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Government and Power in Young Adult Dystopias

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Abstract

Dystopian fiction first appeared as a literary genre in the 1870s and has since been known to conduct social criticism of the real world in a futuristic, fictive form. As it has evolved during the 20th century it has grown into a widely researched topic. In this essay I will analyze two young adult dystopian novels: Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) and Marie Lu's *Legend* (2011). I have chosen to focus my work on four common themes in dystopian literature: government, propaganda, technology, and the suppression of individualism. I have looked at similarities between the two novels to see whether there are detectable patterns connecting them. Furthermore, I investigate whether these novels relate to, or criticize, events in the real world. I also wish to find out what triggered the rise in popularity that young adult dystopian fiction experienced during the late 2000s to early 2010s. I conclude that the novels treat many issues and topics that relate to the real world, and that they quite clearly are based on the social and political climate in the United States during the time they were written.

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Introduction

The genre of dystopian fiction is, from a historical standpoint, relatively new. Dystopian fiction conducts social criticism through depicting imaginary future societies where our actions in the present, real world, have caused negative outcomes. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *1984* (1948) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), are three of our most famous dystopian novels. They all have in common that they criticize issues in society during the time they were written. They bring to light fears and worries of, for example, new technology ending up in the wrong hands, state censorship, freedom, and the use of propaganda.

More recent dystopian literature maintains the same methods of reflecting issues of the real world in fictive societies, and the genre has grown noticeably during the past thirty years. In my thesis I will focus on government and power in two dystopian novels within the category of young adult, also labeled YA, fiction. *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins and *Legend* (2011) by Marie Lu both depict dystopian worlds where totalitarian governments rule over unequal and hierarchal societies. Both novels are written by American authors and take place in the Unites States. Therefore, this paper will be limited to issues relating to the United States, also labeled the US. *The Hunger Games* and *Legend* were published after the 9/11 terror attacks. They were only two novels in a wave of YA dystopian literature that appeared during the late 2000s. During this time the financial crisis starting in 2008 had begun alongside a national housing crisis, as well as the Iraq war. These events present the opportunity to explore whether the two novels were influenced by what happened in the world while they were being written. Furthermore, with *Legend* and *The Hunger Games* having been published so close to each other, I wish to find out if there are recurring patterns or similarities in the two novels.

The Hunger Games is about a girl named Katniss living in a future totalitarian society called Panem, once the US. Panem is divided into numbered districts that are segregated from each other by economic wealth and natural resources. For example, District 12 is very poor and known for coal mining, while District 2 is wealthy and manufactures weapons for the elite population in the Capitol. The Capitol is separated from the districts because they won a civil war that turned the former US into Panem. Panem is ruled by a president who maintains peace in the country through a gladiator-like game where teenagers from the districts fight to the death. *Legend* is about two teenagers, Day and June, who live on opposite sides of a segregated society called The Republic. The Republic is ruled by a militant totalitarian

government who control its population by dividing it into sectors based on wealth. The Republic is at war with an enemy they call the Colonies, and the Republic uses the war as propaganda to frighten its population. Teenagers in the Republic go through a trial which determines what position they will have in society. They either score high and join the upper class of society or score low and end up on the opposite side of the economic spectrum. *Legend* follows two protagonists: June, whose brother is murdered, and Day, who is being charged with the crime. The authors of *The Hunger Games* and *Legend*, Suzanne Collins and Marie Lu, have both expressed in interviews how the newsfeed and national politics inspired their writing of the novels ("Suzanne Collins Talks"; "Marie Lu Talks Legend").

Previous research on power and government in dystopian literature is wide, and there are many scholars who have discussed the reasons why this genre has gained so much popularity, and the effect it has had on its audience. Adam Stock, in his introduction to *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought*, suggests that "[d]ystopian fiction has become a point of reference for discussions about governance, popular culture, international relations, security, racial discrimination, policing, environmental concerns and much more" (Introduction). He claims that while the genre does not necessarily attempt to predict the future, dystopian fiction reflects events and issues that existed in society at the time it was written. Keith Booker, another scholar on the topic, agrees and says that "the treatment of imaginary societies in […] dystopian fiction is always highly relevant directly to specific 'realworld' societies and issues" (19). Another scholar and philosopher that I have chosen to include in this essay is Hannah Ahrendt, who, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* discusses totalitarianism during the 20th century, with a focus on Nazism and Stalinism surrounding the two World Wars.

My aim with this paper is to further strengthen the discourse on the importance of, and meaning behind, power and government in YA dystopian novels. I also wish to look at the reasons why dystopian fiction for young adults became so popular so quickly. Additionally, I want to explore whether real world events, both social and political, played a role in how the novels were written, as well as received, by their audience. This entails mapping out the genre of dystopia, as well as the real-world events that occurred around the time of publication of *Legend* and *The Hunger Games.* I will proceed to investigate the two texts by focusing on four key elements: government, propaganda, technological control, and the oppression of individualism.

Dystopia as a Genre

The Latin word *utopia*, a play on Ancient Greek words, means "no place" or "good place" (Gordin et al. 1). In *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the concept is defined as "[a]n imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state [..] in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics". Utopia first appeared in literature in Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516. Keith Booker claims that More wrote about the concept of utopia as a response to "a time of great social and political change and turmoil" (*Dystopian Impulse* 14), and that the text is a suggestion of improvement in society, as well as a portrayal of the possible results.

Dystopia, or "bad utopia" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), separates itself from utopia and contrasts the ideal future with worlds that imagine the worst possible outcome for society. Keith Booker defines the genre as "specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism" (*Theory and Research* 3). He continues to explain how, while utopian thought may be seen as picturing an ideal version of society, dystopia is a form of social criticism pictured in a disintegrated future. Furthermore, he suggests that dystopia is a response to current social circumstances, meaning that dystopian literature acts as both a critique against, and a response to, issues in the real world (*Theory and Research* 3, 4).

Dystopian literature can be found as early as the 1870s (Claeys ch.5), but the novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1924), seems to have been instrumental in establishing the genre as we know it today. *We* criticizes the rule during the Russian Revolution in 1917-1923, as well as the threat of new technology (Booker, 26). Although Zamyatin can be viewed as one of the forefathers of dystopia (Clayes ch.5), the works which most would recognize as classic dystopias are novels such as the previously mentioned *Brave New World*, *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Most importantly, these works are known to respond to and criticize the social climate in the world at the time they were written. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), responds to the consequences of the Great Depression and the polarizing politic climate that emerged between the two world wars (Stock 84). George Orwell's *1984* (1948), written after World War II responds to the fear of the totalitarianism that had been witnessed in the Soviet Union and Germany. According to Booker, "*1984* takes its energy from the ability to look back on the worst horrors of the Stalin years – with a side glance at Hitler as well" (*Dystopian Impulse* 69). *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), by Ray Bradbury, focuses on

government using censorship through destroying all literature. In doing so, the novel questions what those with the most power can take what they want from the people "do not challenge the culture and ideology that are spoon-fed to them by the powers that be" (*Dystopian Impulse* 106). These novels exemplify how dystopian literature, historically, has acted as a conduit for expressing social criticism, as well as expressing the fears and worries of the authors.

While the genre of dystopian fiction has been a recognized genre for almost a hundred years, there was very little dystopian literature within the category of YA before the 1990s. The first well-known YA dystopian novel is Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993). In the late 2000s and continuing into the 2010s, a large amount of YA dystopian novels were published which resulted in a rise in popularity for the genre (Basu et. al. 2-3). *Mortal Engines*, by Philip Reeve, was published in 2001 and was followed by series such as Scott Westerfield's *Uglies* (2005) and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008). In fact, Basu et. al. mention how *The Hunger Games*, published in 2008, was instrumental in ensuring the status of YA dystopian literature (1). The wave of YA dystopia continued into the 2010s with works such as Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010), Marie Lu's *Legend* (2011) and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011). These novels continued to maintain the social criticism that already existed for adult audiences, but with a tone adapted to a younger audience.

Basu et. al suggest that "[w]hen directed at young readers, who are trying to understand the world and their place in it, these dystopian warnings are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots" (1). They continue to suggest that while these novels "unflinchingly engage with the problems of adolescents, they are nonetheless tied to the broader tradition of children's literature, which stresses hope" (2). Furthermore, they say that conformity and world events such as wars and disease are common in YA dystopias (3). According to Kay Sambell, a frequent pattern in YA dystopias is the adult as the suppressor and the young protagonist as the powerless victim (250). She also says that the death of children or teens, not including the protagonist(s), adds the effect of adult power in YA dystopian novels.

In conclusion, dystopian literature for young adults is a genre that has evolved from the initial utopian dream into one that criticizes society through depicting an obscure future where the world is worse off than it was at the time the novel was written. The genre eventually entered the category of fiction aimed toward young adults which meant adjusting itself to a younger audience.

Government

The way governments exercise power is commonly criticized in YA dystopias, and governments often play the role of the main oppressor in creating unfair and unjust conditions for the protagonist(s). The protagonist is most often positioned as the underdog who must fight for its individual rights in society. Schlozman, in analyzing the psychological impact of dystopian fiction for young adults, claims that "[t]he key adolescent task of identity formation is threatened by the totalitarian rules and definitions that govern the social landscape of dystopian stories" (40). Furthermore, he suggests that one of the reasons that teenagers are attracted to dystopian fiction is because the protagonists in the novels fight for the freedom that adults will not allow teenagers to have in the real world (39). Being a teenager is, after all, not being an adult but somewhere in-between childhood and adulthood. Thus, it makes sense that part of the allure of these stories is how the protagonist is portrayed as an unfairly treated individual who rebels against adult authorities.

Kay Sambell, when discussing YA dystopia and science fiction, suggests that authors within these genres "pull no punches in depicting brutally enforced inequality, horrifying violence and the systematic dismantling of individual rights in their future worlds" (248). She supports what Stock says about how the dystopian genre portrays the future through depicting possible future scenarios worse than the present and says that this also applies to YA fiction (249). Hence, it would be safe to assert that government in YA dystopias act as a reflection of how fragile human rights and social hierarchies can be. Sambell enforces this through saying that these novels "teach by negative examples", in how they invoke fear through depicting worse, yet recognizable and reality-based societies (248). Hannah Ahrendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* claims that "[t]he aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any" (468). In being applied to YA dystopias, this would mean that the totalitarian governments do not necessarily aim to win over the opinions of the people, but to eliminate the opportunity for other opinions to exist. Ahrendt continues to propose that totalitarian organizations are "designed to translate the propaganda lies of the movement [..] into a functioning reality, to build up [..] a society whose members act and react according to the rules of a fictitious world" (364). This correlates with how dystopian totalitarian governments are structured and portrayed.

As has been previously mentioned, dystopian fiction reflects world events that were current at the time they were written. When *The Hunger Games* was released in 2008, the US was already involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan war, which affected the people's trust in

government. In polls conducted by Pew Research Center, asking about the level of trust that US citizens' have in their government, the results showed that "[s]ince 2007, the share saying they can trust the government always or most of the time has not surpassed 30%". The polls also show that in 2008, the year that *The Hunger Games* was published, public trust in Government was at 24%. In 2011 when *Legend* was published, trust in government was down to 17%. In his book on the *The Hunger Games*, Tom Henthorne suggests that the reason the novel received such popular response was due to the time it was published:

> The mood of the time shaped its reception; the book's biting irony matched the mood of the times as a population, which was already weary of the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and suspicious of its political leaders, faced a very real prospect of economic ruin. (1)

With economic ruin, Henthorne is alluding to the Great Recession that started in 2007-2008 and lasted into the 2010s (Weinberg), and the Iraq war that ended in 2011 ("The Iraq War"). It can then be suggested that the political events that occurred when *The Hunger Games* came out are reflected in how politics are portrayed in the novel.

In *The Hunger Games* the fact that Panem is ruled by a totalitarian government is clear. The Capitol is home to the government and the elite, while the districts are home to the rest of the population. Katniss describes the Capitol as a place with "oddly dressed people [..] who have never missed a meal". In contrast she describes District 12 as a place with "black cinder streets" and people who have "stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails and the lines of their sunken faces" (4). While District 12 has its own upper class of merchants, most people who live there are poor. Katniss describes it as a place where people are starving and therefore, she must provide for her family through illegal hunting, selling the game she has caught on the black market (6-7). These examples show how segregated society in the districts is and how inequality plays a big role in how Katniss' life stands in stark contrast to the lives of the people in the Capitol. Furthermore, segregation does not only exist between the districts and the Capitol. The people of the districts are not allowed to travel to other districts (47), which is yet another way that the Government can control the population, as well as the information people have access to.

The Hunger Games is perhaps the largest display of governmental power in *The Hunger Games*. Hosted annually, it is the perfect tool for the government to incapacitate the population without facing backlash. The Games are the main consequence of a rebellion that the people of the districts once started, and lost, against the Capitol. The Games exist to remind the districts of how powerless they are, as they are forced to watch the Capitol kill

their children. The reaping is the event where the names of the children, one female and one male, who will become tributes, or participants, of the Hunger Games are drafted (3). At the reaping, the mayor of District 12 gives some historical background to the Games:

> The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated, it gave us the Hunger Games. [..] In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. [..] Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. (21)

The fact that the treaty contains the word "treason" can be seen as a reminder to the districts that they are the ones who did wrong and therefore must sacrifice their children as punishment. Katniss expresses it clearly in saying that "[w]hatever words they use, the real message is clear. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every one of you'" (19). This certainly agrees with Ahrendt's argument about how totalitarian movements eliminate any opportunity for the people to oppose to the government's ideas, rather than attempt to include and convince them they are correct (468). The Capitol already has the Games and the money, and therefore there is no need for gaining the approval of the districts.

In *Legend*, similar elements of segregation and economic inequality are central to the plot as in *The Hunger Games.* Instead of depicting a whole nation, the setting of *Legend* is limited to Los Angeles. The government, as well as the wealthy and powerful, live in sectors segregated from the ones where the poor live. The wealthy get vaccines against the plagues that invade the city, while the poor cannot afford them (161). Medical assistance is free for the rich but must be paid for by the poor (25). While this form of segregation is slightly different from the division of the districts and the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*, it succeeds in separating the elite from the poor and helps the government maintain power through keeping the main population powerless. Furthermore, this form of segregation manages to define the clear divide between the totalitarian, militant government and those who live outside the governmental organization.

What is particularly interesting with *Legend* is how the reader is shown two different sides of the Republic. The first protagonist, June, is born wealthy and is a close ally to the Republic. She scored highest possible in her Trial and is a so-called prodigy training to be in the military (11). She starts out seemingly oblivious to the issues that affect the rest of the population. The other protagonist, Day, is poor and struggles to provide for his family. He supposedly failed his Trial and was supposed to be sent to the Republic's labor camps (7).

These labor camps, however, are a façade and the Republic kills those who fail their Trials. Day resents the government and rebels through committing petty crimes. As the novel progresses June discovers how unequal the society she idolizes is. She realizes, for example, that not having access to food is an issue outside of the wealthy sectors: "I'd left a giant steak untouched on my plate, without a second thought" (124). The two protagonists being opposites of, and pitted against, each other gives the reader a clear perception of how unequal society in the Republic is.

The Trial further enforces how segregated society is. The scores you get decide whether you get access to education, at what level, and what profession you will join. When you do fail, you go to labor camps to work and never return (7). This does not seem like a fair trial where everyone is given the same odds, and it resembles how the poor districts in *The Hunger Games* have worse odds in the Games than those from the wealthy districts. Furthermore, the government recorded Day's Trial as a failure, which should have sent him to the labor camps (7). Instead, the Government conducted tests on him and then murdered him, or so they thought. This is another display of the Government's power and disregard for its population, and confirms what Sambell suggests: that dystopian novels display violence and show how human rights are disregarded by those in power (248).

Propaganda

Another important element in YA dystopias is propaganda. It presents itself as an extension of how the oppressive government enforces its ideas. Whether propaganda is being presented in the form of technology or through laws and rules, it is a tool that the government uses to indoctrinate the population into their own beliefs. According to Ahrendt, "[p]ropaganda [..] is one, and possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with the nontotalitarian world; terror, on the contrary, is the very essence of its form of government" (344). While neither *Legend* nor *The Hunger Games* deal with the nontotalitarian world, this claim is relevant where propaganda may be said to act as the façade of totalitarianism and terror as its enforcer. If this is the case, then terror is essential to a functioning totalitarian government. Furthermore, Ahrendt argues against the idea that propaganda and violence are equivalent to each other (341), claiming that where control is already established, the government can replace propaganda with brainwashing, rather than violence (364). Approval of propaganda from those already supporting the totalitarian movement, she suggests, matters

more than the indoctrination of those opposed to the totalitarian movement. Perhaps this is due to the government requiring supporters to maintain its power over the population.

As previously mentioned, dystopian fiction is often a form of social criticism of events in the real world. The propaganda that was used during the late 2000s and early 2010s by US political parties is particularly apparent in relation to the dystopian genre. After the 9/11 terror attacks, the war on Iraq became a widely debated topic. George Bush publicly declared "A war on terror" (George W. Bush Library), following the attacks and implemented The Patriot Act as a justification to continue fighting in the war. Furthermore, patriotism may be viewed as evidence of the effect propaganda has on the population. According to a survey made in 2016 asking citizens of nineteen countries to answer whether they live in "the best country in the world" (France. et. al), the US was the highest-ranking country (3). Further strengthening the use of propaganda in the US is another survey investigating freedom, executed by the Human Freedom Index 2020 (Vazquez and McMahon 4). The US did not rank in the top ten countries with the most freedom, which suggests that the perspective US citizens have on freedom is different, compared to other countries in the world. While the Human Freedom Index survey is more recent, and not executed during the time *Legend* and *The Hunger Games* were written, I would argue that it still manages to convey that the mentality of US citizens is, and has been, strongly impacted by both patriotism and propaganda.

In *The Hunger Games,* propaganda is most evident when viewing the Games as a conduit for government propaganda. The districts are expected to treat the Games as a holiday and something to be grateful for, but the mood of the people is described by Katniss as grim (21, 19). Even though the people in the districts are losing their children to the Games, they are supposed to treat it as a celebration (12). Before the reaping starts, the mayor says that "It is both a time for repentance and a time for thanks" (22), indicating that the people of District 12 should view it as a mild punishment that they deserve for starting the previous rebellion. If the Hunger Games function as propaganda in invoking fear and respect from the districts, it seems to have the opposite purpose in the Capitol. The Capitol citizens seem completely unaware of the problematics of the event, as they celebrate and place bets on the tributes (65, 81). This becomes interesting considering what Ahrendt writes about how the dynamic between those within the totalitarian movement is different from those who are on the outside. In *The Hunger Games,* it matters more to the Capitol that its citizens are happy than it does that the districts are suffering.

When it comes to knowing what the people of the Capitol are like, there is limited representation of characters in *The Hunger Games*. Effie Trinkett, the District 12 escort and representant from the Capitol, who will take the tributes to the Capitol, is the most prominent example. During the reaping, Effie exudes an ignorance and an air of being oblivious to the problematic reasons behind the Games (22). She also expresses a childlike excitement for the Games that is put in stark contrast to the serious mood of the people in District 12. Effie, in contrast to Katniss' grim attitude towards the Games, uses the expression "Happy Hunger Games!" (22-23), and when Katniss volunteers as tribute in the place of her sister, Effie's reaction is "Lovely!" (26). Effie becomes the main representation in *The Hunger Games* of what citizens from the Capitol are like and how they view the Games. Hence, looking at Effie's character, the Capitol seems successful in convincing its own citizens that the Games is something positive while it also succeeds in using the Games as a threat to retain power in the districts. The whole idea behind the Games is to instill fear in the opposition and simultaneously keep the faith of those within the movement, i.e., the people in the Capitol. This correlates with what Ahrendt suggests: that propaganda has the most purpose within the totalitarian movement, and not to those who do not agree with it (364).

In *Legend*, the most important role that propaganda has is how it affects one of the protagonists, June. She firmly believes in everything the government tells her and is convinced that the Republic's cause is righteous. She thinks that the Republic is on the winning side of the war against the Colonies (13). She is also quick to believe anything her commander in the Republic tells her, for example, that Day murdered her brother (46). June hears things that seem reasonable to doubt, but she has been indoctrinated into the ideology of the Republic to a point where she would never doubt what they tell her. Another example of propaganda in *Legend* is when June watches as her commander interrogates a Colony spy for information. He says, about the Republic, "You kill your own people and torture those who used to be your brothers?" (91). As a reader it is easy to connect this to the real world where the US is one nation, and not the Republic fighting the Colonies. June's reaction is that she thinks it is a stupid idea that the Colonies would claim they were once on the same side, and blames his outburst on the Colonies being on the losing side of the war. In conclusion, June has been successfully brainwashed by the Republic's propaganda while being raised within the totalitarian movement that they are.

Once a day in *Legend*, the JumboTrons, which are image and sound displays that are placed around the city, pause their ads and propaganda announcements for the pledge of allegiance: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the great Republic of America, to our Elector

Primo, to our glorious states, to unity against the Colonies, to our impending victory!" (67). This is an uncanny hint to the US Pledge of Allegiance, which says "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" (Britannica). Furthermore, it operates as a reminder to the reader that the Republic is, in fact, a fictive version of the US.

Marie Lu said in an interview with the literary website Bookyurt about the conflict between the Republic and the Colonies, that in the novel these are comparable with the dynamic between Republicans and Democrats in the US. She said that it originates "from what we're seeing in American politics today, where the polarization has gotten to the point where it's kind of ridiculous" ("Marie Lu Talks Legend"). This statement supports the idea that there is a connection between how the Republic is portrayed, as well as the previously mentioned statistics on patriotism in the US being present to the plot in *Legend*. Furthermore, in an interview published in the New York Times, Suzanne Collins' expresses similar influences in *The Hunger Games*, saying that she took inspiration watching footage from the Iraq War on television ("Suzanne Collins Talks"). Further supporting this, Paul Harris claims in an article in *The Guardian* that, during the 2008 US Elections, although both parties conducted negative campaigns against each other in media, "the Democratic attack machine is still far smaller than its Republican equivalent".

Technological Control

Neither *Legend* nor *The Hunger Games* are novels where technology plays a vital role to the plot. However, technology is an important part of establishing what kind of societies the novels take place in. Adam Stock claims that "In the postwar era, [Science Fiction] writers often criticized the failure of politics to keep pace with technological change" (231). In other words, Stock suggests that there is a discrepancy between the evolution of politics and technology within the genre. Because dystopias and science fiction novels mostly take place in the future, Stock claims, technology has advanced but politically society seems to have disintegrated. In agreement with Stock, Basu et. al. claim that "[d]ystopian fiction frequently imagines the consequences of new developments in science and technology, often evincing a profound unease over how biotechnology destabilizes conceptions of humanity and the boundaries of the human body" (12).

In his book *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*, Tom Henthorne analyses the meaning behind the trilogy, as well as what made it

appeal so much to its readers. In discussing the novel's belonging within the YA dystopian genre, Henthorne claims that *The Hunger Games* is "largely unconcerned with science and technology" (30). While technology as a concept is not necessarily prominent in the novel, I would suggest that it plays a large role overall. For example, it seems that not all people have access to electricity, according to Katniss who says, "Electricity in District 12 comes and goes, usually we only have it a few hours a day" (93). This is a big contrast to what she sees in the Capitol: "The Capitol twinkles like a vast field of fireflies" (93). This poses a strong example of how unequal the terms of living are in the two locations. Another aspect of technology in *The Hunger Games* is the access to information, where the citizens of the districts only seem to receive government broadcasts when it shows the Hunger Games or a message from the Capitol (51). Additionally, the fact that the districts cannot communicate between one another adds to the idea that technology also can be used as a weapon through simply limiting the populations access to it.

Weapons and vehicles are other ways technology is used to control the population. In *The Hunger Games* Katniss mentions how a tribute in a past Hunger Games was "stunned with electric guns" (120), and when the tributes die in the arena a hovercraft comes to retrieve them (191). When Katniss and Peeta stand on the roof of the training center, Katniss questions why they cannot simply jump off the roof instead of participating and dying in the Games. Peeta informs her that "Some kind of electric field throws you back on the roof" (93). Hence, the Capitol will not let the tributes exit the games in any way except while they are playing. Lastly, the tributes are fitted with trackers in their arms so the Capitol can keep track of them in the arena (167). This tracking technology, in other words, makes sure that the government knows exactly where the tributes are located and allows them further control over what happens to the tributes.

In *Legend*, much of the technological control is connected to its militant rule. The weapons the Republic uses, with electric shockwaves instead of bullets (4), signal a future technology that we don't have yet in the real world. Terms such as "electro-bomb" (1), suggest that most weapons technology is based on electricity in the Republic. Furthermore, just as in *The Hunger Games,* electricity in *Legend* is a tool for incapacitating the poor population. In a passage where Day is looking out over the city he says, "Electric lights shine from each floor—a luxury only government buildings and the elite's homes can afford" (23). Again, this distribution of electricity – a technology most readers would take for granted, is not available to all and instead distributed mainly to the wealthy.

When June goes out on her mission to find Day, she is wearing an earpiece for her friends in the Republic to be able to check in on, as well as listen to her. June also mentions twice, toward the end of the novel, how she throws away her gun because it has a tracking device (251, 285). Hence, while it is not frequently mentioned, we know that the Republic has a surveillance system in place for their citizens, much like the Capitol does in *The Hunger Games*. The Trial works in the same way: once a child has taken the Trial it is, as Day puts it, "on the Republic's grid" (55), i.e. registered and kept track of. Furthermore, the Republic not only tracks the major population of the city, but they track their own people with, for example, above mentioned trackers in guns. This suggests that the Republic, as a totalitarian government, trusts no one and sacrifices any weak link in the system. This is proved later when, through hacking the Republic's internet, June finds a message from her deceased brother revealing how the government killed their parents because they questioned the system (238). Eventually this leads her to the revelation that they also murdered her brother.

Lastly, in *Legend*, a lethal plague is ravishing the poor sectors of Los Angeles, appearing out of nowhere, infecting the poor, then disappearing just as quickly (2, 237). What June finds out through her brother's computer entries is that the Republic has taken viruses developed in cattle and planted them into the poor sectors of Los Angeles to experiment with and turn them into a biological weapon. Furthermore, June's brother suggests that the Republic uses the plague to sort out the weaker population who die (236-37). Meanwhile they use the Trials to control and keep track of the strong children who score high on the test and are useful to the Republic. These examples show not only how the government uses technology to exercise power over its people, but also how it disregards the part of Los Angeles' population that is viewed as less valuable to its purpose. The government sees the poor as more of a liability than an asset or part of society.

Individualism and Character Development

Identity plays a large role in YA dystopian literature. YA fiction characteristically focuses on a young protagonist who struggles to find his or her role in society. It often seems to be central to the plot that the protagonist belongs to a society where those in power have made sure that the individual is merely a part of a categorical system. Basu et. al. confirm this and suggests that individuality is a leading theme in YA dystopias, and that the protagonists often

fight to "retain individuality in a totalitarian world" (4). In agreement with Roberta Seelinger Trites arguments on power and repression in YA Realistic Fiction, Patricia Kennon says that:

> [..] power and powerlessness are integral to YA fiction's exploration of the construction of identity, and that this fiction commonly recognises that power can act as both a repressive and a productive force as filtered through protagonists' negotiation, resistance, and acceptance of various social and political patriarchal discourses. (41)

She continues saying that this can be applied to YA dystopias as well because of how they, too, engage with finding one's identity. Furthermore, Basu et. al. agree and suggest that while the protagonist struggles to find his or her identity, they also want to fit into society (8). Scholes and Ostenson focus on understanding why young adults are so attracted to the genre of dystopia and investigates recurring themes within several YA dystopian novels, claiming that "Most YA novels feature a protagonist who is faced with challenges, external or internal, and who must overcome those challenges as part of coming of age or establishing an identity" ("Understanding the Appeal").

While most seem to agree that the concept of finding one's identity is an important part of YA dystopian fiction, Basu et. al. suggest that "It is perhaps all the more unsettling to realize, then, that [..] the heroes of YA narratives tend to find not an individual identity but a collective one, defined mainly by membership in a particular group" (19). If this is true it becomes hard to define whether YA dystopian novels appeal to young adults due to exploring a search for identity, or if it presents a form of balance between finding one's own identity and finding a communal one. In her discussion of four YA dystopian novels, Patricia Kennon concludes that all four contain "[c]ompeting claims between personal individuality and communal identity" (42).

In *The Hunger Games*, the reader follows Katniss Everdeen as she evolves from a lonely girl who hunts in the woods to keep her family alive to turning into someone who rebels against the Capitol. In the beginning of the book Katniss is an introvert loner who only connects with her sister and her friend Gale. At one point, while her mentor is coaching her before an interview before the Games, he says that "when you open your mouth, you come across more as sullen and hostile" (135). Further evidence of her introversion is how she has a hard time trusting anyone but herself, even though there are people, such as Peeta, her mentor Haymitch and her stylist Cinna, championing and supporting her before and after the Games.

Katniss is continuously put through processes that aim to change or adapt her to what

the audience of the Games wish to see, without success. When she is prepped for the Games, she says she feels as if "My legs, arms, torso, underarms, and parts of my eyebrows have been stripped of the Muff, leaving me like a plucked bird, ready for roasting" (71). She continues to reluctantly express to her prep team that there is little opportunity to look nice in District 12. The one thing her stylists leave as it was before her transformation is Katniss' hairstyle, which can be claimed as central to her individuality: her braid. Towards the end of the novel, when the Hunger Games are over and Katniss is alone, she says, "As I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself" (432). This moment, in the very last chapter of the novel, seems to show how the braid has become the symbol of her individuality, and how braiding her hair turns her back into herself after the Games. It also enforces what was mentioned about YA dystopias by Scholes and Ostenson: that the protagonists in YA dystopias find their identities through the challenges they are faced with ("Understanding the Appeal").

What is significant about Katniss, however, is the small acts of rebellion that define her character. The first time she protests the Capitol is when the tributes are demonstrating their skills in front of the Gamemakers, the people who create and control the Games (117). When most of the Gamemakers' ignore her, she shoots an arrow at a roast pig that has caught their focus. Another act of rebellion which also shows Katniss' empathic side, is when she covers another tribute called Rue with flowers after she has been killed. When the events are aired on television after the Games, the Capitol omits the footage from airing. According to Katniss it is "Because even that smacks of rebellion" (424). The perhaps most significant act of rebellion in *The Hunger Games* is when Katniss refuses to sacrifice Peeta or herself for there to be one winner of the Games. Instead, she chooses to present two lethal berries that will kill them both if they ingest them (402). Thus, the Capitol is forced to accept them both as winners in order to keep the faith of the audience. This is not appreciated by the Capitol. When she has left the Games her mentor Haymitch says to her that she is in danger and that "Word is the Capitol's furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can't stand is being laughed at and they're the joke of Panem" (416).

In *Legend*, I would argue that what most prominently encourages finding an identity, is the dynamic between the two protagonists. The perfect example is how June scored highest possible in the Trial, while Day supposedly failed his (11, 6). It places them on opposite sides of society because the Republic is a place where a score in a trial defines you and sorts you into a certain category of people. Hence, in a place where identity is partly decided by a score in a trial, the cat and mouse game between June and Day, I would argue, is what defines them

as individuals. If June had not decided to track Day down to prosecute him for the murder of her brother (44-46), she would never have been given the opportunity to experience how the poor existed and seen the injustice of the Republic's rule. Furthermore, June would never have doubted the facts behind how her brother was murdered, had she not met Day (217). The consequence of this is that it creates a distrust with the organization she is already part of, and June for the first time forming her own opinions about the Republic. If Day had never met June, he would have remained unknowing that he never failed his Trial, but is a prodigy with a perfect score (194), and he would have never uncovered the reasons the Government used him as a test subject.

Opposite to what June represents in finding her identity and beginning to doubt the Republic, is the character Thomas who was a friend of her brother's. While June's character develops into a more independent and self-thinking individual, she discovers more and more how Thomas is the perfect example of a loyal soldier of the Republic. June reiterates this in saying that "Thomas has always been disciplined" (213), and "He didn't hesitate—not for a second—to obey our commander". In fact, June discovers how he murdered her brother on the orders of their commander (239). Towards the end he is ordered to kill June, and he attempts to go through with it (278). June says that "The Thomas that follows Commander Jameson's orders without question is a different Thomas from the one who worried about my safety in the Lake sector" (214), which illustrates how June's perspective has changed. Her character goes through the transformation of being a perfectly trained and dedicated soldier, to having learned the truth and seeing what things have really been like. I would suggest that without the blindly dedicated character of Thomas, June would have never changed her perspective on the Republic, nor would she have found her belonging with the rest of society.

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored how Marie Lu's *Legend* and Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games* portray government and power. I have investigated how the four elements of government, propaganda, technology, and individuality present themselves in both novels. I have tried to find out if real-world events that occurred around the time the novels were published are possible to detect. I found that YA dystopia's popularity increased during a time where the US experienced large-scale political events such as an economic crisis, the Iraq war, and an unstable national political climate. These events, in turn, are possible to connect to the topics that the novels present and discuss. The most prominent of these are

economic segregation, conflict, and totalitarian power. Although the novels are set in fictive worlds, while describing government and society, they make clear allusions to the real US. For example, the similarities between the pledge of allegiance in *Legend* and the real US pledge of allegiance were striking. I have also discovered how the search for identity, which is claimed to be a central theme to YA dystopias, is closely related to the search of finding a place in society. All three protagonists, while searching for their own identity, manage to also find either a person or a place where they belong.

I was surprised to find that in asking why the genre gained popularity at a certain point in time, and whether the novels were influenced by real-world events, I came to the same conclusion. Fiction that reacted to events in the real world, in turn rose in popularity due to their real-time relevance. While catering to a young audience by having young protagonists, and an air of adventure, *Legend* and *The Hunger Games* manage to maintain the classic trait of social criticism that is characteristic to dystopian literature. It is easy to dismiss literature created for younger audiences as less profound or meaningful, but my conclusion is that these novels could not be clearer in what the meaning is behind the messages they are trying to convey.

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