

## **Will the Odds Ever Be in Her Favor? Katniss Everdeen and the Female Athlete**

**Tony Kemerly**

High Point University

High Point, North Carolina, USA

[skemerly@highpoint.edu](mailto:skemerly@highpoint.edu)

### **ABSTRACT**

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a specific issue. One subset of autoethnography, critical autoethnography, combines the narrative or storytelling aspect of autoethnography with critical theory approaches in order to gain illustrate for the reader a specific site of oppression within one's culture. Through an examination of the books and films of *The Hunger Games*' saga, this paper will examine the interaction between students and professor in regard to the journey of the female athlete through the power dynamic prevalent in the social milieu of sport culture today. For both Katniss and the female athlete, a specific gender representation has been accepted by society and assigned to women; thus, placing constraints on her and her actions by controlling her representation. It is this attempt at control over the female athlete that is the focus of this critical autoethnography. Institutionalized patriarchal practices such as these are faced by Katniss and the female athlete within Panem and the world of sport, respectively. These metaphorically similar norms and rituals reinforce the notion of a perceived superiority of the male athlete through adherence to socially constructed and strictly enforced gender norms that are the site of a constant battle faced by the female athlete today.

**Keywords:** women's sports, pop culture, power, gender, autoethnography, student experience

At first glance, the fictional world of *The Hunger Games* created by author Suzanne Collins and the real world of sports today may not seem to have a lot in common. Technically, both worlds revolve around competition, albeit one has much higher stakes than the other. Upon further examination, however, more similarities between these worlds emerge. A few years ago, while teaching a course titled “Culture of Fitness,” I noticed students growing frustrated and examining the assigned material less and less as the semester progressed, primarily because no one saw a real connection between themselves and the subject matter. Rather than continue with methods that were not connecting with these students, I decided to utilize a reading with which all were familiar and challenge them to make connections themselves. When we chose to examine *The Hunger Games*, the shift to incorporate popular culture into the course renewed students’ interest, as well as provided some unexpected results.

I initially imagined that using *The Hunger Games* in the course would lead to an examination of gym culture, social media and “Fitspiration,” and issues related to gender, race, and sexuality in sport. However, this particular class included a significant number of women who were members of the university’s D-I athletic teams. These student athletes not only found different connections than I had made, but their insights also shone a spotlight on my own biased point of view, which was certainly influenced by my past experiences as a white male in sport. Almost from the beginning of examining the text, the athletes in class began to draw connections between President Snow and the NCAA. Between the Department of Athletics and their coaches. Between the Capitol and a rabid fan base that expects feminine beauty simultaneously with high level sport performance. Between Career tributes and those athletes who receive preferential treatment because of their privilege. The text revealed many more underlying issues to which the athletes could relate than I realized.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, was a character with whom the female athletes could best relate, for she endured oppression and subordination similar to that which female athletes face today. The institutionalized patriarchal practices that Katniss and female athletes encounter within Panem and the real world of sport, respectively, utilize metaphorically similar norms and rituals to reinforce the notion of superiority of the male athlete. Through adherence to socially constructed and strictly enforced gender norms, the world of sports reveals a constant battle faced by female athletes today. This battle is the focus of this critical autoethnography, which will examine the books and films of *The Hunger Games* saga. More specifically, the voice of its protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, serves as an allegory for the journey taken by the female athlete (referred to simply as “athlete” in the remainder of this paper), through the power dynamic prevalent in the social milieu of sport and fitness culture today.

### **“THEY HAVE TOO MANY ADVANTAGES”: PRIVILEGE AND THE MALE ATHLETE**

In *The Hunger Games*, author Suzanne Collins tells the story of the country of Panem, a dystopian depiction of future North America, born after an uprising by the districts that was quelled by the Capitol. The country of Panem is divided into 13 nation-states (12 of which are operational) referred to as districts; each of these districts is responsible for providing the Capitol with the goods of an industry dictated to that area by the Capitol. All districts are subject to the command of the Capitol, led by tyrannical dictator President Coriolanus Snow. The districts have no influence on the politics of Panem and very limited control over their own districts. As a reminder of the Capitol’s unassailable power, the districts are forced to supply, through a lottery, one boy and one girl aged 12 to 18 to compete in the “Hunger Games.” The children are allowed to train for a week before being sent into an arena of the Capitol’s creation to fight to the death in a televised event that is mandatory viewing for everyone in the districts. The last person standing at the end of the games is then celebrated and given a privileged position in society.

The root of the war being waged by both Katniss and the women of my classroom is the automatic privilege afforded to those aligned with the Capitol and its metaphorical corollary, the male athlete. One of the

ancillary readings for the course that struck a chord with the students came from French philosopher Michel Foucault, who stated that privilege typically exists in a form of perceived superiority, which is indicative of a type of power that “applies itself to everyday life, categorizes the individual and marks them by their own individuality, attaches them to their own identity, imposes a law of truth on them that they must recognize, and others recognize in them” (46). I initially interpreted this passage as generically highlighting the privilege that an athlete in a social environment often enjoys, a type of “perceived superiority” in the form of increased leeway with disciplinary action. The women of the class also saw this, but they expressed a deeper connection to the passage. They saw sport through the eyes of Laura Burton, who stated that this type of power is inherent within sport and shapes gender expectations and their concomitant performances by encouraging the exhibition of traits that reproduce traditional values of masculinity, which are responsible for, among other things, subordinating women (156). To them, their inferior positioning in both the world of sport and in society manifests in characteristics such as their “soccer thighs” and “lacrosse shoulders,” which marks their bodies in way that society at large deems inferior to the prescribed feminine norm, and that the sports world sees as a girl trying to play a man’s game. They found this argument particularly problematic—their bodies became a symbol of their violation of social norms, which are quite difficult to argue against.

Upon closer scrutiny, *The Hunger Games* reveals a similar patriarchy-enforcing construction in the world of sport that privileges the male tributes in the book. The power referenced by Foucault (46) and experienced by Katniss and the women in my class, have broad social implications for the athlete, making her vulnerable to patriarchal control that influences her gender performances. While this lends itself to a binary view of gender, it cannot be dismissed as an archaic discourse. Certainly, both today’s 21st century culture and 22nd century Panem have become more gender inclusive and have loosened the constraints of an unyielding traditional gender binary. However, within the patriarchal control inherent in the world of sport and *The Hunger Games*, the gender binary and its accompanying roles and expectations is still apparent. The cultural expectations surrounding gender performance and expectations abound in the districts of Panem, just as they do in society today. Katniss was aware of the roles expected of her — for example, she noticed that Peeta and his brothers were taught wrestling in school, while she did not receive any similar training. Furthermore, she noticed the boys in Panem are conditioned to be aggressive and fight, while that behavior in girls is forbidden (Henthorne 50). These cultural norms are then extended into the environment of the Hunger Games, where male tributes display aggression through their use of swords, spears, tridents, and other melee weapons, while female tributes utilize less confrontational weapons such as guile, stealth, and distance weapons such as throwing knives or a bow and arrow.

Similarly, the athlete today is subjected to different expectations than her male counterparts for performing a variety of sports, from tennis to mixed martial arts (MMA). Within the world of tennis, John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, Nick Kyrgios, and Andy Roddick are notorious for smashing racquets, having on-court tantrums, intentionally hitting balls at the umpire, even drug use, yet they are known as the “bad boys” of tennis and fans cannot get enough of their antics. However, at the 2018 U.S. Open, Serena Williams, arguably more successful than any of these men, was fined \$17,000 for smashing a racquet and arguing with the umpire when he accused her of cheating. Similarly, former undefeated Women’s Ultimate Fighting Champion (UFC) Ronda Rousey was constantly berated by viewers for acting in ways deemed unsportsmanlike. Rousey’s “unsportsmanlike” behaviors consisted of discussing her love of pre-fight sex, commenting on the attractiveness of her body, getting into fights with men, and challenging boxers to winner-take-all fights. Similarly, the athletes in my class shared their experiences of feeling scrutinized for their behavior off the field, stating that their social media accounts were monitored by their coaches and the university to ensure that they were behaving in ways deemed “appropriate.” They were unaware of any such policy for male athletes.

The cultural attitudes that reward male dominance in Panem also resonated with the students. Katniss' fear of entering her district's trading market, "The Hob," without her father by her side was familiar to some of the athletes who recalled similar situations of being fearful during their initial forays into sport when they did not have an older brother or father to navigate the difficulties they would face. Katniss describes how after her father died in a mining explosion, she would wear his clothes and tuck her braid into her cap when entering The Hob, in effect, masking her femininity so that she would be taken seriously as a trader who had a place in the marketplace. Katniss' experiences are much like those of the athlete who needs to, in their words, "not be girly" to avoid being categorized as a "normal girl" and not a serious athlete, thereby risking being categorized by the type of power referenced by Foucault, in which the "truth" of their inferiority is recognized by others.

Privilege is expressed, often subtly, in the language accompanying gender. Just as Katniss notes within the Hunger Games that while the Career tributes are technically no different than the tributes from the other districts and have the same rules applied to them, for those throughout Panem, it is well-known that the Career tributes are privileged over those from the "regular" districts through greater access to expert skills training and conditioning, food, and time. Similarly, despite the fact that males and females play many of the same sports and thus perform many of the same acts, the connotation of the separation is identification of the norm ("athlete") and derivation from the norm ("female athlete"). For example, the language of sport informs the individual that men play "basketball" and "soccer," but women play "women's basketball" and "women's soccer." Despite the fact that both sports are played by men and women, the language surrounding the performance of the sports creates a gendered division within society, thus privileging one set of athletes (male) over the other (female). These linguistic separations serve to naturalize a difference between men's and women's sports in the minds of its viewers and creates a connotation that the men's and women's "versions" of the sport are decidedly different. Thus, it is implied that one must be better than the other, with the attached linguistic apparatus signaling to society that the "pure" version is superior, and those who perform it are also superior to those who do not. Language such as this is used to describe both Katniss and the athlete, illustrating the privileging power that language holds.

### **"THEY'RE JUST TOO STRONG": POWER AND THE MALE ATHLETE**

Patriarchal control is evident in sport through discourses that are congruent with hegemonic masculinity, thus rewarding hypermasculine, heterosexual men. Furthermore, discourses such as these marginalize women by building a world that is ultimately masculine and heterosexual, naturalizing the patriarchal organization of sport (Spaaij et al. 401). This worldview creates tension between femininity and athleticism today (Musto and McGann 102; George 322). This tension arises from the pressures layered upon the athlete's body, as it requires a constant state of ontological contradiction: she must possess a functional, athletic body that will allow for success within her sport, while simultaneously possessing an aesthetically pleasing body that meets the expectations of the entrenched traditional gender roles. Additionally, she must demonstrate the behaviors and attitudes needed to be successful in her sport, while simultaneously demonstrating the socially appropriate behaviors and attitudes expected by traditional feminine gender roles. In other words, the athlete must have a body and behavior that occupy both sides of the binary simultaneously — a difficult task, to be sure.

The power of masculinity over the domain of sport is in many ways similar to the control of personal expression that the Capitol has over the citizens of Panem. In describing a time when she was younger, Katniss recalled that she would often scare her mother by speaking out against how unfair the Capitol was to the people of District 12. Upon learning that this would cause more trouble, she decided to "hold my tongue and turn my features into an indifferent mask [...] Do my work quietly in school. Make only polite small talk in the public market" (Collins 6). This passage spoke to many of the athletes in the class who saw a similarity in

their own lives when as girls, they questioned why they could not play with the boys or be on their team. This type of questioning, they shared, was met differently depending on their ages. As young girls, most responses were dismissive of their ideas based on the surety that those ideas would change once they became interested in boys. However, once adolescence was reached, the responses to their desires to play sports and be athletic became more caustic. Sexuality was often questioned with the threat of being perceived as homosexual often used as a cudgel to force more appropriate behaviors. For many, they shared that this often pushed them into a position where they would attempt to create two personas: the on-field athlete and an hyperfeminine off-field persona that would be used to negate any critiques of their athleticism. For those who continued to identify as “athlete” and not “female athlete,” they related that they often faced social ostracization and found sanctuary with those teammates who were undergoing the same type of treatment, finding acceptance among their teammates while enduring social sanctions. The students who relayed these experiences took issue with the ideas presented by Stephen Franzoi (417) and Kayoung Kim and Michael Sagas (124), who described the female body as an object constructed of discrete parts that exists to be observed, categorized, and evaluated for the purposes of aestheticism; the students expressed that this interpretation limits their ability, as well as that of Katniss, to act in a way that they, not society, deem appropriate.

Challenging the privilege inherent in the hegemonic masculinity of the male athlete in the manner of Katniss and the athlete is difficult, as gender performance is not, as Judith Butler argued, a “wholly voluntary” (139), socially constructed, theoretical concept that can be ignored. Rather, as the students in the class repeatedly pointed out, gender becomes a construct not solely controlled by the individual, particularly considering gender as subject to the power described by Foucault (46) which “applies itself to everyday life, categorizes the individual and marks them by their own individuality, attaches them to their own identity, imposes a law of truth on them that they must recognize, and others recognize in them.” Consequently, gender performances and their associated identities become a physical reality inscribed onto bodies, expected to be maintained and performed correctly under threat of punishment (Haslanger 159; Johansson 43). In Katniss’ world, the punishment for violations of expected norms is typically death; for the athlete, the coercion is more subtle. Furthermore, although punishment is not as overt, the culturally constructed difference between men and women is framed as “natural” by the mass media, which reifies a hegemonic hierarchy in which men are placed at the top of the social order (Hardin et al. 106; Shifflett et al. 125). It is phenomena such as these that contribute to the patriarchal control within sport culture.

### **“THEY ARE THE CAPITOL’S FAVORITES”: LIVING UNDER THE MALE GAZE**

Normalizing certain behaviors and practices reinforces “acceptable” performance standards of gender, which are then policed by a male gaze that insists women treat their bodies as objects of action, as opposed to the originators of action (Kotarba and Held 155). Not surprisingly, for the athlete this balance is quite difficult to achieve as the performance of hegemonically authorized femininity, as dictated by the patriarchy, possesses a narrowly defined balance of “acceptable” athleticism and concomitant muscularity (Dashper 354; Krane 116; Worthen and Baker 473). In this way, patriarchy subverts the athlete who asserts her agency physically through improved body functionality in the form of her athleticism (Markula 94).

In contrast, consider Katniss’ sister, Primrose Everdeen. The reader’s introduction to Prim is a description of her by Katniss who says, “Prim’s face is as fresh as a raindrop, as lovely as the primrose for which she was named” (Collins 3). In today’s world, Prim, as well as her mother who is described by Katniss as “very beautiful,” represent a hegemonically authorized femininity that is subject to the male gaze and thus encourages women to abide by socially constructed gender norms so that they are accepted by society. This portrayal of femininity, described by the athletes as more easily attained by “NARPs” (non-athletic regular

people), has a much greater societal acceptance, as evident in Katniss' description of Prim as someone who "no one can help loving" (Collins 24). However, the love that people have for Prim comes from a reiteration of "cumulative social practices" that, according to Judith Butler (140), further reinforce cultural norms; any attempts to change these performances of "appropriate" femininity typically result in strong normative reactions (Worthen and Dirks 107).

As an example of the ingrained nature of these "cumulative social practices," Katniss describes her fellow tributes in the way they are seen through the lens of the patriarchy: men are strong and capable; women are pleasing to the eye; and any variation from this theme is punished. For example, she describes Glimmer, the female tribute from District 1 as having "flowing blonde hair, emerald green eyes, her body tall and lush ... she's sexy all the way." The male tribute from District 2 as "the monstrous boy [who] is a ruthless killing machine." The female tribute from District 5 becomes "the 'fox-faced' girl [who] is sly and elusive." Rue is described as "dressed in a gossamer gown complete with wings, who flutters her way to Caesar." Finally, the male tribute from District 11, Thresh, is "one of the giants, probably six and a half feet tall and built like an ox" (Collins 45). Katniss' descriptions differentiate gender along binaristic lines. The male tributes are described according to their functional abilities, and the female tributes are described according to their aesthetic attributes.

Katniss' descriptions of the tributes along functional/aesthetic lines triggered a class discussion that revealed schisms in the previously united perspectives of athletes. The source of the division was the type of interrogation that female bodies undergo, and how some athletes have an easier time than others, due to the physical demands of their respective sports. Those women who were involved in sports that required a female body more congruous with the patriarchal ideal, such as cross-country (described by the class as petite, lightly muscled bodies) or volleyball (long-legged, tanned, elegant bodies), were viewed as having an easier time than those whose sports required a different body size such as basketball (taller or more muscular) or softball (masculine or asymmetric bodies). Those involved in basketball or softball argued that their groups tended to be closer because of their propensity to resist the cultural indoctrination and pressure to perform their femininity in a way that embraces their body-object status.

The body-as-object perspective subverts the athlete (while maintaining the perceived superiority of the male athlete) by stripping away agency and power. According to Iris Young, "those aspects of a woman's body most gazed at and discussed, and in terms of which she herself all too often measures her own worth, are those which least suggest action – neck, breasts, buttocks, which, in essence, defines women as Other" (31). This was a point of particular irritation for the women in the class, especially for those athletes in those sports with bodies described as "more appropriate." One student made a particularly compelling point about her volleyball uniform being an example of overt sexualization, when she said, "I'm 6'1" and I'm wearing shorts with a 2" inseam. Should they [Department of Athletics] be really surprised that the biggest group of fans we have other than our family and friends is a bunch of old men?" The cross-country athletes rightfully questioned why they are forced to compete in a "glorified bikini," while their male counterparts wear running shorts and a tank top. Similarly, upon her arrival in the Capitol, Katniss is subjected to hours of body waxing, eyebrow plucking, chemical peels, skin scrubs, and nail filing, all the while having the stylists commenting on her hideous appearance and that she was in no way presentable to the general public until she had been significantly improved; in contrast, Peeta is given a haircut and a shower.

The athlete is similarly objectified as she delves deeper into the world of sport, challenging society to redefine what has historically been classified according to masculine standards that give the male athlete the illusion of physical power and superiority. The patriarchy then uses this to control the athlete by explaining how the athlete's presence undermines the gender roles that society depends on for stability, indirectly reminding society of women's traditional roles. Furthermore, the patriarchy insists that the physical activity

she is engaged in cannot possibly be genuine, and that despite her “masculine” body, she is incapable of performing at the same level of the male athlete.

Social acceptance of the pure functionality of a woman’s body within a system ruled by the male gaze is difficult, but it does give women power that aestheticism does not. That is not to say that women today cannot be powerful. On the contrary, as voiced by one student in the class, it was acceptable for her to be empowered through playing her sport, but her power was essentially “on loan” with the understanding that she would not use it to interfere with (or challenge) society’s established gender norms.

### **THE PERFECT TOUCH OF REBELLION...**

For the athlete, fitting into the existing gender structure is vital for her continued acceptance. Unfortunately, this requires the loss of a degree (or more) of personal agency in order to be found acceptable by the male gaze. For example, in the text, Katniss initially argued and, in some cases, literally fought with her entire team, accomplishing nothing but alienation and separation; she later realizes that in order to have a chance to win The Hunger Games, she needs to heed the advice of Haymitch Abernathy, the male winner from District 12 of the 50<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games (Katniss’s inaugural games were the 74<sup>th</sup>). Haymitch’s advice to her was to make herself more “likable” to the fans of the Capitol so that she would get sponsors that would give her gifts to help her survive; to that end, he pushed her to adopt a more “traditional” feminine gender performance by accepting the mantle of “star-crossed lover,” wearing dresses and playing up the role of a sweet, innocent girl from District 12 — not a teenage girl who is lethal with a bow and arrow from 300 yards. Later, as Haymitch predicted, Katniss realizes that the fans in the Capitol want to help the “young girl in love” and at that point said, “One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. ‘You’re supposed to be in love, sweetheart...Give me something I can work with’” (Collins, 261). This phenomenon is well-described by Sean P. Connors who detailed how Katniss was coerced by the patriarchal structures of Panem society and several male characters into performing an emphasized femininity to increase her own chances of survival. Connors cites Katniss’ wearing grand dresses, removing her body hair, and being cast as desirable due to Peeta’s profession of love as a reinforcement of her attempts at an expected feminine performance to enhance her appeal to Capitol viewers (Connors 148–149). Unfortunately, this realization and performance made Katniss even more beholden to that specific gender performance in order to maintain her popularity leading to a further loss of agency and self.

Similarly, the athletes’ shared experiences of their coaches encouraging them to be more feminine at social gatherings through make-up and dress, and to refrain from wearing any sports gear that coded them as an athlete of whichever stripe they happened to be. Coaches monitor athletes’ social media accounts to ensure they fit the social construction of “girl,” meaning no videos of them playing their respective sports except for those images captured and cleared by the university, no images of them looking, in their words, “trashed” after an especially hard practice, and no overtly sexualized images, despite the fact that the uniforms that some of them are forced to wear are sexualizing. In essence, they were told to deny a major aspect of their lives and identities in order to make themselves more appealing to anyone outside of the sport, with the goal of making them—and by extension, female athletics—more popular. Therefore, while it is clear that engaging in athletic activities is empowering, it is disempowering to reside in a system that holds an expectation that one will maintain a socially acceptable feminine demeanor. As a result, the athlete is encouraged to attempt to straddle the expectations of sport culture and general culture by adopting the theme “we can be athletes and feminine too” (Barak et al. 474-475; Krane 116).

With this statement, the question must be asked, “What about the athlete as an individual who challenges institutionalized definitions of gender performance?” The response from the athletes was both

pragmatic and discouraging. Many agreed that they could certainly compete with or even best some of the male players, but to what end? Sure, they would feel a sense of accomplishment regarding their skill and hard work, but outside of the world of sport, they were forced to consider the cost of such a display of their prowess. To them it seemed that the more skill they possessed and the more they encroached on the “male sport domain,” the more their heterosexuality and femininity were questioned. In their words, “What would be the point? If I seem to be not as good, then no one is surprised because I’m just a girl. If I proved to others that I was better, then that is where the real problems begin. I would be seen as either a lesbian or undateable.” The tenuous empowerment that the athlete acquires for herself by flouting gender norms is demonstrated by Katniss, whose archery skills make her the most lethal Hunger Games tribute in decades, and who receives more support and adoration from the fans and the Capitol community when she plays the role of the dutiful girlfriend to Peeta, the other half of the pair of “star-crossed lovers.” She fed him soup when he was sick and fretted and cared for him with a smattering of kisses and loving affectations, to the delight of Capitol viewers and sponsors. For both Katniss and the athlete, as Charlene Weaving describes, being a woman in an athletic body is to be a site of struggle where the battle for empowerment is ongoing (233).

Based on class discussions, the underlying issue the athletes face when challenging hegemonically authorized femininity is balancing self-expressed gender performances with socially constructed gender norms. Finding an equilibrium between the two is necessary for both Katniss and the athlete to disguise their non-traditional gender behaviors enough so that they cannot be accused of directly challenging the structuralist dominant ideology and thereby face reprisal. However, this balancing act has its price. Many of the athletes shared a rather disturbing sentiment that Katniss describes at the end of the book, after winning *The Hunger Games* with Peeta and finishing all the post-Games interviews:

I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta’s arm around my shoulders feels alien (Collins 370).

This description mirrors that of the athletes, who stated that their environment and those within it were greatly involved in determining their identity at any specific time. One athlete put it this way:

When I’m on the field, I’m an athlete. I play the role of the athlete the way that my coach expects me to play it. As a freshman, I had to learn a new version of myself because the idea that my college coach has of an athlete is different from my high school coach, which was different from my club coach. So, I basically just play the role that I’m expected to play. My on-field identity then influences the feminized version that I present to the world in social situations. So, if I’m more aggressive on the field, I’m more girly in public. If I wear bows in my hair on the field, I don’t have to try as hard to convince people that I’m a girl when I’m in public.

All of this is done so that they can be seen as “normal” and having their priorities “straight.” Therefore, while the athlete may project empowerment, strength, confidence, and aggression while in the midst of their sport, they also realize that some of those qualities are not as appreciated when they are not playing their sport. As such, there is an aspect of their gender that is performed according to norms that are external to them. This juxtaposition of behaviors is important because it illustrates that challenging a system does not mean upending the entire thing and bringing it crashing down in flames. An interesting interpretation that the athletes had was that while the story of Katniss is one that casts her as an empowered hero who challenges the Capitol throughout the entire saga, she does eventually marry Peeta and adopt the heteronormative lifestyle

that earlier in the story she vowed never to do. While the story is written to show that she did it on her own terms, for them, the salient point is that for whatever reason, she eventually followed the norm. The feeling of being trapped was one that they have experienced as well.

## THE ONGOING STRUGGLE AGAINST THE CAPITOL

After *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol sends the most recent victor(s) on a tour that requires the attendance of all citizens in each district. The districts are supposed to be happy for the victor(s), but they are typically angry and bitter at being forced to celebrate the killers of the children from their districts. To add insult to injury, the Capitol holds the victory tour six months after the conclusion of the previous Hunger Games in order to provide a constant reminder that the districts are powerless against the Capitol. Whereas I had not attached much significance to this aspect of the saga, the athletes found it quite relevant to their experiences in college sports: “The Capitol and President Snow are basically the NCAA.” When I asked why, their responses were surprising. “Katniss is supposed to be happy that she survived *The Hunger Games* and should want to be involved in all the trappings surrounding it. We are told, ‘Well, you’re getting your education paid for, so you should expect to have to work for it.’ I get that, and I’m grateful, but paying for my education doesn’t mean you get to control every aspect of my life for the next four years.” The athletes found that much like Katniss, they endure a constant effort by their perceived oppressors to convince them that their lives are not that bad, while simultaneously being reminded of the power they do not have.

The illusion of agency is a powerful weapon that oppressors use in order to maintain hegemonic control over those they subordinate. For the athletes, the illusion of agency is the sense of empowerment that they gain through their sport participation. They were quite adamant that while there was some power to be had, their ability to utilize it as social currency, such as is done by their male counterparts, is questionable. While the athletes certainly felt that they had gained a degree of power and agency through the internalization of aspects of their sporting identities into their personas, the question for them remains, where do they go from here?

What is the end game for the patriarchy and the athlete? Is she, like Katniss, expected to placate the fans by feigning romantic relationships such as Katniss did with Peeta? Doing so would be to accept conventional forms of femininity and have her athletic accomplishments de-emphasized for her marital status, as when American trapshooter and two-time Olympic bronze medalist Corey Cogdell-Unrein was described by the *Chicago Times* as the “wife of Chicago Bears linebacker Mitchell Unrein.” Associations such as these are a powerful means of trivializing the athlete by inextricably linking her to a male partner, effectively obscuring her individual identity and power. For Katniss, as well as the athlete, being female is problematic in that it contrasts her positioning as a functional body, which is disempowering as it results in sexualization, trivialization, and devaluation upon achieving a feminine appearance (Festle 51; Fink 336; Sherry et al. 301).

The ontological balancing act that the patriarchy foists on the athlete, as illustrated in the context of *The Hunger Games*, is among its most egregious acts of oppression. The expectation that the athlete will remain silent in a system of infinite subordination is unrealistic and insulting. Many who may recognize patriarchal control in society in theory are often, as I was in hearing the perspectives of the athletes in my class, ignorant of how it manifests in an individual’s everyday experiences. Thus, outsiders can become complicit in contributing to the subordination of marginalized groups in order to protect an existing power structure from which they benefit. Consider what options this level of oppression leaves for the athlete.

My perspective in using *The Hunger Games* as a metaphor for the athlete overcoming oppression was in itself an example of my ignorance concerning the plight of the athletes. I saw Katniss’ defying the Capitol by threatening to take the Nightlock berries with Peeta as an example of overturning the oppression that they face; the students saw it a bit differently. They pointed to Katniss’ firing an arrow at a cooked pig surrounded by the Gamemakers when she felt she was not receiving the respect she deserved. She followed this act with a curtsy

as a means of softening the aggression she just performed. The athletes saw this act as Katniss' contribution to their revolution in that they can learn to perform the authorized stereotype and fake their subservience to the rules of the patriarchy, thereby lessening the punishment for violations and, in their words, putting on display the ridiculous and superficial nature of the structure put in place by their oppressors. Therefore, after a semester of dialogue about this text and many differing opinions, the athletes saw in Katniss how their participation in athletics has allowed them to wrest from their oppressors and take back for themselves agency and bodily autonomy.

## WORKS CITED

- Barak, Kathleen Sullivan, et al. "Visual Negotiation: How Female Athletes Present Intersectional Identities in Photographic Self-Representations." *Quest*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2018, pp. 471-491.
- Burton, Laura J. "Underrepresentation of Women in Sport Leadership: A Review of Research." *Sport Management Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2015, pp. 155-165.
- Butler, Judith. "Subversive Bodily Acts." *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 2011, pp. 79-141.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*, Scholastic Press, 2012.
- Connors, Sean P. "The Subjugation of Nature and Women in The Hunger Games." *The Politics of Panem*, edited by Sean P. Connors. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014, pp. 137-156.
- Dashper, Katherine. "Strong, Active Women: (Re)doing Rural Femininity Through Equestrian Sport and Leisure." *Ethnography*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2016, pp. 350-368.
- Festle, Mary Jo. "Girls' Rules: Championships, Apologies, and Basketball in the 1950s." *Playing Nice: Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports*, Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 28-52.
- Fink, Janet S. "Female Athletes, Women's Sport, and the Sport Media Commercial Complex: Have We Really 'Come a Long Way, Baby?'" *Sport Management Review*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2015, pp. 331-342.
- Foucault, Michel. "Technologies of the Self." *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, pp. 16-49.
- Franzoi, Stephen L. "The Body-as-Object Versus the Body-as-Process: Gender Differences and Gender Considerations." *Sex Roles*, vol. 33, nos. 5-6, 1995, pp. 417-437.
- George, Molly. "Making Sense of Muscle: The Body Experiences of Collegiate Women Athletes." *Sociological Inquiry*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2005, pp. 317-345.
- Hardin, Marie, et al. "Challenge and Conformity on 'Contested Terrain': Images of Women in Four Women's Sport/Fitness Magazines." *Sex Roles*, vol. 53, nos. 1-2, 2005, pp. 105-117.
- Haslanger, Sally. "The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Construction of Reality." *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry, Serene J. Khader, and Alison Stone. Routledge, 2017, pp. 157-167.
- Henthorne, Tom. "The Importance of Being Katniss: Identity, Gender, and Transgression." *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*. McFarland, 2012, pp. 44-62.
- Johansson, Thomas. "Gendered Spaces: The Gym Culture and the Construction of Gender." *Young*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1996, pp. 32-47.
- Kim, Kayoung and Michael Sagas. "Athletic or Sexy? A Comparison of Female Athletes and Fashion Models in *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issues." *Gender Issues*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2014, pp. 123-141.
- Kotarba, Joseph and Matt Held. "Professional Female Football Players: Tackling Like a Girl?" *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interactionism and the Sociology of the Body*, edited by Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini. Routledge, 2006, pp. 153-164.

- Krane, Vikki. "We Can Be Athletic and Feminine, But Do We Want To? Challenging Hegemonic Femininity in Women's Sport." *Quest*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2001, pp. 115-133.
- Markula, Pirkko. "The Technologies of the Self: Sport, Feminism, and Foucault." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2003, pp. 87-107.
- Musto, Michela and P.J. McGann. "Strike a Pose! The Femininity Effect in Collegiate Women's Sport." *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2016, pp. 101-112.
- Sherry, Emma, et al. "Images of Sports Women: A Review." *Sex Roles*, vol. 74, nos. 7-8, 2016, pp. 299-309.
- Shifflett, Bethany, et al. "Gender Bias in Sports-Media Analytics." *Journal of Sports Media*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2016, pp. 111-128.
- Spaij, Ramón, et al. "Sport and Social Inequalities." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2015, pp. 400-411.
- Weaving, Charlene. "Smoke and Mirrors: A Critique of Women Olympians' Nude Reflections." *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2012, pp. 232-250.
- Worthen, Meredith G. and S. Abby Baker. "Pushing Up on the Glass Ceiling of Female Muscularity: Women's Bodybuilding as Edgework." *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2016, pp. 471-495.
- Worthen, Meredith G. and Danielle Dirks. "Gender and Deviance." *Sexual Deviance and Society*, edited by Meredith Worthen, Routledge, 2016, pp. 93-116.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 27-45.

#### **AUTHOR BIO:**

Tony Kemerly received his PhD in Exercise Science at The University of Mississippi and is a Professor of Exercise Science at High Point University. A shift in focus and an MA in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has allowed for a transition to the cultural studies aspects of Kinesiology. Kemerly teaches courses such as Body and Identity, Locating the Self Through the Whedonverse, Visual Semiotics in Popular Culture, Death: Seeing Beyond the Veil, American Language and Power, and Phenomenology of the Body.

#### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

##### **APA:**

Kemerly, T. (2022). Will the odds ever be in her favor? Katniss Everdeen and the female athlete. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 9(3). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-3/will-the-odds-ever-be-in-her-favor-katniss-everdeen-and-the-female-athlete/>

##### **MLA:**

Kemerly, Tony. "Will the Odds Ever Be in Her Favor? Katniss Everdeen and the Female Athlete." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2022, <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-3/will-the-odds-ever-be-in-her-favor-katniss-everdeen-and-the-female-athlete/>

