

The Way Forward:  
Ecofeminism and the Creation of Society in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: THE TESTING .....	9
2.1 Political Critique.....	11
2.2 Environmental Critique.....	17
2.3 Social Critique .....	21
Chapter 3: UGLIES.....	28
3.1 Political Critique.....	30
3.2 Environmental Critique.....	38
3.3 Social Critique .....	45
Chapter 4: THE HUNGER GAMES .....	52
4.1 Political Critique.....	53
4.2 Environmental Critique.....	59
4.3 Social Critique .....	66
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	73
Works Cited .....	72

## Abstract

This thesis uses an ecofeminist lens to analyze the patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies presented in Joelle Charbonneau's *The Testing* (2013), Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008). The female protagonists of each novel reject the ideologies purported by their society in favour of redefining their relationships with nature and each other to create more hopeful futures; this thesis aims to illustrate that the overarching plotline these novels share are implicit critiques of the structures of our current society. Each novel also critiques additional aspects of current: *The Testing* confronts access to education and idealization of the past, *Uglies* confronts the high-valuation of and preoccupation with beauty within our society, and *The Hunger Games* confronts socioeconomic inequality and the role of the media in our society.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The opening decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a slew of post-apocalyptic, female-driven narratives set in the remnants of a North America destroyed by catastrophic war, climate change, and greed. These novels feature societies that purport to have learned from the mistakes of the previous civilizations upon whose ruins they have built. However, the societies seem eerily similar to our own, facing issues such as gender, class, and economic inequality. The governments within these novels reflect a dichotomy well-established within the contemporary zeitgeist and ecofeminist critical theory that equates men with dominance and civilization and women with subservience and nature. Women, like nature, are meant to be overpowered and kept in their place by the dominant power; as such, the predominant societies of the novels are both patriarchal (male-centered and dominated) and anthropocentric (human-centered and dominated). The female protagonists of Joelle Charbonneau's *The Testing* (2013), Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2005), and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) all rebel against an oppressive society and work to destabilize patriarchal dominance in favour of a return to nature and smaller societies. As such, the radical message of these novels is that women, particularly young women, are the hope for the future.

Although these novels present a pastoral return-to-nature as an idealized way forward, and women the mechanism for bringing about that future, neither women nor nature are shown to conform to the idealized image touted by the patriarchal imagination. Instead, the women of these novels are represented as gritty survivors, pushed to the outskirts of society and forced to reckon with the environmental and societal havoc that anthropocentrism and political incompetence has wrought. As the continually oppressed

“underdogs,” these women and their relationship with nature disrupt the patriarchal, dominance-centered, consumerist narrative. However, rather than reinforcing the nonviolent, nurturing “mother-creator-of-life” narrative, these women’s relationships with nature centers them and all humans within the ecosystem. That is, the patriarchal idea of “the feminine” is neither rejected *in toto* nor adopted unquestioningly, but reframed and adapted to present an alternative to the previous patriarchal leadership; the revised conceptualisation of humans and femininity is both more wholistic and inclusive, defining femininity and masculinity as part of the human and humans as part of the environment. Moreover, while there are some instances where the women protagonists reject traditionally feminine qualities, preferring to fight for themselves and prove their capability, neither the domination nor extremist interpretations of masculinity typical of their oppressors are represented as required for power, leadership, or success.

While there is an abundance of research connecting ecofeminism and dystopian literature, little critical research has been conducted connecting these novels to this context, and almost no research has been done on *Uglies* or *The Testing*. This thesis situates and compares the worlds of these novels and the larger socio-political contexts in which they were published. Such contexts include increased climate awareness,<sup>1</sup> distrust in the government,<sup>2</sup> and fear that people will be the mechanisms of their own undoing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Andrew Revkin, climate awareness and concern has increased in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. For further reading, please see the 2001 Report on Climate Change (IPCC) and the articles by UN News, Coral Davenport, and Anthony Leiserowitz.

<sup>2</sup> The 2010 Report by the Pew Research Center “Distrust, Discontent, Anger and Partisan Rancor” found that Americans had become “less positive and more critical of government”. For further reading on increased distrust in the government, its leaders, and its institutions, please see refer to this report and the articles by McGrath, Grogan, and Heatherington and Ladd.

<sup>3</sup> As Val Plumwood writes, “while we remained trapped within this dominant narrative of heroic reason mastering blind nature there is little hope for us. For the narrative itself and its leading characters are a key part of the problem, leading us to reproduce continually the same elements of failure — including the

By reframing current sociopolitical issues within the future-situated, dystopian societies of the novels, *The Testing*, *Uglies*, and *The Hunger Games* illustrate that the underlying patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies that define present-day society are flawed and unsustainable. This critique is then further supported by comparing the dominant societies of the novels with those movements fought for by the female protagonists, which reject such ideologies in favour of creating a relationship with each other and nature based on mutual respect and benefit.<sup>4</sup>

The three novels covered in this thesis, *The Testing* (2013), *Uglies* (2005), and *The Hunger Games* (2008), were all published at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in America, a time and place that, though rife with innovation, technological advancement, and global wealth, also inherited the growing political insecurity, distrust of the government, climate crises, and fear from the previous century.<sup>5</sup> Dystopian literature provides room for readers to explore potential futures and reaffirms their individual power by way of a protagonist. In the first decade or so of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, novels emerged that mimicked the crumbling world, illuminating specific cultural issues in a digestible format – one that does not render the readers or characters completely helpless;

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arrogance and ecological blindness of the dominant culture — even while we seek desperately for solutions within it” (Environmental Culture 6).

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that each of these novels is the first book of a larger series, but the series as a whole are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper focuses on the world building aspects of the novels which are mostly developed in the first novel of each series. This thesis is also more concerned with illustrating that these novels are representative of current sociopolitical issues and the female protagonists representative of a more ethical way forward than illustrating how the women rebel. This is in part because as part of a series, these novels focus on informing the protagonists’ worldviews and setting up the characters to rebel than actually portraying their rebellion.

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on scientific and technological advancement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, please see the articles by Bennett and Greshko. For further reading on the increase in global wealth, please see the Global Wealth reports 2010-2020 (Shorrocks, et al.). For further reading on increased political and economic insecurity, please see the articles by Bailik, Jacobs, and Wroe. For scientific evidence of the climate crisis, please see NOAA’s Annual and Global Climate Report, Nunez, Herrington and Lindsey, and NASA’s Earth Science Communications Team. For more evidence of the growing fear in American, see Rothman, Sheth, and Strauss.

this type of fiction provides a form of catharsis as the issues are resolved throughout the novel and correspondingly assuages the readers' fears for their own world, or at least reassures them that there is hope for the future. All of the novels covered in this thesis follow the same broad plotline: in a North America broken by war, greed, and climate crisis, a young female protagonist is selected out of the general population and pushes back against the immoral government and the separation of humans and nature. While all of the novels deal with government corruption and fall into the above plotline, each also tackles a specific aspect of society that is presented as malevolent: *The Testing* confronts access to education and idealization of the past, *Uglies* confronts the high-valuation of and preoccupation with beauty within our society, and *The Hunger Games* confronts socioeconomic inequality and the role of the media in our society.

The hopeful message and streamlining of complex sociopolitical issues could give the impression that these novels are escapist fantasy – an anxiety-induced attempt to imagine a world where citizens, particularly young women, have the power to change systemic issues and bring justice to their oppressors; however, the novels are not naively optimistic. Instead, the novels are both pessimistic and optimistic: pessimistic in the sense that they present the current political system as irreparably flawed and corrupt, optimistic in that they present an alternative narrative which spurns the current state of passivity and despair in favor of redefining our relationship with each other and the environment. For example, by the end of *The Testing* series, The Testing is eliminated, but the conclusion is far from naïvely happy with the environment and people still devastated by war, and the country in the hands of the corrupt. As Cia, the protagonist, later states in *The Testing's* sequel, “the only way to be sure The Testing we had to survive never happens again is

not to trust our leaders. It is to be one of them” (Charbonneau *Graduation Day* 291). While it’s not a neat and tidy ending, *The Testing* provides hope that there are girls “who want[] to lead and help [their] country” and recognize that “there is so much still...to do” (*Graduation Day* 291). While the scope of this paper focuses on the first book of each series, *The Testing* series’ conclusion helps to illustrate that post-apocalyptic fiction, particularly its messy and unidealistic narratives, is necessary to imagine and create better futures. Such depictions of disaster are required not only to criticize issues within the current sociopolitical system, but also to provide “strategies for survival, resistance, and hope” (Stifjell 4) in times of change and struggle, both environmentally and anthropocentrically; as Ursula K. Le Guin states, “Science fiction...is a way of trying to explain what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of things” (154). *The Testing*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Uglies* do exactly this by reflecting and then overtly critiquing the current sociopolitical system and cultural relationship to the environment in favour of an alternative narrative of resistance.

For ecofeminists, the current environmental and sociopolitical crisis is merely a symptom of a larger flawed ideology – that of patriarchal dominance and anthropocentric arrogance: in the words of Val Plumwood, a noted ecofeminist critic, “much of the life-threatening crisis that confronts the world in the degradation of the earth’s environment can be traced to life-denying elements in the currently dominant...Western culture [which] historically has set the human above and outside...the sphere of

nature...encourag[ing] both insensitivity to the damage being done to the earth and the denial of the human species' vulnerability to this ecological damage" (97). The patriarchal ideology of the West relies on creating a "moral dualism" in order to support a "supremacism of nation, gender, and race" (Plumwood 105). This "Hyper-separation [defines] the dominant identity emphatically against or in opposition to the subordinated identity, by the exclusion of their real or supposed qualities" (Plumwood 103): "those taken to best exemplify reason, namely elite white males of European descent and culture" reinforce their superiority over the other by opposing "reason to nature, mind to body, emotional female to rational male, human to animal, and so on [with] progress [being] the progressive overcoming or control of this 'barbarian' non-human or semi-human sphere" (Plumwood 104). The danger of this ideology is that it necessitates the reduction of those othered by the dominant patriarchal identity to "mere...tools, or instruments for human needs and projects" (Plumwood 106). The "illusions of human superiority, and disembodiment" that this view breeds not only "enable [the dominant culture] to exploit nature with less constraint, but [] also creates dangerous illusions in denying embeddedness in and dependency on nature...[resulting] in the current reaction of denial of the ecological crisis and refusal to take action to deal with it" (Plumwood 98). The scientific and technological advancements of the past century only reinforce "delusions of invincibility" (Plumwood 103) via a "scientific fantasy of mastery" that rational man is "set apart and entitled to manipulate the earth for their own benefit" (Plumwood 99). Mary Mellor goes so far as to say that "the new capitalist world 'order'" has evolved into a "destructive and oppressive form of filiararchy," a "ruling oligarchy of 'sons', who, lacking even the sense of responsibility that one might associate with

patriarchal rule, continue to ‘play’ in the world of transcendence, blind to the ecological and social costs of their privilege” (qtd. in Rigby 72). However, such a definition overlooks the blatant efforts to ignore and undermine both the growing scientific research warning of the climate crisis and the calls for gender equality<sup>6</sup>. Whatever the term, the reality is that “a minority of the human race is able to live as if it [is] not embodied and embedded, as if it ha[s] no limits, because these limits are borne by others, including the earth itself” (Mellor 190). While humans aren’t invincible or able to miraculously outrun the negative effects of their ideology of dominance, their arrogance has, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, dominated and come to define the current geological epoch — what some scholars define as the Anthropocene (Crutzen). For the purposes of this thesis, the negative aspects of the dominant societies of the novels will be analyzed through an ecofeminist lens, tying them back to patriarchal dominance and anthropocentrism, to demonstrate that their failure is the result of their flawed relationship to both women and nature.

The ruling governments of all three novels are totalitarian, headed by a single authoritarian ruler who manipulates and controls the system to ensure complete submission of all considered lesser, including the general population, women, and nature. Like Western society, the governments are informed by traditional gender norms and therefore patriarchal. Throughout this thesis, dominance is considered symptomatic of the patriarchy. While dominance itself is not inherently masculine, patriarchal gender ideologies equate men with dominance and women, nature, and all things othered by the

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<sup>6</sup> The Global Gender Gap Report outlines the continued inequality between men and women (World Economic Forum. For more reading on the calls for gender equality, please see the articles by Kelan, North, Ochab, and USAID.

white male identity with submissiveness. In defining masculinity as diametrically opposite to femininity, and defining femininity as weak, submissive, and other, dominance becomes symptomatic of a toxic masculine identity. That is to say, patriarchal ideologies require governments and people to be excessively dominant to be considered masculine or powerful.<sup>7</sup> This thesis therefore considers dominance, and authoritarian leadership, as indicative of patriarchal ideology, even though dominance itself is not masculine. In connection with ecofeminist criticism, anthropocentrism and patriarchy are inextricably linked: in considering the white, dominant, male identity opposite to women, patriarchal gender norms inform a toxic dominance-based definition of masculinity which results in systemic subjugation of women and all that is equated with women or deemed other-than the masculine identity, namely nature. The structures and definitions of patriarchal dominance and hegemonic masculinity mutually reinforce each other. It should be noted that the governments within these novels are rarely, if ever, described as authoritarian, patriarchal, or anthropocentric; however, this thesis decodes the structures of the predominant governments and society to define them as such. That the societies within the novels are allegorical representations of present-day America and that all of the protagonists are teenage girls with redefined relationships to the earth is also an implicit suggestion that the undesirable structures are linked with misogyny, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism.

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<sup>7</sup> Smith et al. states that “men are expected to adhere to a strict set of prescribed masculine gender roles that work to promote male dominance through a subordination and overall distrust of femininity” (161). The “desire for dominance and power is central to hegemonic masculinity” (162) as power is deemed “the ideal form of masculinity that men are socialized to achieve” (161). Antifemininity, including “fear of traditional feminine values and behaviours (e.g. appearing weak or docile)” is “internalized as the basis for achieving dominance” (162). These hegemonic male gender norms therefore include “aggressive behaviours”, “restrictive emotionality, self-reliance through mechanical skills, negativity towards sexual minorities, avoidance of femininity, importance of sex, toughness, and dominance” (161).

## Chapter 2: THE TESTING

Charbonneau's *The Testing*, in addition to critiquing the climate crisis and corrupt, fear-inducing government brought about by patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies, critiques idealization of the past and controlled access to education. *The Testing* takes place in the United Commonwealth, a collection of eighteen colonies united after the planet was devastated and left desolate by the Seven Stages War. The series follows Cia Vale, a "young, determined, and civic-minded" youth "possessing extraordinary mechanical skills and impressive knowledge of the natural world" (Charbonneau back cover) who is selected to participate in The Testing: a series of tests administered to an elite few students, based on their academic performance, to determine those who will attend the University and become the future leaders of the Commonwealth. Candidates are not allowed to share their experiences or the process of The Testing with others, and, more ominously, individuals who pass have their memories wiped and are relocated from their communities to wherever the Commonwealth deems their individual skills necessary. After being selected, Cia is thrilled; however, her excitement is quickly muted by her father. Like Cia, her father was selected for The Testing. He passed, attended the University, and was relocated to the small Fives Lakes Colony, named after "what were once called the Great Lakes" (11), where he met Cia's mother and worked to improve the surrounding wasteland and its agricultural output. After she is selected, Cia's father tells her that he has recurring nightmares of his time in The Testing, dreams he fears are actually repressed memories. He warns her not to trust anyone and Cia soon realizes that this process may not be all it appears nor the government officials as benevolent as one would hope. Suddenly, the lengthy interval in

which no candidates from Five Lakes were selected no longer appears a coincidence, but rather an attempt by the leaders of the colony to protect their youth from *The Testing* and the United Commonwealth government.

In some ways, the mere idea of life after an apocalypse destabilizes anthropocentric thinking by illustrating that the end of human-life is not the end of life, and, moreover, shattering the illusion of human independence from nature by reaffirming our reliance on and relationship to our environment. The dominant narrative of human separation from nature leads to an illusion of power and invincibility; this is a dangerous assumption that promotes human passivity regarding the apocalypse through a false sense of superiority. Climate crises, whether natural or wrought by human negligence, are rendered unimportant in modernity because humans have become pacified by the dream of outrunning our dependency on nature through scientific intervention which either undermines or denies our codependency on nature.<sup>8</sup> Future-situated novels question this willingness to be mollified by illustrating that we cannot ‘outsmart’ climate crisis, or at the very least that we cannot continue to enjoy unsustainable modern conveniences under the egotistical assumption that we can and will invent technology as required to nullify the consequences of such a lifestyle. Such is the case in *The Testing*, in that, although humans brought about their own and planetary demise, presumably over an extended period of time since the war occurred in self-titled seven stages, they were unable to remedy the crisis, only learn to live in the resultant environment as best they could. Science and technology are still very much heralded as the solution to environmental

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<sup>8</sup> Plumwood outlines this logical fallacy, stating that “current environmental thinking” believes “it is reason intensified that will be our hero and saviour, in the form of more science, new technology, a still more unconstrained market, or all of these together” (*Environmental Culture* 6).

inhospitability, but there is also recognition that there are underlying systemic issues that need to be addressed in order to truly create a hopeful future that is conscientious and proactive rather than arrogant and reactive.

Contrastingly, recognizing human fallibility can also promote passivity, but through despair rather than a false sense of superiority. Instead of portraying the apocalypse as something sudden and final, narratives such as *The Testing* challenge this sense of desperation by occurring after ‘the’ life-altering event, showing life moving forward despite catastrophe. The dystopian environment that Cia lives in represents both hope and disaster: relating the urgency required to ensure that such a climate and sociopolitical emergency will not arise from systemic anthropocentrism whilst simultaneously providing reassurance that the end is not final, nor a sudden, unstoppable force. Novels like *The Testing* illustrate that a dystopian future is not fated if action is taken. Plumwood states that, in order to create a hopeful future, humans must create an ethic of partnership in which we resituate ourselves within the larger ecological framework and come to recognize the agency of the natural and non-human world (110). In other words, our narrative must become less anthropocentric with greater consideration of the environment, less dominating and more a “negotiation of mutual needs” (Plumwood 110). This type of ecofeminist criticism is crucial because it encourages a respect for nature while not minimizing human agency: just as we have negatively affected our environment, so too can we positively impact it, as Cia and her family have.

## 2.1 Political Critique

The history of the destruction of North America related in *The Testing* reflects fears that current ideologies reliant on denying ecological embodiment and on exploiting

and oppressing the feminine and environmental other are unsustainable and, if not rectified, will inevitably lead to societal collapse. Set in the not-too-distant future, sometime after the “late-twenty-first-century” (159), the United Commonwealth is a dystopia that overtly mimics and critiques the United States. The United Commonwealth was formed following the Seven Stages War, and Tosu City, “where the United Commonwealth government is based” (7), is located somewhere around, and probably based on, what is currently Tulsa, Oklahoma. The fall of the United States and the world as we currently know it is related periodically throughout the novel, sometimes in answers to the written portion of *The Testing* and sometimes via Cia’s responses to her environment. According to Cia, the Seven Stages of War consisted of “Four Stages of destruction that humans wrought on one another” (62) followed by “Three Stages in which the earth fought back” (63).

The First Stage of the War was prompted by “[t]he assassination of Prime Minister Chae, which fractured the Asian Alliance, sparked a power struggle among the other nations and a civil war...[in which] bombs were dropped on the Korean States, destroying most of the population and causing the meltdown of two nuclear reactors” (81). Following this, the “Mideastern Coalition” destroyed Washington, D.C., and Boston (81), the “South American Coalition” declared war on the “North American Coalition” (81), and “the state of California [was plunged] under water” (82). Chicago, “[t]he third city destroyed during the Fourth Stage of War”, was bombed without warning and, though the perpetrator was never confirmed, “the president and his advisers believed they knew [,]...struck back, and the world collapsed” (149). Significantly, the masculine pronoun “his” indicates that government leaders—those with power, deciding how to

respond to threats, and therefore responsible for the repercussions—are mostly men. Defining the male identity as being diametrically opposite to the female promotes a toxic masculinity that vilifies actions associated with femininity, such as compromise, compassion, or passivity, as weak; the patriarchal struggle for power between nations manifested in *The Testing*, therefore, illustrates that governments and societies that rely on domination are unsustainable and ensure mutual destruction.

While the population of the world was “[cut] to a fraction of what it was”(81), humans were not the only casualty of the first Four Stages of War: “biological weapons” transformed the once fertile earth into “flat, brittle land” (165), chemicals including a “bioengineered version of cyanide” and an unnamed poison “cooked up by the Asian Alliance that causes the cardiovascular system to overload” (176) contaminated all bodies of water (4, 155), while plants, animals and insects were mutated or killed (87) “by the same chemicals and radiation that laid waste to the earth” (204). Some bombs even “contained poisons with potencies that, unless physically counteracted, do not fade over time” (252) and left stretches of land so tainted that nothing can live there. The first Four Stages were followed by Three Stages of natural disasters, including “earthquakes, floods, [and] windstorms filled with radioactive air” (81). The Three Stages of natural disasters illustrate that the environment is not merely a passive other to be dominated. Moreover, the vulnerability of humans following the destruction of nature—that they themselves caused—illustrates the error in hyper-separating humans from nature and shatters “delusion[s] of invincibility” (Plumwood 103) created by defining humanity by their ability to dominate: entire technologies and ways of life were eliminated and people and the world were left “struggling to find their way back from the brink of destruction”

(81). By restricting their considerations to the human and denying the ecological embeddedness of humans, the government ensured the resultant mutual destruction of both the environment and humanity, thereby illustrating both humans' dependence on nature and the error of anthropocentric ideologies. That the destruction of the earth was wrought in an attempt to both dominate others and assert the masculine strength (as opposed to supposed feminine weakness) of American leaders illustrates the error of patriarchal ideologies.

Following the Seven Stages of War, there were “differing opinions about how to revitalize the country”, and those who no longer trusted “centralized government” became drifters (227, 134). Those who banded together under the United Commonwealth worked for the last century to create new technologies: methods to purify the waters, genetically engineer plants “hardy enough to thrive in the earth” (81), and establish communication (109-110). Although science and innovation are still heralded as the solution to any vulnerability that anthropocentric arrogance may cause, such as dwindling resources, the “scientific fantasy of mastery” (Plumwood 99) and “invincibility” (Plumwood 103) is shown to be illusory, or at least shaky, because these solutions come after the apocalypse, too late to avoid or deny human vulnerability. The imagined destruction of North America in *The Testing* clearly extrapolates a fear of anthropocentric and patriarchal dominance-based ideologies and the effects that they might lead to, namely complete sociopolitical collapse and environmental destruction. Furthermore, to Charbonneau, this is a reasonable and probable reflection of the future of America, illustrating that the underlying issues represented in the novel are a reflection of those already present in America.

To further this critique, the ominous presence of the United Commonwealth government, specifically after an apocalyptic catastrophe, reflects the current state of disillusion and despair surrounding politics in today's America. By writing of a world set after a catastrophe has occurred and society reformed, Charbonneau emphasizes the power disparity between civilians and government officials. Further, by creating a fictionalized representation of the United States, the novel critiques and questions the effectiveness of the current system of government to properly reflect civil interests and create a better future. As the novel progresses, Cia uncovers the injustice and cruelty of the Commonwealth government and their unethical testing process that rewards ruthlessness and fatally punishes error. The Testing process ensures that only those that will uphold the inequitable status quo become the leaders of future generations. Any Commonwealth officials that question the "necessity of such strong penalties for fail[ure]" or the potential rigging of the tests so that "those who are too smart, too strong, and too dedicated...those...who feel not only compelled to rebuild the Commonwealth but also to question its laws and its choices" are weeded out and relocated or disappear (144). The entire Testing process is designed to foster complete and unquestionable governmental control: it separates all of the brightest students from their families, homes, and anything else they might have ties to; it eliminates all candidates who might question the efficacy and ethics of The Testing; it erases candidates' memories of The Testing process, ensuring that all future leaders are returned to their most pliant and hopeful state and that no ill-feelings or distrust of the government remain; and it repeatedly relocates problematic citizens between colonies to quell distrust. Proving the system's effectiveness, Cia goes from stating that she does not want to "be a part of this system"

(304) before the memory wipe to expressing her feelings of “delight” over being accepted into the University (318). Furthermore, Cia goes from vowing vengeance upon Dr. Barnes and all of The Testing officials for the lives that they have taken (286-287) to describing Dr. Barnes as warm (318). The grim representation of government as controlling, malevolent, and manipulative within *The Testing* reflects underlying fears and suspicions about present-day government — the fear that no politician or political system is or can be uncorrupt.

Additionally, in a campfire debate, Stacia states that the “Fourth Stage of War would never have happened if the president of the United States had attacked the Asian Alliance. Instead [of trying] to broker a worldwide coalition” (194); even while living in and fighting against the ruinous results of war (let alone the arguably successful domination of nature), Stacia still condemns pacifism as weak. The novel clearly disagrees with this position and attempts to illustrate that caring for others and the world is not only right, but necessary: in response to Stacia, Tomas counters that “[s]triking first would have guaranteed a strike by the Asian Alliance. [The president] knew the damage the first Three Stages of War had caused. He had to try and head off what he was certain would be the destruction of the world” (194). Characters such as Stacia and Dr. Barnes believe that by becoming dominant they may regain control of their crumbling society and enforce their ideal vision for the future that is, of course, superior to the visions of others; the continued high-valuation of dominance-based ideologies and political structures, therefore, reflects feelings of desperation among individuals because such structures provide the illusion that by gaining ultimate power, one can have ultimate protection. It is more difficult to create a just future justly, than it is to do so by force.

Furthermore, the debate about what makes a good leader illustrates the distrust felt towards the government, both within and outside of the novel; the conflicting views demonstrate that no matter one's beliefs, there are some actions previously taken by leaders that can be and are critiqued by the general population. The origins of *The Testing* and this exchange illustrates the general distrust and disillusionment felt towards the government, its officials, and its processes.

## 2.2 Environmental Critique

The environmental destruction presented in *The Testing* thus illustrates the detrimental effects of anthropocentric arrogance, critiques the political and sociocultural system that supports such ideals, and advocates for increased climate awareness. The landscape that Cia describes is completely unlike the current climate and environment of North America. Based on information given during Cia's fourth test, she and the other candidates trek "more than seven hundred miles" (138) through the ruined "nonrevitalized" (134) landscape that was once Chicago, Illinois (136, 149), St. Louis, Missouri (252), Wichita, Kansas (177), and Tosu City, which is probably a reimagined Tulsa, Oklahoma. The route she and her partner Tomas take follows a road that "goes all the way to the southwestern side of the old state and connects with another road that leads right to Tosu city" (189), referring to what is probably the I-55 highway to St. Louis, and then the I-44 through to their destination. That route in today's United States would take Cia and Tomas from the shores of Lake Michigan, one of the five Great Lakes of North America, through farm lands, plains, mountains, and the Mark Twain National Forest. In comparison, the landscape Cia describes is unrecognizable: the land is dry and cracked; the lakes, oceans and ponds contaminated; and the Earth unable to bear crops unless they

are genetically modified to “survive in the blighted soil” (13). Within Cia’s 16 years, she has known famine because of whatever destruction humans inflicted upon the Earth in the Seven Stages War (6). The novel clearly identifies the war as the cause of the natural disasters and planetary devastation that follows; this effectively places humans as the sole perpetrators of the Earth’s destruction. Cia explicitly states this during her cross-country journey in the fourth test, giving the following description of her surroundings:

“In front of me there is not a speck of plant life. Nothing lives here. I try to imagine what once stood in this space. How any leader could order a bombing that results in this—the kind of destruction that cannot be fixed with the right chemistry equation or a new breed of plant. The earth is resilient, but its hard to imagine a time when this place will be anything but a terrible reminder of what we as a people can do.” (254)

Perhaps even more damningly, humans wrought this Earthly destruction unintentionally, as a mere side-effect of their arrogance, negligence, and inadequate consideration for the planet, the environment, and all its non-human life. In other words, whatever war was being fought, and by whom, it was either deemed more important than the effects it might cause on the Earth or these effects were not even considered; this emphasizes the detrimental effects of anthropocentrism and illustrates what Plumwood deems the current failure “to situate human identity, human life, and human places in ecological terms” (100).

To address these detrimental effects, the novel portrays society breaking into smaller communities with greater appreciation for and connection with their surrounding ecosystem following the deterioration during and after the Seven Stages War. Cia was

raised in this return-to-pastoral society. Terry Gifford dates the origins of the pastoral literary tradition in Greek antiquity (15) and defines pastoral in three ways: as a “(mostly) idealized” description of nature and life in the countryside (2), as a literary form that “describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to urban life” (3), and as a pejorative that “impl[ies] that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country” (3). *The Testing* seems to rely on the third definition to critique the idealized return-to-nature narrative purported by the dominant powers in comparison to the lived reality of the female characters within nature. This pastoral idealization often touts an inaccurate vision of a slower and more simple life; however, it also challenges the separation between humans and nature that occurs within cities wherein people become estranged from the processes and resources that are exploited for their own benefit. *The Testing* manages to both confront the idealization of pastoral life and challenge the separation of humans and nature by contrasting the pastoral ideal with the lived actuality of the female protagonist. Cia, both in her daily life in Five Lakes and her experience during the fourth test, is forced to confront agricultural processes— hunting, gathering, cultivating, and preserving the flora and fauna that support her life— and the starvation that arises from the soil made hostile by human error. Water, plant life, animals, and all the resources that support her life are rendered more valuable in their scarcity and more precious in their necessity. By actively engaging in improving her environment, Cia comes to appreciate nature and her own role in fostering it as it supports her. The contrast between urban and rural life and, more importantly, pastoral reality and the pastoral fantasy confronts the hyper-separation enforced by anthropocentric ideologies.

Cia's experiences reemphasize human dependence on nature and create a stark visualization of the effects of human neglect and arrogance whilst concurrently contradicting the idealized image of pastoral living. For Cia, this bleak representation of the future impresses an urgent need and desire to proactively change the system which created such disaster and to ensure this destruction does not continue, resulting in her interests in environmental conservation and political reform. Cia's ideals, however, are in opposition to Dr. Barnes's and the government's in two critical ways: she is not operating with a falsely idealized perception of the past and she has expanded her idea of the mistakes made beyond the Anthropocene to include nature. The "past mistakes" (144) that *The Testing* is designed to avoid repeating are centered on human "confrontation" (144) and not on the directly resulting destruction of the planet; moreover, Dr. Barnes is obsessed with "restor[ing] the land and [the] country both to their former glory" (76), illustrating that he is both operating under an idealized perception of what nature was and more focused on regaining the glorified past that resulted in the planetary apocalypse than working to foster the earth and create a more ethical future. While Dr. Barnes and the government officials that run *The Testing* and the country are so focused on recapturing the glory of the past, Cia has been moulded by her environment to see destruction as wrong, life as sacred, and conservation and care as key to creating a brighter future. That the main character redefining human-nature relations is female is crucial: it demonstrates that the anthropocentrism is not an innate human flaw, but rather an ideological error informed by radical interpretations of masculinity. Growing up largely outside of the patriarchal influence of her government, Cia has not learned to vilify stereotypically feminine traits, or even to consider traits such as compassion and

nurturance as distinctly feminine qualities, in favour of patriarchal fantasies of utter dominance. Without patriarchal ideologies to inform her, Cia is instead able to develop her own relationship with the earth based on reciprocity and care. *The Testing*, therefore, confronts the patriarchal and anthropocentric idealization of both the past and the pastoral, rejecting it in favour of a more realistic interpretation of and relationship with nature.

### 2.3 Social Critique

On a societal level, *The Testing* criticizes governmental restriction of access to education and knowledge. As society reformed, The Testing became a key process in identifying youth who would make the next generation of civil servants; however, though the candidates' prospective roles are marketed as leadership, the vice-grip of the authoritarian government, and the erasure of participants' Testing memories, means that those who survive The Testing are relegated to roles without enough knowledge of the system they are working within to critique and truly lead the formation and progression of their society. Government officials review academic performance and extracurricular activities to determine who among the general population have the potential to be supposedly 'good' leaders; however, what qualities beyond sufficient intelligence and social responsibility are desirable is decided by those already in power. The Testing rewards those who conform to the patriarchal ideologies already rampant within the government: those who do not exhibit a "killer instinct" (195), uncompromising strength, and other such extremist interpretations of masculinity do not progress into positions of power and, even worse, are killed, ensuring that they cannot challenge the status quo, let alone inform the general population of the government corruption; this creates a cycle of

corruption, oppression, and injustice. *The Testing*, therefore, critiques restricting access to knowledge and education to keep the masses quiet and compliant because such restrictions limit change, reaffirm corrupt political systems, and reinforce patriarchal ideologies and illusions of supremacy.

Throughout the novel, the question of “[w]hat kind of leader would that type of person make?” (127) is reiterated, and, by contrasting Cia and her ethics with the sexist and patriarchal values held by the government officials, *The Testing* suggests that leadership is not inherently masculine or feminine, but should be a marriage of the two. *The Testing* is supposed to serve as a mechanism to “ensure the United Commonwealth d[oes] not repeat past mistakes...[, that] the future leaders of [the] country...ha[ve] the breadth of qualities that w[ill] not only help [the] country flourish but keep [its] people safe” (144); this indicates that a maternal nurturing of the country is not considered sufficient and that a paternal protective role is required, if not preferred. However, it is demonstrated throughout the novel that it is controversial which qualities make a good leader and which caused the destruction of the world. Many of the Testing candidates, such as Stacia, believe that acting offensively and with “killer instinct” (195) to eliminate competition makes a leader “strong” (194), while others think compassion and prudence are the way forward. Cia repeatedly describes her notion of caring, of “treat[ing] life with respect” (301), as the “Five Lakes Colony way” (302), emphasizing that her ideologies differ from the authoritarian and anthropocentric norms; her success within *The Testing*, and the dominance-based and anthropocentric structures of government that created it, challenges the notion that excessive strength and ruthlessness are necessary for leadership. Moreover, it illustrates that stereotypically female characteristics such as a

desire to nurture, empathy, and cooperativeness are not weaknesses, and that an ethic of care towards others, whether human or non-human, is needed to break distorted hegemonic masculinity and anthropocentric ideologies and create a more just and hopeful future. Traditional gender norms are continually subverted with Cia and other women exhibiting intelligence, leadership, strength and other stereotypically masculine characteristics, and her partner Tomas and other males requiring help, being emotional, and exhibiting other stereotypically feminine qualities.<sup>9</sup> Most of the characteristics associated with success within *The Testing* are masculine and portrayed as strong; weakness is deemed feminine, undesirable, and associated with failure. This portrayal of traditionally feminine characteristics as something associated with failure and ineptitude might insinuate that in order to succeed, one must become more masculine, and that feminine qualities are something to be ashamed of or hide whether exhibited by male or female characters; however, Cia's ability to succeed whilst retaining her compassionate and nurturing nature challenges the "moral dualism" (Plumwood 105) purported by patriarchal ideals. Cia is able to succeed because she is strong and intelligent and able to foster a better future because she cares for the society environment that supports her; in other words, she does not need to conform to extreme interpretations of masculinity to succeed. Instead of subscribing to the idea that masculine qualities are inherently-dominance based and diametrically opposed to supposed feminine submissiveness, she erodes the purported dichotomy by illustrating that no trait is distinctly masculine or

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<sup>9</sup> As summarized by Barbara Welter, "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, neighbours and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). The "dual feminine function" was "beauty and usefulness" (163); any and all pursuits outside of this were considered the realm of man, unsuitable for women's supposedly delicate sensibilities.

feminine, but rather human. The interpretation supported by her success suggests that the government's valuation of traits is sexist, unethical, and ineffective. By portraying Cia as ethically opposed to the government, the novel also suggests that the values held by the government, those that do not value the earth and people as Cia does, led to the war and earthly destruction.

*The Testing* further critiques government systems based in radical masculinity by illustrating the dire consequences of defining the male against all things 'feminine' or 'weak'; in *The Testing*, the search for ruthless and seemingly-invincible candidates is shown to not only be sexist, but harmful and unsustainable. The origins of *The Testing* appear civic-minded at first, even noble. The creator of the process "believed that the Seven Stages of War occurred because the world leaders did not have the correct combination of intelligence, ability to perform under pressure, and strength of leadership to lead [their people] out of confrontation" (144). *The Testing* was created to ensure that future leaders had these characteristics. *The Testing* consists of four parts: written examinations testing "knowledge of history science, mathematics ... reading ... logic and problem-solving skill," hands-on examinations demonstrating "ability to transfer intellectual knowledge into practical use," a teamwork examination that tests ability to assess "teammates' strengths and weaknesses," and a fourth test determining "decision-making and leadership abilities" (75). Those who pass all four sections must finally undergo a "personality and psychological evaluation" with a selection committee before admittance to the University (75). While these tests sound logical, safe, and moral, the consequences for failure prove the tests to be otherwise. Instead of merely being dismissed from the program and sent home, wrong answers are "penalized" with

“[d]izzines[, v]omitting[, h]allucinations[, and] even death” (109), and worse “those [that] seek[] medical attention [are] deemed [not] strong enough leaders to return” (116). For example, while operating under the effects of the poisonous plants, Malachi, a candidate from Cia’s home-colony, has a nail embedded in his eye after he mistakenly tampers with the wrong part of an electronic device they were instructed to fix, and dies from his wounds (110-111). In the following tests, penalties for failure are no less severe, and candidates often have the opportunity to “eliminate” (128) their competition, if not directly murder them; it is up to the candidates to “evaluate their [competition’s] strengths and weaknesses” and decide who to trust (126), with the consequences for miscalculation being fatal. After each portion of The Testing, cuts are made. While the official story is that “all unsuccessful candidates...[are] assigned to a new colony” (321), it is unclear whether candidates who are cut in this way are relocated or otherwise eliminated; however, if the final three portions of The Testing are any indication, the penalty for failure is likely death. While the process may not appear specifically sexist, it rewards behaviour that is ‘masculine’, violent, and ruthless and penalizes any weakness, or stereotypically feminine traits, no matter the circumstances. Moreover, the consequences for failure imply that citizens who do not portray these stereotypically masculine traits are worthless, that their greatest purpose can only be to support the development of this warped interpretation of masculinity in others; othered by the patriarchal identity, those who demonstrate stereotypically feminine traits are reduced to “mere...tools” (Plumwood 106).

Perhaps the most striking example of this killer mentality and its failings is the director’s response to a candidate committing suicide. Ryme, Cia’s roommate, takes her

life after becoming overwhelmed with the stress of The Testing; Dr. Barnes consoles Cia after she finds Ryme's body by stating that Ryme's "decision to end her candidacy" ultimately served the Commonwealth by weeding out a potential leader who would not be "capable of dealing with the kinds of pressure she would be forced to deal with in the future" (94). While his words alone illustrate Dr. Barnes's callous "indifference" to Ryme's death and scorn for her emotional reaction to circumstances, her "weakness" (95), even more alarming is Cia's later discovery that every room is equipped with a surveillance camera, the implication of which is "someone watched Ryme as she stripped her bed of the sheet. Tied it to her dress. Reasoned out the best place to affix it to the light fixture on the ceiling...watched as she stepped off the chair. Saw her struggle against the rope, claw her throat in an attempt to free herself, and go limp as her body shut down. They could have saved her. Instead, they let her die" (96). In *The Testing*, the government "eliminate[s] dozens of its most promising citizens every year" (311) because they either are deemed weak or challenge the structure of government beneficial to the ruthless officials who are already in power; by contrasting Cia's horror at the current governmental system and the callousness of those who employ it, this novel illustrates that weakness is not equitable with worthlessness and valuing strength to the exclusion of all else reinforces a vicious, unjust, and unsustainable patriarchal domination ethos. The environment was deemed passive and therefore weak and this weakness was used to justify the world's exploitation and destruction; just as the destruction of the natural world consequently destroyed those destroying it, so too will this single-minded valuation of strength lead to ruin for humans.

*The Testing* critiques the sexist ethos of domination put forward by patriarchal and anthropocentric government and societies. Additionally, the novel criticizes the control of information and education by representing the continuing corruption of the government caused by the self-confirming processes of The Testing.

The dystopian world of Joelle Charbonneau's *The Testing* both reflects current fears of what the future will bring and critiques the current systems that would create such a future. Cia Vale and her acts of rebellion present a narrative of hope by illustrating that social change is possible if citizens, especially young women, challenge immoral governance, unequal access to education, idealization of the past, and the separation of humans from nature.

## Chapter 3: UGLIES

Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* confronts many of the same issues. As in *The Testing* and *The Hunger Games*, *Uglies* is set in a North America broken by war, greed, and climate crisis. Although she does not start out as a rebel, Tally Youngblood, the young female protagonist, eventually comes to question and then resist the corrupt government of her city and the human nature dualism that it enforces. Tally's ideological transformation also illustrates the detrimental effects of a high valuation of and preoccupation with beauty within society. In addition to critiquing contemporary North Americans' relationship with beauty,<sup>10</sup> *Uglies* also mirrors the current sociopolitical problems of government corruption, political uncertainty, and climate crisis, as realized by patriarchal ideologies and anthropocentrism.

The novel follows Tally Youngblood as she leaves the protective bubble of her city and discovers the terrible truth underlying the entire premise of her society: that her world is only a paradise at the expense of the individuality of every citizen. Tally Youngblood lives in a world divided. Set three hundred years into the future, after humanity has almost destroyed the world a couple times over, humans have collectively decided to "pull the cities back from the wild, to leave nature alone" (Westerfeld 268). Cities are now independent from each other and from nature, with the only exception being the global "Committee for Morphological Standards" (262). It was determined that underlying all biases, crime, and war was a biological preference for beautiful people (268); to eliminate this issue, all citizens undergo an operation that turns them into a

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<sup>10</sup> For evidence of the current preoccupation with beauty and the resultant unrealistic beauty standards, please see the articles by Boszik, Donati, Oakes, and Weiner.

“pretty” (3), molding their features to the standard determined by the so-called “Pretty Committee” which makes sure “pretties [are] all more or less the same” (262). Now “everybody is happy, because everyone looks the same: they’re all pretty” (268), or so Tally has been taught.

In Tally’s city individuals are segregated geographically based on age and beauty: uglies live in dorms in Uglyville until sixteen, at which point they are turned pretty and move across the river, first to New Pretty Town, then to the suburbs as a middle or late pretty. Tally has been eagerly awaiting her sixteenth birthday her whole life; all she wants is to turn pretty and cross the river where everything is just “one big party” and the only rules seem to be “Act Stupid, Have Fun, and Make Noise” (12). Everything changes, though, when her friend Shay decides to run away to the Smoke: a place, “more than just a hideout for assorted runaways” (219), where “[h]undreds of people ha[ve] made a life” (225) and “[t]hey don’t separate everyone, uglies from pretties, new middle and late...[a]nd you never have to get the operation...don’t have to look like everyone else...act like everyone else” (89). Although Tally originally refuses to go with Shay, she is later manipulated by the local authorities, named Special Circumstances, to follow her to the Smoke, act as a spy, and betray her friend under threat of never being turned pretty. Once there, though, Tally finds a home among the Smokies, comes to appreciate natural beauty, and uncovers the sinister secret behind the pretty operation. Unknown to Tally and the rest of the population, being pretty comes at a cost. It is assumed that there are no more arguments because being pretty equalizes everyone, removing jealousy, hatred, and prejudice; Tally learns, however, that the operation “changes the way you think” (268) with “[t]iny lesions in the brain” (263): “the reason war and all that other stuff went away

is that there are no more controversies, no disagreements, no people demanding change. Just masses of smiling pretties, and a few people left to run things” (267).

While it is not directly stated, *Uglies* is set in and criticizes what was once the United States. This is made clear by two passing comments: one—that if Tally “hadn’t been smart enough to figure out [Shay’s] directions [to the Smoke], [she] could be halfway to Alaska” (226), and two—that Tally “only knew the name of one big desert on the continent...the Mojave” (342), which is located in present-day California. Beyond these two comments, it is still evident that the society represented in the novel is a critical magnification of fundamental elements of American culture and government, namely its high valuation of physical beauty, its limited and infantilizing beauty standards, its ever-widening gap between government and citizens, and both its exploitation of and distancing from the natural world.

### 3.1 Political Critique

*Uglies* thus represents the current sociopolitical state and criticizes the patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies that could lead to such a dystopian future. In snippets throughout the novel, it is related how the world has come to be in its current state. Three hundred years into the future, people of our own time are collectively remembered as the “Rusties,” not only for our excessive use and waste of metal and natural resources, but because of our archaic and destructive mentalities. The Rusties are considered “insane” (200), just “an idiotic, dangerous, and sometimes comic force of history” (346) rather than “actual people” (200); this perception is due to the Rusties “almost destroying the world in a million different ways” (200) through “wars and mass hatred and clear-cutting” (272), “burying [...] junk everywhere” (92), “burning trees to clear land, burning

oil for heat and power, setting the atmosphere on fire with their weapons” (62), and overpopulating the world (48). However, the final collapse, “when the Rusty world fell apart” (345), was caused by a bacterium that infected and ate oil: “[t]he spores spread through the air, and when it landed in petroleum, processed or crude, they sprouted...[and] changed the chemical composition of the oil” (345) to become unstable and pyrophoric; “as it burned, the spores were released in the smoke, and spread in the wind. Until the spores got to the next car, or airplane, or oil well, and started growing again” (346). Humans, reliant on oil and ignorant of the cause of the flames, were “stuck down in [the] streets like a horde of rats trapped in a burning maze” (61). Those that survived, seeing the results of their arrogance and callousness, unanimously decided to “put a wall up between themselves and nature” (92), pulling back into independent cities; humans determined that they were too destructive as a whole to live with nature: that it was “wrong to live in nature, unless you want[ed] to live like an animal” (92). This left hulking “Rusty Ruins” (48) scattered across the globe, “[a]ny glass [...] long since shattered, any wood [...] rotted, and nothing remain[ing] but metal frames, mortar and stone crumbling in the grip of invading vegetation” (61). Since “science confirms that global warming is the result of anthropogenic greenhouse gas or carbon emissions, the overuse of fossil fuels, and deforestation” (Varney 139), the history represented in *Uglies* is clearly meant to critique anthropocentric abuse of the environment. As previously shown in *The Testing*, denying relationships to women and the feminine reinforces a flawed perception of patriarchal dominance and superiority, not just over women, but over all associated with women, nature, animality and primitivism. Anthropocentric dominance that the Rusties exerted over the environment is therefore indicative of

underlying hegemonic masculinity. This ideology, in *Uglies* as in present-day society, enables Western culture “to exploit nature with less constraint, [and] creates dangerous illusions in denying embeddedness in and dependency on nature” (Plumwood 98), and thus leads way for the destruction of nature depicted in the novel. What’s more, the novel presents an argument for not only human’s destructive and anthropocentric tendencies, but also regarding the anxiety that these tendencies are innate and will repeat. By separating themselves from nature, the humans in this novel reveal a deep-seated fear that humans will ultimately be their own undoing. Further critiquing the anthropocentric and authoritarian ideologies at the root of current political systems, *Uglies* demonstrates that this fear is already present in society by depicting a dystopian future and an apocalyptic past rooted in today’s sociopolitical issues.

In Tally’s city, authority figures attempt to distance contemporary humans from the Rusties by “always ma[king] the Rusties out to be so stupid” (62), and defining themselves as more evolved humans that are merely “descended from Rusties” (341). Truthfully, though, humans are not more evolved, they have just been subdued, forcibly made complacent and compliant through brain lesions that systemically strip individuals of their competence: “[h]istory would indicate that the majority of people have always been sheep...[t]hese days [they are] just a bit...easier to manage” (272). This comparison of humans to sheep criticizes humans’ complacency and inaction in the face of the mistreatment of the earth. Furthermore, the comparison satirically mocks the false separation of humans and nature purported by patriarchal and anthropocentric domination narratives by emphasizing the animality of humans. The contemporary humans of Tally’s society placate themselves by considering themselves more evolved and thereby superior

to nature. However, by first situating current “rusty” humans within nature and then reiterating the anthropocentric ideologies that define present society, the novel illustrates how absurd this separation is. Humans are shown to have always been, and that they will always be, part of nature; moreover, by comparing the still-destructive dominant society with the Smoke, which lives with and within nature, *Uglies* argues that human societies are not inherently unsustainable, but rather anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies are.

*Uglies* goes on to critically portray the preoccupation with beauty. While beauty might not appear to be a politically charged subject, the current preoccupation with it is shown to provide a tool for both distraction and manipulation by the state, with “the worst damage...done before they even pick up the knife...[because the citizens are] all brainwashed into believing [they]’re ugly” (276). Though it is never stated “which c[a]me first: the operation or the lesions” (273), humans seem to have unanimously accepted the operation as beneficial—eradicating diseases such as anorexia and prejudices based on looks “since everyone knew at sixteen they’d turn beautiful” (200)—to the extent that it is now mandatory. The operation has become so normalized that it provides those in power with the ultimate tool of control and manipulation. In the operation,

bones [are] ground down to the right shape, some of them stretched or padded, [the] nose cartilage and cheekbones stripped out and replaced with programmable plastic, skin sanded off and reseeded like a soccer field in spring...eyes laser-cut for a lifetime of perfect vision, reflective implants inserted under the iris to add sparkl[e]...muscles all trimmed up with a night of electrocize and all [] baby fat

sucked out for good, [t]eeth replaced with ceramics as strong as a suborbital aircraft wing, and as white as...good china. (97)

All of this is considered normal and necessary, and it is unthinkable that people might be “evolved enough to treat everyone the same even if they look[] different. Look[] ugly” (97). Ugliers are encouraged to insult each other every day, “Fattie, Pig-Eyes, Boney, Zits, Freak—all the names ugliers call[] one another, eagerly and without reserve” (277), which “naturalizes...feelings of inferiority” (Moran 127) and maintains the subordination of those not yet lesioned; this system is justified with an illusion of equality, since every one pre-surgery is ugly, “equally, without exception, so that no one fe[els] shut out by some irrelevant mischance of birth. And no one [is] considered to be even remotely beautiful, privileged because of a random twist in their genes” (277).

Tally is repeatedly confronted with evidence that damns the manipulative system or contradicts information that she has been taught, but the societal beauty ideals are so ingrained within her that she is unable to confront them. For example, when creating “morpho[s]” (39)—visualizations of how they might look post-operation—Tally’s friend Shay states that “[t]his whole game is just designed to make us hate ourselves” and that “[m]aking [them]selves feel ugly [was] not fun”. Tally only response is that they “are ugly!” (44). Additionally, when Shay tells her that Cleopatra “wasn’t even that great-looking[, but] seduced everyone with how clever she was” Tally laughs and says that “[s]he was probably a classic pretty and they didn’t even know it [because] they had weird ideas about beauty [back then and] didn’t know about biology” (40) without realizing that this contradicts her earlier claim that “[a] million years of evolution had made [this single definition of beauty] part of the human brain” (16). Like the majority of

the population, Tally has become so preoccupied with becoming beautiful that she is easily distracted or redirected away from the ugly realities of her society and without anyone to question the way things are run, the patriarchal, authoritarian rule is further cemented.

In Tally's city, everything is meant to reinforce the proposed beauty standards and citizens' dependency upon the state. People are coddled like children: everything, from bungee jackets to fireworks, has built-in safety measures and food is always tempered so it is not too hot or cold. The city "feeds...educates...[and] keeps [its citizens] safe" (107) at no cost, with the understanding that all citizens are assigned jobs once they come of age to maintain the city. The trade-off for living in paradise under the city's protection is subjection to ultimate and unquestionable authority. The citizens operate under the illusion of freedom. All citizens wear "interface ring[s]" (4) that monitor their location and who-knows-what-else, citizens are no longer taught to write by hand meaning that all "ping[s]" (6)—messages—and personal diaries can be read by electronic "house minder[s]" (4), and everything from elevators to bridges can talk "[and] report trespassers, more importantly" (5). Whether people are comfortable with "the idea of being tracked and monitored and advised every minute of the day" (355) by these interface rings or not, they are systemically manipulated into compliance by requiring the rings' presence in order to be recognized by the automated electronics that maintain the city, such as elevators and vehicles; for example, maintenance vehicles navigate the city via a laser that reads "bar codes painted onto the road[s]" (356), and when Tally sneaks into New Pretty Town without hers, she notes the caution she must now take because she "is invisible to vehicles. They'd just run her down like she was nothing" (7), "[w]ithout

an interface ring, she was nobody” (15). By coddling the citizens, the government creates a dependency, to the effect that ““you can never tell from the inside...[h]ow small the city is. How small they have to make everyone to keep them trapped there”” (208). This dependency reinforces the dominance assumed by the patriarchal government: by belittling its citizens as children, the government officials reinforce their belief that as rational, aggressive, and authoritarian leaders, as hyper-masculine individuals, they are superior and therefore entitled to and justified in their paternalistic dominance. This warped logic, therefore, further justifies the actions that reaffirm their masculine dominance, such as those that erase the autonomy of others (and the potential for oppositional defiance which might otherwise destabilize or disprove their ideologies), creating a cycle of oppression.

Most importantly, the city provides the operation that turns people pretty. All faces over the age of sixteen are pretty—magazines or other such relics are destroyed because “[o]therwise, it’s too easy to get used to ugly faces, normal faces” (330)—and being ugly is made equitable to being a monster, as exemplified by “faces with crooked smiles or huge noses” being worn as costume masks along with “devil faces and horrible clowns, green monsters and gray aliens with big oval eyes” (10); this emphasis on beauty and the extreme disparity created between ugly and pretty faces “programs [Tally and other residents] into thinking that anything else is ugly” (82). Being ugly is something shameful and, as a result, Tally feels like she is not a “real person” (84) and that “nothing count[s] until [she is] a pretty” (280). Perhaps most insidiously, becoming pretty is intertwined with becoming an adult, and since pretties are brain-damaged to make them more complacent, this means that thinking independently, being pugnacious, resistant, or

in any way antagonistic to authority is belittled as childish—“being a clever little ugly” (84) or “[j]ust another ugly escaping the tyranny of beauty” (133)—thereby discrediting anything said. Having the city as the sole provider of the operation that grants personhood and discrediting any form of resistance creates an absolute dependency between citizens and the state, and provides the ultimate threat to manipulate Tally. Mary Moran, one of the few scholars to write on *Uglies*, states both that all uglies “resemble subjugated women in a patriarchal society” and illustrate that “Tally’s pre-operative feelings mirror those of women in a patriarchal society”, and yet claim that “Tally’s world does not seem to have a patriarchal structure, since men do not [solely] dominate positions of power and both genders demonstrate qualities often associated with either masculinity or femininity in our world” (127); this claim, however, fails to account for whether those who are in power or exhibit masculine qualities have undergone an operation, either to turn pretty or special. Even though both boys and girls become pretties, the pretties are characterized by their feminine qualities, such as their vanity, vapidness, softness, emotionality, and submission to the dominant authority. In comparison, the specials characterized by their masculine qualities, such as their calculating-nature, intelligence, athleticism, coldness, sense of superiority, and dominance —Moran describes them as having a “particular skill in critical thinking and inventiveness, [and] additional cosmetic surgeries that make them into supersoldiers with heightened senses, preternatural abilities, and cruel faces” (131). So, while Dr. Cable, the main authority figure in *Uglies*, is a woman, she embodies patriarchal and hegemonic definitions of masculinity. As Moran herself states, Dr. Cable draws on “patriarchal modes of ethics and identity” (131) and is “bound by patriarchal modes of control and

domination” (129), seeing “all other humans as objects—either obstacles that she must destroy or dominate, or tools that she can use to achieve her goal” (131). The only characters within the entire series which portray both masculine and feminine behaviours as defined by Moran are either ugly, meaning they do not have the behaviour-altering lesions to begin with, are fighting their lesions, or have had their lesions. *Uglies*, therefore, does have a patriarchal structure according to traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity, even though both male and female characters exhibit stereotypically gendered traits and are in positions of power. Without the preoccupation with and high valuation of beauty within Tally’s society, her city would not be able to control her; therefore, *Uglies* critiques societal beauty standards and practices that are reinforced by patriarchal governments.

### 3.2 Environmental Critique

In *Uglies*, it is demonstrated that wholly separating humans from nature fails to correct anthropocentric ideologies, consumerism, and ecological unaccountability. While there is some ‘nature’ within Tally’s city, all such elements are tamed, “purif[ied]” (107), and made useful for humans: the river is dammed from “a snarling monster” to become “slow-moving and dignified” (56) and the trees are reduced from “a black void full of wild and ancient trees” to mere “generic carbon-dioxide suckers that decorate[] the city” (56). Not only does this use of nature impose human dominance over the environment, it also reinforces that “the wild, where anything could be hidden, [is] not a place for human beings” (58), further separating humans from a natural environment. After humans retreated from nature, nature began to reclaim the land, as evidenced by the “few shapeless” Rusty ruins that Tally sees “rising through the grasp of vegetation” on her trip

to the Smoke (144). While the recovery of nature in the absence of humans might make the separation of humans and the environment appear positive, it is ultimately shown to reinforce the ecological-irresponsibility typical of patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies.

Tally's city is a high-tech paradise with party towers, pleasure gardens, hovercars, and wallscreens (39) (a personal communication and media device). Anything desired, from clothes to personal belongings or trinkets, can be requisitioned for free and is recycled after use. The city exists "in equilibrium with [the] environment," with "[r]enewable energy, sustainable resources, [and] a fixed population" (346); all 'meat' products are soy-based (151), it "purif[ies] the water that [it] put[s] back in the river, recycl[es its] biomass, and us[es] only power drawn from [its] own solar footprint" (107). There is a metal grid underneath the entire city (354) that supports its buildings via "hoverstruts" (11) and enables all methods of transportation, including hoverboards and hovercars, using a system of magnets. While the city is self-supporting and doesn't negatively impact the environment, the consumerist culture of use and disposal that is criticized in Rusties because of the havoc it wreaked on the environment is still prevalent in Tally's city. Things are requisitioned, created, and discarded without conscientious thought, and, as a result, citizens have little concept of waste because they are sated by the net-zero ecological footprint. For example, it isn't until Tally leaves the city that she realizes "how much *stuff* she needed before" (153). The evolving technology has stunted the growth of an earth-human relationship built on an ethic of care and failed to decenter the anthropocentric thinking that created the environmental issues originating in Rusty culture; In other words, "Although the cities collapse the binary of nature and technology

in a practical way, psychologically the divide remains” (Ostry 107). This interpretation is only strengthened as Tally leaves the city and is exposed to alternative methods of survival and relationships with nature at the Smoke; there, it is show that “technology itself is not evil [but] the negative values of the technological utopia” (Ostry 107).

Throughout the novel, Tally’s perception of nature evolves from an anthropocentric view to a decentered, embodied view. When she firsts leaves her city, Tally notes that “[t]he windows of fallen walls stared up at her[ as she hoverboarded above them], sprouting weeds as if the earth had grown eyes” (144). This representation of the earth is complicated: in some ways, anthropomorphizing the earth encourages care and respect for nature on behalf of humans, as if the earth is watching and judging your actions against it; however, requiring that the earth resembles a human to be worthy of respect insinuates that nature is lesser than human and therefore less deserving of care. When Shay first tells Tally about the Smoke, Tally cannot imagine a way of living with and within nature without resorting to the violence of the Rusties; when Tally gets to the Smoke, however, she learns how to work with instead of against nature. Eventually, her relationship with nature becomes one of respect instead of domination: “[t]he physical beauty of the Smoke [clears] her mind of worries [and e]very day seem[s] to change the mountain, the sky, and the surrounding valleys, making them appear spectacular in a completely new way. Nature, at least, didn’t need an operation to be beautiful. It just was” (230). As argued in the following social critique, without the oppressive narratives of her city, Tally comes to consider herself part of nature: focusing on how her body feels rather than how it looks. In coming to recognize nature’s beauty, Tally comes to realize her own embodiment, her shared beauty with nature: she revels in the beauty of

sensation, and her interactions with the beautiful world around her helps reframe her own beauty. She learns to appreciate physical difference as a new presentation of natural beauty, innately perfect in its connection to nature. By comparing Tally's city with a society that focuses on embodiment, conservation, and ecological-accountability, the error in anthropocentric human-nature dichotomies is made clear. This is indicative of the science fiction nature of *Uglies*. Elaine Ostry, one of the few scholars to write on *Uglies*, terms Tally's city and the Smoke competing utopias of "abundance" and "sufficiency" (102)—a "technological utopia [that] echoes youth culture with its love for technology, consumption, and distraction" and an "ecological utopia [that] promotes maturity with its emphasis on self-reliance, self-restraint, hard work, decision-making, and community"—that "hope to foster personal growth and social change through environmental awareness" in its readership (101). Nature provides space for Tally, "[a]way from the unchanging daily grind of [her] urban environment[]" to break free of the "rigid binaries of her society" (McDonough and Wagner 160), "question [her] societ[y,] and develop a longing for independence" (159). The characters "develop leadership skills when in nature...they take charge in order to contribute to their communities' survival and live in harmony with nature" (Ostry et al. 102) which encourages the novel's readers to realize, like Tally, that they "cannot and should not remain idle" (McDonough and Wagner 162), that they should fight to "prevent the fictional futures from becoming reality" (Ostry et al. 110). It should be noted that while the novel centers a female protagonist, like with *The Testing* and *The Hunger Games*, "both male and female are positively linked to nature", suggesting that "the value of life is enhanced through the simultaneous restructuring of understandings of both gender and nature within a larger cultural framework"

(McDonough and Wagner 168). While the Rusties represent the consequences of our exploitation of and lack of consideration for our environment, Tally's city illustrates that a complete retreat from nature does not solve the anthropocentrism underlying these destructive actions. Together, these two societies replicate and criticize the current consumerist culture and negligence of the environment and emphasize the importance of recognizing embodiment and embracing humans' relationship to nature.

The relationship between nature and humans, both Rusty and contemporary, is highlighted in the novel's "white orchids" (181). When Tally first comes across the flowers, not knowing what they are, she admires their beauty and notes how peaceful the scenery looks: "nothing...but hills, blinding white with flowers, and the glimmering river climbing up the mountains" (169); to her, the orchids are nature in its purest and most beautiful form, "a different world" (169) than the one she and other humans occupy. Emphasizing the error in Tally's pastoral idealization of nature is her later realization that

[t]his flower used to be one of the rarest plants in the world. A white tiger orchid...[until a]bout three hundred years ago, some Rusty...messed with the genes to make them propagate more easily...[b]ut she succeeded a little too well...[and t]hey turned into the ultimate weed...a monoculture...crowd[ing] out other species, chok[ing] trees and grass...[until] there aren't enough hummingbirds [which nest in trees] to pollinate them...[and] the orchids eventually die out, victims of their own success, leaving a wasteland behind.

Biological zero. (181-182)

What was once rare, natural, and beautiful was turned into a biological weapon that destroys entire ecosystems in its wake. The orchids, therefore, represent the failings of

both the Rusties and the contemporary cities. Like the Rusties, the orchids exemplify human greed, arrogance, and anthropocentric ideation; like the orchids, Rusty-humans are the “ultimate weed” (181) that destroy themselves and their surroundings by uncompromising, unchecked, and unconscious success, “chok[ing] everything around them” (182). Further impressing this comparison, the orchid has been threatened by “poison, engineered diseases, [and] predators,” but “fire is the only thing that really works...[and a]ll we can hope to do is contain the weed” (182); both humans and the human-made orchid alike are mitigated, and mitigated only, by fire. Like the contemporary cities, the orchids represent the failings of a conformist monoculture; with only one type of beauty dominating, there is no competition and other types of beauty are erased, whether it be the beauty of natural meadows, forest, and wildflowers or the beauty of physical and mental difference, intelligence, and self-assurance. It is possible that the colour of the flowers is a nod to a racist preference for white in the contemporary beauty standards; however, this is not addressed and could be mere speculation. The orchids illustrate the fallibility of anthropocentrism in both the past and present human societies: natural resources are manipulated, exploited and destroyed for human satisfaction and to humans’ ruination.

The orchids are also used to emphasize the necessity of human accountability and stewardship regarding the environment. While there is a depiction of environmental resiliency in which nature reclaims the Rusties’ ruins and flourishes when left to its own devices, humans are still held responsible for figuring out how to destroy the “white weed” (342). The white orchid, as both a natural and man-made species, turns entire expanses of land from an ecosystem to a barren desert—and not the natural kind that is

“full of life”, but one full of “featureless humps stretching into the distance...[with n]othing mov[ing] but slow snakes of sand borne by the wind” (342). As neither wholly natural nor synthetic, the “white weed” (342) is represented as something nature cannot overcome without human intervention. For example, David states that there might be something other than desert “in a thousand years or so” and hopes that “someone will have found a way to stop the weed from coming back...[so that] the process [of orchids choking out natural species] will [not] just start all over again” (342-343); this illustrates the need for human care in rehabilitating the environment which they destroyed. Furthering this sense of accountability, land where “[t]he Rusties ha[ve not] already broken its back,” as they have with “farms [and] grazing pasture”, is resilient to the weed. The orchids are unable to penetrate the dense underbrush of “old-growth forest[s]” (191); the survival of these forests that have “been around for centuries, probably even before the Rusties” (191) illustrates the destruction that anthropocentric domination has wrought while impressing the need for ecological accountability to rectify the results of this failed relationship. Simply denying humans’ place in the ecosphere, even if doing so does not negatively impact nature as in the case Tally’s city, is not enough to compensate for humans’ historical meddling with nature. In *Uglies*, fostering a new relationship based on mutual respect and benefit is shown to be not only possible, but necessary to creating a more hopeful future. In the end, just as nature survives every storm, so too will “the world...still exist after the storm” of humanity has ended (351).

### 3.3 Social Critique

The standards for beauty in Tally's city are incredibly narrow, emphasizing the absurdity in the implicitly racist and infantilizing beauty standards<sup>11</sup> accepted today. It is explained that "[t]here [is] a certain kind of beauty, a prettiness that everyone [can] see. Big eyes and full lips like a kid's; smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features; and a thousand other little clues...[that] people were always looking for...no matter how they were brought up" (16). This recognition of and preference for perfect beauty is reduced to "biology...[something] you couldn't help believing...not when you saw a face like this. A pretty face" (17). This definition of beauty is grossly infantilizing. Defining looking "young and vulnerable" (16) as attractive implies that maturity, self-assuredness, strength and confidence is undesirable, and correspondingly reaffirms paternalistic state control. Moreover, teaching an entire population that their response to beauty is a compulsion that they cannot control has potentially dangerous implications for rape; disturbingly, by mimicking the current societal narrative that blames women for supposedly provoking desire in men rather than rapists for violently violating the bodily, psychological, and spiritual autonomy of another, the novel creates the same conditions that are used to excuse sexual violence today. However, the threat of this issue is avoided in the novel by stating that this vulnerability "made you want to pay attention to whatever they [have to say], to protect them from any danger, [and] to make them happy" (8). While beauty and sexuality are not necessarily conflated in *Uglies* as they are in present-day society, the novel still critiques the patriarchal society that uses infantilization as a mechanism for

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<sup>11</sup> For more reading on racialized beauty standards, please see the articles by Donella, Harper, and Silvestrini. For more reading on infantilizing beauty standards and the sexualization of girls in media, please see the articles by Bigler, Bock, Coupland, and the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.

control. Regarding potential racism, while Tally finds it unbelievable that “people [once] killed one another over stuff like having different skin color” (44), she also mentions that making Shay’s skin “lighter” would bring it “closer to baseline” (43) and that more “exotic” physical features are not allowed (39), indicating that white skin and features are still preferable. However, again, this issue is not directly addressed. As Mary Couzelis, one of the few scholars to write on *Uglies*, states, “[n]ovels that ignore race or present a monochromatic future imply that other ethnicities do not survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important” (131) and therein risk “maintaining hegemonic cultural relations (132). Couzelis argues that “[w]hile *Uglies* is not necessarily promoting the idea that other races are inferior, the text does not problematize the science of certain Anglo features being purportedly superior and most attractive” and therefore fails to address how science and “the controlled release of information” has historically supported racism (136). However, I argue that “having the characters never question how race is involved” in definitions of beauty (Couzelis 135) is more realistic and better illustrates the insidious indoctrination of racism within Western ideals and culture. The implicitly racist beauty standards that Tally mentions should be enough make readers “reflect on their understood notions of beauty and how they acquire those ideal” and the “contemporary racial hierarchies” that inform such ideals (Couzelis 134). Because Tally has been surrounded by a single definition of beauty her entire life, she has never had to confront how intolerant this system has made her. For instance, when she first sees “an *old ugly*,” a forty-year-old librarian, she describes him as “wrinkled, veined, discolored, shuffling, [and] horrific” with “milky eyes...a rattling voice and...one claw” (197); Tally is filled with pity by “his sagging features” and describes the Smokies as “insane to

tolerate that, to *want* it” (197), illustrating how hypocritical her perception of the Rusties is and how illusory the sense of evolving beyond racism, agism, ableism, and sexism is. By mirroring the current racist, sexist, and infantilizing beauty standards within a dystopian future, *Uglies* illustrates not only how manipulative and controlling these standards are, but also how absurd a single definition of beauty is. That these standards are set and maintained by the “Pretty Committee” demonstrates the systemic nature of these standards and critiques the patriarchal societies that enforce such standards.

Both of the dominant patriarchal societies in *Uglies*, the Rusties and Tally’s city, work in conjunction to critique the high valuation of beauty within our society. Tally’s first glimpse of what beauty was in the Rusty-era comes when she is in the Smoke, where some relics of the past have been preserved. When looking at magazines “over three centuries old” (202), Tally gasps in horror, not only at the widest array of ‘ugly’ faces she’s ever seen, but also at the models who look like they are “starving...ribs thrusting out from [their] sides...legs so thin that Tally wonder[s] how they didn’t snap under [their] weight” (199). Tally states that body dysmorphia and mutilation, specifically anorexia, was one of the reasons the operation was created (200), and that no one gets such diseases anymore because they know “at sixteen they’d turn beautiful...[and] it [will] all be sucked away” (200). However, Tally fails to realize that the mindset underlying those diseases has not disappeared, merely the technology to ‘perfect’ people improved and become more accessible. She pours over the pages of bodies “grotesquely fat, or weirdly over-muscled, or uncomfortably thin...[with] wrong, ugly proportions” and wonders at their unabashed posing despite their “deformities” (198), but she does this without any introspection: Tally does not realize that her internalized shame at being ugly

is no different than that of girls three hundred years earlier. In some ways, it is even worse because Tally's life has no purpose or meaning beyond becoming beautiful: the first thing she notices about herself and others is their imperfections and the only "[h]appy ending" (67) that she can imagine is turning pretty. Moreover, "what's inside [of Tally]" is decided based on people's reaction to her face, and she is taught that this reaction is "not just culture, it's evolution!" (278), making her supposed ugliness seem even more inescapable and objective. In Tally's mind, she needs to be pretty in order to have value in society: without the operation "[she] is nothing...[w]orse, she [is] ugly" (7). As Moran states, "[r]ather than removing the power of beauty as they claim to have done, the authorities in Tally's society have merely modified the ways in which personal appearance dominates every aspect of daily life" (127). By highlighting the similar mindset between Rusty-era and contemporary beauty ideation, *Uglies* criticizes the high valuation of physical appearance and illustrates just how subjective beauty is. Further, by implicitly comparing the mindsets of the two generations, the novel critiques the underlying patriarchal mindset that deems people, but particularly young women, unvaluable unless they conform to the beauty standards set by the dominant power.

It is only really once Tally is forced out of her city that she begins to change her definition of beauty and consider that her city and its government might not be as idyllic and benevolent as she thinks. Tally's mental transformation is slow, with many breakthroughs and reversions before her final epiphany; by showing Tally work through this process, however, the novel demonstrates the failures of patriarchal definitions of, and emphasis on, beauty, and of anthropocentric denials of embodiment. Once she is out in the wild, Tally is confronted with reality and realizes that "[b]eing in the city all the

time ma[kes] everything fake, in a way. Like the buildings and bridges held up by hoverstruts, or jumping off a rooftop with a bungee jacket on, nothing was quite real there” (74); in comparison, she finds that in “the wild...[m]istakes ha[ve] serious consequences” (150). This not only illustrates that Tally has been operating under a curated version of reality, but also that Tally is an organism within the larger system of nature: by learning to conserve herself, Tally comes to appreciate her role in conserving nature. The longer that she is outside of the city, the further Tally’s sense of identity and her place in the world is removed from the city: where “Tally had always thought of the city as huge, a whole world in itself” she comes to realize that “the scale of everything out [in nature is] so much grander. And so beautiful” (152-153). As Tally’s worldview changes, so too does her definition of beauty. When Tally decides to bathe in the icy cold mountain-fed river that she has been following, she undergoes a sort of rebirth, baptism, or transformation wherein “an unlikely kernel of warmth ignite[s] in her stomach, as if the icy water had activated some secret reserve of energy within her body [and h]er eyes open[] wide, and she f[inds] herself whooping with excitement” and the mountains and surrounding nature become “crystal clear...[as her] heart pound[s] fiercely” (163). In this scene, Tally focuses on her senses and embodiment instead of her outward appearance—she comes to define herself not by her physical appearance but by her physical being, by her connection and response to nature. This emphasis on embodiment “contrasts with the patriarchal idea of the self as located in the mind and antagonistic to the body” (Moran 126), subverting both patriarchal and anthropocentric views of women, beauty, and nature. Troublingly, though, at this point she still speaks in terms of dominance and ownership, saying that “[t]he world seemed to belong to her” (162), indicating that she

has not yet overcome the patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies that have been ingrained in her. However, as Tally learns alternative modes of living in the Smoke, she comes to appreciate the sense of preciousness that limited supply provides (231) and becomes more focused on conservation efforts and living with nature as opposed to separate or dominant to it. Additionally, Tally learns to appreciate imperfect beauty, first in nature, stating that “[n]ature, at least, didn’t need an operation to be beautiful” (230), and then finally in humans as she realizes that humans are a part of nature, stating that she does not want her love-interest David “to look like everyone else” (279) and that she no longer considers “[t]he familiar faces [of the Smokies]...ugly”, but rather that “the cold expressions of the Specials, beautiful though they were,...seemed horrific to her now” (300). In the end, Tally becomes less dependent on her city and more self-assured, allowing her to confront and redefine her perceptions of beauty and conceptions of value. Tally shows that in “embracing an embodied, relational sense of subjectivity, women can rebel against limiting standards of beauty while strengthening mutually supportive connections with other people” (Moran 124) and the environment. In becoming embodied, like Cia, in *The Testing*, Tally rejects the paternalistic ethics of care imposed by her society and develops feminist “ethics of care” (Moran 130). Tally’s ideological transformation throughout *Uglies* illustrates the fallacies of patriarchal definitions of beauty, societal preoccupation with physical appearance, and the anthropocentric implications of a human definition that ignores embodiment.

Westerfeld’s *Uglies* tackles current sociopolitical issues such as government corruption, the separation of humans and nature, and the unduly high valuation of beauty within society. Tally’s journey across a North American broken by war, greed, and

climate crisis, illustrates the drastic consequences of anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies. This critique is furthered by contrasting the dystopian city that Tally leaves behind with the community she finds in the Smoke, which presents a hopeful way forward, a reimagining of a society free from patriarchal ideals, unrealistic beauty standards, and anthropocentric exploitation of the environment.

## Chapter 4: THE HUNGER GAMES

The final novel discussed in this thesis is Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. Like the previous novels, *The Hunger Games* is a critical representation of the patriarchal and anthropocentric ideals that inform current society, and “nature is central in the dystopian protagonists’ gradual realization that they are living in a dystopia” (Dror 175). As with *Uglies* and *The Testing*, it deals with government corruption, political uncertainty, and climate crisis. In addition to this, the novel critiques socioeconomic disparity and the role of media within society. By critiquing a society that collapsed and reformed after suffering war and climate crises, this novel, along with the others, shows that the root causes of these issues are current societal ideologies.

The novel follows Katniss Everdeen as she is taken from the relative safety of her poor, remote home in what was “once called the Rockies” (Collins 41), District 12, after she volunteers for the Hunger Games in order to save her twelve-year-old sister from certain death. The Hunger Games are an annual spectacle mandated by the Capitol “[i]n punishment for the uprising” in which “each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes [are] imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland[ for] a period of several weeks, [as] competitors...fight to the death[ with t]he last tribute standing win[ning]” (18); the language used to describe the games alone—tribute, punishment, imprisoned—is indicative of the districts’ vulnerability and dependence on the malevolent Capitol. The society represented in the novel is a critical reflection of current sociopolitical issues within North America—particularly controlling police-states,

socioeconomic inequality, media spectacle, and environmental crisis—and their underlying patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies.

#### 4.1 Political Critique

In contemporary Panem, the control and manipulation shown by the government is representative of the negative aspects of a dominance-based hegemonic masculinity. The government exercises this control by operating the districts as police-states, monopolizing resources to create dependency, and psychologically manipulating the districts via the Hunger Games. Regarding the police-state, Katniss describes District 12 as somewhere “you can starve to death in safety” (6). Citizens are mired in poverty, starvation is a common occurrence (28), and yet “trespassing in the woods is illegal” (5), even to gather apples growing close to the fence (6), and “poaching carries the severest of penalties” (5); while it would be nice to think that the electric “high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops” (4) that surrounds the district is an attempt to protect nature following the historic climate crisis, or even to protect civilians from the wild animals surrounding their rural location (4, 5), the sense of public surveillance, censorship, and restriction of civilian movements that Katniss frequently mentions (6, 80, 365) makes it clear that the laws are there to increase the general population’s reliance on the Capitol. Hunting is forbidden purely because “the idea that someone might be arming the Seam [the poorest part of District 12] would never [be] allowed” (6). As in *The Testing* and *Uglies*, the authoritarian government “fashions the citizen subjects as childlike and naïve...infantilized...by the strict codes and regulations...they are kept in the dark about what life is like beyond their perimeters; they experience minimal

communications and travel; and their lives are preoccupied with the day-to-day, as opposed to long-term thinking” (Dror 185).

Though the division of humans from nature in *The Hunger Games* is more explicit, the fear that this division causes within civilians is reminiscent of that of present-day society. In present-day society, the division of labour has resulted in food being something bought, pre-packaged, off a shelf, rather than something hunted or gathered; as Plumwood writes, “[t]he human/nature dualism” means that humans are “not conceived ecologically as part of a system of exchange of nutrition” (“Gender” 53), through “[g]lobal markets...we [have] los[t] touch with the real material conditions that support our lives” (“Gender” 46). This distancing, in addition to supporting humans’ feelings of superiority over nature, means that things that were once familiar, such as animals, natural environments, or plants, are now seen as threats, things to be wary of and kept at bay by the protective walls of modernity. In both the novel and current society, the general population has become so far removed from nature and the processes that support their survival that nature has become foreign, unfamiliar, and dangerous, something that “has a sinister feeling to it...[a place with] hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand...[where t]here could be anything in there” (295), rather than “a potential source of food as well as a threat” (296). While the separation and resulting fear of present-day citizens is due to anthropocentric feelings of superiority, in *The Hunger Games*, humans are intentionally separated from nature by the authoritarian government to induce fear, reaffirm its control, and create a dependency. It should be noted, however, that wealthier Capitol citizens, those not subjugated by the dominant power, demonstrate both fear and feelings of anthropocentric superiority as a result of this distancing, similar

to present-day effects of urbanization. Katniss's shock that owning a nanny goat is "not even against the law" (271) further illustrates that the laws imposed by the Capitol upon the districts are meant not to protect, but to keep the population submissive and dependent. She states a goat can "change your life in District 12" by producing "four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell" (271); her shock that something that helps provide both economic independence (by producing sellable goods) and physical independence (by producing food that is not regulated by the government) is not illegal shows that the imposed laws are intended not to serve citizens, but to master them. By operating the districts as a police-state, the paternalistic and authoritarian government of Panem is able to maintain its control over the districts, creating a dependency and subjugating its citizens.

To further establish dependency upon the dominant powers, the government holds a monopoly on all goods. Each district specializes in a different area of production: District 1, luxury goods; District 4, fishing; District 5, power generation; District 11, agriculture; District 12, coal; etc. However, the products are transported "directly...to the trains" which take them to the Capitol for distribution (11), giving the Capitol complete monopoly over the goods and forcing insecurity upon the districts. Additionally, "travel between the districts is strictly forbidden except for officially sanctioned duties" (41) and communication restricted "because even [if] the information seems harmless, [the Capitol] do[es]n't want people in different districts to know about one another" (203). By dividing the country and limiting communication between the districts, the Capitol is better able to control the country as a whole. Without access to information, the population does not know how bad it is throughout the country, that even the districts that

“grow the food” are starving and “whip[ed]...[while] everyone else watch[es]” if they eat the crops (202). This strategy decreases the probability of a rebellion by both minimizing how bad things are and fostering jealousy between the districts, redirecting anger that would otherwise be aimed at the Capitol.

By monopolizing the goods needed to survive, restricting individuals’ ability to get these resources in other ways, and criminalizing all attempts to overcome these restrictions, the Capitol limits District civilians’ options to “dying of hunger and a bullet in the head” (17). These dire stakes demonstrate the Capitol’s desire to make survival a full-time job so that citizens are too preoccupied and tired to rebel (Dror 176): as Katniss states it does not matter what the truth is because it doesn’t “help [her] get food on the table” (42) and she is “too sad and tired” to question current systems anyways (294). Although they are fundamentally different economic systems, the Capitol’s monopoly over consumer goods is comparable to capitalism in regards to the vulnerability and economic inequality imposed on the general population when corrupt agents, whether government or business, dominate the market. Such narratives of dominance are informed and supported by patriarchal ideologies. As previously argued in the chapters about *The Testing* and *Uglies*, defining masculinity as hyper-separated from femininity results in actions such as compassion, cooperation, and passivity being deemed weak and feminine; correspondingly, aggressive actions that result in dominance are interpreted as strong and masculine. Economic dominion, whether on behalf of government or business bodies, is therefore inevitably informed by gendered societal norms. Patriarchal ideologies are present in both the novel and the current capitalist economic and political system of America; the poverty and dependency in *The Hunger Games* acts a critical

depiction of the devastating effects of systemic domination encouraged by such ideologies.

The greatest Capitol weapon, however, is the Hunger Games, which has effectively established a sense of futility, fear, and despair within the districts for the past “seventy-four years” (19). The reaping, at which the tributes are chosen, not only allows the Capitol to “keep tabs on the population” (16) but also to subjugate the poor. The reaping system is “unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it” (13): if “you are poor and starving...[y]ou can opt to add your name more times in exchange for tesserae...a meager year’s supply of grain and oil for one person” (13), meaning that those in poverty are more likely to get chosen. Even more insidious, the system is psychologically manipulative—individuals can opt to add their names for “each member of [their] family as well” which makes the parents complicit in risking their child’s life for their own gain (even if that gain is necessary for survival). This complicity makes it less likely that individuals will fight to abolish the system because doing so would make it harder to justify earlier compliance, thereby guiltning them into continuing with the system. Regardless of economic status, as Katniss states, “the real message is clear. ‘Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you’” (19). Though the Games are a punishment, “[t]o make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires [people] to treat the Hunger Games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others” (19), as entertaining and celebratory. Additionally, to “remind people that the Hunger Games never really go away” there are victory ceremonies in each district as well, where “everyone will have to pretend to love [the victors]”, further adding to the humiliation

and spectacle of the games (370). This system creates an oppressive sense of futility and despair within the Districts, reinforcing the authoritarian rule of the Capitol: “[t]aking the kids from [the] districts, forcing them to kill one another while [the districts] watch...is the Capitol’s way of reminding [district civilians] how totally [they] are at [the Capitol’s] mercy. How little chance [the districts] would stand of surviving another rebellion” (18).

In addition to impressing their own vulnerability upon them, the Hunger Games also decreases the fighting population of the districts and ensures that the strong survivors of the games “receive[] a life of ease back home”, giving them less reason to fight against the Capitol (19). However, to maintain control over the victors and make sure that even the strongest of the tributes do not get any false ideas of invincibility, they are forced to relive the games every year as mentors for the new contestants; the powerlessness and futility that this system pushes upon the victors is best exemplified by Haymitch Abernathy, Peeta and Katniss’s trainer, who became a drunk after “mentor[ing] two kids and then watch[ing] them die. Year after year after year” became “unbearable” (306). For the victors, Districts, and Capitol citizens, the Hunger Games distracts the population from the contexts that surround their life and makes [them] easy to manipulate” (Dror 185), much like the preoccupation with beauty in *Uglies*. As Dror notes, readers “will be able to see and question” (185) the novel and “how the Capitol controls dissemination of information via television, propaganda, the use of celebrity, and other forms of media” (186-187) as a representation of current sociopolitical issues. Ultimately, the Capitol’s complete control over the districts is a hyperbolized representation of the flaws of a patriarchal system based on dominance, and accordingly reflects the current state of despair within society.

## 4.2 Environmental Critique

*The Hunger Games* is set in Panem, a country made up of “a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts” “that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America” following “the disasters, the drought, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, [and] the brutal war for what little sustenance remained” (18). This history mimics both current environmental challenges and those forecast to occur as the climate warms, and therefore implicitly indicates that the patriarchal and anthropocentric sociopolitical culture has brought about the climate crisis. The history of Panem states that the newly formed country “brought peace and prosperity to its citizens”; however, the “Dark Days” that followed wherein the districts rose against the Capitol contests this story (18). The uprising ended with twelve of the districts defeated, “the thirteenth [district] obliterated”, a “Treaty of Treason [which purportedly] gave...new laws to guarantee peace and, as [a] yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated,...the Hunger Games” (18). The disparity between the recount of history provided by the Capitol and Katniss’s lived reality illustrates the domineering authoritarian rule of the Capitol. Katniss is only able to develop her own relationship with nature because she leaves the boundaries set by the Capitol, allowing her to access “prohibited knowledge and skills (such as flora and fauna lore and hunting with a bow”—nature “allows Katniss to both understand and undermine the dystopian regime that presides over Panem” (Dror 177). Through Katniss and the dystopian society that she lives in, *The Hunger Games* invites critical consideration of the current sociocultural relationship with nature and the human/nature dualism purported by anthropocentric ideologies (Dror 179). Clearly, the mistakes of the past North America

are repeated within this new society, with Katniss suppressed by a corrupt and flawed patriarchal government and the environment exploited by an anthropocentric culture.

The Capitol's relationship with nature is wholly anthropocentric and shows no improvement over the relationship held before the fall of North America despite the crisis largely being environmental and most probably anthropogenic. For example, Panem continues to mine coal in District 12 (41), indicating that the new country hasn't redefined its relationship with nature. Dror compares the Capitol with the Districts to conclude that "modern Western civilization [is] vilified in direct with older forms of labor, such as hunting and gathering, bartering, and a generally honest work ethic" (181). Such a conclusion, however, fails to realize that the Districts are a part of the Capitol's system; idyllic pastoral societies are not glorified in *The Hunger Games*: the Districts are impoverished, starving, and (like the Capitol) separated from nature. Instead, like in *The Testing* and *Uglies*, the novel suggests that people reform their relationship with nature to make it more reciprocal, based on an ethic of care. The dominant government of *The Hunger Games* manipulates and exploits their surrounding environment for their pleasure and advantage. Perhaps the best example of this is the numerous genetically-engineered species, or "*muttations*" that the Capitol created as "weapons" (42). Two such species are described in the novel, the first being jabberjays, which, being able to "memorize and repeat whole human conversations", were used to spy on "the Capitol's enemies" during the rebellion (43), and the second being tracker jackers, large "killer wasps...spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war" which are known to track their victims and whose venom raises "lump[s] the size of a plum on contact" and cause "hallucinations...[that] have actually driven people to madness"

(185). These “muttations” (42) illustrate the anthropocentric dominance that the Capitol feels towards the environment, since they are willing to exploit and manipulate nature for their benefit.

Further illustrating the sense of dominance that the Capitol enforces over nature are the many instances where the Capitol manipulates the environment of the arena. The “Gamemakers” (286), those who determine both the layout of the arena each year and what occurs in the arena, rig “certain areas of the arena...for certain attacks” (176). Within the arena, wildfires with “an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made” destroy areas of the forest and animals within the environment, “rabbits and deer, and...even...a wild dog pack” (172), are left to flee as best they can all for the entertainment of the Capitol, because “[t]hings have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. [And t]he audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness” (173). No consideration is given to the flora or fauna of the arena. The Gamemakers control every aspect of the environment within the arena, including rainfall (310), whether a moon is projected or hidden (310), and whether the streams overflow or are a “bone-dry bed” (326), to ensure that the Games are entertaining, so “they’re guaranteed a bloody fight to the death with nothing to block their view” (327). The “surreal world of the arena where the authenticity of everything is to be doubted” by those in the Games (310), where “[f]easts always result in fatalities” (279), only bolsters the Capitol’s sense of anthropocentric arrogance and authoritarian dominance. Even the general population of the Capitol are so self-absorbed and distanced from survival that “even though they[] rattl[e] on about the Games, it’s all about where they were or what they were doing or

how they felt when a specific event occurred...Everything is about them, not the dying boys and girls in the arena” (354) and most certainly not about the environment in which they die in; those in the Capitol have become so distanced from survival that it has become entertainment. The Hunger Games merely reinforces this illusory hyper-separation, and thus the Capitol’s superiority over nature, by controlling every natural aspect of the arena.

Perhaps even more damning, the Hunger Games illustrates that those in power *know* what is necessary for survival but, instead of using this knowledge to recognize their own dependence on nature, are so comfortable in their own prosperity that they are willing to manipulate the survival of others, thus reinforcing their patriarchal as well as anthropocentric dominance. For instance, the first sixty seconds of the Games has all twenty-four tributes spread “equidistant” from a “Cornucopia...spilling over with the things that will give [the tributes] life...in the area. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire starters...[and] other supplies, their value decreasing the farther they are from the horn” (148). This scene is representative of the relationship between the Capitol and the Districts: the District tributes surround a symbol of plenty controlled by the Capitol and are forced to fight amongst themselves for the scraps. The Capitol’s manipulation of resources is illustrative of its separation from nature: since they live in luxury, they are able to use and exploit natural resources for their entertainment. In the arena, tributes are left “[s]tarving, weak from injuries, trying not to reopen wounds” (299), while in the Capitol, citizens are able to pay “exorbitant amount[s]” of money to send their favourite tributes rich stews complete with “silverware and plates” (303); ultimately, the surreal juxtaposition between the starving tributes and the wealthy

Capitol, enjoying their struggle from their comfortable homes, illustrates just how separated those in power have become from nature in their luxury. While the tributes, and by extension the Districts, are forced to recognize their own vulnerability and embodiment in their struggle for survival, the Capitol further separates itself from nature and flaunts its arrogance by manipulating the environment to make their struggle more difficult. Through the Hunger Games, the Capitol imposes their anthropocentric and authoritarian dominance.

In comparison, Katniss is wholly embodied and she recognizes her relationship with nature as necessary, something that must be both respectful and mutually beneficial to maintain her survival. Unlike *Uglies'* Tally, who must undergo an ideological transformation, Katniss is depicted throughout the series as “in sync with nature, appreciating it, understanding it, and using it to take a stance against the Capitol” (Kniesler 21). Katniss is defined by her relationship to nature: she is a “girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob” (371). From her mother she learned apothecary plants, “their names, where to gather them, when they came in bloom, their medicinal uses” (50) and from her father she learned “[p]lants for eating...[d]andelions, pokeweed, wild onions, pines” (50) as well as how to hunt. Moreover, upon her father’s death, eleven-year-old Katniss became the sole provider of her family, as her mother fell into a depression (26-27), and her experience with starvation as she struggled to survive for the first couple of months until she became a more capable hunter-gatherer impressed her reliance on nature upon her: “[t]he woods became our saviour, and each day I went a bit farther into its arms. It was slow-going at first, but I was determined to feed us. I stole eggs from nests, caught fish in nets, and gathered the various plants that sprung up

beneath my feet...I kept up alive” (51). Far from being a pastoral idyll, Katniss’s struggles to put food on the table emphasize the luxury of surplus: even “hunting daily, there are still nights when game has to be swapped for lard or shoelaces or wool, still nights when [her and her family] go to bed with [their] stomachs growling” (9). However, “[t]he meat and plants from the woods combined with the exertion it [takes] to get them have given [Katniss] a healthier body than most” (94), so while her life might not be easy or idyllic, *The Hunger Games* presents living in tandem with nature and recognizing one’s reliance on nature as beneficial for both humans and the environment, strengthening the one and ensuring the conservation of the other.

Katniss’s embodiment is only further impressed upon her, and the reader, once she enters the Games. In the Hunger Games, the tributes become one with their environment — reliant on its resources and equivalent with any other prey or predator within its ecosystem. When dehydrated, Katniss is reassured that the “rabbit [she] startled earlier [in the day]...has to drink too [and she] just ha[s] to find out where” (154), illustrating that she is just an animal too. When she hears the “occasional hoot or howl” of “[n]ight creatures”, she is reminded both that “[she’ll] be competing with natural predators for the rabbits” and that she might “be viewed as a source of food” as well, that “any number of animals [could be] stalking [her] at this moment” (155); in equating herself with nature, Katniss reaffirms her and the other tributes’ place within the ecosystem and destabilizes the anthropocentric hyper-separation in which humans are “not conceived ecologically as part of a system of exchange of nutrition and never available as food...to other animals” (Plumwood, “Gender” 53). She both hunts and is hunted (214). Katniss is repeatedly reminded of her body through her vulnerability to the

cold (158), dehydration (170), starvation, and her injuries (198) and forced to both prioritize her body's needs and recognize her reliance on nature to meet those needs: "I crash into the trees, repeatedly swiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am" (289). Moreover, the Games are a reminder that both she and nature are subjugated, oppressed, and dominated by the Capitol. Katniss isn't from the "the artificial candy Capitol" (104) where they "do surgery...to make people appear younger and thinner" (124), where "[w]rinkles aren't desirable. A round belly isn't a sign of success" (125), and pastoral life is idealized; for her, survival is difficult, namely because the Capitol inflicts difficult circumstances upon the Districts including "years of watching tributes starve, freeze, bleed, and dehydrate to death" (169). In the arena, as in the Districts, Katniss is part of the ecosystem, manipulated and controlled by the anthropocentric and authoritarian government of the Capitol.

Perhaps the best example of how both the tributes and nature are dominated by the Capitol is the Gamemaker's finale. The grand finale of the Hunger Games has the remaining tributes chased and mauled by dogs genetically-engineered to resemble the fallen tributes:

"in that moment I realize what else unsettled me about the mutts. The green eyes glowering at me are unlike any dog or wolf, any canine I've ever seen. They are unmistakably human...I notice the collar with the number *1* inlaid with jewels and the whole horrible thing hits me...it's Glimmer...Teeth bared in hatred...It's them. It's all of them. The others. Rue and Foxface and...all the other tributes[.]" (333-334)

Although the tributes are compared to animals throughout the novel, the end of the Games has them literally transformed into animals. This not only equates humans with animals, illustrating their embeddedness, but also demonstrates the Capitol's anthropocentric and underlying patriarchal arrogance in that they dominate both the tributes and nature for their own entertainment and gain. Conflating nature and the tributes in such an unnatural way is also incredibly psychologically manipulative, leaving Katniss and Peeta to wonder "What [the Capitol did] to them?", if the mutts have "their real eyes?", or if they have "been programmed to hate [Katniss and Peeta's] faces particularly because [they] have survived and [the other tributes] have been so callously murdered?" (334). This psychological manipulation further emphasizes their vulnerability, that they are not "*more than just a piece in [the Capitol's] Games*" (236) no matter how much they would like to "show the Capitol that whatever they do or force [them] to do there is a part of every tribute they can't own" (237). Further, by turning the tributes into animals, the Capitol reinforces that its citizens are distinct from those in the districts, more evolved and separated from nature. Although the novel clearly illustrates how morally corrupt and unsustainable the ideologies of the government are, the Games exemplify the anthropocentric and patriarchal dominance of the Capitol.

#### 4.3 Social Critique

Upon first entering the Capitol, Katniss describes the "grandeur" of the city: the "magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air, the shiny cars that roll down the wide paved streets, the oddly dressed people with bizarre hair and painted faces who have never missed a meal" (59); to her, "[a]ll the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to eyes, like the

flat round disk of har candy [she] can never afford to buy at the tiny sweet shop in District 12” (59) because her district does not have access to the luxuries and technologies of the Capitol. The Capitol has the technology to make “skintight, flesh-colored mesh...high-grade body armor” (335), create highly specialized animal “muttations” (42), completely restore hearing to a deaf ear (349), remove decades worth of scars “without a trace” (351), and heal “starving, wounded, mess[es]” of people on the verge of death within a few days (350), yet the districts starve and are reliant on herbal apothecaries because “almost no one can afford doctors” (8); the socioeconomic disparity between the Capitol and the districts is so vast, in fact, that Katniss could only identify the material of the couch in the Justice Building, “the richest place [she’d] ever been in” before going to the Capitol, as velvet because her mother had “a dress with a collar made of the stuff” (34). In contrasting the circumstances of Capitol and District citizens, the availability of such technology and wealth confined within a small portion of society is shown to be a morally corrupt way of forcing vulnerability upon a specific population.

Throughout the novel the opulence of the Capitol is repeatedly contrasted with the poverty of the districts; Panem is clearly meant to mirror present-day America, with the Capitol representing the overt wasteful, consumerist culture of the wealthy and the districts representing those required to support such wealth. Illustrating the economic disparity in terms of food, when Katniss is in the Capitol, she dissects one of her meals to determine how she might mimic it in the District:

The top splits and from below rises a second tabletop that holds our lunch.

Chicken and chunks of oranges cooked in a creamy sauce laid on a bed of pearly white grain, tiny green peas and onions, rolls shaped like flowers, and for dessert,

a pudding the color of honey. I try to imagine assembling this meal myself back home...Days of hunting and gathering for this one meal and even then it would be a poor substitute for the Capitol version. What it must be like, I wonder, to live in a world where food appears at the press of a button? How would I spend the hours I now commit to combing the woods for sustenance if it were so easy to come by?  
(65)

Upon her comparison, Katniss states that “[t]he whole rotten lot of them is despicable” for luxuriating in their life of ease and surplus while those who support their lifestyle starve (65). This is a direct criticism of the economic disparity within North America, and probably between the Global West and third world countries. Moreover, the effort that Katniss would have to expend to replicate the meal illustrates how unsustainable such an obnoxiously luxurious and wasteful lifestyle is, both in terms of the natural resources and labour it exploits. By illustrating the moral corruptness and unsustainability of the Capitol, *The Hunger Games* criticizes the anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies that support and defines such a government and society.

Beyond the obvious inequality between the Capitol and the districts, however, there is also a deeper analysis of the government’s malevolent role in this disparity. The reaping system of the Hunger Games requires “every citizen in all twelve districts in the entire country of Panem” to enter their names between the ages of twelve and eighteen, with the entries being cumulative; however, impoverished individuals can enter their names more times in exchange for tesserae, “a meager year’s supply of grain and oil for one person,” for each member of their family (13). This system unequally affects the impoverished, but, even more malevolently, it encourages a wrongful misdirection of

anger and resentment from the government responsible for the games and poverty towards the merchant class of the districts. Gale, Katniss's friend and hunting partner, explicitly states that "the tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in [the] district[s]. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam [the poorest region of District 12] and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure [they] will never trust one another," that "[i]t's to the Capitol's advantage to have [them] divided among [themselves]" (14); however, as illustrated by Katniss's response that ranting "doesn't change anything. It doesn't make things fair. It doesn't fill [their] stomachs" (14), the powerlessness of those in the districts towards the Capitol ensures that, even though they know their resentment is misdirected, the district poor are unlikely able to help funnelling their frustration. This false separation of working and merchant classes in District 12 is perhaps best illustrated by Peeta's disclosure that "practically everything [his family] eat[s] is stale" and Katniss's resulting revelation that she "assumed the shopkeepers live[d] a soft life" and that even though "Peeta has always had enough to eat...there's something kind of depressing about living your life on stale bread, the hard dry loaves no one else wanted" (309-310). Ultimately, *The Hunger Games* reflects the ugly truth of socioeconomic inequality in present-day society, the disparity between the truly wealthy and the poor, and the resulting manipulative misdirection of anger.

The despair felt by those in the districts is heightened by the role of media in the novel. *The Hunger Games* includes a critical portrayal of media and spectacle in society. The Hunger Games are the "institution that keeps the Capitol in power...Panem's primary consumer product" (Dror 176). Broadcasting the Games is dual-purposed: in addition to striking fear into the districts, the forced spectacle of the Hunger Games

affirms the fear that the Capitol's general population feels towards the districts and their "barbarism" (74) by turning each tribute into "some kind of monster that [they're] not" (141). Affirming these fears also justifies the Games to Capitol residents, and removes responsibility for the brutality from the Capitol to the tributes. For the districts, attendance is "mandatory," with officials imprisoning those not engaging with the spectacle (16). The air of celebration —touting of the "glory" and "spirit of the Games!" (23)— mandated by the state merely adds humiliation to the torture, illustrating that the districts' citizens are completely at the mercy of the Capitol. Forcing the districts to perform and treat the Hunger Games as a sporting event increases and reinforces their fear, vulnerability, and subordination. For example, upon being selected Katniss reiterates the common Hunger Games saying that "the odds are not in [her] favor today" (25). Firstly, 'odds' implies an act of fate and while there is uncertainty as to who among the districts children will be chosen, the inevitability of someone being chosen, as mandated by law, contradicts this implication. The potent mixture of uncertainty and inevitability heightens the districts' fear and despair. Secondly, there is a great discrepancy between the narrative of the Games and the reality. The 'odds' Katniss refers to can mean either survival and wealth or a brutal, televised death, with probability heavily favouring the latter; the Games are not fun, but literally a matter of life and death. Celebrating the Games as games distorts reality, dissociating the tributes and district citizens from their experiences and diminishing the value of their lives and trauma. The discrepancy between the spectacle and reality of the Games thereby reinforces the tributes' sense of humiliation and powerlessness. Thirdly, forcing the districts to perform for the Games impresses their subordination upon them, especially since the poor are more likely to be

selected and performance is both mandatory and designed for the entertainment of the wealthy. That Katniss “volunteer[s] as tribute” (22) to protect her sister only highlights how incongruous the narrative and reality of the Games are, and likewise illustrates the subordination, vulnerability, and fear felt by the districts. The discrepancy between the surreal world of the games and the reality of them continues throughout the spectacle. Peeta and Katniss, along with the other tributes, are required to play into the games: making themselves more beautiful to increase their chance of gaining sponsors (58), blowing kisses into the crowd in the hopes of gaining “a little extra help, some food, the right weapon” in the arena (70), holding hands to “present[ them]selves not as adversaries but as friends” while wearing “fiery costumes” in the hopes of distinguishing themselves from the other tributes (79), and forced to become the “girl who was on fire” (67) and the “star-crossed lovers” (135) in hopes of keeping Capitol attention. Televising the Games reinforces the districts’ vulnerability and subordination, heightening their sense of despair with yet “[a]nother reminder of [their] weakness...Another reason to keep inside the fence of District 12” (186).

The showmanship and artificiality of the Games is so surreal and distanced from the reality that Effie, Katniss and Peeta’s liaison, compares pretending to be civil in the face of someone who aggravates you with doing so among people “betting on how long [you’ll] live” (115). The illusion erected by television somehow separates the Capitol from the tributes to the extent that “quiet, bloodless deaths” are “considered very anticlimactic” (39) whereas the “real fun” (36), the “real sport of the Hunger Games is watching the tributes kill one another...[in] manipulating [them] into confronting one another face-to-face” (177) to “die a bloody death while the crowds urge on [the] killer”

(80). The games are normalized to the extent that the deaths are no longer considered “murder” (308) but entertainment, compassion and pity are erased and at “the climax of the Hunger Games...the audience expects a show” (337). Perhaps the best example of this normalization is the contrast between the Capitol’s ability to view Haymitch, an ex-tribute, as an “old friend” (305), while simultaneously enjoying the deaths in the arena, such as Cato’s slow mauling until he resembles a “raw hunk of meat” (341). In recounting the final death of the seventy-fourth Hunger Games, Katniss states

“From the Gamemakers’ point of view, [Cato’s death] is the final word in entertainment. It goes on and on and eventually consumes my mind, blocking out memories and hopes for tomorrow, erasing everything but the present, which I begin to believe will never change. There will never be anything but cold and fear and the agonizing sounds of the boy dying”. (339)

This quotation succinctly depicts how televising the games reinforces the subjugation and fear of the districts while creating a boundary separating them from the dominant government. In the end, televising the Hunger Games creates an illusory barrier between the Capitol and district citizens of Panem, effectively increasing entertainment of one and the torture of the other.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*The Testing*, *Uglies*, and *The Hunger Games* all reflect current sociopolitical issues, including government corruption and environmental crisis. In addition, *The Testing* mirrors and critiques restricting access to education and idealization of the past, *Uglies* the high valuation of and preoccupation with beauty, and *The Hunger Games* socioeconomic disparity and the role of media and spectacle within society. In reframing these issues within a future-situated society, these novels illustrate that these issues are caused by the flawed underlying anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies that define current government and society; by making these future societies dystopian, the novels critique the current state of society. Furthermore, by contrasting the dominant societies with those fought for by the female protagonists, these novels illustrate not only that these ideologies are flawed and unsustainable, but also that they are replaceable. This counteracts the passivity brought on by despair, illustrating that humans are not doomed to repeat past mistakes, and encourages the redefinition of humans' relationship with each other and nature.

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