doctors. Immediately, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* (hereafter, *Scorch Trials*) positions a group of young people, referred to as “Gladers”, as unable and unequipped to adequately navigate their post-apocalyptic world. Caught between the perils of insatiable consumers and an organization which sees their bodies as raw material that can be harvested, *Scorch Trials* serves as rich science fiction (sf) allegory that invites us to reflect on how young people are positioned in a free market society. This is allegorized and coded in the film through the use of zombies, and the mantras of commodification, as narrative devices. Because *Scorch Trials*’ dystopia is generously sprinkled with semiotic codes of capitalism (zombies, powerful corporations, environmental collapse, etc.), I see the film as being markedly different from other more popular entries in the YA dystopian genre, thereby distinguishing it as a film which explicitly calls into question neoliberal ideologies and market fundamentalism.

Guided by what Kellner (1995) calls “contextual cultural studies” (p. 101), this essay will read *Scorch Trials* as a social text which articulates various anxieties, dreads, and uncertainties about neoliberal capitalism that are coded in the film. For Kellner

(1995), an effective cultural studies approach reads artefacts intertextually within sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts (p. 103). Moreover, what is also important for a cultural studies approach is to situate films within genre cycles because “reading films contextually involves seeing how they relate to other films within the set, and how the genres transcode ideological position” (p. 103). For example, although the “return to Iraq and Afghanistan films” all comprise a single genre, a transgressive and subversive film like *War Machine* (2017) undermines standard motifs of the genre, and may offer a more progressive, satirical critique, and different ideological position than *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) or *American Sniper* (2014). While *Scorch Trials* does not parody YA dystopia like *War Machine* does its respective genre, *Scorch Trials* is unique in the YA dystopian cycle because of how it reconfigures standard genre motifs with the inclusion of what McNally (2012) calls “monsters of the market”, or zombies, to be more specific.

Because of this unique addition, *Scorch Trials* deserves to be read as both a YA dystopian film *and* a zombie film, and include the debates surrounding the cultural politics of both genres. As such, this chapter will take its methodological and theoretical cues from theorists who read sf and dystopian texts as allegory that comment on the future by reading the present (Baccolini & Moylan, 2003; Nama, 2008), and zombie films as signifiers of labour, exploitation, consumerism, and capital (Brayton, 2012; Newitz, 2006; McNally, 2012). By working through literary and cultural studies approaches to reading zombies as metaphors of late capitalism, along with dystopias as a warning sign for our contemporary sociopolitical climate, this essay seeks to read *Scorch Trials* as a media text which registers what McNally (2012) calls “the capitalist grotesque” through a

study of “a capitalist *monsterology*” (p. 2). For McNally (2012), capitalism’s greatest success, perhaps its most salient characteristic, are the ways in which it has seamlessly colonized the essential fabric of every aspect of human life. By treating capitalism as a phenomenon that is felt, experienced, resisted and allegorized in narrative form, a monsterology seeks to study how *Scorch Trials* registers “the monstrous forms of everyday life in a capitalist world-system” (p. 2), especially as it pertains to young people. Fredrick Jameson would call this interpretive approach an excavation of the “political unconscious” of a text (1981, p. 87).

To extract this more politicized and contextual reading of *Scorch Trials*, this chapter will analyse how the film transcodes a more left wing political discourse as compared to most other YA dystopian films. For a contextual cultural studies approach, the term “*transcode*” is used to describe how a media artefact can be a site of ideological struggle and contestation. Where some films may embrace various notions of market fundamentalism and neoliberal politics, others may reject and critique neoliberalism, conservatism, and right-wing ideologies. In any case, transcoding is the method by which ideology is embedded, encoded and expressed by the media text (Keller, 2010, p. 2). To transcode the discourse that can be found in the film, this chapter will briefly lay out critical debates surrounding *Scorch Trials*. Then, it will follow a poststructural approach which uses a Marxist tradition of seeing popular culture as an effect of historical materialism. Where a poststructuralist lens can help to make visible various layers of meaning, the Marxist tradition can help situate the object under analysis as a product and effect of the circulation and flow of capital. Even though a poststructuralist approach and historical materialism are not one in the same, I have chosen to use both to



help illustrate how the meaning that we might find in the text, either literally or symbolically, can often be tethered to the denotations and connotations of money. For Nicholas Garnham (2012) historical materialism is identified as a mode of analysis of capitalism which stems from the relationship between the abstract (money, commodity value, exchange relations) and the concrete (material things, lived experiences) within social formation (p. 168). In other words, historical materialism can help illuminate how popular culture and mass media are fundamentally bound by the production, circulation, and surplus accumulation of capital. Although a poststructural lens may see signs and signifiers as open to interpretation, historical materialism acknowledges that those interpretations are always situated in a capitalist mode of social organization, and thus warrant an examination concerning how a text might transcode capitalist organization, and how a text is contextually situated within it.

By viewing media culture and discourse as an active agent which does cultural work to both produce and reflect our social realities (Kellner, 2010; Ono, 2009; Fairclough, 2003), I will contextualize some of the politics that can be found in *Scorch Trials*, and measure them against more conservative ideologies that embrace market fundamentalism which can be found in a majority of YA dystopian cinema. In effect, this analysis will provide a reading that sees the horror elements in *Scorch Trials* as significant semiotic codes which express the nature and uncertainties of late capitalism. As such, this essay will be guided by the following questions: In what ways does *Scorch Trials* make visible the occult monstrosity of capitalism while inviting us to question its hegemony? How does this film transcode anxieties and fears about corporatism, global capitalism and neoliberalism? Lastly, how can we read the nuance of zombies in the film

as an added value to a critique of capitalism? By reading the text against a backdrop of wider social, cultural, political, and economic culture, I argue that *Scorch Trials* is a media text that offers a critique of neoliberal capitalism through its narrative themes.

## **Background**

Directed by Wes Ball, *Scorch Trials* is the second installment of the *Maze Runner* film franchise and is adapted from James Dashner's novel series of the same name. The film serves as a sequel to *The Maze Runner* (2014), and a prequel to the upcoming film, *The Maze Runner: The Death Cure*, set to be released in 2018. Although *Scorch Trials* was met with lackluster praise, it has maintained a unique niche popularity since it is one of only three YA dystopian film series to attain sequels, and the only major film series in the genre to feature a male actor, Dylan O'Brien, in the leading role. While there are possibilities for examining *The Maze Runner* and *Scorch Trials* in conjunction with one another, I will be focusing exclusively on the *Scorch Trials* for this essay. I have chosen to do so first because the narrative unfolds in such a way that the *Maze Runner* is treated as germane preliminary exposition that sets the stage for what unfolds in *Scorch Trials*, making the sequel responsible for conveying much of the rising action and a portion of the narrative climax. *Scorch Trials* also merits attention because the film incorporates distinct horror elements that register with cultural anxieties that were not present in the *Maze Runner*, nor any other film in the genre: that is the presence of zombies as monstrous metaphors for late capitalism. Although a popular vocabulary already exists which reads zombie films as an effect of capitalism, scholarly literature has yet to use that

vocabulary to discuss *Scorch Trials*.

More surprisingly, however, is that critical scholarly inquiry on *Scorch Trials* appears to be absent from scholarly databases. Scholarly and media analysis on *The Maze Runner*, on the other hand, is present but scant. Elliot (2015) argues that the first novel by James Dashner is not only dystopian fiction, but can also be read as trauma literature, offering a method of vocalizing the effects of trauma by way of showing community building and the mitigation of grief. Flynn (2015) has offered a sociopolitical critique which sees *The Maze Runner* as one in a series of 21<sup>st</sup> century sf films which increasingly views the body-as-technology as both a means and an end towards discipline, surveillance, and social control. Aside from these two articles, most discourse on *Scorch Trials* has been constructed through critical reviews and online fan message boards. Although there is a rich history reading zombies against the political economy of capital, the socially symbolic meaning of their presence, and how this discourse may be conflated by various antagonisms in *Scorch Trials* appears absent in both popular and scholarly analysis of the text.

Quite frequently in the popular media, *Scorch Trials* is discarded as the unwanted or forgotten middle child of YA dystopian cinema. It is neither celebrated like *The Hunger Games* or decried like *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave*, but rests in mediocre purgatory somewhere in-between. Not simply based on thematic or cinematic merit alone (*Scorch Trials* is arguably a much more sophisticated film than *Divergent*), unfortunately, it is burdened by being one of the last big budget YA dystopian film in a genre that is currently in its death

throes<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps as a result, dominant discourse on *Scorch Trials* has framed the film as apolitical, ahistorical, and unworthy of critical contextualization. Some critical reviews have argued that the film suffers from double-dipping in too many sf elements and that it is an “all-of-the-above sci-fi dystopia” (Ebiri, 2015, par. 3) that checks off motifs ranging from human experimentation to zombie outbreaks. In addition, some critics have attested that the film offers nothing new, asking quite banally, “how will attractive teenagers survive the apocalypse?” (Williams, 2015, par. 1). For the most part though, popular discourse on *Scorch Trials* dismisses the film as either a hollow slice of popular entertainment that succeeds only because it “steps up the spectacle” (Kermode, 2015, par. 1), or as dystopian sf that is nothing more than apolitical simulacrum that is “severely lacking in themes and social commentary” (Kendrick, 2015, par. 5; Bradshaw, 2015). What does stand out, however, as a noticeable split in the popular discourse are the ways in which zombies, (called Cranks in the film) are just as equally dismissed as they are depoliticized. This is perhaps due in part to the unconventional marriage – *Scorch Trials* is a YA dystopian zombie film.

For the most part, YA dystopian films follow patterns and genre formulas. Often, they are situated in a post-apocalyptic, not-to-distant future where young people attempt to overthrow some oppressive institution (usually the government). To do so, these young

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<sup>6</sup> With the seminal conclusion of *The Hunger Games*, the collapse of *Divergent Series*, and an 18-month delay of *The Maze Runner: The Death Cure* (due to O’Brien’s on-set injury), *Star Wars*, Marvel and D.C. superhero films have gobbled up the fan based, and snatched up the niche young adult market that YA dystopian films previously monopolized. This is particularly evident in how this new batch of films have been cast. It is no coincidence that both *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Star Wars: Rogue One* (2016) casted young, feisty, Katniss-like, women in the lead roles. Moreover, the global appeal of Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss in *The Hunger Games* franchise is likely what set the stage for D.C./Warner Brothers to finally green-light the decades-long anticipated, and recent box-office smash, *Wonder Woman* (2017).

people must break uniformity and antagonize a revolution (i.e. *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*). Popular zombie films, on the other hand, tend to see the collapse of the world due to a pandemic. The apocalyptic cultural anxieties found in zombie films like *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2016) and *Train to Busan* (2016), for instance, are usually articulated through a first-hand account of a crumbling public sphere, the military state apparatus, the decay of civil society, and insistent threats to person's bodily integrity. Yet, the *Scorch Trials* riffs on both genres. In the film, the goal of the protagonist is to stop the oppressive post-state apparatus WCKD, while simultaneously eluding infection from the flare virus. And because the film functions with a slight slippage of genre conventions, it has been subject to public discord. On the social media discussion forum Reddit, many fans of the films have lengthened comment feeds to debate what kind of film *Scorch Trials* is, some expressing surprise at the horror-like direction that was taken in *Scorch Trials*. While some fans have discussed the striking similarities between "Cranks" and zombies found in video games like *The Last Of Us*, and post-apocalyptic films like *I Am Legend* (2007), and *World War Z* (2013), one fan in particular has stated quite frankly, "I have to say, I totally didn't expect this franchise to shift into the zombie genre" (JakkuScavenger, 2016).

Along with fan confusions and uncertainty read on social media forums, the cast and crew have also expressed a similar ambivalence to the zombie-esque nature of *Scorch Trials*. This was particularly evident when director Wes Ball, and leading actors Dylan O'Brien, Ki Hong Lee, and Kaya Scodelario, were questioned specifically on whether or not *Scorch Trials* is a zombie film. During an interview at a press release to promote the film, the cast and crew of *Scorch Trials* tactically worked to avoid using the word

“zombies” in their responses. Kaya Scodelario, for example, answered the question “Do you feel that this is a zombie movie?” with a simple, “no, not at all.” When asked the same question, Ki Hong Lee played with the dynamic ways in which zombies have been represented in Hollywood films, questioning the extent to which Cranks can be classified as zombies if they do not slowly lump around like the ghouls seen in George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) (Kino tv, 2015). Despite admitting that the film leans heavily on horror/monster movie themes, director Wes Ball defended his reluctance to invest in the common parlance of zombiedom simply to preserve the uniqueness of Cranks in the film. Dylan O’Brien, on the other hand, had a much more insightful vision of the contextual polemic of zombies, one that we can use to read *Zombies/Cranks* as a cultural signifier of life under late capitalism. As he describes, “[Cranks/Zombies] are more so really just a representation of what’s happened to this world and what’s happened to humanity, you know. Not a zombie movie but zom. . . Crank elements” (Kino tv, 2015). Although it could be argued that to demystify the conversation about Cranks/zombies in *Scorch Trials* may be nothing more than politicizing the mundane (Reddit forums may indeed just be a space for playful cultural banter, and clearly the films cast have been coerced into using language more suitable to marketing the film), I see overgeneralizing and oversimplifying more noticeable characteristics of the film as antithetical to a genre that is explicit about political allegory. By using zombies as a vehicle to convey meaning in the text, *Scorch Trials* fits with a rich history of critiquing the proclivities of capitalism.

For McNally (2012), monster narratives ranging from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to Hollywood zombie films are embedded in the market logic of capital’s

“*occult economies*” (p. 4), where spectral monsters of our age are both everywhere and nowhere. By everywhere, we might think about how the ubiquitous, monstrous glut of capital thrives on the quotidian rhythms of work, “where making a living often feels like dying” (Newitz, 2006, p. 2). By nowhere, we can imagine how various monster discourse, be they the vampire, the serial killer, the mad doctor, or even the zombie, often preclude the context of capitalism, exploited labour, or consumerism. As McNally (2012) suggests, “nowhere in the discourse of monstrosity today do we find the naming of *capitalism* as a monstrous system, one that threatens the integrity of human personhood”, instead “zombies move throughout the circuits of cultural exchange, largely detached from the system that gives them their life threatening energies” (p. 3).

Along with McNally (2012) and Newitz (2006), seminal work that critiques capitalism has also made this connection. By reading the work of Karl Marx, we can find the threat to bodily integrity that is essential to the ethos of monster movies is a representation of capitalism domesticated, familiarized, and animated. Karl Marx himself was quite fond of making this connection. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx (1988) encouraged us to see a challenge to capitalism as a “spectre” or a “hobgoblin” (p. 54). In *Capital Volume I*, Marx’s (1976) haunt-ological vocabulary invites us to see the “monstrous outrages” (p. 353) of capitalism as we would any iconized creature of Hollywood. With its “werewolf-like hunger” (p. 353), and its “vampire thirst for living blood and labour” (p. 367), Marx reminds us how capitalism is like a hungry zombie that “will never let go while there remains a single muscle, sinew or drop of blood to be exploited” (p. 416). Yet, these monsters of market can also manifest in the form of mad doctors or “crazy capitalists” that we find regularly circulate in popular culture.

What is also omitted from popular discussion of *Scorch Trials* are the ways in which it handles its central antagonist, WCKD (World Catastrophe: Killzone Department) – pronounced “wicked”. Where films like *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Giver*, develop apocalyptic elements by implicating harsh, social order set in place by the government, perhaps *Scorch Trials*’ most frightening element is that that social organization does not exist. Rather, a post-state organization, WCKD, can procure resources, terrorize young people, and operate without restrictions or limitation. Essentially, *Scorch Trials*’ central antagonist is a relentless medical corporation. Since the film borrows slightly from cyberpunk dystopia elements in that it suggests harboring a suspicion of shadowy corporate-like institutions, *Scorch Trials* has more in common with the zombie apocalypse film *Resident Evil* (2002) and its sequels *Apocalypse* (2004), *Extinction* (2007), *Afterlife* (2010), *Retribution* (2012), and *The Final Chapter* (2016) than it does with *The Hunger Games* or *Divergent*. In *Resident Evil*, a bioengineering pharmaceutical company called the Umbrella Corporation is responsible for incubating and accidentally releasing the T-Virus which mutates much of the world’s populations into zombies. The series follows protagonist Alice (Milla Jovovich), as she attempts to navigate the post-apocalyptic world, aid survivors, and reclaim her memories, all while in constant pursuit by seemingly infinite zombie hordes and Umbrella Corp. agents that want Alice for reasons unknown to the audience.

What is most interesting about *Resident Evil* is that like *Scorch Trials*, it calls into question the very foundation of the neoliberal model of profit over people, encouraging viewers to rationalize the end-game of consolidated corporate political power and influence amidst a withering state, a fallen democracy, and widespread human suffering.



Essentially, *Resident Evil* asks, what is the point of making a profit when the world has collapsed? How can we continue to view the world through the lens of the market when the human labour required to sustain it no longer exists? *What happens when capitalism has consumed that which it needs to sustain itself?* Although *Resident Evil* is a post-apocalyptic nightmare in almost every imaginable way, by the last film in the series, the narrative ties up all the loose ends, revealing the fulfilled fantasy of a corporate wet dream. In *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*, we learn that the release of the T-virus was not accidental but intentionally released by the Umbrella Corporation to cleanse the world for affluent elites who safely slumber in cryo-chambers, planning on rebuilding the planet as they see fit upon their awakening (the film even included the lines “You’re fired”, followed by an execution of a board member, as a satirical nod to the television show *The Apprentice* and the deranged celebration of capitalism’s psychosis). If *The Death Cure*, the sequel to *Scorch Trials*, continues with the general theme of Dashner’s source material, it will likely follow a similar path travelled by *Resident Evil*<sup>7</sup>. However, before we can contextualize the ethos of *Scorch Trials*, it will be necessary to have at least a cursory account of the film itself.

### **Narrative Summary**

The first film in the series, *The Maze Runner*, finds a group of young people in the center of a gigantic labyrinth with no recollection of who they are, where they came

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<sup>7</sup> In the third book of Dashner’s series, *The Death Cure*, WICKED (read as WCKD in the films) confesses that they used the solar flare as cover to intentionally release the Flare virus to curb overpopulation (Dashner, 2011, p. 324).

from, and why they are there. At the end of *The Maze Runner*, Thomas (Dylan O'Brien), and his group of Gladers (since they called their community in the maze "the Glade") successfully escape the maze and discover that they were part of an elaborate, Darwinian experiment planned by a suspicious organization known as WCKD. While watching a video recorded and narrated by the head of WCKD, the corporate-cool Ava Paige (Patricia Clarkson), we learn that the world outside of the maze has been ravaged by solar activity that has decimated the planet, causing immense suffering on a global scale. Along with the collapse, the planet has also been infested by the Flare, a virus which mutates people into mindless, violent, and unpredictable Cranks (*à la* zombies) that transmit infection upon intravenous contact. Through Paige, we learn that the Gladers were contained and tested in hopes of finding a cure for "The Flair" that resides inside their young bodies, and although their methods of disposing of young people to find global stability is draconian, as Paige notes, "WCKD is good". The film ends following Paige's monologue, when an anonymous para-military squad sweeps the Gladers out of the maze surveillance room and off into "the scorch".

*Scorch Trials* begins immediately following the events of the first film, where we are reunited with Thomas, Minho (Ki Hong Lee), Teresa (Kaya Scodelario) and Newt (Thomas Brodie-Sangster), as they are sheltered by Jansen (Aidan Gillen) in an industrial compound, safe from both WCKD and the Flare. Upon arrival, however, the film suggests that something is afoot and that Jansen's lack of transparency and clarity should be regarded with the utmost suspicion. After being fed, clothed, and cleaned, the Gladers meet dozens of other young people who were also put through life-threatening testing by WCKD, and some of whom are also reserved and uncertain about their new

sanctuary; on a regular basis, Jansen and his colleagues take a handful of young people and promise to transport them to somewhere unknown. An unnamed fellow maze survivor tells Thomas and his Gladers that the groups of young people are headed for “some kind of farm. A safe place”. Soon after, Thomas becomes unsatisfied with the too-good-to-be-true security provided by Jansen and decides to investigate the matter further. After befriending Aris (Jacob Lofland) and exploring the compound, Thomas uncovers that he and his fellow Gladers are not out of reach from WCKD, but are still in the protective custody of the sketchy organization. Following the revelation, Thomas and his group escape the compound. Their goal, Thomas narrates, is to find “People. Survivors. Anyone who can help us.”

Their journey through “the scorch” begins with the crew scavenging for food, water, and clothing in a building which, the film suggests, was inhabited and now abandoned by vagabonds like themselves. While searching within the gloomy building, Minho activates an electricity generator, which in turn, signals their presence to the Cranks (zombies) who have been roaming the building in silence all along. After a well-shot chase scene, and of course, a lot of shaky-cam running, the Gladers successfully evade the ghouls, take shelter for the evening, and awaken the next morning to the desolate desert of what appears to be a post-apocalyptic landscape somewhere in North America. The rest of the film follows the group of Gladers hunted by WCKD and pursued by Cranks while searching for a resistance movement called The Right Arm, and adding to their motley crew along the way. The film’s denouement takes place when the Gladers successfully locate the resistance movement and side with the Right Arm in a violent conflict against WCKD.

Although “capitalism” is never outright mentioned in *Scorch Trials*, it functions in the text as mimesis, both linguistically and symbolically. In other words, capital accumulation, circulation, acquisition, and commodification is turned topsy-turvy and reflected, imitated, signified, and represented. We can see it in the relationship between young bodies and WCKD and through the threat to bodily integrity provided by Cranks. More simply, capital manifest in the form of an evil corporation and a capitalist monster. And because capitalisms most effective weapon is its elusiveness, its everydayness, and its normalness, a critical theory must use a “*dialectic optics*” or, “a way of seeing the unseen” to read capitalisms persistence in various cultural representations (McNally, 2012, p. 6). As McNally (2012) argues:

Market-forces constitute horrifying aspects of a strange and bewildering world that represents itself as normal, natural, unchangeable. For this reason, fantastic genres, be they literary or folkloric [in this case, cinematic], can occasionally carry a disruptive critical charge, offering a kind of grotesque realism that ‘mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity’ the better to explore it (p. 7)

Even though the intent of *Scorch Trials* may not be to mimic the more frightening effects of capitalism, its associations emerge all the same. As Newitz (2003) describes, “the “capitalist” part of capitalist monsters is usually a subtext” that “lurks in the background, shaping events, and infecting the plot line” (p. 3). These kinds of subtextual cues persist in *Scorch Trials*. On one hand, various snippets of dialogue in the film that is used to describe the Gladers as commodities or “assets” that are the property of WCKD (a point which I will discuss at length later on). On the other hand, Cranks (or, zombies) function as a semiotic manifestation of Marxist monsters. Together, both function to code *Scorch Trials* as a media text which is quite fond of articulating left-wing anxieties about global capitalism. Yet, the film does so quietly, even indirectly. How fitting, then, that

*Scorch Trials*, like all YA dystopian entertainment, is targeted at a demographic of young people that have been completely colonized by calls the logic of capitalism. As Fisher (2009) notes, “for most people under the age of twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizon of the thinkable” (p. 8).

### **Working Like Crazy**

Speaking contextually, the doomsday discourse that we find in *Scorch Trials*, which thematically reproduces the spectral influence of capital, can also be located in contemporary acts of resistance by young people who have, in recent years, challenged market fundamentalism and corporate interest, or what Giroux (2013) calls “neoliberal terror”, or “the dark registers of financial capital” (p. 521). Although *Scorch Trials* may not be a direct response to one singular event, like the Arab Springs, Occupy, or the 2012 Quebec student protests (also referred to as the “Maple Spring”), the film is a text that transcodes “economic distress, political cynicism, cultural emptiness and personal hopelessness” (Castells, 2012, p. 1) which were the driving force of the above-mentioned movements. Contextually, we can read *Scorch Trials* as a media artifact that taps into the trepidation and uncertainty that many young people feel towards the neoliberal capitalist status quo of privatization, commodification, deregulation, and hyper-individualism. What Giroux (2013b, p. 12) has extensively outlined as “the crisis of youth” is an appropriate position in which we can situate the film (See: Giroux, 2009; 2012).

It is no coincidence that *Scorch Trials* became popular at a cultural moment when

young people are increasingly caught between the tension of being “consuming subjects” and the harsh dictates of “punishment, surveillance, and control” of neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2013, p. 13). For instance, at the time of the release of the film, student debt in Canada had increased over 24.4% from 1999 to 2005, reaching a whopping \$28.3 billion by 2012 (Tenser, 2014). As a response to increasing debt and the price of post-secondary education, in 2012 students in Quebec mobilized through marches, sit-ins, and demonstrations to protest tuition increases in what was the longest and largest student strike in North American history (Hallward, 2012). Amongst a wide lexicon of political unrest, what was central to the Maple Spring was an indictment of a social institution where bureaucratic targets are met by market initiatives. What is slightly problematic about the list of demands of the Maple Spring was the ways in which the movement conformed to what Fisher (2009) calls a “business ontology” (p. 17). For Fisher (2009), a business ontology is a seamless way in which capital occupies the horizon of the thinkable, and leads us to believe that “it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should run like a business” (Fisher, 2009, p. 17). In short, the Maple Spring sought to reduce tuition increases and austerity measures, not rethink post-secondary education as a social right that should be free and available to all. Because the protest did not engage with more emancipatory politics, it continued to “naturalise” the epistemic order of capital. And since capital does not depend on any sort of subjective belief or propaganda, argues Fisher (2009), it can proceed perfectly well without anyone making a case for it (p. 13). This kind of perversion of embedded ideology that we can find in political discourse like the Maple Spring is just as pervasive in fictional narratives, like *Scorch Trials*, for instance.

In the film, the disintegration of world governments due to planetary solar flares and the flare pandemic, lead to the creation of WCKD, an organization created by pooling the resources (*à la* money) of what was left of the world's governments. Yet, perhaps unintentionally, the film downplays this. We are never encouraged to question where the government is, why it is missing, and when it will provide sanctuary and assistance. Instead, WCKD is presented as the edifice of politics as we know it: an entity, free from the dictate of democratic governance, fashioned to privatize solve the post-apocalyptic problem by any means necessary. The film does not explicitly name WCKD as a phantasm of late capitalism, but *Scorch Trials* offers an array of subtextual cues which argue that its dystopia takes place in the late stages of the future market.

Towards the end of the first act, after the disorderly entry into the paramilitary compound, Thomas becomes slightly jaded by his complacency and comfort under Jansen's protection. Sensing his uncertainty, Aris, who was rescued from a different maze, insists on showing Thomas that Jansen may not be as forthcoming as initially thought. While crawling through an air duct, Aris leads Thomas to a vent where the pair witness something odd; lab technicians transporting covered bodies on trollies into a secure room. Aris tells Thomas that "they bring in new ones every night like clockwork . . . once they go through that door, they don't come back out". Aris continues with a hint of fright, "I don't think anybody really leaves this place". In this scene, the film suggests that "the farm", initially believed to be a place of greener pastures, may have insidious biopolitical undertones. Soon after Thomas' aided discovery, he lifts a pass key from a security guard and breaks into the unauthorized room. What follows is perhaps the most memorable and disturbing sequence in the film.

Upon entering the dark, blue-lit laboratory, the camera retreats from Thomas and Aris to reveal dozens of bodies hanging from harnesses attached to the ceiling. All the bodies have tubular, neon electrodes pinned to their heads, abrasive breathing apparatuses protruding from their mouths, and vials of fluid that appear to be electronically syphoned from their viscera. Shortly after they enter the chamber, Jansen and his secretary enter as well. While Thomas and Aris hide amidst the dangling bodies and limbs, Jansen begins a video call with Ava Paige. Sporting a tight pony-tail and a long, white lab coat, Paige conveys the urgency required to syphon the life-blood of the survivors of the mazes to find a cure for the flare. Paige makes it clear that she “just received board approval” and that she wants all the remaining young people in Jansen’s facility to be “prepped for harvest”. When Paige expresses uncertainty about the fate of her chattel, Jansen assures her that “the assets are secure”. After eavesdropping on the conversation, Thomas hightails it back to his bunkmates and begins an escape mission from the WCKD installation.

The laboratory scene is scary. It is visceral, grotesque, and quite haunting. It invites us to imagine how the body can be a *thing*, a vessel that can be sucked dry and easily disposed of, much like how Marx (1976) understood that capitalism is a slaughterhouse which “traffic[s] in human flesh” (p. 379), and that transforms “children’s blood into capital” (p. 382). More simply, the scene fantastically imagines how the body fits within the political economy or *the* monster of modernity. Since “the essence of capitalist monstrosity is its transformation of human flesh and blood into raw materials for the manic machinery of accumulation” (McNally, 2012, p. 115), by using young people’s bodies as the site of horror, *Scorch Trials* invites us to ponder on how the body



fits within the circuit of accumulation and exploitation. In doing so, this monstrous imagining is what sets the pace for the remainder of the film.

This scene is useful for our purposes here because it functions to articulate two important points. First, the logic of capital accumulation persists, the cold language of Paige and Jansen communicate such a point. Moreover, a quick reading of the source material would embolden this point. Although the film may not be explicit about framing WCKD as a megacorporation, it is often implied and is elaborated upon at length in Dashner's novel. As he wrote, WCKD "exists for one purpose and one purpose only: save the world from catastrophe" (p. 55). As a WCKD crony in the novel elaborates, "We have resources never known to any group of any kind in the history of civilization. *Nearly unlimited money*, unlimited human capital and technology advanced beyond even the most clever man's wants and wishes [emphasis added]" (p. 56). Although "the market" may not exist in the novel and the film, it does so symbolically. While the top-down hierarchies between Paige and Jansen resemble that of a CEO and a floor supervisor, Dashner's brief description also invites us to see how the ideology of capital can persist without making a case for it.

Along with the spectral presence of capitalism, a second reason why the scene might be useful is because it vividly illustrates a body-panic (so often induced by relations of capital) underscored by a capitalist monster that Newitz (2006) identifies as the "mad doctor" (p. 54). For Newitz (2006), the archetypical "mad doctor" is an intellectual worker who is totally consumed by his work, even to the point of his own destruction and those around him, and whose drive to succeed usually induced him to merge with his own experiments (p. 54). The mad doctor is often used as an avatar to

articulate the ways in which the labouring body can develop a manic obsession with work, and can be alienated by both physical *and* intellectual labour. We might think, for example, of the classic antihero *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or even Spider Man's nemesis Doc Ock (Dr. Octopus), who fuses robotic octopi arms to his spine to help him build a giant fireball in the film *Spider-Man 2* (2004). While *Scorch Trials* dodges a more on the nose representation of the trope (no scientist ever bonds with his experiment), the scaffolding that builds the mad doctor functions on the margins of the film all the same. When Jansen begins his video call with Ava Paige, he addresses her as "Dr. Paige". During their conversation, Paige embodies many signifiers that would situate her as such. Not only does she dress like a medical doctor, she even abides by a healthy dose of medical ethics. At the end of the conversation, she sharply remarks "Jansen! . . . I don't want them to feel any pain". Soon after Thomas and Aris, dip out of the "harvest" lab and begin their mission to escape the compound, the film continues to provide semiotic cues that invite us to see it as, partly, a mad doctor film.

After Thomas and Aris gather their motley crew of young folks, they find a woman identified as "Dr. Crawford" strolling through the cement hallways of the compound, take her hostage, and demand that Crawford help them find a missing member of their squad. As we follow them through sterile medical-like facilities where they find their separated friend Teresa, the camera is not shy about highlighting set props like medical cabinets, med-tech scrubs, syringes, and x-rays of skulls. Essentially, WCKD is an organization run by mad doctors. Their goal? To find a cure for the flare. The way they obtain the final product? Experimenting on and harvesting the bodies of young people. The reason WCKD is so spooky is because it is full of intellectual

labourers whom are obsessed with work and alienated from any vestige of human empathy for the body. In short, WCKD draws parallels to the political economy by allegorizing the blood-sucking capacities of capital that, “. . . vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx, 1976, 342).

When Thomas later recounts what he saw, his monologue reads as if it is from a Marxist playbook. “We never escaped. Me and Aris found bodies. Too many to count”. Although he acknowledges that the bodies were not dead, “they weren’t alive either. They were strung up, tubes coming out of them, they were being drained. There’s something inside of us that WCKD wants”. A Marxist allegory can be found here both in the “harvested” bodies and in those whom labour to harvest. Simply put, the film offers both the “vampire-metaphor” of capital (McNally, 2012, p. 140), as well as the “mad doctor”. For McNally, the metaphor of vampire-capital is used to explain the corporeal ways in which capital “feeds off the living”, how “capital’s blood sucking is unseen”, and how capitalism involves “‘transubstantiation’, a process in which a quality – in this case life – is transferred from one substance to another” (2012, p. 140-141). Where the bodies hanging limp in the blue lab become synonymous with assets or chattel, like lifeless carcasses swaying from meat hooks in an industrial freezer, the mad doctor is a spooky monster “not because he deviates from professionalism, but because he embodies it. The horrors he imposes on other people – experimenting with their bodies, subjecting them to clinical violence – are the inevitable results of losing his mind to professionalism” (Newitz, 2006, p. 87). Yet, mad doctors and vampire capital are not the only monsters that we find expose capitalism in the film. After escaping the WCKD compound, the Gladers also come into conflict with a horde of zombies.

## Capitalist Munchers

The zombie narrative found in *Scorch Trials*, and familiarized by decades of extant film, television, and print media, is widely recognized to have roots in Haitian folklore (McNally, 2012, p. 211). Initially popularized by William Seabrook's 1929 novel *The Magic Island*, the "zombie" (originally "zombi", derived from the African god "Nzambi") was an allegorical monster of slavery and cheap labour. Made dead and resurrected by Voodoo sorcery, the zombification process deprived the reanimated corpse of memory, and free will. The purpose of zombification was to "profit through exploitation of slave labour" (Ackermann & Gauthier, 1991, p. 475). Neither totally alive nor completely dead, Haitian folklore documented zombies as automatons that laboured on sugar plantations under complete control of a master. Because of their indentured servitude, the Haitian zombie was "the ultimate wage-slave" and "the perfect worker under capitalism" (Plawiuk, 2005).

However, since the introduction of the zombies in American popular culture, the creature has undergone decades of renovation to better reflect anxieties or widespread dispossessions of any given historical moment and to center itself within changing social, political and cultural epoch. For instance, the modernization of the zombie that we are more familiar with today from popular television series like *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present) is regularly attributed to the auteur work of George A. Romero. The filmmaker's early entries *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) were salient and influential for the horror genre because they displaced the zombie as a mindless labourer, instead reimagining them as flesh-eating consumers. The more contemporary

Hollywood imagining of zombies is useful for our purposes here because of how they align with the ideology of capitalism. Yet, the zombie as a cultural signifier is not fixed and static but is subject to change and evolution. For example, Bishop (2009) reads zombie films like *Resident Evil* (2002), *28 Days Later* (2007), *Shawn of the Dead* (2004), and other cultural artefacts that emerged with ferocious popularity in the early to mid-2000s as constituting “the zombie renaissance” (p. 17). Bishop argues that these films are included in a unique cycle because much of the zombie media released at the time, and the fundamental genre conventions in general, reflected a very cynical cultural consciousness that resonated with post-9/11 paranoia. *World War Z*, for instance, is underscored by a more cross-continental movement of bodies, crisis, infection, and metaphorically, capital (Bishop, 2015)<sup>8</sup>. By situating *Dawn of the Dead* in a shopping mall, Romero’s seminal film is very much the master text which used monsters to read capitalism, thereby pointing out the ways in which major social institutions like the shopping mall, for instance, can become a site of zombification (Webb & Byrland, 2008, p. 91). As McNally notes “by repositioning zombies as crazed consumers, rather than producers, recent Hollywood horror films tend to offer biting criticism of the hyper-consumptionist ethos of an American capitalism characterized by excess” (p. 260). And *Scorch Trials* is quite fond of using zombies to this extent. Where the general theme of “harvesting” young people’s bodies can be read as the vampiric greed of capital, and mad

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<sup>8</sup> I would go so far as to argue that the zombie motif has taken a radical transition from its original conceptualization in Haitian folklore, its popularization in Hollywood by Romero, and the “renaissance” of the early 2000s. More contemporary zombie media have used the motif to reflect whiteness and the dispossession/empowerment of femininity. Television shows like *iZombie* (2015 - present), *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017 – present), and the film *Raw* (2016), all share striking similarities in that they depict white women becoming empowered in the workplace and sexual relationships (*iZombie*, *Raw*), and even the nuclear family (*Diet*), by their zombiedom.

doctors can be read as the deranged work habits of professionalism, the use of Cranks in the film invites us to reflect on the final link in the chain of capital circulation. That is, consumption. It is not so ironic then, that when we first meet the Cranks, we do so in a desolated, decrepit, post-apocalyptic shopping mall.

After their scuffle with the WCKD medical staff, Thomas and the Gladers manage to locate an exit out of the compound and find themselves entering the sandy, desert environment of the scorch. Pursued by WCKD personal and hounded by the strong, nighttime winds, the Gladers slip into a what appears to be an empty building. While the Gladers explore the ruins, several set props offer clues to what their new sanctuary is. Dusty signs reading “DIAMONDS” are partly veiled by shadow above closed gates; various styles of clothing are askew on hangers and counter tops; while Teresa inspects a corner of a room, she is startled by a group of semi-nude mannequins staring back at her. “Looks like people lived here”, says Minho, as the Gladers scavenge for clothes amidst makeshift beds, aged photographs, and empty water barrels. Equipped only with flashlights found in a store, the group separates into teams to track further into the empty halls of the mall. While the Gladers are searching, the film follows Thomas and Minho who converse about their fears and remind us about being “harvested”. During their excursion, Minho turns on a generator that provides electricity to lamps, floodlights, and Christmas lights sporadically placed throughout the mall. The noise of the generator and the visual stimulation provided by the sudden influx of light “awakens” the Cranks, and the film quickly transitions from a mad doctor movie to a prototypical zombie film. Anytime the camera is steady enough to allow a close-up of monsters, their resemblance to previous depictions of zombies in popular films is uncanny. They have the same pasty

hue as “night seekers” in *I am Legend*, the same veiny protrusions as the zombies in Zack Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead*, the same fungal growths as hosts for the virus in *The Last of Us* video game, and the same jarring speed as “the infected” in *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, and *World War Z*<sup>9</sup>. The next several minutes documents quite an exhilarating chase sequence, where the Gladers are pursued up escalators, and across glass fenced balconies, and eventually out of the mall by the screeching Cranks.

Interestingly enough, in Dashner’s novel, Cranks do not embody the same ferocity as they do in the film. In Dashner’s *Scorch Trials*, the flare virus renders the mind somewhat intact, allowing the cranks to maintain a degree of humanity. They talk, can articulate themselves, and exist on a continuum from “just infected” to full “Gone”. At times, they communicate with the Gladers or harass them with shouts of “*Kill me! Kill me! Kill me!*” (Dashner, 2010, p. 9), signaling that they are more like people gone bonkers than they are mindless monsters. Moreover, in the novel, they are regularly discussed as the dispossessed, as disposable undesirables, deserted by WICKED and left to die in the wasteland (Dashner, 2010, p. 169). Although Dashner’s initial conceptualization may have added an interesting element to the film, I see the use of zombies in the film as actively working as explanatory markers of capital, or of what Giroux simply identifies as “zombie politics” (2011, p. 31). For Giroux, the figure of the zombie is an appropriate way of addressing the complex nexus of neoliberal capitalism, commodification, and consumption. As he describes it, “the reign of the market shapes conditions of life and death in the zombie economy” (Giroux, 2011, p. 37).

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, director Wes Ball accredited inspiration for his Cranks to many of the previous mentioned films (Lee, 2015).

In *Scorch Trials*, Cranks in the shopping center are monsters that reside *in* the market, or at the storefront of the capitalist economy. As McNally (2012) reminds us, fantastic narratives that are set in such a place “capture something very real about the economic universe we inhabit”. We might find that reminder is intertextually embedded in the etymology of the word “monster”, which is derived from the Latin *monere* (to warn) (p. 11). What cautionary tale, then, is *Scorch Trials* providing us when it uses zombies? Surely, introducing Cranks in the hyper-consuming space of the shopping centre is anything but accidental. For Harper (2002) the significance of setting a zombie film in the mall is essential for denaturalizing capitalism’s invisibility. Where the mall can function as a safe place of pleasure, so to can it turn shoppers into mindless consumers. And the *Scorch Trials* clearly recons with this relationship. The post-apocalyptic mall that the Gladers find themselves in is coded first as a sanctuary, then as a potential site of zombification. In a capitalist economy, not only can we be the victims of vampire capital, but we can also be complicit in the process when we buy commodities made with the special ingredient of dead labour. As Fisher describes it, capital is not only parasitic, it is a “zombie maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labour is ours, and zombies it makes are us” (2009, p. 15).

Put simply, in *Scorch Trials*, Cranks personify the grotesque tendencies of consumer capitalism. Like how capital requires infinite space to grow and a good consumer never stops, a Crank’s “desire to consume consume consume (flesh) (thereby infecting all of humankind) is not so different from the capitalist consumer’s desire for more more more” (Loudermilk, 2003, p. 88). For George A. Romero, locating horror in a shopping center is essential for debunking the myth of what he called “the false security



of consumer society” (Loudermilk, 2003, p. 84). By providing a face for excessive consumption, Cranks “present the ‘human face’ of capitalist monstrosity” (p. 288), fully recognizable as “vacuous, mimetic replications of the human beings they once were” (Shaviro, 1998b, p. 85). What is most spooky about the Cranks is that they act as kaleidoscope which provides a mirror image that allows us to see the horrors of our complicity in the market. In short, Thomas and the Gladers are afraid of becoming “the perfect consumer” (Webb & Byrnerdi, 2008, p. 90). While drawing the connection between zombie tropes and Cranks may seem like speculation for an incoherent fetishization of a genre trop, framing Cranks as “perfect consumers” is an extrapolation from evidence provided in the film. Although we never outright see a Crank feasting on the body of a non-infected person (likely to avoid an 18A or R rating for the film), most interactions with Cranks point to their appetites as the site of anxiety. Later in the film, during the second major chase sequence following the mall scene, a Crank succeeds in biting Brenda (Rosa Salazar), but is killed before it can take another chomp. Brenda then becomes a major site of anxiety and is faced with hostility when she meets non-infected people. When the Gladers are fleeing the mall, a group of Cranks shred Winston’s (Alexander Flores) midsection, which we assume is to get to his innards. Cranks never pursue each other, only the non-infected. In the final moments of the escape sequence from the mall, Thomas wedges a door half closed with his body weight to allow his allies a head start at escape. When Thomas releases the door, dozens of Cranks pour over the threshold as Thomas races away. While he sprints away from the ghouls, the camera leads his path, and all sound in the film purposefully descends to a deafening silence. While he runs, the word “SHOPPING” is clearly inscribed in big bold letters on the wall

behind him, perhaps as a fleeting reminder of the false sense of security provided by consumer capitalism.

### **State and Political Economy**

Now that I have argued that *Scorch Trials* can be read as a cautionary tale of capital, I would like to point out how the film stands in direct contestation to more popular films in the genre, specifically *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. In *The Hunger Games*, an authoritative dystopian government dictates all the coming and going of a North America that has been split into twelve “Districts”. In the film, Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) embarks on a revolutionary crusade to dismantle her dystopic society. Her main objective is to kill President Snow (Donald Sutherland), stop the hunger games (a reality television series where young people kill each other until only one remains), and rebuild the organizational model of society that Snow has so forcefully, and authoritatively, put into place. In *Divergent*, Tris Prior (Shailene Woodley) embarks on a similar mission through a post-apocalyptic Chicago which has been meticulously organized into “Factions”. Because Tris is “divergent” (meaning she does not by nature fit into any one Faction) she also seeks to dismantle the planned society in which she resides.

How *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* differ from *Scorch Trials* are the ways in which the two former films call into question the dictates of “big government” instead of the capitalism. In other words, *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* use the horror of “big government” to construct their dystopic horizon, and neglect a more nuanced allegory for

the horrors capital accumulation. In these dystopias, private conglomerates (like WCKD), and monsters of the market (like mad doctors and zombies) do not exist. Instead, both *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* function as a frightening allegory for communism, not free market capitalism. So, to justify *Scorch Trials* as sf allegory that is frightened of the free market, we can sketch the parallels between the film and anti-neoliberal protest which occurred soon after its release. As Kellner suggests, some films have “anticipatory dimensions that can predict and anticipate events of the era” (2010, p. 18). More specifically, I see *Scorch Trials* as both drawing on and anticipating anti-corporate movements that continue in the wake of movements like Occupy and the Maple Spring. Because she starred in the YA dystopian film *Divergent*, Shailene Woodley’s activism during the height of the resistance movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline is perhaps the most appropriate example to use here.

In August 2016, Woodley joined the initial stages of protests which sought to prevent the construction of the approved \$3.4 billion Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. First protesting alongside Native youth outside of the White House in Washington DC (ICMN Staff, 2016), and then over the next several months Woodley continued to be an outspoken proponent of the Indigenous-led “#NoDAPL” (No Dakota Access Pipeline) movement on social media and television interviews, serving as a recognizable figure to help situate the development of the pipeline as an urgent public and political crisis. Regarded as another step that fills the pockets of a corporation at the cost of people and the planet, protest and progressive coverage of #NoDAPL activism was invaluable in how it worked to frame the intimate relationship between corporate interest, corporate political power, and neoliberal state politics (Nieves, 2016). Receiving

little to no airtime on commercial news outlets, alternative media would cover Woodley's activism alongside images and videos of Water Protectors getting attacked by private security details hired by Energy Transfer Partners (the company behind the pipeline), and brutalized and harassed by a highly militarized local police department. In October 2016, Woodley was one of 27 Water Protectors who were arrested and strip-searched for criminal trespassing and engaging in a "riot" during non-violent ceremonial actions to mark Indigenous People's Day in the U.S. (DemocracyNow!, 2016).

Using Woodley as a case study, I would like to draw attention to some of the contradictions that emerge when reading YA dystopian cinema against a backdrop politics that the actress and the rest of the Water Protectors bravely stood against. The kind of contradiction between text and context that I would like to discuss is glaringly present when considering Woodley's anti-corporate activism alongside popular YA dystopian films like the *Divergent Series*, *The Giver*, and *The Hunger Games*, for example. Ironically, where Woodley draws our attention to Energy Transfer Partners as a powerful and ruthless entity that has immense political power and influence and upholds corporate interest above public good, one that might, we can imagine, exploit labour and "harvest" natural resources, the *Divergent* films with which she is regularly associated preclude such nuanced criticisms. In other words, where *Scorch Trials* - like Woodley's activism - invites us to see capitalism and neoliberal politics as the tipping point to a doomsday or the apocalypse, much YA dystopian cinema does not. Although this is no fault of Woodley's (her work as an actress is symptomatic of the relations of labour and capital), this contradiction does illuminate a discursive omission latent to the YA dystopian cinema: where authoritarianism and "big government" are often scrutinized in

YA dystopian Hollywood films, naming *free market capitalism* as a monstrous system is often neglected.

Yet, it would be too convenient to co-opt Woodley's activism as merely an anti-corporate protest. Vociferously advocated in the #NoDAPL movement was also a critique of the Obama administration, which would not step in to prevent the construction of the pipeline, and the 2016 Republican and Democrat presidential nominees who both found little to no space on the campaign trail to comment on the resistance movement at Standing Rock. What the movement highlighted was either the indifference or the inability of the state to separate the market from democratic governance, essentially framing the interests of the American government and Energy Transfer Partners as one and the same. Mark Fisher (2009) might call this collusion of capital and state a delusion of political economy, or a symptom of "capitalist realism" (p. 2). For Marxist theorists including Fredrick Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, and Mark Fisher, the acceptance of capitalism as the only political and economic system make it "easier to imagine the end of the world than imagine the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). As Fisher (2009) describes it, capitalist realism supposes that "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2). What Fisher also identifies as an explicit issue with capitalist realism is the way in which market fundamentalism is presented *as* democratic interests, and vice versa. In the case of #NoDAPL, we find a similar quagmire. As such, what contextualizing #NoDAPL and "capitalist realism" allows us to do is consider how doomsday discourse can transcode either left or right-wing ideologies.

Where the presence of a corporation seems to be absent from *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, a corporation is all that exists in *Scorch Trials*. Not only does WCKD harvest the live blood of young people, it employs them as well. At the beginning of the film, soon after the Gladers come under the custody of Jansen, he arranges a meeting with Thomas in what appears to be an interrogation room to find out what he remembers about WCKD. Thomas reveals that his foggy amnesia is somewhat subsiding and that he recalls the time before entering the maze, “I remember I used to work for WCKD. I remember that they sent me into the maze.” Later in the film, we learn that Thomas’ female counterpart Teresa was also an employee of WCKD. And by the end of the film, she becomes the “company woman”. After the Gladers escape from the compound, the mall, and successfully navigate the scorch, they finally locate the resistance movement, the Right Arm. During the first night, Thomas approaches Teresa, stands alone on the edge of a cliff. While they converse, Teresa explains that she cannot continue to justify evading WCKD when their methods of finding a cure could potentially save millions of people and that she has informed WCKD of the Right Arm’s location. Teresa’s confession is perhaps the most emotive scene in *Scorch Trials*, and the film encourages us to see it as such (Thomas is clearly emotionally taken aback and even slightly teary-eyed by the end of the conversation).

In addition to the cues within the text, material to promote the film also worked to “sell” WCKD, drawing striking similarities to commercials made for oil and gas companies seeking to legitimize their products, intentions, and practice. In a self-aware viral marketing video on the website [wckdisgood.com](http://wckdisgood.com), superimposed over images of

military men carrying babies, tent camps, and apparently homeless people in the streets, a tranquil voice narrates:

From the moment we're born, we learn to trust. . . Sometimes we must put our faith in others. Our world has changed . . . We no longer feel protected from disease and corruption. We look to those we can trust, those who will protect us. Those who will bring order, peace, and those who will find a cure so that humanity will no longer live in fear (wcdkisgood.com, 2017).

What makes the video so pernicious, and WCKD so frightening, is its ability to operate without limitations or regulations, thereby situating the megacorporation as beyond political reproach. More so, the “WCKD is good” propaganda shares eerie similarities to a commercial published in January 2017 by Energy Transfer Partners, which so convincingly elaborated on the pipeline as “the safest, environmentally cleanest, and least expensive” method of providing energy (Dakota Access Pipeline Facts, 2017). Like how Energy Transfer Partners has an immense influence upon political and public discourse, in *Scorch Trials*, WCKD stands in for the dystopian nightmare of corporate influence upon democratic government.

The super-corporation, run by “mad doctors” like Ava Paige and staffed by “company women/men” like Teresa, articulates left-wing anxieties, fears, and phobias of an autonomous political entity that makes democratic government synonymous with independent corporations that have no need to abide by constitutions and democratic charters. As Giroux (2011) argues, “there is no longer a distinction between political and corporate sovereignty” (p. 111). This lack of distinction between state and corporate interest was also pervasive and in the police lexicon regarding the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), which was drawing similar criticisms at the time of the release of *Scorch Trials*. Described as an international trade agreement, the TPP was an economic

agreement that was being negotiated by the U.S. and eleven other major commodity-producing companies. Among other policy initiatives, the TPP sought open trade tariffs for imported commodities like Nike shoes, and to allow corporations the right to contest domestic policies in international court (Kasperkevic, 2015). What was most problematic about the TPP was that it was projected to have sweeping effects on the public sphere, especially for local jobs, but had not given the public an opportunity to read and have input on the deal. Instead, companies like Apple, AT&T, Nike, and General Electric were invited to sit on advisory committees to negotiate the deal (Brown, 2015). By focusing on WCKD as the central antagonist in the film, *Scorch Trials* worked to express anxieties surrounding the neoliberal state apparatus.

By situating the narrative within a dystopic and memetic context of late capitalism, *Scorch Trials* fits with a long tradition of using dystopian narratives to offer left-wing critiques of global capitalism and neoliberalism – which, surprisingly, does not appear in most YA dystopian film. By foregrounding WCKD as the main antagonist in the film, *Scorch Trials* frames the post-state formation as what Moylan (2003) might call “a full-fledged neoliberal regime” (p. 138). For Moylan (2003) dystopian narratives can be very effective in deconstructing neoliberal discipline and exploitive corporate logic. For instance, in Octavia Butler’s YA dystopian novel *Parable of a Sower*, most of the U.S. has been overrun by corporate hegemony. In the novel, the U.S. government exists, but almost exclusively to serve in the interest of a few major corporations that privatize towns, public services, and indenture people as work-slaves. As Moylan (2003) argues, a narrative that foregrounds the dystopic capacity of capital is essential for demystifying its hegemony. As he writes, in many of these narratives



Regulation and support once provided by the progressive welfare state for the protection of the population has disappeared, and even the accommodationist role of the liberal and early neoliberal state in nurturing and protecting corporate development has disappeared as corporations...become strong enough to look after their own infrastructure development and military protection (p. 138).

In other words, while the state may be foregrounded in films like *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, it functions in *Scorch Trials* as a pretext to the formation of an independent post-state political apparatus.

Yet, some films seek to warn us of the horrors of *too much* government. Films like *The Hunger Games*, *The Divergent Series*, and *The Giver* would also share similar topical motifs of cynicism, distress, and hopelessness, which all articulate indictments of the state—a mantra too often recited by neoliberals. For instance, the dominant discourse on *The Giver* situates the text as “a conservative-friendly film” (Woolf, 2014, par. 11). Enthusiastically embraced by market fundamentalist and neoliberal conservative Sarah Palin, *The Giver* can be read as an insidious parable of socialism, including the despotic dictates of the welfare state, and the horrors and impossibility of social planning and social equality. As Palin describes, *The Giver* is an apt allegory for a leftist dystopian government that is “all too eager to take away our freedom” by “limit[ing] aspects of everyday life. . . supposedly, to create some kind of utopia” (Child, 2014, par. 2).

While more conservative-friendly films may be celebrated by neoliberal zealots like Palin, they are also open to criticisms for serving as “propaganda for the ethos of individualism” (O’Hehir, 2014, par. 4). Unlike *Scorch Trials*, which is essentially a “team” film that critiques scary corporations and capitalist monsters, *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Giver* all celebrate the central ideological themes inherent to consumer capitalism without drawing attention to capitalism itself (i.e. maverick-branded

individualism, cutthroat competition, and a disdain for “big government” that, as Palin suggests, takes away our freedoms, etc.). In doing so, the films warn us of the state - not morally bankrupt corporations, predatory investors, or the exploitation of human bodies required to sustain life in late capitalism – as elements that build a dystopic future. In other words, capitalism’s ideology is embedded and works in these films with “the seeming naturalness of oxygen in the air” (O’Hehir, 2014, par. 2).

Because many popular YA dystopian films are underscored and encoded as vehicles of ideology, to a certain extent, they can potentially work to communicate right-wing ideals. As Morrison (2014) sees the genre, many contemporary YA dystopian films reflect the invisibility and naturalness of life in late capitalism, exposing a collective cultural blind-spot or discursive omission regarding the politics of capitalism. Although Morrison does not simply berate fans and consumers of these popular films as passive cultural dupes, his examination of the ways in which capitalism may go unquestioned and uncriticised as a harbinger of a dystopic future is worth addressing at length. As he notes:

This is one of those zeitgeist moments where the subconscious of a culture emerges into visibility. We might be giving ourselves right-wing messages because, whether or not we realise it, we have come to accept them as incontestable. This generation of YA dystopian novels [and films] is really our neoliberal society dreaming its last nightmares about the threat from communism, socialism and the planned society. (2014, par. 7)

Along with left-wing anxieties of neoliberal politics in the manifestation of WCKD, read within a long history of using zombies to critique capitalism, the use of Cranks in the film also serves a textual function of reminding us of the nightmare of capitalism: limitless consumption, corporeal estrangement, and the alienation of the body.

## Conclusion

In part, due to its credentials as being a standard YA dystopian text, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* is often associated as a bland simulacrum of the genre. As such, *Scorch Trials* is more often dismissed in popular discourse than it is celebrated. This may be why the text has not been politicized by popular media as a tool to help develop a critical consciousness in young people, and why it is lacking in critical scholarly analysis. Although reading a text as art is subjective (the merits by which we might enjoy a film is dependent upon the viewer), I see *Scorch Trials* doing immense cultural work in commenting on neoliberal politics and consumer capitalism that stands in drastic contrast to overused platitudes that are pervasive in the genre. Although *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, for instance, may work to encourage young people to question authority, both series articulate fears of “big government” and evil social planners, both of which are hallmarks of the left and decried by market fundamentalists and neoliberals alike. Conversely, however, by foregrounding a post-state formation as the main threat in a dystopian future, *Scorch Trials* does the opposite. In the films post-apocalyptic future, it is the absence of “big government”, social security, and the effects of poor social planning that construct the dark, dystopian horizon. WCKD, in other words, is the manifestation of neoliberal politics gone haywire; an organization with “unlimited money, unlimited human capital and technology” that replaces the government and operates on a cutthroat business model according to its own moral authority. WCKD’s one purpose? To “save” humanity by harvesting the bodies of young people. Like global capitalism and neoliberal hegemony, what is most frightening in

*Scorch Trials* is that there seems to be no viable alternative. Just as harvesting the bodies of young people in *Scorch Trials* is the *only* way to find a cure to the Flare, market fundamentalist would have us believe that there is no alternative to reliance on fossil fuels, casino capitalism, and the privatization of the commons. In addition, *Scorch Trials* also offers a coded critique of capital with the use of Cranks, which are *de facto* zombies.

In this instance, a critique of capitalism functions symbolically. For many cultural critics, the “zombie” is a trope that provides a vehicle by which our relationship to consumerism can be surveyed and measured. Although Cranks are only auxiliary antagonists and appear sporadically throughout the film, *Scorch Trials* works to communicate many of the fears, anxieties, and suspicions of consumer capitalism that were conveyed in genre defining films like George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*. This is clearly demonstrated by the near-apocalyptic location in which the film was shot, the abandoned shopping center. In the mall and throughout the film, the relations to capitalism are not so subtle. When bitten, Cranks transmit infection, the bitten become infinitely hungry, and the cycle continues. By projecting this polemic on the backdrop of a shopping center, the film articulates a fear of constructing identity specifically through conspicuous consumption.

## Chapter Four

### Colour Blind and Still Hungry: White Liberalism and Labour Politics in *The Hunger Games*

In October 2015, towards the end of her career as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* film franchise, actress Jennifer Lawrence gained attention in popular and social media for her declarations protesting wage and labour inequalities in the film industry. Following the Sony hacks, which leaked emails, scripts, and accounting information to the public, Lawrence discovered that she was paid substantially less than her male co-stars for her role in *American Hustle* (2013) (Smith, 2015). In a public essay penned to Lena Dunham, Lawrence expressed uncertainty and anger at the evident wage gap and gender discrimination made public by the leaks, writing:

This could be a young-person thing. It could be a personality thing. I'm sure it's both. But this is an element of my personality that I've been working against for years, and based on the statistics, I don't think I'm the only woman with this issue. . . We've been able to vote for what, 90 years? I'm seriously asking. . . Could there still be a lingering habit of trying to express our opinions in a certain way that doesn't "offend" or "scare" men? (Lawrence, 2015, par. 3).

While Lawrence's critique was warranted, her candid remarks on working and discrimination functioned as a salvo for a wider conversation concerning labour and whiteness, especially since her declarations were soon dovetailed by #OscarsSoWhite and situated squarely in the age of Black Lives Matter (BLM). Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to measure Lawrence's earnings against other Hollywood celebrities, I am more concerned with how her critique invites us to conceive of wage inequalities specifically from a white woman's perspective, thereby depoliticizing the racial aspects of inequality. As current estimates suggest, although white women earn less compared to

white men, people of colour – particularly women of colour – on average, fall even further behind white men and white women in average yearly income and hourly wage in the U.S. (Oh, 2017).

Where Lawrence's remarks reflect and embrace a discourse of universalism, unanimism, and white racial liberalism, so too does the young adult (YA) dystopian film franchise, *The Hunger Games*, in which she stars. In the films, Lawrence/Katniss conveniently occupy a subject position where she/they draw attention to labour and gender binaries without challenging whiteness and the more salient aspects of racial politics. Moreover, where Lawrence and her successful franchise draw attention to universalized oppression, labour, and late capitalism (or neoliberalism) - without calling whiteness into question - they also draw on themes and motifs like civil disobedience, insurgencies, and anxieties about unbridled domestic police that have dominated public discussion mostly due to the BLM movement. By contextualizing the intersection of race and class, in this essay, I argue that *The Hunger Games* film series is a cultural text which engages in a racial project that highlights the theoretical and lived concepts of whiteness through its narrative themes.

Co-founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, BLM gained traction in 2013 with the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the 2012 murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was posthumously put on trial for his own death; the 21<sup>st</sup> century lynching of 18-year-old Mike Brown, whose deceased body lay uncovered and exposed in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, for hours after he was shot by police officer Daren Wilson in 2014; as well as the 2014 police drive-by shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed for playing with a toy gun in Cleveland, Ohio. BLM drew attention

to extreme racial inequality at the hands of the state, police, and American society at large, as well as the judicial reluctance to acknowledge racism as a factor which contributes to the loss of life. In many respects, the murders which birthed BLM also laid bare the conditions of an American biopolitical dystopian nightmare; the existence of authoritative, oppressive and deadly militarized police, cold disregard for human life, the impunity of state-sanctioned murder, and most importantly, the insidious disposability of young people, all of which are marquee themes of the popular young adult (YA) dystopian films franchise, *The Hunger Games*.

In the similar fashion to Kinji Fukasaku's Japanese science fiction (sf) thriller *Battle Royal* (2000), *The Hunger Games* is a film franchise based on Suzanne Collins' popular YA dystopian novels of the same name. Produced by Lionsgate, and adapted for screen by Collins herself, *The Hunger Games* includes a total of four films: *The Hunger Games* (2012) (hereafter, *Hunger Games*), *Catching Fire* (2013), *Mockingjay Part 1* (2014) (hereafter, *Mockingjay 1*), and *Mockingjay Part 2* (2015) (hereafter, *Mockingjay 2*). Targeted primarily at young adult audiences and dealing with themes of class oppression, authoritarian plutocracies, surveillance, state injustices, police brutality, and of course, complicated love triangles, *The Hunger Games* franchise (hereafter, *THG*) is one of the most successful and profitable young franchises to be released in cinemas in recent years, filling a niche market left open after the conclusion of the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight Saga* films. Collectively, *THG* films have grossed over two-billion dollars in worldwide ticket sales (IMDB, 2017), has spawned an endless buffet of toys, games, clothes, makeup, and various other consumer commodities, and has granted the lead actress, Jennifer Lawrence, bonafide stardom as "the girl on fire". During and following

the conclusion of the series, *THG* has and continues to be referenced in pop culture and the political lexicon. During demonstrations in Thailand, where the films were banned, protestors were arrested for using the three-finger salute made famous by *Hunger Games* (Chandler, 2014). During the 2016 presidential election, Stephen Colbert satirized the campaigns as “The Hungry for Power Games”, dressing as the flamboyant announcer Caesar Flickerman while crashing the beginning of the Republican National Convention in ornate, Flickerman attire (Moran, 2016). Although the four film installments can be read independently, this essay will seek to contextualize the four films (*THG*) as a collective text, which speak to various contested discourses of race that underscore race relations and racial politics during their tenure as popular cinema.

By tracing the shifting and contradictory phases of racial iconography, I will read *THG* as a collective text, which reflects and reifies contemporary race relations. This analysis will attend to the subtle moments of insurgencies, collaborations, indignation, and omission about racial politics that emerge through *THG*, along with contextualizing these politics within the cultural landscape in which they are situated. By adding to an already broad and wealthy body of scholarly investigation of the film series, this analysis will contribute a unique reading that will take methodological cues from the works of critical media and cultural studies theorists who see film, television, and other forms of media and popular culture, as signposts which illuminate the social realities of the historical era (Nama, 2008; 2011, Kellner 1995; 2010; Guerrero, 1993; hooks, 1996). As such this text will be guided by the following overarching questions: In what ways does *The Hunger Games* experience race? More specifically, how do the films represent whiteness and what are the discursive effects of those representations?



An analysis of this sort matters and is important because it can help us understand how some media culture can be a site of contestation and struggle. On one hand, film series' like *Hunger Games* can promote positive social change, and work to advocate for the interest of oppressed groups. On the other hand, however, media culture can work to disadvantage and impede progressive social change, especially if it does not table issues of sexism and racism specifically. When we examine *Hunger Games*, we might find that it is quite a contradictory text. Even though the film series attempts to promote a progressive social shift from aristocracy to freedom and democracy, it never explicitly works to be antiracist. Its work of antiracism only occurs when explicitly racist expectations are slightly undermined (like various biracial buddy partnerships discussed later in this chapter). As such, the films operationalize the neoliberal model of racism (where public and political issues become private issue of either the characters or the film audience). By not being an explicit theme in the films, *Hunger Games* promotes a laissez-faire antiracism that inevitably functions to privilege whiteness. As such, this chapter will argue that *THG* franchise is a media artifact that engages in a unique racial project of and for whiteness. This analysis, therefore, sees the series as transcoding both liberal and conservative iterations of whiteness through sf allegory.

## **Background**

In dominant discourse, *THG* is represented as a master critique of neoliberalism for young people. However, the film series is also situated as a critique of gender representations, patriarchy, and liberal democratic sensibilities, calling for a radical shift

in women's empowerment, gender roles, and neoliberal austerity measures. Therefore, as a collective text with potent political overtones and themes, *THG* franchise is a media artifact which is prone to being framed within a wider sociocultural and political landscape. For example, Allan (2012) of *The Atlantic* has proclaimed the progressive possibilities of the text, suggesting that by taking the subject matter seriously, the film offers smart political commentary, and that "in Katniss, *The Hunger Games* offers the populist hero the Occupy movement wasn't able to deliver" (par. 10). Furthermore, sociologist Noreen Hertz has coined young people born between 1995-2002 "Generation K" – short for the "kick ass" female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen – because they are a second wave of millennials who had their formative years influenced by, among other facets, the global Great Recession of 2008 (Hughes, 2015).

Likewise, some critics of the film have read *THG* as an anti-neoliberal manifesto for young people, most of whom are realizing their identities in relation to life in late capitalism, or as what Guy Standing (2010) calls "the precariat" – a combination of *precarious* and *proletariat*. Mark Fisher (2012) has identified *THG* within this context, calling the film a "precarious dystopia". As Fisher suggests, *Hunger Games* is emblematic of a struggle to break out of the "arena" (or, the symbolic Darwinian battleground of market fundamentalism) by throwing off this imposed dog-eat-dog Hobbesianism and reinventing solidarity. He goes on to note that *Hunger Games* is, "characteristic of the current moment, in which fragmented challenges to the dystopia of neoliberalism may presage a moment of radical change" (p. 33). Considering that Suzanne Collins' first novel in the book trilogy was published at the onset of the global financial meltdown in 2008, and that the film continues to be read in relation to the

neoliberal era, *Hunger Games* has a very intimate contextual relationship with the politics of neoliberalism. In addition, while media discourse on the film has been mostly myopic, focusing on the “liberal” and “progressive” possibilities of the text against the backdrop of wider economic climate like the Occupy movement, the first instalment of the series, *Hunger Games*, has received extensive scholarly analyses from various perspectives (Abate, 2015; Keller, 2013; Rosen & Rosen, 2012; Shau MingTan, 2013; Kirby, 2015; Phar & Clark, 2012). In the large body of work that has critiqued *The Hunger Games*, only a select few have discussed the representational practices of race in the film.

Dubrofsky & Ryalls (2014) have contextualized *Hunger Games* as a text that naturalizes white femininity, particularly concerning Katniss’ (Lawrence) racial identity, which is constructed by “performing not-performing” (p. 396) authentic hegemonic and heteronormative whiteness through (re)enactment on reality TV. Likewise, the backlash response to the “scandalous” casting in *Hunger Games* of a bi-racial actress, Amandla Stenberg as Rue - the tribute from District 11 - has been the predominant thoroughfare by which race is discussed in scholarly literature on the film. Gilbert-Hickey (2014) has examined the racist backlash and the “gothic tendencies” (p. 8) which emerged via social media in regard to blackness and racial politics. Kinney (2013) has discussed the pedagogy of teaching and understanding racial formation through popular culture using the response to Rue as a backdrop to examine the public’s response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. What Kinney (2013) helps us understand are the ways in which the discourse that emerges from conversations of popular culture are often mirrored in public dialogue. As she writes, the response to the casting of Rue and the murder of Trayvon martin are quite similar:

Just as Suzanne Collin’s “real intent” became the focus of debate in casting of Rue’s character (not the invisibility of whiteness), the conversation about Trayvon Martin’s “hoodie” became the story, not the ways in which blackness is represented as criminality and the accompanying presumption of suspicion that underlay the shooting of Martin (Kinney, 2013, p. 51).

Moore, and Coleman (2015) have contextualized the reception of Stenberg as Rue, while shedding light on the tropes of racist and post-racial imagery, the re-centering of whiteness, and the problematic conversion from Collin’s racially-bland source material to a contemporary blockbuster film. What Moore and Coleman (2015) help unravel is the problematic relationship between colour blind casting representations of “diversity” on screen, and discussions about racism in the U.S. As the pair notes, “Given the supposedly satisfactory answer to diversity, the producers of *The Hunger Games* likely were surprised *both* by the criticisms of too much whiteness in the film and also the racist tweets critical of the presence of black actors” (p. 961). Finally, Brown (2015) contributed a piece wherein she discussed various contradictory discourses in the text, including the racist reaction to Rue in the “post-racial” Obama-era, as well as the fetishism of commodity objects like Cover Girl make up, and designer clothing in fashion magazines like *Vogue*, used to market the film which is explicit about the grotesqueness of overindulgence, instant gratification, consumerism, and conspicuous consumption.

By adding to the pre-existing body of work, I seek to contribute a unique reading of *THG* film franchise. Considering the current state of political culture, this analysis may be a useful tool in understanding how some media culture can be both prescient and reflective of shifts in political culture, even if read in retrospect. More specifically, a contextual analysis of *THG* may be useful because in many ways, it – and by extension, all YA dystopia cinema – was a unique cultural phenomenon in that the genre can be

situated squarely within the age of Obama, giving critical insights to the white-supremacist dystopia, or a white liberal utopia, eerily coming to fruition in the age of President Donald Trump. Although the peak of YA cinema has long since been reached and many enthusiasts, studios, and actors may be experiencing YA dystopia “burn-out”<sup>10</sup>, *THG* franchise can now be read as a complete text which does cultural work to transcode certain ideologies, discourses, and hegemonic beliefs, even if the fictional series purports to be a progressive and liberal media artifact.

### **Theory, Method, and Approach**

This analysis will be a diagnostic critique that takes a poststructuralist theoretical position. For poststructuralist theorists, poststructuralism not only considers social theory, but also social history. As such, the intersection of language, subjectivity, and social organization helps to illuminate how particular discourses may contribute to certain modalities and mechanisms of power, thus reflecting how social relations may be experienced and expressed (Weedon, 1997). As Weedon (1997) suggests, rather than being innate and fixed, meaning is *constructed* by language, is subject to power relations, and is a site of disunity and conflict, only existing through association and connections (p. 21). In other words, the meaning of a text - in this case, a visual media text - is a site

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<sup>10</sup> *The Hunger Games* was both the beginning and the end of the YA dystopian film boom. While *HG* set the trend for Hollywood which spurred dozens more like it, *Mockingjay Part 2* was the last successful release of the genre. Shortly before the death-rattle and less than expected, but not horrendous, box office take of *Part 2* in December 2015, *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* (2015) was met with mediocre appraisal. After *Part 2*, the second sequel in the *Divergent Series*, *Allegiant* (2016), tanked so badly that it did not recoup its production budget, the final instalment was relegated to a TV adaptation, and the cast expressed little interest in returning to their roles.

of ideological tension, where struggles for hegemony of various discourses are waged on the front of representation. This type of approach can be used to examine visual media and a myriad of genres in Hollywood cinema. For example, although *THG* does not give explicit commentary on racial politics, the text is nevertheless embedded in the social, historical, cultural and politicized implications of race in an American context.

In effect, I am interested in how meaning might be coded subtextually, how racial formation and representation – of both whiteness and blackness – may be grounded in a sociohistorical moment, how the current analysis of neoliberalism in *THG* may also be read in conjunction with contemporary race relations, and how the films, grounded in the age of Obama, were prescient of a dramatic shift in American politics. Although the structural absence of Native Americans, South East Asians, Latina/os and various other ethnic groups is indeed a shortcoming of the text, I will focus exclusively on the representations of white and black bodies as these two identities are represented exclusively in the films and will better help to situate the films contextually.

While grounded within poststructuralist theory, this analysis will be a contextual cultural studies examination, guided by what Keller (2010) calls a “*diagnostic critique*” (p. 34). For Kellner, a diagnostic critique, “involves a dialectic of text and context, using texts to read social realities and events, and using social and historical context to help situate and interpret key films” (p. 34). In other words, this bimodal optic opens the conversation between context-to-text, and text-to-context, allowing any media artifact to comment on the events, hopes, anxieties, ideologies, and sociocultural struggles of the context in which that artifact is situated, and vice versa. In effect, a diagnostic critique sees media artifacts as not only passive forms of entertainment, but as powerful tools

which do cultural work that inform many aspects of everyday life. Consequently, this approach intends to formulate progressive political practices and sharp critical consciousness by providing, “weapons of critique for those interested in producing a better society” (Kellner, 1995, p. 117). As such, read diagnostically, many Hollywood films can give key insights into the political struggles of any given historical moment.

For example, during Obama’s tenure, superhero films based on DC and Marvel comics became a reliable and bankable go-to for Hollywood studios, many of which commented on or reflected contemporary political discourse, especially towards the end of Obama’s presidency and the soon-to-be Trump era. Take, for instance, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2011). Although *Winter Soldier* was intended to be a catch-the-Soviet neo-McCarthyist thriller, the film conveyed a much more potent political message that resonated with domestic audiences, especially since *Winter Soldier* depicts Cap’ himself (Chris Evan) becoming disenchanted by the illegal, unethical, and omnipresent gaze of the American surveillance state apparatus. The film was topical and pertinent following the aftermath of “whistleblower” Edward Snowden’s revelations about the NSA’s Prism program and unlawful mass data collection and storage of personal and private communications of American citizens. Furthermore, a diagnostic critique would reveal that many of the high-profile superheroes films of 2016 transcoded certain schisms, confusions and anxieties surrounding the Clinton/Trump presidential campaigns and upcoming presidential election. In *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), The Avengers become divided between team-Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) and team-Cap (Evans) based on slight differences in ideological and political positions. Much of the marketing material for *Civil War* asked audiences, “Whose Side Are You On?”

Likewise, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) had a more abrasive political directive with the slogan “Choose Your Side”. In *B v S*, Batman (Ben Affleck) lurks within the shadows of neofascism, justifying heightened militarization and the trampling of civil liberties in the name of domestic security, as well as framing *the* illegal alien, Superman (Henry Cavil), as a potential danger whose threat must be treated as an absolute certainty. The themes presented in *Civil War* and *B v S* (uncertain political allegiance, questions of civil liberties, neofascism, domestic security, “dangerous” illegals etc.) were rampant and divisive during Donald Trump’s and Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaigns, both of which were incredibly flawed, and neither of which were ideal for progressive politics. Finally, the much-anticipated antihero film *Suicide Squad* (2016) presented what can only be described as a calamitous cacophony, both narratively and technically, yet, surprisingly still grossed unbelievable ticket sales domestically and abroad. The use of the slogan “Worst. Heroes. Ever.” emblemized an uncomfortable meta-truth which many American voters were coming to terms with when casting their ballots (or not), and who now are dealing with the outcome and effects of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Insofar as a poststructuralist reading and a diagnostic critique can read media as markers of a historical era, what is not addressed within various text can also be quite informative. The exclusions, silences and depoliticization of various social vectors like race, sexuality, ability, and empire can also help illuminate the ideological project of a given text. As Kellner (1995) notes, contextual cultural studies is just as interested in “*how ideology fails*” along with how it succeeds, and how a text may be a site of cognitive dissonance, or a site of tension, even though it purports to be harmonious and



straightforward (p. 114). For example, many of what I would call the “return to Iraq and Afghanistan” films like *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *American Sniper* (2014), *Lone Survivor* (2013), *Whiskey Tango Fox Trot* (2016), and *War Dogs* (2016) narrate the various effects, struggles, and financial benefits of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. However, while many of the films do not always glamorize the tentacular reach of American empire, they often neglect a more politicized discussion of the illegality of the invasion, the erroneous basis on which it began, the disastrous effects on Afghani and Iraqi civilian life, and the plight of many American veterans who suffer PTSD and die by suicide after returning from tours abroad. Poststructuralists might call this ideological failing a discursive omission.

While much of the discussion of *THG* has certainly been informative and critical, in many regards, only a few pieces have discussed how the films *ideologically fail* to comment on race relations. For instance, Saddique (2014) has stated quite clearly in the title of his piece that race is *The Topics Dystopian Films Won't Touch*. In his dissemination, Saddique questions the extent to which YA dystopian films like *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* can be truly informative cautionary tales if they benignly neglect issues of racism. As Saddique notes:

If the United States were to truly transform into a totalitarian state, or suffer environmental catastrophe, it's safe to say that societies deepest division wouldn't magically disappear overnight. These dystopian adaptations ask their young audiences to imagine that race and gender issues have been partially overcome in the future, while general human suffering has somehow increased (2014, par. 3).

While commentaries such as these are poignant for our purposes here, these types of critiques have been sparse, and have continued to be relegated to the margins of the dominant discourse around *THG* and YA dystopian cinema in general. Furthermore,

although they are informative, work such as Sadiqqe's, does not comment on the more intimate connection between *THG* as a media text and the current sociohistorical moment. As a result, many questions emerge dovetailing a reading of Sadiqqe's necessary and useful, but still preliminary and precursory, analysis. For example, why is a discussion of racism in YA dystopian cinema so imperative to the current historical moment? What meaning of race, racial formation, and racism can be formulated through the structural absence of blackness in the text? How does the text work to aggressively re-center and reframe whiteness?

The ways in which media messages reflect and respond to various social, political, and in this case, racialized, discourses are often more complex than the simple production and consumption of a media artifact that is imprinted with semiotic codes. As Hall (2007) notes, the connotation of the visual and the contextual can offer different discursive meanings (p. 482). At this intersection, the politics of signification and the struggle in discourse can be joined to “‘detotalise’ the message in the preferred code to retotalise the message within some alternative framework” (p. 487). In other words, a text is not only preconditioned and coded exclusively through intentionality. Rather, the reception of a media text depends on a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional reading (Hall, 2007). Barthes (2007) would call this intersectional, interpretive, and audience-centered approach an active “play” of the text (p. 86). The alternative framework here will be to read *THG* using a lens from critical race theory to “retotalise”, “play”, and help contextualize the film series within the contemporary racial moment.

## Narrative Summary

*Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay 1* and *2* are a dystopian film series which takes place in a post-apocalyptic America, referred to as Panem. Set in the not-too-distant future in the U.S., Panem is subdivided into 12 poor Districts, the affluent Capitol, and District 13. While Districts 1 through 12 are responsible for different industries and forms of physical labour (i.e. District 11 labours as “farm hands” who work strictly in agriculture, District 12 in mining, etc.), the Capitol consumes the products of the 12 Districts, overindulging in excess food, fashion, luxury and comfort. In the meantime, the patrons in the Districts live in harsh conditions of poverty, starvation, degradation. District 13, on the other hand, is apparently an uninhabited waste land, left to ruin after “the first rebellion”.

In penance for “the first rebellion” seventy-four years ago that led to the “dark days” – which we are led to believe was a brutal rebellion or civil war led by District 13 – each District is responsible for offering a male and female “tribute” between the ages of twelve to eighteen, to the custody of the Capitol. Chosen through a lottery style draw known as the “reaping”, tributes are given a brief training period where they are encouraged to procure corporate sponsorship through pageantry and television interviews, and learn combat and survival skills before they are forced to participate in deadly gladiatorial combat until only one remains. This annual televised spectacle is called The Hunger Games. The winner/survivor of the Games then becomes a “victor” who is granted class ascendancy based on certain job fulfilments; they have guaranteed income for life from the Capitol, lavish living conditions in their District’s “Victor’s

Village”, and overall celebrity status so long as they travel on a “victory tour” to promote the Games and serve as mentors for the next round of tributes. Essentially, *THG* is *Survivor* meets *Lord of the Flies*, which takes place in Orwell’s *1984*.

*Hunger Games* begins in the dystopian world of Panem, in District 12, at the reaping for the seventy-fourth annual Hunger Games. After sacrificially volunteering as a tribute to replace her younger sister Primrose (Willow Shields), sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen (Lawrence) is sent to the Capitol alongside her fellow tribute Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), victor-mentor Haymitch (Woody Harrelson), and Capitol liaison Effie (Elizabeth Banks). Upon arrival at the Capitol, Katniss meets her pageantry stylist, Cinna (Lenny Kravitz), as well as the cold and sinister leader of the totalitarian government, President Snow (Donald Sutherland). During the first Games, despite the Darwinian impetus of the arena, Katniss develops a liking for Rue (Stenberg), the girl tribute from District 11 (the District coded as “black”). Their comradeship eventually ends when Rue dies in combat, leaving Katniss and Peeta as the only remaining tributes. However, rather than giving President Snow another tribute to use as propaganda, the duo opts to use their bodies as a communicative act of resistance through mutual suicide. Since Snow would rather the duo live as victors than die as martyrs, the pair are both declared winners, bringing the first film to an end.

*Catching Fire* sees Katniss and Peeta return to the arena again for a special edition of the games, the seventy-fifth “quarter quell”. For this quarter quell, President Snow decides that tributes can only be chosen from the existing pool of victors. Since Katniss is the only female victor in District 12, she automatically defaults for her second tour in the arena. However, since the games only take up the last quarter of the film’s

two-hour runtime, much of *Catching Fire* is used as exposition to explore Katniss and Peeta in post-hunger games life (Katniss clearly suffers PTSD), their experiences on the victory tour, the growing discontent of citizens of Panem, and their training and preparation for the games. While Katniss is on the victory tour, we are given clues that not all is right in Panem; several districts are engaging in violent civil disobedience, and floggings and public executions are becoming commonplace, some of which are shown on screen and many of which are eluded to. Moreover, during her training period, Katniss develops an affinity for her opponents, like she did for Rue, and questions whether she will be able to see them as enemies, asking Peeta “how are we going to kill these people?” During the games, she and several other tributes collaborate to beat the arena instead of each other. The film ends shortly after Katniss is lifted out the arena and into a hovercraft, where we are informed by Heavensbee (P.S. Hoffman), who the film reveals is a double agent for the rebellion, that “this is the revolution.”

*Mockingjay 1* and *Mocking 2* are divided adaptations of Collin’s final book in her trilogy (a recurring trend for Hollywood studios who have taken a liking to doubling their profits for one adaptation). *Mockingjay 1* begins immediately following the events of *Catching Fire* and occurs mostly in District 13. In the film, we learn that District 13, led by President Alma Coin (Julianne Moore) was not completely destroyed in the “dark days” and has since been rebuilding and waiting for an opportunity to overthrow the Capitol. Although *Mockingjay 1* introduces new characters like Boggs (Mahershala Ali), the film mainly focusses on Katniss’ shooting propaganda, or “propos”, and her distress that Peeta was not retrieved from the quarter quell and is now imprisoned at the Capitol, likely being tortured by Snow and his cronies. After Peeta is successfully extricated from

the Capitol at the end of *Mockinjay 1*, *Mockingjay 2* follows Katniss and her “propo” team, led by Boggs, infiltrating the Capitol behind the front lines in an attempt to assassinate President Snow.

In every film, however, racial politics appear to be a moot topic that does not contribute to the plot or narrative. Nevertheless, the films do invite us to explore whiteness, particularly as it pertains to multiracial collaboration and labour politics. As such, textually, the film produces a gamut of whiteness in relation to biracial buddy partnerships, whiteness as saviour, and whiteness as injury.

### **A Tribute to White Liberal Utopia**

I have chosen to call my reading of *THG* a white liberal utopia because of the efficacy of the film series. Simply put, the films completely adopt and conform to white liberal sensibilities. Through this conformity, they open up interesting paths for exploring whiteness (which I will discuss later). For now, however, I would like to frame the films as a product of what Winant (2004) calls “The Liberal Racial Project” because of how it, “seeks to limit white advantage through denial of racial difference” (p. 59). In the film, the main character is white, racism does not exist, and cross racial alliances help forward the plot. As Winant (2004) tells us, “the white liberal project, in all its variants actively promotes an expedient vision of greater substantive equality, linking class and race, and arguing for the necessity of transracial coalition politics” (p. 62).

Since this essay sees *THG* as a political project which transcodes assorted, yet complementary discourses, it may be necessary to first break down how the set of films

fit into the matrix of what bell hook's calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society" (1994, p. 6). When we consider the films from the perspective of racial logic, we may find that they often gravitated towards a kind of smooth, sultry, or "color blind" iteration of whiteness, white supremacy, and race. Yet, representation of various characters is still dependent upon racial difference. Yes, in this post-apocalyptic future, racial segregation still exists (in the films, District 11 is coded as a "black" space, or a black ghetto, separate from the rest of Panem). Therefore, racial spatial imagery functions to create a geographic "other" as produced by the text. For this reason, *THG* films performs narrative labour by constructing a discourse of racial difference through space (whites over here in District 12, blacks over there in District 11) while simultaneously dismissing racial difference (whites and blacks experience no racial tension and animosity when they meet in the Hunger Games arena because everyone is on the same level of systemic oppression). In short, the films develop a liberal whiteness, steeped in altruism and universality. Yet, this remains problematic. In *THG*, the production of Katniss Everdeen as a "safe" white subject (that does not grapple with racism) produces a liminal space where the pendulum of whiteness is able to swing from left to right with ease. At the zenith of the left upswing, whiteness is coded with "colour blind", "biracial buddy", friendly liberalism that deploys a "leftist desire to produce an antiracist white (or post white) subject", one whose political commitments are "refunctioned as cross race and cross class struggle" (Wiegman, 1999, p. 123). On the right, whiteness is coded with conservative undertones, where dispossession is expressed through class (on par with marginalized groups that experience the same dispossession due to the historical persistence of *racism*, like the blacks in District 11). What Wiegman (1999) calls "the

paradox of particularity”, or what can be called here “the *pendulum* of particularity” is what works to frame whiteness in *THG*. On either side, whiteness is malleable, ambivalent, able to swing back and forth, to change its contours to perform an anti-racism *and* preserve a minoritized political identity which takes the shape of class formation and class struggle (not racial formation or racial struggle).

On one hand, the series possesses beyond-racial utopian possibilities, where the trans-historical force of the white supremacist culture that hooks writes of is no longer a factor of oppression in *Panem* (although patriarchy clearly is). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) might say that like the aporia of a postracist utopia, *THG* reads like a “gorgeous dream” that “smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake” (p. 11), obscuring how racism is a visceral experience that “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth” (p. 10). On the other hand, the films encode discourses of whiteness and labour that embrace Republican, conservative and right-wing ideologies. Although I intend to discuss the latter in the next section, I would like to focus here on how a “good” white subjectivity, or “The Dreamers”, as Coates would call them, is embraced in the series, subverting the idea that *THG* is strictly a *dystopian* parable. In order to do so, it is necessary to contextualize how racial formations manifest as political projects in the films and how they are presented in utopian imagery.

In many ways, *THG* engages in what Omi and Winant (1994) call a “racial project” by incorporating thematic motifs of what Moylan (2014) calls a “critical utopia” (p. 10). By use of both these textual and political projects, *THG* weaves a narrative tapestry of what I see as a *white liberal utopia*, specifically as it pertains to liberal whiteness, race relations, the erasure of racial difference, and ultimately the re-centering



of whiteness, without engaging in any antiracist pedagogy whatsoever. In fact, how whiteness is presented in *THG* series reflects much of the marquee tenants of utopianism. For Jonathan Pike, a utopian projection is an account or a vision of a perfect world, which operates in three ways. First, a utopia generates aspirations that should guide motivations for change. Second, utopianism highlights a sociopolitical account of human nature, power relations, and systems of domination since utopian societies are human societies reimagined. Third, utopian thinking generally provides a point from which a critique of contemporary society can occur since it is a projection and reworking of the current sociohistorical moment (Pike, 2007). This is how the *THG* series ideologically fails. By engaging in a stringent class critique of power relations, not accounting for implications of race, racism, and white supremacy, *THG* series embarks on a unique racial project of and for utopian whiteness.

For Omi and Winant (1994) a “racial project” does ideological work, and is concretized through the link between meaning and structure, discourse and institution, and signification and organizations. These components situate the human body, and its political agency, as something that can be structured and represented. As the pair notes, “[a] racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or exploration of racial dynamics” that, “connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice” (p. 56). This kind of project that both interprets and represents the phenomena of racialization can be found in a myriad of text, especially sf cinema. Moylan (2014), on the other hand, sees a “critical utopia” as an effective step to an enduring transformation, one that instigates a mediation between larger political liberation processes – like anti-racism for example – and the individual consciousness-raising agency needed to take

radical social change forward (p. xv). Furthermore, a critical utopia traces the journey from passivity to agency, marking new levels of individual activism that service sociopolitical transformations (p. xv). A racial project housed in a critical utopia of whiteness – or, a *white liberal utopia* - would suggest that the interpretation and exploration of racial dynamics, and propensities of racism and white supremacy, can be elided and transcended by the agencies of individuals. Not only is this project evident within the series itself (which I will return to in a moment), but it also manifests discursively at the point of production.

Both Suzanne Collins and Gary Ross, the director of the first film, have expressed the racial politics of *Hunger Games* with utopian fantasies of whiteness when asked to justify the casting of Lawrence, Hutcherson, and Liam Hemsworth in a narrative where miscegenation has rendered any taxonomy of race moot. As Collins' describes, the films take place, "in a time period where hundreds of years have passed from now" and that "[t]here's been a lot of ethnic mixing" (Valby, 2011, par. 24) which has essentially dissolved racial difference and the sociohistorical power of whiteness. Nevertheless, whiteness endures and is always re-centered. Aside from Collins' remarks being contradictory, given the casting choices of a lead actress who previously gained notoriety for her performance as a dirt-poor white Southerner in *Winter's Bone* (2010), by neglecting to account for the sociohistorical power of whiteness in the past, in the present, and possibly in the future, Collin's contextualization of race relies substantially on what Winant (2004) calls the "liberal racial project" of whiteness (p. 60). For Winant (2004), the white liberal racial project is most effective in promoting a utopian vision of racial equality mostly through class reductionism (p. 60). However, the weakness of the

liberal project is that it does not challenge the “real wage” of whiteness, like the material benefits and employment, or the “psychological wage” of whiteness, like the privileged status in the eyes of authority that non-whites do not have (p. 62).

Not only is this utopian fantasy of white liberalism pervasive at the point of creation and production, it also exists in the discourse of how the film was received. For instance, some media commentaries on the film have suggested that *Hunger Games* is “all about racism – or more accurately, the things that animate racism now” (Wilkinson, 2014, par. 9). These animating points include “othering” characters, the banality of systemic oppression, the complacency of Capitol citizens who blood-lust for the Games, and a focus on the biopolitics of disposability enacted via disciplinary techniques and mechanism of social control from the state that can either “take life or let live” (Foucault, 1978, p. 136; for biopolitics see: Hardt & Negri, 2000). Also, other media commentaries have argued that “The Hunger Games anticipated Trump’s rise”, not because of the ways in which the films centralize the plight of white people and the need for a white saviour, but mostly because of, “the fact that in our culture, a really strong, compelling narrative trumps everything, every time, no matter what side you’re on” (Grady, 2016, par. 4). Indeed, both readings may ring true. Politically speaking, both *THG* and the rise of Trump are predicated on galvanizing reality TV celebrities for political purposes. Racially speaking, Katniss is “othered” as the poorest-of-the-poor; citizens of the Capitol, governed by the pure-white Coriolanus Snow, are vilified through their selfish benevolence and love of the Games; the sole purpose of the Games is to keep the more impoverished Districts “in their place” through the biopolitical paradigm of power; and the *raison d’être* of the films is to explore the individual acts of protest and militancy

required to ascertain a humane degree of civil rights, if not radical social change.

However, although these analyses are helpful in fleshing out the political possibilities of the text as well as the utopic projections of a liberal racial project, they engender a more pressing question regarding racial politics and power. That is, how do we negotiate a set of films that may be “*all* about race” or even prescient of the neofascist Trump regime without either acknowledging or deconstructing the representational politics of whiteness?

### **Strategizing Whiteness: “. . . I see her in my sister, Prim”**

Although white liberalism and utopic colour blindness is present in both the production and reception of the series, I argue that they are most recognizable as a racial project in the text itself. As Kinney (2013) argues, the racial project in *THG* is grounded in “the possessive investment in whiteness” (p. 45). For Kinney (2013), the coding of whiteness in *Hunger Games* is problematic because it helps develop a framework that ignores how whiteness is shaped, constructed, and reconstructed. The invisibility of Katniss’ whiteness juxtaposed with the hypervisibility of Rue’s blackness, for instance, “reveals how the cloak of colorblindness frequently renders whiteness invisible” (p. 48). To develop a vocabulary that can remove this cloak and identify the project of whiteness at work, Projansky & Ono’s (1999) notion of “*strategic whiteness*” (p. 152) may be a useful tool.

Projansky & Ono (1999) contextualize this understanding as a reaction-formation that responds to various social changes and social movements in a historical epoch where

whiteness is modified and renegotiated to validate and self-protect its centrality, power, and privilege (p. 152). Projansky & Ono affirm that it is particularly helpful to study the “*subtle discursive adjustments*” (p. 152) in contemporary films that are understood as tackling white supremacist racism. This is most recognizable in how some Hollywood films identify “good” from “bad” whites by how they engage with the “other”. Although the pair use more domestic portrayals of race relations in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), *Six Degrees of Separation* (1993), and *Smoke* (1995), I see strategic whiteness as an effective mechanism that works in *Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay 1* and *2* for two main reasons. Firstly, although the films do not tackle racism head-on by presenting it as a conflict within the narrative, the sociohistorical significance of whiteness and power, how the films were situated within the age of BLM, and the collaboration between Katniss and her various black accessories (Rue, Cina, and Boggs) merit a critical reading of race and whiteness within the text. Second, blackness is not just adjunct or auxiliary but is often signified through the imagery of segregation, police brutality, and even outdated Hollywood tropes of blackness.

Textually, this racial utopianism and white liberalism is quite blunt and is most notable in the relationship between Katniss and the female tribute from District 11, Rue (Stenberg), who is one of the main black characters in the first films, and who is often referenced throughout the series. Well into *Hunger Games*, while Katniss and Peeta train in the tribute center, the film encourages us to understand the intimate connection between Katniss’ whiteness and Rue’s blackness. Following a discussion between Katniss and Peeta concerning survival tactics, Peeta quickly interjects, “hey, I think you have a shadow”, calling attention to Rue who is peering behind a pillar. Although the

difference between the two is initially conceptualized as the presence of *lightness* and *darkness*, a historical trope of othering non-whites (See: Shohat & Stam, 2014; Dyer, 2007), soon, Katniss' and Rue's relationship flowers into a more contemporary Hollywood trope when they become "biracial buddies" (Guerrero, 1993, p. 127) while attempting to beat the affluent "career" tributes from District 1. This is an important example as it demonstrates the utopian possibilities of whiteness and the class reductionism of liberal racial projects within the film which is used in the interest of whiteness all the same. As Guerrero (1993) notes, the biracial buddy formula is a strategy used to sooth the black images, to put the image of blackness in "protective custody" (p. 128), and to conform to white sensibilities, rendering whiteness as a safe subjectivity, and non-whiteness as non-threatening.

However, it is worth acknowledging that this partnership is somewhat complicated by the gender identities of both Katniss and Rue. Where Guerrero (1993) offers us critical readings of various buddy-cop action films of the 1980s, and the intricacies of their social dynamics, he does not tell us how the buddy formula is fixed by boundaries of masculinity, and how gender might work to help situate this racial dynamic. For Guerrero (1993), the biracial "buddy formula" is a method by which, "the [film] industry contains and controls the black filmic image and conforms it to white expectations" (p. 127). This form of racial containment, whether it be as a buddy or a sidekick, works to "reinscribe the cinematic racial hierarchies of old" (Guerrero, 1993, p. 128). Katniss ad Rues relationship in *Hunger Games* does just that. For example, when it appears that Katniss has been bested by other tributes in the arena, and is trapped at the top of a tree, Rue appears, deus ex machina, to provide Katniss with an effective exit

strategy. The escape scene, and subsequent buddy partnership that ensues, not only encourages us to understand their partnership as a strategic one, but a racial one as well, especially since it preserves the racial hierarchy that Guerrero (1993) highlights. For instance, the biracial buddy narrative and the preservation of racial hierarchies is quite problematic when we consider that Rue decides to wake up Katniss and help her escape, instead of attempting to kill the unsuspecting opponent while she slept. Blackness thus becomes reduced to a measure of safety and reliability, relieved of the racial threat of difference. The soothing of racial tension is compounded even more so when we consider that the “buddies” in this partnership are both women. By displacing men and foregrounding women, the film invite us to celebrate progressive gender politics that deal in problematic racial representations all the same.

Although one could argue that by using two women in roles usually reserved for men, *THG* somehow transcends tradition racial boundaries. I, however, see this quick switch, or what Projansky & Ono (1999) call a “*subtle discursive adjustment*” (p. 152), as an example of “*strategic whiteness*” (p. 152) in action. In other words, Katniss and Rue’s partnership still conforms to racist stereotypes and hierarchies, inevitably, to the benefit of the white protagonist. To begin with, Rue is essentially a voiceless sidekick to Katniss. In addition, their partnership conforms to the racist colonial and Hollywood trope of infantilizing dark bodies and framing them as “politically immature” (Shohat and Stam, 2014, p. 140). Throughout the first film, Rue is indeed a small shadow of Katniss. Rue’s meek demeanor, childlike posture, and lack of agency and self-determination situate her as subordinate to Katniss’ heightened political agency, and strong, developed body (Lawrence was 22 years old when she was cast as 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen).

Explicit signifiers of Rue's blackness are compounded when their "buddy" partnership finally comes to an end.

After surviving alone through the first portion of the games, Katniss develops an affinity for Rue (one of her opponents) and eventually teams up with her to defeat the pack of "careers". Following a melee with a career tribute, Rue is impaled and eventually succumbs to her injuries while cradled in Katniss' arms. In a scene which carries the most emotional weight in the film (arguably more so than Katniss volunteering as a tribute), Katniss wreaths the body of her "shadow" comrade with flowers as a symbol of her humanity and short-lived life. After a brief mourning, she gives the three-finger salute to CCTV which broadcasts live throughout Panem. Following Katniss' impromptu memorial and salute, the film cuts to District 11, Rue's home District - which is clearly shown as a predominantly black District - erupting in a violent uprising where Peacekeepers (the Capitol's police force), wearing sheer white uniforms and riot gear, are mobbed and beaten by insurgents. Peacekeepers retaliate with high-pressure water hoses, reminiscent of the grainy celluloid footage which documented the state response to the protest of a racially divided America in pre-Civil Rights Birmingham, Alabama. Although this brief tangent in the film suggests that any mounted resistance to an economically oppressive state must be waged on a racially united front, what I see is an eruptive response to a state-sanctioned murder of a young black girl who, in her dying moments, was shown respect and treated with dignity by a white woman. What the scene expresses is a profound cultural desire for racial liberalism and "whiteness as innocence" (Kinney, 2013, p. 23) that was at odds with the racial tensions and anxieties surrounding the casting of Rue, as well as the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Yet, the film



works to aggressively downplay any racialization of the “buddy” partnership. Instead, Katniss’ and Rue’s relationship is incredibly bolstered by their gender identities. The fact that Katniss and Rue are both women allows the narrative to push a pro-feminist agenda, and a discursive indictment of patriarchy, over any “messy” entanglement with racism. This trend continued with the 2013 release of *Catching Fire*.

Eerily prescient of the string of the haunting murders of young black men at the hands of the police and the militarized response of the police to protest, *Catching Fire* also worked textually to produce a “good” white liberal subject amongst the backdrop of black cultural politics, particularly as it pertains to community policing, disposability of the black body, and a fear of unbridled domestic police forces. This is, perhaps, most notable in the drastic change in the way that Peacekeepers are depicted as the series progresses and how Katniss is situated within this discourse. In *Hunger Games*, Peacekeepers look more like volunteer bobbies, adorned with hard-hats, clear visors, and crisp-white trousers and jackets. In *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay 1 & 2*, however, Peacekeepers take a much darker and monovalent turn. Depicted more as high tech death-squads who enforce “law and order” than community police who “serve and protect”, the Peacekeepers wear sleek, white body armour, have full helmets with black tinted facemasks, and are always equipped with military grade assault rifles. The representation of over militarized police in *Catching Fire* tapped into a cultural fear and growing concern regarding police forces who willingly use more violent and coercive means to repress social dissent, particularly in protests calling for justice for Jordan Davis, and soon, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice. Since the reason for the more tactical transition of the Peacekeepers is never explained in the films, it can be read as a response to the

heightened militarization of domestic police forces that are increasingly being granted military-grade equipment from Homeland Security and the Department of Defense (Else, 2014). Like the over-policing of communities of colour in many American urban centers, in Panem, “[i]nstead of a police presence designed to keep order, the police seem prepared to quell a rebellion” (Myers-Montgomery, 2016, p. 279). However, these factors rarely affect Katniss directly. Rather, we are encouraged to experience death-by-cop and over-militarized policing as ingredients which structure Katniss’ liberal whiteness and utopian perspective.

The first 30 minutes of *Catching Fire* showcase Katniss and Peeta in post-Hunger Games life. As “victors” of the previous games, the two tributes are forced to embark on a “Victory Tour” where they begrudgingly promote the games at every District, beginning with District 11. As Katniss and Peeta arrive via train, we see that there has been an increased police presence that looks akin to a military occupation – this is likely due to the uprising shown in *Hunger Games*. On their way to the town square in an armoured truck, the film cuts to a distance shot of blacks in District 11, labouring in fields while Peacekeepers stand watch. Once they arrive at the square, Peeta and Katniss remorsefully address the gathering crowd but direct their attention at the families of the dead tributes, Thresh and Rue. Although there are clearly white extras in the scene showing the crowd, because the camera is fond of showing close-ups of only black folks, and routinely visits the giant screens projecting images of Thresh and Rue, we are encouraged to imagine District 11 as specifically a space of blackness. What is most interesting about this scene is how Peeta and Katniss strategically navigate their liberal whiteness, in this explicitly black space, while they address the crowd upon a stage at the

Justice Building.

As Peeta candidly remarks, “both Thresh and Rue were so young. . . We know that without Rue, without Thresh, we wouldn’t be standing here today. So in recognition of that . . . we would like to donate one month of our winnings to the families of the tributes, every year, for the rest of our lives.” Katniss also contributes to white benevolence in the all black space when she says, “I did know Rue. She wasn’t just my ally, she was my friend. I see her in the flowers that grow in the meadow by my house. I hear here in a mockingjay song. I see her in my sister, Prim. . . and I couldn’t save her. I’m sorry.” After Katniss’ colour blind obituary, an elderly black man raises the three-finger salute, whistles the mockingjay song, is dragged out of the crowd and onto the presentation stage. As Peacekeepers drag a lamenting Katniss into the Justice Building, the elderly black man is forced to kneel and killed execution-style in what was perhaps the most shocking scene in the film. Although it may have been unintentional, the scene was not only jarring, but it also resonated with the massive civil unrest occurring at the time which sought to draw attention to police brutality against black bodies. Yet, the scene still worked to position Katniss’ whiteness as innocent, liberal, and even accidental. While she is being subdued by Haymitch after witnessing the execution, between whimpers, she faintly asks “what did I do?”

I would like to draw attention to how both Peeta and Katniss are clearly haunted by the specter of black death, and how black death is used as a springboard to reach the post-white liberal subject. Their subjectivity as “good” white folks differentiate the two from the (white) Peacekeepers, and the cold indifference of the mostly white body politic of citizens in the Capitol, such as the (all white) President Snow. In *Hunger Games*, black

death manifests in Rue's demise in the arena. In *Catching Fire*, it comes in the form of the execution-by-Peacekeeper of the elderly man, and later on, Katniss' stylist, Cinna. In *Mockingjay 2* Boggs' (Ali) is sacrificed while guiding Katniss on her mission to assassinate Snow. In every case, Katniss is an ally that functions as a suture to stitch white identity to black death. Yet, the benevolence of her actions is crucially depoliticized by the racial politics of whiteness that underpin multiracial collaboration in the series. Particularly noticeable in the Justice Building scene in District 11, the series works to strategically distance itself from racism (it's something that occurs "over there") while seeking racial forgiveness to form a "good" antiracist (or post-white) subject in a black space or through "buddy" relationships. As the text leads us to believe, Katniss is, in fact, not like the Peacekeepers or the superfluous Capitol citizens; she cares about black lives. In many ways, the film marks the journey from white passivity to the white agency, and racial (dis)identification required to reach the white liberal utopia. By disaffiliating Katniss and Peeta from the (white) Peacekeepers, they are also disaffiliated from the signifiers of anti-black white supremacy (like police brutality). For Weigman (1999), this kind of simultaneous proximity and disaffiliation is crucial for understanding how whiteness can be strategically remolded and displaced in popular film, always to the advantage of the white subject. What she refers to as "race trait-ing" or "nonessentialist whiteness" is a replacement of *conscious* identification as precursors to political action that de-essentialize the relationship among white skin, white privilege, and white racism. This, in turn, may shift the signification of various emblems of black oppression and white material privilege to a form of white injury that, rhetorically speaking, is akin to blackness (p. 126). For example, later on in *Catching Fire*, "good" whiteness-as-injury

that is “discursively black” is claimed corporeally through the suffering of a white man’s body when Gale is repeatedly whipped at a post in District 12 by another white man, Head Peacekeeper Romulus Thread (Patrick St. Esprit), the only Peacekeeper to expose his face in the film.

However, the films deserve some credit for allowing a space for whiteness to exist in multiple locations, and to be understood beyond the experience of white domination and racism. As Giroux (1997) argues, to develop and implement real antiracist practices, whiteness has to be recognized as something beyond exploitation and domination so that, “‘whiteness’ as an ideological and social location can be progressively appropriated as part of a broader politics of social reform” (p. 384). In other words, “white youth [and adults] must feel that they have a stake in racial politics that connects them to the struggles being waged by other groups” (Giroux, 1997, p. 384). Surely, *THG* helps to establish such a pedagogy. However, the strategic ways in which whiteness is positioned in *THG* helps to establish a kind of progressive subjectivity that remains problematic, mostly because antiracism is never dealt with explicitly. In this respect, *THG* suffers from quite a strenuous tension; it wants to have its cake and eat it too. The series wants us to move beyond positions of guilt and resentment. However, through Katniss, the path by which we get there is not one of antiracism, but one of colour blindness, whiteness-as-injury, white guilt, and false equivalency. In other words, *THG* can help us identify some limitations of a progressive whiteness that Giroux (1997) argues for. That is that the same position that Giroux advocates for, the “progressively appropriated” whiteness that has “a stake in racial politics” can be reached by two avenues, but inevitably end up at the same position. Through one route, we might find an engagement with antiracist pedagogy that

Giroux advocates for, where solidarity with the struggle waged by other groups is found without a false equivalency. Along the other, we might find a strategic whiteness that skirts critical engagement with antiracism, yet appears to find solidarity all the same. At the end of both tracks, we come to a whiteness that promotes equality.

In short, the construction of liberal whiteness in the film series, from the point of production, reception and textually, is very problematic since it does not account for the sociohistorical power of white supremacy. W.E.B. Du Bois might call this flattening of the racial landscape a “white blind spot” (Roediger, 2007, p. x) which supposes that the interest of some whites is in the better interest of all. This is the concept that has allowed *THG* to be mythologized as a progressive and liberal text. By serving as the blueprint for a progressive political agency, *THG* films inadvertently composes a narrative that privileges the utopic possibilities of whiteness while disengaging from antiracist practices. This “white blind spot” continues to be problematic, if not a perverse component upon repeated viewings, even though the films did not *intend* to be about racial politics. As such, this analysis sees the films as doing cultural work, as prescribing certain discourses about racial politics – whether intentional or not – all while engaging in its own pedagogical project of racial representation, most of which focuses on the plight, oppression, and militancy of revolutionary white bodies.

### **When (White) Trash Burns**

What is striking about the racial coding of the films are the ways in which they invite us to empathize with the motif of white disenfranchisement through characters and

by the overall narrative. In other words, while racial privilege does not exist in Panem, class privilege certainly does. As such, we are reminded of the ways in which whites may experience systemic classism, much like blacks do racism, in a world void of a taxonomy of racial difference. Where racism no longer prevails as a prominent means of othering, District-ism as it may be referred to – or the amalgamation of race-as-class – defines difference throughout the entire franchise. The consistent referral to Katniss’ (white) working class origins in District 12 is an insistent reminder of how whiteness is reflected using signifiers of racial oppression in the films. In short, through representation and signification, *The Hunger Games* series utilizes tropes of racial oppression, morphing elements of a dystopia to pertain only to white bodies. The series continues with a sf trope of imagining the subjugation of white people at the expense of diversity, essentially saying, as Siddiquee (2014, par. 7) remarks, “things could get so bad that people who look like Liam Hemsworth [Gale] are now at the bottom, too!”

Witticism aside, although this reification of whiteness-as-injury presents itself visually, and was particularly noticeable during Gale’s whipping in *Catching Fire*, it is also discursively present through dialogue. For instance, in *Mockingjay 2*, when President Coin hijacks President Snow’s broadcast during the invasion of the Capitol, her description of Katniss and Panem invites us to imagine Katniss as the poorest of the poor, and envision the working conditions of the people of Panem akin to that of chattel slavery. In this regard, Katniss is continually referred to as “a small-town girl from the Seam, in District 12, who survived the Hunger Games and the quarter quell, and rose up and turned a nation of slaves into an army!” Since sf cinema can serve as allegories for the fears and anxieties of any given historical era, in many ways, *THG* serves as a coded

commentary for the frightening collision course which sees white folks on, what Roediger calls “the winding road to *white slavery*” (2007, p. 66). For Roediger (2007) the notion of the “white slave” is intrinsic to understanding how white identity can maintain privilege while calling into question forms of systemic oppression based on capitalist accumulation and paid or indentured labour. Historically, the benefits of identifying “*white slavery*”, notes Roediger (2007), is that the moniker allowed an argument against wage dependency as bondage, and called for the better treatment of workers without calling into question chattel slavery itself (p. 73). This kind of co-opted, injured reading of whiteness, I argue, is quite pervasive throughout the entirety of *THG* series.

In the opening moments of *Hunger Games*, we are introduced to District 12, located in the distant future of Appalachia (South Eastern Continental U.S.). Plagued by what appears to be a dystopian nightmare of feudal proportions, District 12 is represented as the refuse heap of a post-apocalyptic America; dilapidated housing, children playing with sticks in the mud, laundry being done by hand, and coal miners marching on their way to the mines, all thick with grime and enveloped in a dull, dirty, olive glow. Moreover, although the film gives hints and clues to racial and class division of whites, Collins’ book makes this distinction explicit. Peeta derives from the “Merchant section”, where shop owners live above their business and tend to have blonde hair and blue eyes. Alternatively, Katniss derives from the “Seam” (likely a moniker for the term “coal seam”, a bed of coal that is profitable enough to mine) which is the poorest area of not only District 12 but the whole of Panem. People from the Seam work as manual labourers in coal mines suffer from poverty, often die of starvation, and tend to have grey eyes, dark hair, and olive complexions (Collins, 2008, p. 8). This distinction is somewhat



realized in the film when comparing the two tributes from District 12, Katniss and Peeta, and is noticeable in the juxtapositions between the two tributes and the pure-white Coriolanus Snow, Effie and other whites from the Capitol.

Along with the division of white bodies in District 12, *Hunger Games* also positions whiteness existing categorically and hierarchically. During the reaping scene in District 12, where Katniss valiantly volunteers as tribute, we are introduced to the Capitol liaison Effie. Her powdered, thick, grotesquely over-applied, and ornate whiteness represents a bourgeois upper-class subjectivity. As Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) suggest, there is a distinction between the kinds of whiteness presented in the film. “[T]he wealth, excess, and privilege of the people in the Capitol and the richer districts make them hyper-visible, marked by an undesirable and inauthentic white racial identity” (p. 403). Although I agree with Dubrofsky and Ryalls, there is indeed a distinction between whiteness, I am reluctant to dismiss this distinction as based simply on desirability and authenticity. Regardless as to how the shades of whiteness may be perceived, in Panem, as the narrative suggests, Effie’s hyper-visible, inauthentic, and undesirable whiteness is normative, dominant, and therefore hegemonic. In this regard, Katniss is an *abnormal* or at least a subordinate white subject<sup>11</sup>. Next to the superfluous *pure* white bodies in the Capitol, Katniss embodies many of the signifiers of what is commonly referred to as “white trash” (Isenberg, 2016; Wray & Newitz, 1997).

Packed with racial signifiers, the moniker is useful to help illustrate how Katniss as different or *abnormal*. For Wiegman (1999), “white trash” (p. 122) is one of a few

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to assume, however, that all whites from the Capitol in the series are represented like Effie. There are several characters like Cressida (Natalie Dormer) and Heavensbee (Hoffman), for instance, that do not embody the “hyper-visibility” of whiteness. However, they are not represented as part of the elite in the same manner that the “hyper-visible” whites in the Capitol are.

ways in which white identity can be conceptualized. As she notes, the epithet is especially useful for “‘racialization’ of the permanent poor in order to demonstrate the otherness of whiteness within”, and is used to rethink working class struggles “as a preamble to forging new cross-racial alliances” (p 123). For Isenberg (2016), the euphemism “white trash” is a repugnant racial slur which was used to demean poor whites in a slave-era Antebellum America. Along with the historical genealogy of this subjectivity, Isenberg (2016) describes “poor white trash” as “creatures of the slave states” that exist “on the margins of plantation society” (p. 136). More than just a category for separating poor and affluent whites, white trash is racialized as *other*, thereby differentiating them from affluent, property-owning, preferred renditions of whiteness. Isenberg (2016) suggests that white trash, also known as “clay-eaters”, or “sandhillers”, called into question the automatic badge of racial superiority and troubled the sociobiological center of racial hierarchy. This was particularly noticeable with their alleged “tallow” tinged skin colour (p. 136). In any case, white trash was recognized as a “notorious race” falling below African slaves on the scale of humanity (p. 137). Wray and Newitz (1997) argue that “because white trash is a classed and racialized identity degraded by dominant whiteness, a white trash position vis-à-vis whiteness might be compared to a ‘racial minority’ vis-à-vis whiteness” (p. 5). What I see as a narrative of the ascendancy of white trash is both topical and reflective of the political climate and labour struggles during the release of *The Hunger Games* films. Moreover, the reason why the liberal racial project (mentioned earlier) is able to succeed in the films is because the narrative is so aggressive about overemphasizing the struggles of white trash through labour and class. As Winant (2006) tells us, one of the successes of radicals of the new

left have been to see social problems as ““universal contradictions” of class rather than “secondary” problems of race” (p. 62). In many instances, the films work to code discourses of white labour politics through much of the series.

*Catching Fire* immediately follows the events of *Hunger Games* and opens to similar imagery as a reminder of the politics of whiteness and labour that underscores the series. Following her dual-win with Peeta in the first games, *Catching Fire* depicts a Katniss that has been able to attain a mild amount of upward class mobility. In the opening of the film, she is shown hunting for game – presumably for therapy as she now has tribute income from the Capitol – and converses with her love interest, Gale (Hemsworth). During their interaction, the film juxtaposes the two against a backdrop of gloomy coal workers, heavy industrial machinery, skinny mongrel dogs, and grubby streets with propaganda visible on walls reading “BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW”. Shortly after, Katniss strolls into her post-Hunger Games villa in “Victor’s Village” that she inhabits as a prize for her win in the first games, signifying her removal of the shackles of white poverty. Although a reading of the political ascendancy of white trash may seem tangential to the films, a revisiting of this sociopolitical landscape and white subjectivity is noteworthy for several reasons. The most important, however, is that white trash, and white labour is routinely referenced in conversation with one another throughout the entire series.

At the end of *Catching Fire*, after Katniss beats the arena again, she is rendered incapacitated by an electric blast. After her incapacitation, she is angelically lifted, engulfed in a beam of light, to a hovercraft in a Christ-like crucifix pose, which Dyer (2007) argues re-centers whiteness through sanctimonious recollections of white bodies

and white suffering (p. 15). Once Katniss comes to in the hovercraft, the film reveals a twist ending. As the Gamemaker, Heavensbee addresses Katniss, we learn that most of the events of *Catching Fire* have been an elaborate ploy to safely extract her from the arena to kick-start the revolution. “Katniss, you have been our mission from the beginning. The plan was always to get you out. Half the tributes were in on it. This is the revolution and you are the Mockingjay.” Immediately before the film ends with a close-up of Katniss who stares deadly into center frame, Gale confesses the current state of District 12, “after the games [The Capitol] sent in hovercrafts and they started dropping firebombs . . . There is no District 12. It’s all gone”, including the Seam, the labourers, and the coal industry at large. In the beginning of *Mockingjay I*, Katniss visits smoldering rubble and scorched remains of what is left of District 12 and the people of Appalachia. What is most interesting about the ways in which white trash encapsulates *Catching Fire*, and is further explored in *Mockingjay I*, is how the films encourage us to empathize with the plight of white labourers and a predominantly white labour industry, much like Lawrence’s remarks concerning the (white) wage gap in Hollywood.

This contextualization of the ascendancy of white trash was pertinent to the cultural moment at the time of the series’ reception while in cinemas. During Obama’s presidency, curbing the incoming catastrophe of human-accelerated climate change was a must-do on the administration’s to-do agenda. Where regulating the environmental impacts of coal saw little oversight from the Bush administration, heavy regulations imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency as well as executive climate action orders signed by Obama signaled, for many Republican and right-wing pundits, a “war on coal” that would wreak havoc on coal dependent local economies and white working

class people (The Associated Press, 2012; Davenport, 2014). These measures to curb climate change were devastating for coal miners and industry workers in states in the Appalachia region (West Virginia, Kentucky, and Alabama) who lost countless jobs that revolved around the extraction, refining, transferring, and burning of coal. Like District 12, the glory days of Appalachian labour in the coal industry is “all gone.”

However, I do not intend to make the real-world struggle of poor working whites synonymous with white trash – this is far too simplistic and degrading for people who identify as Appalachian and does not account for Native American tribes that also rely on the coal industry for economic subsistence. Rather, I would like to point out how the film exposes a nexus of class and race through labour, and how the films draw attention to whiteness as a racialized category that is reductionist in nature and identifiable mostly through the context of work. In short, the films suggest that while white liberalism is embraced (as seen in “buddy” partnership between Rue and Katniss) and that cooperation between whites and blacks is necessary for toppling the authoritarian regime, a critique of white supremacy and hierarchies based on race are still taboo. As a result, contextually, *THG* implies that the core of social division now, and potentially in the future, is and will be reducible to class, not race. This is how the texts work to transcode conservative ideology. By placing whiteness as a dichotomy - *abnormal* “white trash” and *pure*, bourgeois whiteness – the series molds a certain white liberal utopianism, while that very liberalism is continuously undermined by a more conservative discourse of whiteness and white supremacy. Nama (2009) sums up this point quite eloquently when he suggests that “despite the attempts in sf film to engage race and class issues, there remains, for the most part, a collusion of silence in the American body politic when the intricacy of race

and class oppression is the topic” (p. 122). This collusion and silence in *THG* was a major shortcoming for a series that was so celebrated as a teaching tool of mass-instruction that helps inform young people’s critical consciousness. As Nama notes, this collusion can also be an indicator as to how the text is culturally situated. Since a critical debate about the overlap of race *and* class may be taboo in public discourse and even alternative cultural outlets like sf entertainment, such a debate can also manifest in the “rallying cry to the dispossessed” (2007, p. 122).

That Katniss (and the general racial ethos of *THG*) is able to perform a liberal racial project is dependent upon that liberalism being continually undermined by solidarity across class lines. In other words, in *THG* Katniss is a “good” white subject because of material dispossession. How the text levels whites to the harmed position of blacks is a result of a “construct of mutuality-of-harm” equivalency (Wiegman, 1999, p. 144). This mutuality of oppression through material dispossession is perhaps the most pressing limitation on scholarly work that has attempted to theorize the antiracist white subject. For Roediger (2007; 1994) and Wray and Newitz (1997), the abolition of whiteness and the antiracist project is crafted at the site of disenfranchised, discriminated, and harmed whites, which is problematic since it “take[s] on analytical equivalency to blackness” (Wiegman, 1999, p. 4). However, not only is this false equivalence presented as a project in the text, but we can also read it contextually to the political climate outside of the film.

Where the project of the white liberal utopia in *Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay 1* and *2* transcodes white liberalism and “colour blind” or “post-racial” politics of the Obama era, the stringent focus on the hopes, fears, and anxieties of

dispossessed working whites also parallels the conservative populism that emerged as normative during the 2016 Clinton and Trump Campaigns. Just as the reporting on the vanishing coal industry in Appalachia reads as a remorseful, dystopian obituary in its own respect (Stolberg, 2016), *THG* films thematically narrate a dystopia which centers on “white death” (Dyer, 1997, p. 208) that became a rallying cry during the Trump campaign. I am not arguing that *THG* directly helped in the election of Trump. Rather, I am arguing that the series coincides with the Trump’s campaign promise to “Make America Great Again”, especially since the two major themes, whiteness and labour, that were paramount to understanding the dystopic context of *The Hunger Games* series were also relevant in the political landscape in which the films were made, released and received. Moreover, along with a coded critique of whiteness and labour, the dominant political struggle which takes place in the last two films, *Mockingjay 1 & 2*, were also effective and prescient in predicting the divisiveness of the upcoming presidential election.

Released at the onset of the campaign trail for the 2016 election, read diagnostically, *Mockingjay 1 & 2* were effective kaleidoscopes in how they articulated the various discourses of anxieties, uncertainties, and political distrust that many American voters - especially young voters and people of colour - felt towards the status quo Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton and the renegade Republican nominee, Donald Trump. As some cultural critics have argued, a strong aspect of the *THG* was the way in which it did not find pleasure in placing faith in liberal democratic institutions, but instead focused on the downfalls of any position on a political spectrum as we can currently conceive of them. For Penny (2016) this is very pertinent since the end of the

series suggests that “even the revolutionaries have their own sinister, totalitarian agenda” (par. 11). This dichotomy was most recognizable through the two major political leaders in the films; the head of the Capitol, Coriolanus Snow, and leader of the “revolution”, Alma Coin. Although Snow and Coin are not direct reflections of Trump and Clinton, the ways in which the films present them as equally problematic, or the lesser of two evils, was remarkably predictive of the 2016 election.

In *Mockingjay 1*, Snow and Coin are presented as opposites on the political spectrum, symbolic of the idealised separation between Republicans and Democrats. Visually, the films give cues to invite us to imagine them as such. In scenes where Snow is grandstanding, he is often accompanied by red banners with the Capitol insignia. Conversely, when the films focus on Coin giving similar speeches, particularly at the end of *Mockingjay 2* before Snow is executed, she is accompanied by blue banners with the District 13 insignia. At the beginning of *Mockingjay 2*, Snow narrates to all of Panem why the games exist, the necessity for political complacency, and the need to maintain “law and order” before his Peacekeepers execute hooded rebels in several districts, including District 11. Since *Mockingjay 1 & 2* present Coin as the *only* alternative to Snow, the films encourage us to understand her political agenda as, in fact, different from Snow’s. Specifically, because he is a megalomaniac, Panem needs to be liberated, the Hunger Games must be abolished, and Coin can make that happen. The ethos of a counter hegemonic “revolution” was also similar to Sander’s campaign and bid for the Democratic nominee. Unfortunately, there is speculation that Sander’s did not gain the



nomination because the Democratic party colluded to give the nomination to Clinton<sup>12</sup>. The perversion of progressive politics and the (im)possibility of a revolution was also explored in the final two films. After infiltrating and taking control of the Capitol, and capturing Snow, Coin gathers the remaining living tributes to aid in decisions regarding political transitions. Before the end of the film, though, Coin's political position takes an unexpected turn. Before consulting with anyone, she appoints herself interim president of Panem and motions to have a "symbolic" hunger games with the Capitol's children, much to the surprise of the tributes and the audience. Like the rallying cries of both Republican and Democratic voters who were increasingly skeptical of the democratic guise of "leftist" politics - especially since the party back-doored Sanders, was in talks with Big Banks on Wall Street, and even declared BLM a "radical movement" which they should not support (Craven, 2016) – *THG* also tapped into a collective fear concerning the current state of allegedly liberal politics that was evident in the year leading up to the 2016 presidential election.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, *Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay 1*, and *Mockingjay 2* sketch a paradox of whiteness, and cultural politics of race in a late neoliberal era. By presenting whiteness on a gradient, as opposed to a dichotomy, the series works to transcode certain discourses of whiteness and colour blind politics which were pervasive

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<sup>12</sup> Many cultural critics have argued that Sanders would not have won the election because he did not invest in identity politics enough to swing the black and Latino/a vote.

in the Obama era. By embarking on a white liberal racial project, *THG* functions as both a text that is beyond race because of how it textually produced “good” white subjects. This utopic colour blindness and strategic whiteness are evident in the various ways in which Katniss navigates her points of contact and relationships with black people in the film. Although the film does not use racial politics as a backdrop for this dystopian narrative, signifiers of black cultural politics persist in the series. Therefore, while much of the representations of blackness, unfortunately, conforms to the Hollywood trope where people of colour sacrifice their bodies for the benefit of white heroism, Katniss’ whiteness is situated as benevolent, caring, and different from dominant whiteness. This difference in whiteness is evident when juxtaposing Katniss and her multiracial collaborations against Snow, the Peacekeepers, and the bourgeois whites from the Capitol. Although we are invited to experience the “post-white” subject through Katniss, various class markers also highlight a conservative undertone to the text.

In this regard, *THG* also transcodes conservative discourses of whiteness by identifying it exclusively through markers of class, thereby disassociating whiteness as an identity marker that is integral to any vestige of anti-racist activism. By representing Katniss as an *abnormal* white subject who experiences whiteness-as-innocence and whiteness-as-injury, she is ripe with the signification of a racialized whiteness, specifically as “white trash”. By contextualizing working class struggles of coal miners in District 12 as a marker of white identity, the films also expose a subtext of white working politics that have been devastated under the Obama administration. The potential revitalization of the coal industry under the current administration also signals *THG* as a text which was both reflective and prescient the dominant political and social culture.

Yet, the films strategically neglect a more honest discussion of race and white supremacy. As a fan, I have been unable to separate a contextualization of racial politics both during the films' tenure in commercial theaters and even while revisiting the films. With the continued persistence of the BLM movement, I am often reminded that Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and Renisha McBride were all young people of the age to which the films are targeted. These young people all succumbed to white supremacy, yet their tragedies are marginalized while colour blind whiteness is celebrated and whiteness as injury is denounced. For this reason, the concluding moments of *Mockingjay 2* continue to resonate, for me, as the most unsettling, frightening, and disturbing monologue in the entire series of *The Hunger Games*.

After successfully toppling two autocratic regimes, the film flash-forwards to Katniss, Peeta, and their two young children who have retreated to a woody sanctuary in District 12. This final scene suggests that white heteronormativity was the goal of “the girl on fire”, “the Mockingjay” and the revolution in Panem. Aided by orchestral music, as Katniss cradles an infant in her arms who just woke from a bad dream, she recites a final epilogue that, as Coates (2015, p. 11) might say, “*smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake*”:

Did you have a nightmare? I have nightmares too. Someday I'll explain it to you. Why they came, why they won't ever go away. But I'll tell you how I survive it. I make a list in my head of all the good things I've seen someone do. Every little thing I can remember. It's like a game. I do it over and over. Gets a little tedious after all these years, but there are much worse games to play.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Welcome to Dystopia

We could say now that the *hype*-othermia that YA dystopian media culture enjoyed at its apex has melted and thawed. Yet, the fetishizing of the post-apocalyptic and dystopic has never been more pervasive in North American popular culture than it is right now. We can hear it in the gloomy sounds of The Gorillaz's album, *Humanz*, a "party album for a world gone mad" (Petridis, 2017) or in the resistance vibes of A Tribe Called Quest's final album, *We got it from Here . . . Thank You 4 Your Service*. The last track on the album is titled "The Donald". We can see it with regularity in television shows like *Colony* (2016-present) and *Samurai Jack* (2001-2017), and in films like *Z for Zacharia* (2015), *Chappie* (2015), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and *Logan* (2017), all of which continue to captivate audiences. And we are even witnessing dystopia coming back from the dead. At the time of this writing, decades-old cyberpunk dystopias like *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), Richard K. Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon*, and the anime classic *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) are getting updated in the form of sequels for their 21<sup>st</sup> century relevance. Currently, fandom is buzzing with anticipation for Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and is closely following the news for the rumoured *Matrix* revival (Shea, 2017). More importantly though, we can feel dystopia in our political climate. At this moment, sf-like dystopia is materializing in political rhetoric, trending parlance, and salient moments of political protest and civil disobedience.

When presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway ushered in the era of “alternative facts” in November 2016, the warnings of creeping authoritarianism and historical revisionism conveyed in Orwell’s *1984* evolved from literary sf allegory to material reality. It’s no wonder, then, that Orwell’s novel recently peaked as one of the most popular, best-selling books on Amazon (Dessem, 2017). And while Orwell’s work seems to be relevant now more than ever, so too does Margret Atwood’s feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the novel, women are stripped of civil rights and work as reproductive slaves that bear children for the elites of society. The novel has recently been adapted into a Hulu television series that has found wild success, earning a total of five Emmy nominations and a spot amongst some of the most well produced sf television yet. However, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has not been re-popularized because of some vogue culture industry trend, but because of how it speaks to contemporary politics, and how it articulates the fears, anxieties, and plight of women whose bodies are increasingly disciplined and stripped of reproductive rights under the current presidential regime in the U.S. In fact, shortly after the release of the first season of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Woman’s March on Washington turned out to be one of the largest days of protest in U.S. history (DemocracyNow!, 2017). Soon after the Women’s March, dozens of street protests in state capitals around the U.S. were finding women dressed as Handmaids, in crimson cloaks and white bonnets, to draw attention to the horrific slashes to funding for planned parenthood, and the perverted approach to women’s bodies made normal by the current presidential administration (Hauser, 2017).

However, unlike *The Handmaids Tale*, the texts I chose to analyze in this thesis have not made their way into the popular lexicon or political rhetoric quite like Atwood’s

feminist dystopia. This does not mean that *The Hunger Games*, *The Scorch Trials*, and *The 100* are less important, or that they have less sociopolitical significance (as I have tried to illustrate in each chapter). Instead, as I have argued, the media text under examination in this thesis deal with more complex and problematic politics that are less obvious, less buzz worthy, and in some cases, do not exist, within popular vocabulary. For example, *The Handmaids Tale* functions as a criticism of authoritarianism and reproductive rights, but the now sprawling popularity of the narrative can also be attributed to a collective patriarchal fetishism which sees the sexual politics of women's bodies as somewhat more important or detached from white supremacy or settler colonialism.

To avoid a myopic approach to cultural criticisms that focussed on one issue alone, I have chosen to engage in three separate but complementary analyses which attempted to offer a more rounded challenge to what bell hooks calls "white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy" (1994, p. 6). Alone, the problematic developed in each chapter serves as an individual vignette which speaks to a portion of hook's famous tag line of power and privilege; Chapter Two focusses on whiteness and white supremacy; Chapter Three dwells on capitalism, and Four on the politics of neocolonialism, including masculinity, patriarchy, and colonial grunt work. Collectively, each intervention creates an equal length of a frame which triangulates how a complex system of hegemonic power can function through popular entertainment.

Reading these individual interventions collectively helps to provide a richer and broader theoretical perspective that reads racial imagery alongside other cultural signifiers like colonialism, capitalism, and labour. In this thesis, I have provided several

textual elements and narrative plot-beats that help explore the ways in which neoliberalism functions in media like *The Hunger Games* series, *The 100*, and *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*.

One element that persist amongst all the text analyzed in this project is a discussion, in various degrees, about the alienating consequences of the neoliberal state. In one way or another, the genre often returns to the politics of labour, market capitalism, and big government to illustrate how the mechanisms of dystopia can function. Yet, these messages are contradictory throughout the genre. Take, for instance, the comparison between *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, *The Hunger Games* series, and *Divergent*. All three films call neoliberal politics into question, but they do so in different ways, and to alternative ends. Where *Scorch Trials* suggest we harbour suspicion towards corporations that make workers manic and exploit bodies for profit, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* do something a bit different. This is not to say, however, that *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* completely neglect a critique of work and exploitation. In fact, exploitation via work is a catalyst which kick starts the revolution in both films. However, in the films, labour is not sold to the free market. Instead, labour is framed as a social task, one that eventually contributes to the longevity of the state.

However, a second element that occurs with regularity, and what I am most interested in, is how these various critiques (or embrace) of neoliberalism gives clues, insights and evidence into how race is represented in a neoliberal epoch, and how identity politics play a crucial role in dictating the outcomes of characters in these text, just as they do people of colour in the world in which we live. As David Theo Goldberg (2009) reminds us, race, as an identity category, is an

“invisible indispensability to neoliberalism” (p. 317) and is a “key structuring technology not just of modern state formation but also more contemporarily of neoliberalism as a driving condition of late modern capitalist state formation” (p. 338). By using critical discourse analysis and poststructural theory, I found that many of YA dystopian films work in unison to convey a similar ideological position regarding race and racism. For instance, the structuring technology that Goldberg speaks of is so ubiquitous in media like *The Hunger Games* and *The 100*, that it is almost invisible. In *The 100*, we are given a glimpse of how the multiethnic state is still very much concerned with, above all else, security from the outside. In *The Hunger Games*, we are given a glimpse of the neoliberal response to the “concern about the impending impotence of whiteness” (Goldberg, 2009, p.337), that is wrapped in a bow of liberal whiteness to avoid any prospect of intended racism.

What I want to emphasize with this thesis more than anything else is that racial representation is an integral part of all media that exist across the popular cultural landscape. I suspect that they function to brush under the table very serious issues of racism and white supremacy, as well as envision fantasies of reaching a postracial world without engaging in antiracist pedagogy. Since the examples I illustrated in this project were central to the culture industry during the height of their popularity, I understand that they are quickly become a relic of a bygone era. That said, as new media continues to be released and celebrated, it is important the scholarship continues to question and politicize text that might otherwise be dismissed as apolitical entertainment.

The individual interventions and collective conversation offered by this thesis matter because it forces us to reconcile different dimensions of emancipatory politics. My



hope with this work is that readers can disrupt a colonizer mindset *and* consider how capitalism effects perceptions and biases. That readers consider the continuum of white supremacy *and* how racial neoliberalism develops a platform for new kinds of racism; and, most importantly, that in order to challenge racism, capitalism, and neoliberalism, we need to reject separatist politics and engage in communal and mutual cultural critiques.

However, although this work has attempted to investigate a myriad of themes, one major theme that is continuously developed throughout this thesis is the complex nature of whiteness. In both Chapter Two and Chapter Four, I developed an alternative way of reading the politics of whiteness found in *The Hunger Games* and *The 100* respectively. In both texts, whiteness is decentered and marginalized, thus allowing it to become flexible and malleable. In *The Hunger Games*, a whiteness that is stereotypically associated with power and privilege is discredited by a “progressive” working class white subjectivity through Katniss Everdeen. However, through Katniss, the film develops a false equivalency which avoids a confrontation with racism. As such, *The Hunger Games* does not distinguish between whiteness as a social and political subjectivity and a whiteness that is antiracist. Because of this slippage of identity, the film does not do the emancipatory work of imagining “. . . how whiteness as an ideology and social location can be progressively appropriated as part of a broader politics of social reform” (Giroux, 1997, p. 384). In *The 100*, whiteness is also decentered via criminality and dirtiness (signifiers usually reserved for non-whites), thereby coding it as “cool” within the axioms of the colonial relations. In both cases, whiteness is something that exists out there,

something that does not merit a critical examination of white identity as “. . . a discourse of critique and possibilities” (Giroux, 1997, p. 384).

When read contextually, cultural artefacts like *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, and *The 100* invite us to participate in what Hall identifies as the “tension”, of politics *and* representation (2007, p. 42). For Hall (2007), this “tension”, between “texts and context, intertextuality” and “the historical formations in which cultural practices are logged” is what allows cultural studies to develop an analytic model that can read the “political nature of representation itself” (p. 42-43). In other words, by situating media in a particular social and historical context, we can gain critical insight to any historical moment by conceptualizing representation as a site of ideological struggle and contestation, in turn, develop a critical vocabulary for more progressive politics. It has been the goal of this thesis to do just that — to offer a way of reading the political nature of representation itself. And as Hall (2007) argues, representational practices have material effects (p. 42). How can we say that the dominant discourses of settler colonialism, racism, or capitalism that we find in popular culture, are disconnected from the problems and possibilities of who or what is represented? I found that, for the most part, these themes are addressed in many YA dystopian media artifacts, but often in problematic ways. What is most problematic about the films explored in this thesis is that they address their respective themes as separate from one another when they are, in fact, intimately interconnected. Although *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, and *The 100* offer us a remixed rundown of the proclivities of dystopia, the cultural politics that they speak to are in deep conversation with one another.

For example, colonialism and the acts of ant-colonial resistance that we find in

*The 100* cannot be understood outside of free market interest or the “vampire-metaphor” of capitalism that we find in *The Scorch Trials*. The #NoDAPL protest is a great example of this intimate connection. Energy Transfer Partner’s pipeline, which now runs through the Standing Rock reservation, is, on one hand, a physical colonization of the space that Sioux occupy. On the other hand, the pipeline can be read as a capitalist monster, an iron basilisk that burrows, slithers, and extracts capital at the expense of threatening the bodily integrity of Native Americans by poisoning their water supply. Likewise, neocolonial narratives that we find in *The 100* cannot be understood outside of the parameters of the neoliberal racial logic that we find in *The Hunger Games*. The reason why *The 100* is able to navigate its “post racial” world is because, like *Hunger Games*, race appears as disappearing.

In Chapter Two, I developed a way of reading the politics of whiteness as found in the four films in *The Hunger Games* franchise: *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay 1*, and *Mockingjay 2*. What the films are so fond of articulating are the ways in which some whites are good while others are bad. Paradoxically, throughout the entire series, “race” does not exist. As a result, *The Hunger Games* functions as a foil that exposes whiteness as what Omi & Winant (1994) call a “racial project” of white liberalism — one that explores, interprets, and represents racial dynamics by connecting what race means in any particular discursive practice. By reading whiteness as a racial project, I argue that, in many respects, *The Hunger Games* engages in a specific racial project. The films regularly invite us to see whiteness as subject identity that can transition from one end of the spectrum to the other, much like the smooth swinging of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. But blackness exists only as a petrified, superficial

subject identity that is used only to identify “good” or “bad whites.” Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) and her various “biracial buddy” partnerships with black characters throughout the series help illustrate the various way in which whiteness is strategically modified and renegotiated to validate the centrality, power, and privilege of whiteness. In the series, Katniss is framed as a “post white” subject that is colour blind. Her liberalism is what helps paint a post racial utopia. However, that identity is simultaneously undermined by a whiteness-as-injury, which has an analytical equivalency to blackness, but is constructed along class lines (not racial lines because racial difference does not exist in the films). The convergence of liberal whiteness, labour politics, and the discursive omission of blackness as a lived subject identity was topical to the cultural landscape in which the films were being released.

Jennifer Lawrence’s open letter about the gender pay gap that she published towards the conclusion of the franchise is an appropriate salvo through which we can explore and contextualize this matrix. Although Lawrence offered a critique of work and a gendered political economy, it comes from a white liberal perspective, one that highlights the plight of women, but seems to disregard the plight of women of colour. We might find that her remarks (which also mark the pathos of *The Hunger Games* franchise) are increasingly problematic when read in the context of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #OscarsSoWhite. Lawrence’s statements, and the overall pathos of *The Hunger Games*, invite us to imagine the plight of mostly white people, which was antithetical to the cultural moment in which the films are situated, as made apparent by the BLM movement. Yet *The Hunger Games* films are full of liberal imaginings of universalism and unanimism since they also draw on themes and motifs like civil disobedience,

insurgencies, and anxieties about unbridled domestic police that have dominated public discussion mostly due to the BLM movement.

In Chapter Three, I expand on an examination of labor, work, and capitalism to better understand how *capitalism* itself has been represented in the genre. Although a major theme in *The Hunger Games*, and many other YA dystopian films, is a scathing indictment of the authoritarian state, the more frightening dynamic of capitalism often seems to elude a more politicized critique. However, *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* is not marred by this omission. In fact, the film is bursting with monstrous metaphors of the alienating, and deadly tendencies of vampire capital. As McNally (2012) reminds us, “capitalism is both monstrous and magical” (p. 114). Its magic resides in the ways that it obscures the transaction between human bodies and capital. Veiled by magic-caps and deprived of a palpable reality, its monstrosity manifests in the pale, distorted images of vampirism and zombies” (p. 114), both of which haunt and lurk through *The Scorch Trials*. As such, I argue that *Scorch Trials* is a YA dystopian zombie film that invites us to imagine the apocalyptic nightmare of the free market economy. In the film, a group of young people are relentlessly pursued by “capitalist monsters” (Newitz, 2012). These monsters take the shape of WCKD, an evil post-democratic, post-state corporation; mad doctors obsessed with the work of experimenting on and “harvesting” bodies of young people; and zombies that transmit infection, devour and consume. In short, the central antagonisms in the film are Marxist allegories for capitalism. When read contextually, the film is important for how it transcodes cultural anxieties concerning neoliberal capitalism.

It is no coincidence that the film gained popularity shortly after seismic social movements like Occupy, the Arab Spring and the Maple Spring which sought to draw attention to widespread wealth inequality and what Giroux (2013) calls “neoliberal terror” (p. 515). At the time of the release of the film, not only were young people and post-secondary students in Canada and the U.S. haunted by billions of dollars in student debt (Tenser, 2014), they were also witnessing global dominance of neoliberal terror and corporate hegemony with the Trans-Pacific Partnership international trade agreement. Shortly after the release of the film, anti-corporate activism was quickly becoming mainstream. For example, actress Shailene Woodley, famous her for role as Tris Prior in *The Divergent Series*, was actively participating in the #NoDAPL protest to remind us that corporations continue to have a dangerous amount of political influence in our society. Yet, corporate influence and neoliberal politics were not the only phenomena being critiqued by the #NoDAPL movement. In addition, what the Indigenous-led movement also drew our attention to is the continuance of settler colonialism in North America and how settler colonialism is (not) represented in commercial media.

The manner in which media culture works to represent the persistence of colonialism is what informed my analysis of *The 100* in the final chapter of this thesis. In the final chapter, I use Ono’s (2009) notion of “neocolonialism” to examine the ways that settler colonialism is reimagined, reconfigured, revised and put on display in the YA dystopian television series, *The 100*. What is most interesting about the series is the way in which it unabashedly, and unapologetically remixes North American Settler Colonialism in unique and innovative ways. In the series, a group of multiracial young people are hurled down to the earth from a mothership, and are forced to perform

colonial labour and establish a new settlement. When they reach the ground, however, they find the new frontier that they imagined from their mothership is inhabited by indigenous folk. As a result, the series aggressively works to frame the colonist as “good” and the Natives as “bad” through the use of lighting, dialogue, camera angles, and casting choices. Since the series is sprinkled with a colourful, multiracial cast, it also works to aggressively displace binarized notions of race. Yet in order to imagine Manichean colonial distinctions of good and evil that narrative relies on, the series manages to produce new and innovative modes of representing racial difference. The series, therefore, can be contextualized within the neoliberal paradigm of racial logic and “The Great Forgetting” of North American colonialism.

### **Reflexivity**

I recognize that although I have been extensively involved with young people due to my work as a teacher in a public-school system, I cannot speak on behalf of the young folk with whom I regularly conversed. However, my teaching work has allowed me to recognize that this study is quite timely and still very relevant since young people continue to engage with the media that I have studied thus far. In fact, it is quite common for “Hunger Games” or “Maze Runner” units to be taught in primary school classrooms, where reading the book is followed by a viewing of the films.

## **Limitations**

Perhaps the most pressing limitation to this study lies in the poststructuralist epistemological lenses which it uses. Although the various discourses read in this study are my interpretation, they are not authoritative or absolute, but are rather one of several potential readings of the text under analysis. Cultural studies theorists often refer to the various meaning that can be found in a text as “polysemy”, which is a technical word for a way in which a signifier can have more than one meaning (During, 2007, p. 6). In addition, since we are still relatively close to the culture apex at which YA dystopian films were popular, the meaning produced by the films may shift and change with political climate as their popularity gradually subsides (the research and writing for this thesis began in the fall of 2015, four months before the December 2015 release of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 2*, and will conclude just under a year before the release of *The Maze Runner: The Death Cure*).

## **Contributions and Future Research**

Where other dystopian media, like the cyberpunk series *Altered Carbon* (2018), provides a visual landscape for analyzing the integral parts of race like nation and class, some fiction does not provide the same opportunity. As individual artifacts, YA dystopian films are rich with insights, observations, and critiques. However, unlike cyberpunk fiction, as a genre, YA dystopian media lacks clean parameters by which the genre can be socially contextualized. From reading this thesis, and viewing the films, one



might ask what exactly does the genre want us to contemplate? The dictates of big government? The potential threat of indigenous natives? Or the inevitable end of capitalism? As a result of the hodgepodge critiques offered by the genre, it produced distinctly different, yet complementary media that seemed to touch on various cultural phenomena. How interesting that the genre intersects with the waning years of the Obama administration, the rebound from the financial crash of 2008, the emergence of movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy, #NoDAPL, a surge in American white supremacist nationalism, and the reign of now President Donald Trump. That the genre was relatively unable to develop standard characteristic and politicized motifs suggests that YA dystopian media exists in quite a turbulent political era, one that was incredibly tumultuous for race relations in the U.S.

By engaging with existing scholarly literature on media and popular culture, this thesis has made critical race theory and neoliberal politics the thread which connects films in the genre. By drawing on a wealth of tools throughout much of this thesis, I have suggested how racial politics, neoliberalism, and colonialism have been a dark horse that lingers in the background of many of these properties, ideologically coding the text. In doing so, I have illustrated how YA dystopian media has engaged with the zeitgeist buzz in the political lexicon. By reading these films within the “Great Awakening” of popular culture, and offering critiques of historical and contemporary racism that emerge in media culture, this study contributes to the field of contextual cultural studies by engaging in the commitment to understanding how the popular functions in the culture, and working to develop strategies which study and deconstruct to help foster political activism that can

have material effects in our yet undetermined future. An undetermined future that continues to be explored with new emerging media culture and sf stories.

The resurgence of cyberpunk dystopia media like the *Altered Carbon* (2018) Netflix adaptation, for instance, invites a much-needed discussion about race, colonialism, neoliberalism, and global capitalism, and thus serves as an appropriate end to this thesis. In the series, set 250 years in the future, human consciousness has the capabilities to be transmitted or “resleeved” via biotech called “cortical stacks”. Because consciousness exists in the “stacks”, bodies or “sleeves” are shells that can be traded, replaced, bought, and sold. In effect, immortality becomes a possibility for titans of industry and the ruling class that can afford it while the poor die or are forced to occupy the available reserve sleeves. Borrowing unapologetically from the neon imagery and noir cynicism found in *Blade Runner* (1982, 2017), and the post-human tech found in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995, 2017), *Altered Carbon* offers interesting mediation on the ethics of technology, transhumanism, artificial intelligence, simulacra, and the collapse of boundaries which differentiate binaries like age, sex, gender, and race.

The series follows Takeshi Kovacs (Will Yun Lee), a freedom fighter (dubbed “terrorist”) turned detective who has been “resleeved” (in actor Joel Kinnaman’s body) to investigate the death of the richest man on earth. While some critics of the series have drawn attention to how *Altered Carbon* conforms to the crisis of whitewashing Asian characters in Hollywood (Truffaut-Wong, 2018), I would argue that the series also challenges the semiotic association of imagery, skin colour, and racial logic. On one hand, *Altered Carbon* invites us to consider the ways in which technology may trouble the center of our conceptualization of race, sometimes inverting racial hierarchies (the

final episode of the series was not shy of using themes of Afrofuturism to illustrate this point). On the other hand, however, it continues to operationalize the trope of preserving and prioritizing whiteness. This is especially noticeable in a cringe worthy scene in episode seven, “Nora Inu”, when Kovach is on his death bed, begging his sister to “Save the [white man’s] sleeve”. What is interesting about *Altered Carbon* is how the series unfolds over a broader, layered narrative of colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalist exploitation. While we watch Kovach proceed with his investigation, throughout the series, we are also encouraged to consider other questions like how could tech-driven colonial hegemony foster new forms of domination? At which point does a freedom fighter become a terrorist? And to what extent does continuing with the capitalist status quo outweigh the benefits of an alternative? In short, *Altered Carbon*, and much other cyberpunk fiction, is both deep and broad.

Whichever critique one may choose to pursue and whichever media artifact one may choose to examine, we can say that popular culture like YA dystopian cinema and cyberpunk fiction is not always didactic, meaning they do not try to teach us or tell us what to think. Instead, films *The Hunger Games*, and *The Maze Runner: The Scorch Trails*, and series like *The 100* and *Altered Carbon* engender discussions, and maybe even emotive responses, about possibilities regarding race, sexuality, gender, and identity. Although Truffaut-Wong (2018) and other criticisms of the *Altered Carbon* are alluring, criticisms that rely solely on critical racial theory are in danger of limiting their emancipatory potential. As Ono (2009) suggests “an argument purely based on a theory of race has less explanatory potential than a theory that recognizes the significance of colonialism, in which race is understood to be an integral factor that includes gender,

sexuality, class, and nation” (p. 144). In closing, I offer the analysis in the thesis across a series of texts as a possible tool to foster understanding and alternative perspectives, and to help imagine and shepherd a future that will not follow the path towards a dystopian horizon.

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