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HUNGRY FOR JUSTICE:
THE HUNGER GAMES AND DEVELOPING AN ACTIVIST IDENTITY IN WOMEN FANS

A Dissertation in
Adult Education

by
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine popular culture as a site of public pedagogy where women learn about their role in society and form identities based on those perceptions. More specifically, this research focuses on how and what women fans of The Hunger Games (THG) series learn about activism and advocating for social justice causes from interacting with this popular culture phenomenon in online spaces. Three theories frame this study, including poststructural feminism, popular culture as public pedagogy, and convergence culture. The design of the study utilizes a cyber ethnographic approach to examine the online sub-culture of women learners as they engage with the THG franchise and each other in virtual and physical spaces. Data collection consists of in-depth interviews with 10 participants, online observations of fan activities, and review of 320+ relevant cultural documents and artifacts. I employ a fantasy theme analysis of the data collected, along with conducting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the film adaptations of the THG series and THG fandom.

The findings of the fantasy theme analysis, detailed in Chapter Four, identify four main themes: a) a central legend/myth is key to a shared vision among fans; b) the hero’s journey becomes internalized by fans as they advocate for causes important to them; c) the fight for justice transcends a focus on the individual and moves to desire for collective change; and d) revolution is a moral, political, and immediate game for fans, with very real consequences for themselves and society. These fantasy themes coalesce into a larger rhetorical vision shared among fan activists, as they work for a more just and equal world.

The CDA yields four additional themes, providing added understanding to the main fantasy themes. The CDA themes, detailed in Chapter Five, include: a) both the films and fan
activists transform the person/character of Katniss Everdeen into a legend and myth; b) the films create a shared currency consisting of symbol, salute, and song, which fans exchange in support of one another; c) both District citizens in the films and women fan activists personalize the risk and reward of rebellion; and d) in the reel and real spaces, fan activists hack *THG* narrative and use media to create a hunger for justice among the larger population. The study ends with implications of the findings for theory and practice, as well as outlines the limitations of the study and makes suggestions for future research.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Within this first chapter, I provide an overview of a qualitative research study examining popular culture as a site of public pedagogy where women learn about their role in society and form identities based on those perceptions. More specifically, I focus on how and what women fans of *The Hunger Games (THG)* series learn about activism and advocating for social justice causes from interacting with this pop culture phenomenon in online spaces. To begin, I offer a background to the study, followed by a description of the conceptual framework (detailed more in Chapter Two), problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions. Additionally, I include a summary of the research methodology utilized, which is further detailed in Chapter Three. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the significance of the study, including a review of its major assumptions, limitations, and definition of terms.

Background

Most likely, we’ve all seen one—possibly at a movie theater, while grocery shopping, or at a local amusement park. They frequently bear the symbolic representation of their adoration. Perhaps you are one and bear a similar mark. When you cross paths with another, and recognize the sign of a shared appreciation, you acknowledge each other as comrades. I’m referring to *fans*. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) describe fans as “individuals who have a passionate relationship to a particular media franchise” (p. 166). Fans of all types exist around the world, with numerous shared interests. When en masse, they represent a *fandom* whereby “members
consciously identify as part of a larger community to which they feel some degree of commitment and loyalty” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 166). Fans often congregate in physical spaces, like small discussion groups at bookstores or at large national conventions, in order to express their affection for a particular franchise, to exchange ideas, and to interact with fellow enthusiasts. While these gatherings remain a prevalent mode of interaction, the introduction of the Internet created a new sub-group of fandoms: the online fan culture. Baym (2000) explains that digital technologies provide the means for fans to assemble in virtual environments. Fandoms now transcend geographic boundaries, permeating digital spaces for collaboration, creation, and participation that center on favored popular culture productions. These online spaces can be accessed at any time, with the instant gratification of connecting to other fans, from all over the world, for a multitude of purposes.

In his discussion of online fan culture, Jenkins (2006b) describes these virtual communities as “expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture” (p. 137). They represent dynamic gatherings of people with unique voices, distinct traditions, and pleasurable relationships created from shared interests around a franchise (Baym, 2000). Their existence in virtual spaces allows for broad participation and more exposure in mainstream society. Jenkins (2006a) asserts “fans have always been early adapters of new media technologies; their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production” (p. 135); and as this study demonstrates, new forms of activism and social movements. Online fan communities exist not only in virtual spaces because of the Internet, but their online nature allows for faster creation and exchange of digital creations and information, leading to greater visibility of fan culture in a variety of contexts (Jenkins, 2006a).
However, within this enormous collection of research on fans and fandoms, academia affords little attention to what fans *informally learn* from their favorite popular culture franchise. Further removed is empirical research on how these cultural productions function as a site of *public pedagogy* where they serve as significant influencers on identity construction. And virtually non-existent is literature on how women fans develop an activist mindset and identity from engaging with certain pop culture pedagogies. Yet, they do…somehow. To provide evidence of this claim, one simply needs to consider the 2014 resistance by citizens of Thailand to the political upheaval in their country. Several pro-democratic protestors, also fans of *THG* series, began using the three-finger salute featured in the fictional story as a symbol of their collective struggle against government oppression (Mydans, 2014; C. J. Williams, 2014). Thus, fans potentially learn about civic engagement and activism from this dystopian, fantasy narrative, which also features women in leadership positions with political and revolutionary power. This begs the question: How might popular culture, while a form of leisurely entertainment, also function as a site of informal learning that impacts the perspectives of women fans on advocating for social justice causes, thereby helping to shape such an activist identity?

**Learning from Stories**

Lindeman (1926) once posited that adults learn daily from countless experiences outside the walls of higher education. Many contemporary scholars further this perspective, challenging academia to examine everyday learning experiences, like those fostered by engagement with popular culture stories (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010a; van Zoonen, 2005; R. R. Wright, 2010b, 2013a). Beyond its entertainment value, popular culture teaches its consumers what and
how to think about social matters. Many educators even consider popular culture a site of learning more influential than formal educational institutions (Sandlin et al., 2010a). Consequently, popular culture is considered a form of public pedagogy (hooks, 1996).

The term “public pedagogy” first appeared in academic literature in the late nineteenth century, and since used quite extensively as a theoretical construct in education-focused research (Sandlin, O’Malley, & Burdick, 2011). Succinctly defined, public pedagogies are “spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside the walls of the institution of schools” (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010b, p. 1). They are significant to our understanding of individual identities and social formations; perhaps even more so than traditional pedagogical practices that occur within the classroom (Sandlin et al., 2010b). Examples of public pedagogies include cultural institutions, like libraries, museums, and zoos; figures and sites of activism, like grassroots social movements or public intellectuals; and informal educational sites like commercial spaces, the Internet, media, and popular culture (Burdick, Sandlin, & O’Malley, 2014; Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011). Although seemingly a broad category, emphasis must be placed on the fact that these sites are pedagogical in nature only when learning occurs. Thus, they may not serve as sites of learning for all people and/or at all times.

Historically, theorizing and research on public pedagogy was closely tied to cultural studies, as this field offers “education researchers a way to critically investigate public and popular culture spaces for their pedagogical aspects and for the ways these spaces reproduce or challenge commonsensical and oppressive configurations of reality” (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011, p. 343). Some scholars, like Henry Giroux, even view popular culture pedagogies as a “potential site for social justice, cultural critique, and reimagined possibilities for democratic living” (Sandlin et al., 2010b, p. 3), as my study demonstrates. Thus, time spent with popular
culture material offers more than just a relaxing evening in front of the television, enjoyable night at the movies, fun day at a music festival, or enchanted afternoon with a best-selling novel; many fans are learning about themselves, about others, and about a multitude of critical social issues. And of great relevance for my study, some fans even learn about their role in activism and advocating for social justice causes. But how does the informal learning that occurs from popular culture pedagogies lead to action in the real world? What inspires individuals to act upon the books they read or movies they watched on screen?

**When the Reel Becomes Real**

Given that popular culture offers a form of entertainment, one expects people to engage with media as a pleasurable activity, most often within a leisurely setting. These sources of entertainment foster an environment where audiences relax their critical minds, as texts employ particular visions and values upon audiences. In these moments, cultural knowledge is conveyed and audiences more readily absorb messages, as compared to other, more explicit methods of ideological subjugation and prohibition (Pauly, 2003). Even the most critical consumer experiences moments of seduction or allows an intentional suspension of reality. In her pioneering work, *Reel to Real*, bell hooks (1996) asserts these pedagogies hold a certain power over audiences. Popular culture pedagogies contribute to shaping an individual’s perspective on social issues like race, class, gender, sexuality, and more through entertaining narratives and relatable characters. Beyond the consciousness of audiences and their recognition (or not) of the pedagogical characteristics of movies, shows, books, and other popular culture material, these texts powerfully influence readers and audiences, conveying messages with significant personal
and social consequences. Personal ideologies are shaped and molded by authors, writers, directors, actors, and other production staff, not to mention advertisers and the production companies that provide financial backing (hooks, 1996).

As such, critically examining popular culture presents an opportunity to examine whose interests are served by visual representations presented in these public pedagogies. Representations result from the production of meaning that occur through an organized system containing signs to symbolize real and imaginary ideas, objects, people, events, feelings, etc. They are essential to the shared meaning making process between members of a culture (Hall, 1997). While meaning is created and exchanged through numerous channels in America, popular culture pedagogies offer an infinite source of meaning producing, educational practices. Each photo, magazine, book, song, television show, character, movie, and other social discourses create an opportunity for meaning making and shape how members of society view the world. These systems of representation “organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 13).

As previously noted, public pedagogies influence our everyday lives. Giroux (1999) suggests that public pedagogies have become a substantial—and for many, the primary—educational force in regulating meaning and values as it pertains to individual and social identities. As it relates to my study then, popular culture pedagogies provide one source through which women comprehend and make meaning of their world. Additionally, visual representations within certain popular culture pedagogies, serve to disrupt hegemonic myths about women (Johnston, 1999). I believe these pedagogies help to shape for women fans the meaning of advancing resistance movements against systemic oppression. The notion of popular culture pedagogies shaping women in civic engagement weighs considerably on social issues,
because these visual representations potentially “obliterate the distinction between reality and fiction by presenting already ‘finished’, all-consuming images of possible worlds” (Trifonas, 2010, p. 179). Thus, fictional narratives represent imagined futures for audiences. These *reel* narratives hold the potential for *real* impact on fans, with wider implications for society. So then, what are women fans informally learning about their role in leading others and working toward social change (i.e., activism)? What impact do these visual representations have on shaping individual and social identities in both digital and real spaces? Finally, how does their participation in fan culture contribute to knowledge production, collaboration, and activism?

**Convergence of Learning**

To understand how *THG* fandom thrives in virtual spaces, I apply the concept of *convergence culture*, also referred to as *cultural convergence*, to the phenomenon of online fan communities. Of particular interest is the way in which virtual spaces allow fans to fully engage in this sub-culture. Henry Jenkins (2006a), who originated this construct, outlines several unique aspects of convergence culture, of which five I apply to my study. They include, the ability for fans to: a) pool their knowledge about a franchise in the collaborative enterprise of an online fan resource (i.e. fan site); b) connect scattered pieces of information about a franchise from copious sources; c) express their individual interpretations and feelings toward a franchise, thereby creating unique an online fandom sub-culture; d) share their individual creations with others through the Internet; and e) explore the fictional realm of a franchise in order to make deeper understanding of their world (p. 185).
Jenkins (2006a) states this type of “convergence thinking is reshaping American popular culture and, in particular, the ways it is impacting the relationship between media audiences, producers, and content” (p. 12). In essence, convergence culture provides insights and understanding of fans interaction and collaboration in online spaces. Through use of the Internet and access to new digital technologies, fans are taking media and popular culture into their own hands. They create new types of shared experiences and produce digital artifacts to be instantly shared and accessed by millions around the globe. Referring again to the resistance movement instituted by the Thai people described earlier in this chapter, fan activists appropriated symbols from THG series for their use in challenging government oppression. Yet, there is much to uncover as to what and how people—in particular, women fans—informally learn from this popular culture pedagogy, including how visual representations within the narrative impact their lived experiences. It is critical scholars explore the informal and incidental learning that occurs when fans engage with popular culture material, in addition to engagement with other fans in online and offline spaces, and how their experiences and subsequent actions help to transform the world.

**Problem Statement**

In 2014, Thailand experienced political turmoil with a military coup of their previous government leadership. Many Thai citizens demonstrated resistance to the coup by utilizing the three-finger salute featured in THG series (Mydans, 2014; C. J. Williams, 2014), a worldwide literary phenomenon authored by Suzanne Collins and dramatized in four film adaptations. Activists in the imaginary story used the salute as a form of rebellion to government oppression.
Yet, the use of this fictional symbol by Thai fan activists was both very real and very impactful. Movie theaters became sites of political resistance, leading to Thailand’s military government arresting protestors who used the salute, subsequently banning the symbol, and pulling *THG* films from theaters. But Thai fan activism could not be stopped. Instead, fans shared their message through social media channels. One fan activist tweeted: “Dear #HungerGames. We’ve taken your sign as our own. Our struggle is non-fiction. Thanks. #ThaiCoup #Thailand” (Sethisuwan, 2014). All this, inspired by a fictional narrative featuring a complex female protagonist who resists government oppression and subsequently sparks the fire of a revolution, which spreads throughout her make-believe country.

This example of political resistance demonstrates the powerful connection between fans of pop culture and the potential for inspired civic engagement. Yet, what are fans informally learning from pop culture that motivates them to engage in this type of activism? How are fictional stories and characters shaping their identities with regard to social justice movements? Moreover, what are they learning from visual representations of women in activism? Media and cultural studies note the significance of the relationship between pop culture, fans, and activism (Jenkins, 2006a, 2011; Scardaville, 2005; Walters, 2011; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013), but much of the work in these fields fails to examine this relationship within a learning and identity construction context (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). That is to say, within this enormous body of work, scholars focus little attention to the role of pop culture as a site of public pedagogy (hooks, 1996; Sandlin, Wright, et al., 2011), where fans learn about civic engagement and constructing their identity within a context of social activism. Critically examining popular culture also presents an opportunity to examine visual representations (Hall, 1997) of women
advancing resistance movements, as featured within *THG* narrative and relates to the identity construction of fans.

In a world where billions of people experience some form of systemic oppression, and in a time when many people participate somewhere on the activism spectrum; it is vital that society achieves a more comprehensive understanding of the varied ways individuals informally learn about themselves and their role in changing the world. For the academic community, researchers must explore the pedagogical influences from mainstream culture that shape the identities of fans as they become inspired to act for social justice causes.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study is to critically examine what adult fans, specifically women, informally learn about activism from *The Hunger Games* series, and to understand how their identity is shaped by this popular culture pedagogy in online and offline spaces, as it pertains to advancing social justice causes.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guide this research, as it relates to women fans of *THG* series:

1) How did the narrative help shape an activist identity in participants?

2) What did participants informally learn about activism and advancing social justice causes from engaging with this popular culture pedagogy?

3) What is the role of fellow fans in digital (online) spaces, as it relates to participants’ learning experiences regarding activism in the real (offline) world?
Theoretical Framework

Recognizing the purpose of my study is to explore the lived experience of women fans with regard to the intersection of popular culture pedagogies and their view on activism, I utilize three theoretical constructs, positioned within a critical perspective, to frame the research: poststructural feminism, popular culture as public pedagogy, and convergence culture. I review each concept briefly below, including strengths and limitations, along with how each construct informs this study, complements one another, and structures my view of this topic.

Poststructural Feminism

In adult education, there exists a long history and emphasis on social change (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). At the core of this field is a commitment to equity. Yet, most adult educators perceive social change in the context of transformation within the individual learner, rather than political or social change (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Working toward large-scale societal reform requires a particular philosophic perspective. A critical orientation to adult learning offers the analytical tools to examine inequity and oppression at the systemic level, which ultimately impacts the adult learner. Brookfield (2010) describes critical theory as a perspective that challenges social inequality by examining how oppression becomes a permanent reality for many people. Subjugated groups often accept oppression without complaint because the dominant ideology normalizes inequality, making it appear natural and even predictable. Thus, the purpose of critical theory is to contest and transform this state of affairs (Brookfield, 2010). Additionally, part of cultural change related to social justice includes a recognition and awareness by the adult learner that oppression and unbalanced power between groups in a culture
is neither part of the expected social order, nor is it acceptable. Developing this *critical consciousness*, a notion introduced by Paulo Freire, is the goal of critical theory educators and scholars in the adult education field (Brookfield, 2010).

While a critical orientation offers much in the way of critiquing unequal power relations and challenging oppressive social norms, this perspective was dominated by male scholars for decades (Brookfield, 2005). In fact, the foundational tenets of critical theory were first introduced by the Frankfurt School, a group of upper-class European men generating material for the cognitive benefit of other men (Brookfield, 2005). For many years, this body of work primarily critiqued capitalist ideals in relation to power and largely overlooked—albeit perhaps not intentionally—factors of gender, race, and sexuality in their analysis. Essentially, systemic oppression was examined as a problem experienced by the male working class sub-set of society. The interests of women and other subjugated groups became a secondary contemplation, if considered at all.

On the contrary, Weedon (1997) contends that understanding power relations is important since they structure all areas of life, including social systems like the family unity, education, welfare, work, politics, culture, and leisure. She explains that power relations “determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (p. 1). In essence, institutional systems of oppression affect more than working class men. Some form of structural subjugation touches all women, people from difference races and ethnic heritages, and those who ascribe to varied sexual orientations and identities, among others. As such, many believe critical theory by itself offers an insufficient lens from which to examine power relations that impact women and other subjugated groups, suggesting *critical feminist theory* holds the key to a more comprehensive critique (Brookfield, 2005; Theriot, 1990; Weedon, 1997).
Accordingly, feminism is political in its aim, while offering a broad philosophical outlook. Scholars and educators positioned within this theory work to challenge and transform unequal power relations based on gender, race, sexuality, and class (Brookfield, 2005, 2010; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Theriot, 1990; Weedon, 1997). While rooted in critical theory, feminist theory evolved into a theoretical perspective unto its own (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Feminist theories challenge “the centrality of male worldviews within critical theory, and [attempt] to build on the elements of these that are most productive for advancing women’s interests” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 312). Issues impacting women are central to feminist theory, particularly as they apply to personal and social relationships, economic and political issues, and ideologies of sexuality (Brookfield, 2010). Some feminist scholars and educators perceive feminism as moving beyond the centrality of gender and fighting the whole system of oppressive ideology and domination through critiquing intersecting systems of sexism, classism, and racism (Brookfield, 2005; hooks, 2003). In essence, feminists take up the charge to advocate for all those who live under social despotism.

As it pertains to this study, poststructural feminism (a sub-set of feminist theory) forefronts gender, along with other types of systemic oppression. This body of theory “helps us to understand those social and cultural practices which constitute, reproduce, and contest gender power relations” (Weedon, 1997, p. vi). Applying this theoretical lens illuminates the varied ways women both experience and challenge oppression in society. Additionally, this perspective adds insight to how women develop a critical consciousness, as part of a multiplicity of identities, all contributing to the development of an activist mindset and perhaps even activist behaviors. However, simply applying a poststructural feminist lens fails to explain how and what women fans informally learn from THG series. Merely highlighting a gendered experience
or critiquing systemic oppression does not touch upon the impact of this pop culture phenomenon on the identity construction of women, as they informally learn about their role in advocating for social justice. Consequently, adding a second theoretical construct to this study—that of popular culture as public pedagogy—provides deeper understanding with regard to how women learn from engaging with cultural material.

**Popular Culture as Public Pedagogy**

As described in the introduction of this chapter, *public pedagogy* “has been largely constructed as a concept focusing on various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling” (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011, p. 338). Among the types of public pedagogy included within this construct, popular culture is given little attention in the field of adult education (Heuer, 2007; Sandlin, 2007; Tisdell, 2007). Yet, due to its ubiquitous and entertaining nature, popular culture holds more power to educate or miseducate than other forms of learning (Odgren, 2015; Tisdell, 2007). Important to the understanding of popular culture as public pedagogy is the *informal learning* that often takes place as individuals engage with various types of media and cultural artifacts (Odgren, 2015). Heuer (2007) contends that informal learning dominates the field of adult education, as the majority of what we learn happens outside of the formal classroom. In this context, “adults choose what, where, and how they will learn and usually are the evaluators of their own learning” (Heuer, 2007, p. 56). One can conceptualize popular culture in this context of informal learning because adults choose the material with which to occupy their time, including where and how this engagement occurs. When unmediated by a media literacy educator, ultimately,
adults decide what they learn from popular culture and if/how they incorporate particular meanings into their lives. In essence, conceptualizing popular culture as public pedagogy forefronts informal learning, as adults engage with popular culture texts and artifacts.

Additionally, informal learning provides insight into how popular culture shapes individual and social identities (Tisdell, 2007). This can partly be understood by the knowledge and understanding that people often find answers to important life issues in the narratives of pop culture stories, distributed by the mass media (Guy, 2007). Through television, films, radio, the Internet, books, and other forms of popular culture, the mass media create and disseminate messages regarding important issues to society (Guy, 2007). Perspectives on gender, race, class, sexuality, and other human issues are taught through various pop culture texts (Guy, 2007). Sandlin (2007) explains popular culture influences identity construction via what it teaches audiences through visual representations of people and social issues.

It’s also important to note, the role of popular culture in shaping identity construction relates to its ability to reproduce oppressive ideologies and resist the dominant dogma—often with both occurring in the same text (Guy, 2007; Sandlin, 2007; R. R. Wright, 2007). When considering the notion of informal learning, one can understand how the adult learner chooses, consciously or unconsciously, whether to use popular culture to perpetuate or resist oppressive ideologies. R. R. Wright (2007) explains this distinction in her study of British women and their adoration for The Avengers television series during the 1960s. While likely a host of women watched the series, for some fans, observing the lead character presented them with an alternative narrative they never before considered. The lead character broke with traditional representations of women found on television and presented new opportunities for who and what these women fans could become—for which some acted upon in their own lives.
The opportunity for resistant learning highlights the way popular culture can foster critical awareness in audiences. Sandlin (2007) says popular culture often serves as a “site of conflict, where individuals resist, negotiate, and accommodate power relations” (p. 74). She refers to the active engagement with popular culture material by adult learners and notes how individuals are not only shaped by popular culture, but also actively re-create it for their own purposes. By wrestling with its content, pop culture can bring issues to the consciousness of audiences and affect the fluid nature of identities, which are continually in a state of transition (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b). As it relates to my study, the idea of fluid identities offers insight into how some women fans recognize and/or re-conceptualize their role in activism, resist gendered expectations, and take up causes important to them. Yet, informal learning, identity construction, and resistance to dominant ideologies does not explain the connection of fans to a particular popular culture franchise and to each other. For that, a third and final theoretical construct pertaining to fans and fandoms must be included.

**Convergence Culture**

Bury (2005) contends fandoms are “ultimately about relating to other fans” (p. 209). These communities create ongoing social spaces for interpersonal engagement, whereby they collaboratively explore a pop culture franchise and share aspects of the narrative and characters personally meaningful to them (Baym, 2000). Through their communicative practices, fandoms develop unique group identities (Baym, 2000). They also offer a form of “collective intelligence”, a notion idea first introduced by Pierre Lévy (1997):
The knowledge of a thinking community is no longer a shared knowledge for it is now impossible for a single human being, or even a group of people, to master all knowledge, all skills. It is a fundamentally collective knowledge, impossible to gather together into a single creature. All the knowledge of the collective intellect expresses singular becomings, and these becomings compose worlds. (pp. 214-215)

Jenkins (2006a) explains what makes collective intelligence unique is not the possession of knowledge by a fan community, but the dynamic and participatory process by which fandoms aggregate this information. Further, these fan communities engage in a process of storytelling. Fans create worlds bigger than the franchise itself (Jenkins, 2006a). Hence, this collaborative process builds and reinforces strong social ties. Together, they create new meanings that hold personal and social relevance. And as it relates to my study, fans redefine the notion of a hero and hack the narrative of some pop culture franchises, to create new meaning and work collaboratively to change the world.

Jenkins (2006b) also notes fans desire to share narrative interpretations and artistic creations with other fans to make the process both more enjoyable and meaningful. While individual interpretations of texts vary, the experiences of sharing those understandings with the larger group (i.e., fandom) brings a concreteness and a sense of fulfillment not achievable within individual consumption. This demonstrates the participatory tenet of Jenkins' (2006a) convergence culture: borrowing from mass media to create new types of cultural productions that are digitally shared amongst the fan community. Whether to impart their creations, offer an interpretation of an internal character struggle, or protect the authenticity of a beloved character, fans “intensify their involvement through acts of curation and circulation” (Baym, 2000, p. 216).
Yet, how might one understand the influence of pop culture narratives and characters on the identity of women fans? Jenkins (2006b) explains fans, in particular women, are drawn to storytelling and other types of creations inspired by a pop culture franchise because:

Fandom is a vehicle for marginalized sub-cultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns with dominant representations;

fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests. (p. 40)

Jenkins et al. (2013) also assert fans create new cultural material, based on a franchise, in order to communicate something about themselves. In essence, they express their identity through an appropriation and reinterpretation of a fictional narrative or character.

As a theoretical construct, convergence culture explains how some women fans of THG series engage with digital technologies as a vehicle for both collective identity and individual expression. Virtual spaces offer communicative structures for fans to share their experiences, disseminate cultural artifacts, and engage in opportunities to make deeper meaning of their world. Baym (2000) says “the Internet did not invent fan groups; they were thriving long before computers existed. One the other hand, the Internet has changed them, and for those with Internet access, it has changed what it means to be a fan” (p. 215). Digital technologies, then, allow fans to connect in virtual spaces that transcend geographic boundaries and develop relationships that provide reciprocal appreciation for a shared interest. Fandom is shaped and mediated by technology (Baym, 2000). The current digital age now affords fans the ability to move beyond their individual minds, traverse physical spaces, and interact in an online franchise community whenever they please.
Fandoms, like one generated by *THG* books and films, also use digital technologies to generate new forms of cultural production (Jenkins, 2006b), including of an activist nature. Fan creations now transcend material restrictions to which they were once bound. This sharing through online resources underscores what Bury (2005) views as fundamental to fandom: “being a member of a community is not something one *is* but something one *does*” (p. 14). Online fandoms operate as dynamic, evolving spaces for collecting knowledge, a marketplace for sharing creations, and a center for exploratory learning. As it relates to my study, Jenkins (2006a) stresses that the political effects of fan communities come not through just the critical reading of favored texts, but also through access to new social structures and new ways of cultural production. These online fandoms offer new ways of knowing, producing, learning, creating, and resisting together.

**Overview of Research Methodology**

To gain an in-depth understanding of what and how women fans of *THG* series informally learn about activism, I employ a qualitative research process, positioned within a critical poststructural feminist perspective. As will be detailed in Chapter Three, the overall design of the study utilizes a *cyber ethnographic* approach to examine the online sub-culture of women learners as they engage with the *THG* franchise and each other in digital spaces. The following section provides an overview of cyber ethnography, followed by a brief discussion on how I apply this method to my research.
Qualitative Inquiry and Cyber Ethnography

Conducting qualitative research provides an opportunity to deeply explore particular human issues, understanding that reality is both fluid and unique in accordance with individual experience (Merriam, 2009). Research conducted within this paradigm focuses on distinct interpretations of lived experiences and the meaning people make with regard to a particular social problem (Creswell, 2014). The researcher serves as the primary instrument to collect data from a small, purposeful sample of participants, as well as from analyzing related documents and artifacts and other forms of data collection (Merriam & Associates, 2002). As it pertains to my study, a qualitative approach allowed for adaptive and dynamic inquiry (Merriam, 2009) to understand the informal learning and meaning making occurring with women fans as they engage with this popular culture pedagogy.

Further, adding a feminist design to my research forefronts the lived experiences of women fans, including how their identities are shaped by lived experiences and interaction with others in the learning process (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). By doing so, this study instinctively highlights the voices of women fans, including how they harness and express their voice on matters important to them through their activist efforts. As such, my study contributes to a growing body of research committed to advancing social justice. More specifically, to understand how some women fans learn to resist systemic oppression at the individual and group levels (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014).

Yet, the focus of my study narrows to the informal learning experienced by women fans in digital spaces, a new area of exploration for the adult education field. As such, a cyber ethnographic approach offers the most appropriate means to examine how women construct meaning online and through interactions with other fans. Ethnographic research conducted in
digital spaces provides a method to examine the activities of a particular culture that exists in
digital spaces (Buch & Staller, 2014). This research seeks to tell a story of a cyber culture
(Murthy, 2008) through the thick, rich descriptions and my personal interpretations (Merriam &
Associates, 2002). The result offers an enlightened understanding of the unique ways digital
(online) and real (offline) worlds blend to create more complex social interactions that transcend
geographic boundaries.

**Design of the Study**

To begin the research process, I explored several fan sites, blogs, and social media fan
pages of *THG* to become immersed in the online fandom of the series. Data collection consisted
of online observations of fan activities, in-depth interviews with participants, accumulation and
examination of relevant cultural documents and artifacts, and the development of field notes. I
employed a *fantasy theme analysis* (Bormann, 1985) of *THG* fandom within the context of the
online resources mentioned above to ascertain particular fantasy themes shared among fans.
This was followed by a *critical discourse analysis* of the film adaptations of the *THG* series in
relation to the shared fantasy themes, in order to garner additional insights and connections.

Ten participants were selected through a snowball process of posting on fan sites, blogs,
and social media pages, followed by a request for additional referrals from initial respondents.
Four foundational criteria guided participant selection in this study: a) participants represent
adult learners, defined as those around the age of 25 or older; b) they present as or self-identify
as women; c) they self-identify as fans of *THG* series, defined as those who consumed the
literary and/or cinematic versions of the series, as well as engage with other fans online; and d) those who participated in some form of activism, whether the activity occurred online or offline.

Review and analysis of the data occurred throughout the course of the study. I recorded initial themes, after which I explored and further refined throughout the cyber ethnography—a process referred to in qualitative research as a constant comparative method of analyzing data (Merriam, 2009). Chapter Three provides detailed discussion of the data collection and data analysis procedures I used, along with how my study addresses dependability strategies and research ethics.

**Significance**

Long have scholars in cultural and media studies examined the dynamics of fans and fandoms; particularly with researchers examining these sub-groups as they interact with pop culture material (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Jenkins et al., 2013). A growing body of work also looks at the relationship between popular culture and fan activism (Scardaville, 2005; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). Yet, as previously mentioned, most of this research remains bounded within a context of audience reception and interaction. A paucity of literature exists that examines fandom within a learning context (Sandlin, Wright, et al., 2011). For the field of adult education, my study contributes to an understanding of what fans *informally learn* from popular culture. More specifically, how popular culture helps to shape an activist *identity* in women fans, as they engage with others to challenge inequality and injustice. While emerging literature in the field looks at the notion of popular culture as a form of public pedagogy, adult education scholars issued the call for a more in-depth examination of the specific ways popular culture functions as
a site for learning. Sandlin, Wright, et al. (2011) emphasize this point, noting the importance of research to focus on popular culture and media because these public pedagogies represent spaces through which individual and group identities are formed.

Further refined, my study examines what women fans informally learn about activism from *THG* narrative—a focus ripe for exploration, with virtually little attention given to this relationship from any field of study. My research ventures into new territory of informal learning and fan activism, building upon both practice and theory in adult education. As it pertains to the latter, my study offers research about women, conducted by a woman for the purpose of presenting new ways of viewing women’s contribution to social justice issues. Until we understand more comprehensively about the variety of factors contributing to women’s participation in advocating for social justice causes; we lack the knowledge to galvanize this and other subjugated groups, with the intent of helping learners to discover their personal agency to act on issues of personal importance. Consequently, this research contributes to a body of knowledge in the field of adult education that seeks to “stimulate intellect and imagination so that adults may be enabled to move towards understanding the workings of culture and power in their lives” (Graham, 1989, p. 160). In other words, I hope my study offers readers another perspective on how adults learn from and use popular culture to affect their lives and the world around them.

Accordingly, I desire for my research to offer more than material for the academic community to ruminate on the theoretical implications of findings, but to contribute body of knowledge that actively helps women make deeper meaning of their lives and transform it in ways relevant to them. Moreover, if feminism is to succeed with efforts of gender equality, in addition to addressing issues of race, class, and sexual orientation, then scholarship must move
beyond the use and application of theoretical language that only a few cadre of intellectuals can understand (Brookfield, 2005; hooks, 1994). Utilizing popular culture pedagogies as a site for meaning making and change, recognizes that women’s lived experiences happen every day and in contexts beyond the classroom and formal instruction. This type of learning happens in the comfort of living rooms, in the darkness of movies theaters, from the illumination of tablets, and in the minds and imaginations of millions of women around the country and the globe. I’m emboldened by the hope these experiences will activate the minds of women, inspire them to take action, and therefore contribute to a movement where they lead change in the public sphere.

This research also holds great personal relevance. I am continually amazed by the various ways people informally learn from entertainment and pop culture, including how this material impacts them and how they use it to make real change in the world. There are considerable implications when (seemingly) inconsequential, fictional material, created for mass amusement, can be appropriated and used as a vehicle for revolution. This research has—and will continue—to stretch my academic mind. Contemplating the various ways fans learn from popular culture, how it shapes their identity, and how it is shaped by their interactions with it, offers me an incredible opportunity to contribute to a field of study with a rich history of helping adults make deeper meaning of their lives. Personally, this research brings a measure of closure to an area that weighs heavy on my mind. Advancing women’s equality in the public sphere is a passion of mine, ever since I embarked on this graduate school journey. Yet, I felt the academic community missed a remarkable opportunity to examine in what fashion women already lead, perhaps just in ways traditionally overlooked. Katniss Everdeen, the fictional hero from THG series, not only inspires women fans around the world; she also symbolizes the potential for fan activists, who follow their hearts and passions, to make the world a more equitable place for all.
Assumptions

As it relates to the purpose of my study, the following assumptions are embedded within the research:

1. Fans informally learn about activism from popular culture. More specifically, they learn how women advance social justice causes and further resistance movements from engaging with THG series.

2. The “what” fans informally learn from popular culture (i.e., THG series) helps to shape their identity with regard to matters of social justice. These learning experiences may even inspire them to take action in some form.

3. Fans learn collectively within digital spaces. Fandoms now traverse geographic boundaries through use of the Internet, thus allowing fans immediate access to large amounts of cultural information and instant connection with other.

Limitations

Considering all research contains weaknesses in varying capacities, some of the following limitations for this study include:

1. The understanding that reasons for engaging in activism may vary significantly, depending on the person and context. As such, it may be difficult to ascertain the degree to which a particular popular culture franchise, such as THG series, was the only or even the primary factor inspiring fans to take action.

2. This study is specific to fans of THG series and may not be generalizable to fans and fandoms of other media and popular culture franchises.
3. Ethnographic study in digital environments present numerous methodological challenges to overcome. Examples include difficulties in discerning when online information is public versus private, securing informed consent, conducting interviews when face-to-face interaction may not be viable, determining what qualifies as a document related to fan culture, language barriers, and more.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **Activism**: used interchangeably with “civic engagement” or “advocating for social justice causes” and refers to a form of resistance. Within the context of this study, activism “consists of acts of opposition to dominant culture that contain within them a critique of domination and a struggle for self and social emancipation” (Sandlin, 2007, p. 75). Activism is described as organic to everyday life—a natural reflex to daily inequality and injustice experienced by individuals and larger groups of people (Walters, 2011).

2. **Civic engagement**: used interchangeably with “activism” and “advocating for social justice causes”. Within the context of this study, it refers to the ways individuals and groups engage in various forms of social struggle—from everyday activism to full-fledged resistance.

3. **Convergence culture**: also called cultural convergence, is a theoretical construct introduced by Henry Jenkins that explains the phenomenon of online fan communities. It includes three concepts: media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence. Convergence culture is a space where “old and new
media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 2). This construct describes how pop culture consumers take media into their own hands and engage with others to build collective knowledge.

4. **Critical theory**: is a grand theory, rooted in the work of Karl Marx, that focuses on the “conflicting relationship between social classes within an economy based on the exchange of commodities” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 10). Central to critical theory is a critique of disparities in social power, primarily relating to class relations (Hart, 1990). Critiqued for its oversight on how power uniquely affects women, critical feminist theory was born from this perspective to address how systemic inequalities affect gender, race, and sexuality, in addition to class.

5. **Cyber ethnography / digital ethnography**: is a sub-set of traditional ethnographic study, originating in the field of anthropology, which “explores the cultures and worlds that exist in cyberspace” (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 112). Researchers who use cyber ethnography design studies to examine online activities (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but may also include an exploration of how digital engagement blends with offline life.

6. **Fans**: are individuals who have a passionate relationship with a particular media or popular culture franchise (Jenkins et al., 2013).

7. **Fandoms**: are a collection of fans who consciously identify as part of a larger community to which they express commitment and loyalty. Fandoms exhibit characteristics of a public, in that they have a common sociality and shared identity (Jenkins et al., 2013).
8. **Feminist research**: forefronts gender as the central category of inquiry and analysis, whether the methodological approach is quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. It is grounded in feminist theoretical perspectives that highlight the issues, voices, and lived experiences of women (S. Hesse-Biber, 2014a).

9. **Feminist theory**: evolved from critical theory into a separate “comprehensive philosophical perspective that seeks to explain the nature of unequal power relations based on gender, race, and class” (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 178).

10. **The Hunger Games**: is a series of three novels written by American author, Suzanne Collins, which include: *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010). The books were adapted into four films, released in theaters starting in 2012 through 2015. The series takes place in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic society, following the struggles and triumphs of the lead protagonist, Katniss Everdeen. Every year, the Capitol of the nation of Panem (ruins of North America) forces each of its twelve districts to send a male and female tribute into a televised battle to the death, called the Hunger Games.

11. **Informal learning**: occurs in everyday settings and context. This type of learning is “usually self-directed, independently pursued, and unregulated, often with the purpose of solving problems” (Kasworm et al., 2010, p. 26). Informal learning is described as unplanned, opportunistic, less predictable, tacit, highly contextual, holistic, and generally focused on the individual learner (Hager, 2012). Informal learning encapsulates a comprehensive scope of activities, including such things as hobbies, crafts, sports, recreational activities, and engagement with popular culture, among others.
12. **Online fan culture / virtual communities**: are defined as “expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 137). Fans identify as a community by their shared interests, rather shared similar locations. These types of virtual communities represent dynamic gatherings of people with unique voices, distinct traditions, and pleasurable relationships created from shared interests around a particular media or pop culture franchise (Baym, 2000).

13. **Popular culture / pop culture**: denotes cultural material produced for wide distribution and mass accessibility. In context of this study, popular culture is considered a site of learning, as well as a struggle between dominant social groups and those who struggle against oppressive ideologies (Guy, 2007). While several definitions of popular culture exist, I employ a blended version of the postmodern and Gramscian orientation. This perspective views “the pleasurable aspects of popular culture are acknowledged yet not uncritically embraced, and where the hegemonic aspects of popular culture are acknowledged but not seen as totalizing” (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009a, p. 121).

14. **Poststructural feminism**: is a theoretical framework that highlights “the variations of women’s lives and identities and [asks] how they are perceived and shaped, both by themselves and by others” (Frost & Elichaoiff, 2014, p. 42). Key constructs in this approach include language, discourse, difference, and deconstruction (Scott, 1988). Four key themes emerge in relation to adult education: a) examining the construction
of knowledge; b) honoring voice; c) questioning authority; and d) recognizing the positionality of the learner (Tisdell, 1998).

15. **Public pedagogy**: represents “spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools” (Sandlin et al., 2010b, p. 1). Public pedagogy includes learning that occurs in institutions like museums, libraries, and zoos; through figures and sites of activism like grassroots social movements; and in informal educational sites like commercial spaces, media, the Internet, and popular culture (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011).

16. **Qualitative research**: desires to uncover “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Researchers working from this perspective believe meaning and experience cannot be systematically isolated and measured, rather realities are fluid and unique to each individual (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

17. **Representations**: result from the production of meaning that occur through an organized system containing signs to symbolize real and imaginary ideas, objects, people, events, feelings, etc. Representations are essential to the shared meaning making process between members of a culture (Hall, 1997).
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dissertation research exemplifies a unique form of academic work for emerging scholars. Consequently, the literature review within such scholarship represents the opportunity to engage in an ongoing discussion with other authors on a particular subject matter (Queen & Squires, 2011). Demonstration of knowledge on relevant subjects is vital, in order to join any conversation and contribute meaningful insights towards various fields of study. As such, this chapter represents my entry into scholarly conversations on the nexus of adult learning, popular culture, and fan activism. Given the purpose of my qualitative study is to examine what women fans informally learn about civic engagement from *The Hunger Games (THG)* series, including how their identity is shaped by this popular culture pedagogy as it pertains to women advancing social justice causes, I conducted an interdisciplinary literature review to thoroughly explore the current scholarship on this issue and identify gaps in research for further study.

Within this chapter, I review five bodies of scholarly work related to the purpose of my study. I begin with a brief overview of the methodology for this chapter, and then turn to a review of literature on poststructural feminism. Next, I engage with a body of work that journeys through the educational roots of cultural studies and its connection to feminist studies, as well as to a critical examination of the media. The third body of literature I review looks at the notion of popular culture as a vehicle for learning about social issues, particularly as a form of critical public pedagogy. I follow with a review of work in the area of fan studies, as it relates to the transformation of some fans into activists. Finally, I end with a discussion of current literature relating to *THG* series and present concluding thoughts on how my study fills an apparent gap in research.
Methodology of Review

The following literature review represents a lengthy, recursive research process involving numerous searches and discoveries over the course of several months. Utilizing a combination of key terms, I consulted several journal databases to query conceptual and empirical literature relevant to the purpose of this study. Keywords include: adult education, adult learning, cultural studies, media studies, public pedagogy, popular culture, poststructural feminism, convergence culture, fans, fandoms, fan activism, and *The Hunger Games*. In addition to a general query of the Penn State University library system and Academic Search Complete (EBSCO), I consulted specific academic journals, including *Adult Education Quarterly, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Film & Television Literature Index, International Journal of Lifelong Education, ProQuest Education, SAGE, and Women’s Studies International*.

As it pertains to the collection of literature for poststructural feminism (section one) and cultural studies (section two), I include only those sources relating to identity construction and adult learning, among a few other foundational works to establish context. The purpose for setting such boundaries is in consideration of the vast bodies of work on poststructural feminism, critical theory, and cultural studies. It is important to situate this study historically and socially, while at the same time recognizing the impracticality of reviewing entire bodies of literature within the limited scope of dissertation research. As such, readers should understand that other significant works exist in these areas as it pertains to those larger fields of study; however, they are excluded as not providing additional, relevant insights to this study. It should also be noted, the literature I selected for discussion on popular culture as public pedagogy (section three), fan activism (section four), and *THG* (section five), represent a comprehensive review of the varied
research conducted thus far on the intersection of popular culture, women fans, and activism for social justice causes within the field of adult education.

**Poststructural Feminist Insights on Gender and Identity**

In the field of adult education, the use of theoretical lenses helps scholars focus on the adult learner and guide how we might assist individuals with making deeper meaning of their lives (Kasworm et al., 2010). Lindeman (1926) believes that liberating the mind, while aiding others in their journey to live richly through greater knowledge and enhanced understanding, represents the overarching goal of adult education. Within that belief, there exists a long history and emphasis on social change in the field of adult education (Kasworm et al., 2010). At the core of this discipline is a commitment to equity. Yet, most adult educators perceive social change in the context of transformation within the individual learner, rather than political or social change (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Working toward large-scale societal reform requires particular theoretical flecks in our lenses of adult education studies.

A critical or radical philosophy of adult learning offers the analytical tools to examine inequity and oppression at the systemic level, which ultimately impacts the adult learner (Brookfield, 2001). Brookfield (2010) describes a critical perspective as one that assumes “inequity is a permanent structural reality and is accepted without complaint because dominant ideology has convinced the majority that inequity is normal and predictable. The purpose of critical theory is to change this state of affairs” (p. 74). As it relates to my study, one illustration of applying a critical perspective to advance change is illustrated by women fans using their favorite pop culture franchise as a vehicle for self-expression and advocacy for social justice
causes. Critically analyzing this situation helps educators recognize how popular culture helps to shape the identities of some women fans and inform their understanding of activism to bring about change in society.

While most popular culture directly supports and normalizes inequitable power structures, occasionally (especially within the science fiction and fantasy genres) creators of pop culture write narratives to challenge hegemonic beliefs and the systems and structures supporting those beliefs. Suzanne Collins, the author of THG series, did this very thing with her creation of a dystopian fantasy that questions the legitimacy and power of hyper capitalism, problematizes society’s obsession with war, calls attention to the ignorance of class privilege on the subjugated, warns against the dangers of oppressive government, and much more. During an interview about the series, Collins explains she intentionally included sociopolitical overtones in THG narrative to reflect historical and current world events, “including the use of hunger as a weapon to control populations. Tyrannical governments have also used the techniques of geographical containment of certain populations, as well as nearly complete elimination of the rights of the individual” (Blasingame & Collins, 2009, p. 726). Accordingly, part of social change includes a recognition and awareness by the adult learner that oppression and unbalanced power between groups in a culture is neither natural nor acceptable. THG narrative illustrates how some writers and creators provide readers and viewers with a vision of their counter-hegemonic assumptions set within an exaggerated or fictional space. These texts offer opportunities to get people thinking, reflecting, and questioning. Developing this critical consciousness, a notion introduced by Paulo Freire, is the goal of critical theory educators and scholars in the adult education field (Brookfield, 2010).
Challenging the Male-Centric Perspective

While a critical orientation offers much in the way of critiquing unequal power relations and challenging social norms, this perspective has been dominated by male scholars for decades (Brookfield, 2005; Thornham, 2000). In fact, the foundational tenets of critical theory were first introduced by the Frankfurt School, an elite group of European men generating material largely for the benefit of other men (Brookfield, 2005). For decades, this body of work primarily critiqued capitalist ideals in relation to power and tended to ignore factors of gender, race, and sexuality in its analysis. Systemic oppression was often looked at as a problem experienced by the male working class sub-set of society. The interests of women and the “Other” became secondary within this critique. However, placing this into historical and social context, these scholars were addressing formative issues of the time—most of which dealt with situations of dominance facing the working class, which happened to be predominately male. Yet, from this critique of critical theory, feminism took up the charge of addressing issues of structural inequality from a gendered perspective.

Accordingly, applying a feminist, critical perspective provides understanding on the lived experiences of women, as it relates to differences in power among groups; particularly, since power relations “structure all areas of life, the family, education and welfare, the worlds of work and politics, culture and leisure. They determine who does what and for whom, what we are and what we might become” (Weedon, 1997, p. 1). In essence, systemic oppression affects more than just working class men. Some form of structural subjugation touches all genders and sexual identities, people from difference races and ethnic heritages, and those who fall outside the prescribe “norm” in society. As such, many believe a critical perspective by itself offers an insufficient lens from which to examine power relations that impact women and other subjigated
groups, suggesting that a feminist viewpoint holds the key to a more comprehensive critique (Brookfield, 2005; Theriot, 1990; Weedon, 1997). Feminism is political in its aim, offering a broad philosophical viewpoint. Feminist scholars and educators work to contest and change unequal power relations based on gender, race, sexuality, and class (Brookfield, 2005, 2010; Elias & Merriam, 2005; Theriot, 1990; Weedon, 1997).

While rooted in critical theory, feminism evolved into a philosophical perspective unto its own. Numerous models offer a variety of lenses to apply when examining issues in adult education, such as liberal, socialist, radical, Marxist, and postmodern or poststructural (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Feminist theories challenge “the centrality of male worldviews within critical theory, and [attempt] to build on the elements of these that are most productive for advancing women’s interests” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 312). Issues impacting women and gender-based inequality are central to feminist theory, particularly as it applies to personal and social relationships, economic and political issues, and ideologies of sexuality (Brookfield, 2010; Fenton, 2000; hooks, 2003).

Some feminist scholars and educators, such as bell hooks, perceive feminism as moving beyond the centrality of gender and fighting the whole system of oppressive ideology and domination through critiquing intersecting systems of sexism, classism, and racism (Brookfield, 2005; hooks, 2003). Feminists pick up the charge to advocate for all those who live under social repression. At the core of all feminist lenses is a centrality of gender issues, particularly on women’s subjugation; but also an attention to the varied ways people experience oppression in society. However, within the vast work of feminist research and advocacy even the notion of “gender” is contested (Alcoff, 1988).
Privileging Women’s Lived Experiences

French theorist, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) famously wrote, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 283). An intriguing insight espoused for decades, as the term “woman” in feminist theoretical literature remains heavily contested among scholars (Butler, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000). Alcoff (1988) notes the difficulty resides in the fact that the concept of “woman” is both necessary and problematic. Necessary because it stands as the central concept in feminist theory, the focal point of women’s lived experiences, and the entry into re-examining social perspectives from a woman’s vantage point. Problematic because “woman” is “crowded with the overdeterminations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of females” (Alcoff, 1988, p. 405). The construct of “woman” exists due to its difference from “man”; hence examining such a notion limits analysis to what has been already created by men. Alcoff (1988) notes that feminism struggles with defining who and what women truly are, because all historical and contemporary source of knowledge about women have been polluted with sexism and misogyny. She says:

Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured—understood, explained, and diagnosed—to a level of determination never accorded to man himself, who is conceived as a rational animal with free will. Where man’s behavior is underdetermined, free to construct its own future along the course of its rational choice, woman’s nature has overdetermined her behavior, the limits of her intellectual endeavors, and the inevitabilities of her emotional journey through life. Whether she is construed as essentially immoral and irrational (a la Schopenhauer) or essentially kind and benevolent (a la Kant), she is always construed as an essential something inevitably accessible to
direct intuited apprehension by males. Despite the variety of ways in which man has construed her essential characteristics, she is always the Object, a conglomeration of attributes to be predicted and controlled along with other natural phenomena. The place of the free willed subject who can transcend nature’s mandates is reserved exclusively for men. (Alcoff, 1988, p. 406)

To Alcoff and others (Butler, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000; Theriot, 1990), even examining the idea of “woman” is antithetical to the purpose of feminism, as this very exercise presumes women exist in comparison and contrast to men. Consequently, the study of women’s experiences reproduces male domination. Scott (1988) asserts feminism needs a theory to “let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals”; a theory to enable us “to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them”; and a theory that will offer analytical tools more “useful and relevant for political practice” (p. 33).

How then does one understand lived experiences of women, particularly activists who also represent popular culture fans? And how might scholars and educators in adult education help learners recognize and challenge gender oppression? Alcoff (1988) and Tisdell (1998) suggest poststructural feminism holds the key, as this perspective rejects the category of “woman” altogether. As the name suggests, poststructural feminism blends together theoretical ideas from poststructural and feminist theories, thus examining the intersection of the social and the individual (Theriot, 1990; Tisdell, 1998; Weedon, 1997). This body of theory pays close attention to issues of knowledge, discourse, difference, and power, including how these intersect and entwine in the lives of women. It can be used as a way to examine both the everyday—the common, ordinary events—and the formal systems in place that structure women’s lives
Poststructural feminists seek to understand how multiple systems of oppression intersect in ways that position each of us as both oppressed and privileged; which subsequently shift according to the context in which we find ourselves (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). Gauntlett (2008) adds to this conversation by cautiously noting our identity is a complex construction, of which gender is only one part and may be more or less significant depending on the historical and social environment.

Still, of critical importance for poststructural feminists is the issue of gender, deconstructing “woman” as a category and focusing on the lived realities of women (Scott, 1988; Tisdell, 1998; Varga-Dobai, 2012). Those oriented in this perspective also pay close attention to individual forms of resistance and personal agency in relation to oppressive social forces, as well as stressing a deeper understanding of women’s response to their unique, lived experiences (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). Common among all poststructural theories, including poststructural feminism, is the notion of deconstructing the dominant discourse, bringing to light underlying assumptions (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Scott, 1988; Tisdell, 1998; Varga-Dobai, 2012). Hence, analysis of language is paramount to this perspective (Flannery & Hayes, 2000; Theriot, 1990). Chapman (2004) says while “intertwined in cultural and social practices, language constructs our world, producing very real and frequently damaging structures. But we can deconstruct and reconstruct language to shape a more equitable world” (p. 97). She notes social discourses define what is knowledge and truth, who can speak and who cannot, what is normal and acceptable, and who holds power. Raymond (1990) explains “not everything is reduced to language or that everything is an idea. It is to say that meaning-making, by which self and the world are made comprehensible, is a language-structured activity” (p. 6).
By deconstructing meaning and power relationships, the poststructural feminist lens questions universal categories, like gender, and how these constructs have been historically naturalized (Scott, 1988). This paves the way for scholars and educators to uncover what is absent rather than present, examine layers of difference rather than similarities, highlight the local (individual) rather than just the universal (social), and understand how meaning emerges as these elements intersect (Kaufmann, 2011). Weedon (1997) calls for an understanding of “why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men and the mechanisms whereby women and men adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interests” (p. 12). This, Weedon (1997) says, is the agenda of a poststructural feminist perspective. What follows is a closer look at the tenets of this theory and how it informs my study with analyzing systems and structures of society, as well as the individual consciousness of adult learners themselves.

**Understanding Language, Discourse, Difference, and Deconstruction**

Scott (1988) outlines four key concepts that feminism appropriated from poststructuralism, which include *language, discourse, difference, and deconstruction*. For Scott, *language* encompasses more than vocabulary and grammar. Beyond the word itself, poststructural feminists are interested in the meaning a word holds and its power over us. hooks (1994) explains that “words impose themselves, take root in our memory against our will” (p. 167). Nevertheless, the meaning of a word is fluid, holding no obvious or direct relationship with ideas or things (Weedon, 1997). Instead, language represents an entire system of establishing meaning within society. It underlies social organization, cultural understanding, and
individual consciousness, as well as structures the power flowing between groups (Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). It is “the site where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (Weedon, 1997, p. 21).

The importance of connecting language with subjectivity resides in its social construction. We use language to describe our uniqueness, but only within the confines of social meaning. Language also serves as a site of divergence and conflict against social expectations and norms (Weedon, 1997). St. Pierre (2000) contends language is “an important clue that indicates the failure of boundaries and the possibility of resistance and freedom” (p. 479). It represents any system through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices are organized, whereby people engage with it to understand their world, including who they are and their relationship to others (Scott, 1988). Poststructuralism views language as an entry point to initiate understanding of how individual and collective identity is established, for language does not reflect social reality but constitutes it for us (Weedon, 1997). Analysis of language includes not just written and visual texts, but also cultural practices and utterances of all kind, as these give historical and contextual meaning (Scott, 1988).

From a feminist orientation, poststructuralism regards gender as fashioned through language (Weedon, 1997). Thus, the term “woman” does not reflect a reality, rather represents a construct produced through language with a conflicted meaning that continually evolves. Furthering this idea, St. Pierre (2000) applies Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of the sign and contends the meaning of a term (sign) is derived from its differences against all other terms (signs). “Woman” exists because of its difference to “man”, as demonstrated by the application of “mankind” when describing human beings or the general use of the masculine descriptor in
literature. This happens because “individual signs do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meaning through the language chain…. [which is an important distinction]…. because they make language truly social and a site of political struggle” (Weedon, 1997, p. 23). Further, because meaning is never fixed, but changes with context, one can conclude that there is “no basic or ultimate correspondence between language and the world” (Scott, 1988, p. 35).

Poststructural feminism recognizes meaning as continually shifting, therefore “we can never know exactly what something means—we can ever get to the bottom of things” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 482). Hence, this nullifies the man/woman binary. The issue then becomes the process of social meaning making and how one might make visible the function of language to produce social structures that control our world (St. Pierre, 2000). To begin describing and understanding how something continually shifts based on culture and context, we must turn to the second key concept in poststructural feminism: the notion of discourse.

Scott (1988) views discourse as a way to address the process of meaning making. Drawing upon the work of French theorist Michael Foucault, Scott (1988) states “discourse is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” (p. 35). She continues, saying part of meaning making involves conflict over ideas and the power of some groups to control knowledge construction for all of society. St. Pierre (2000) clarifies that for poststructural feminists, the concern resides with how discourse functions, rather than what discourse is (i.e., its meaning). The objective is to understand how it exists, who controls it, and how it affects society; for discourse is what organizes and regulates language. Thus, “meaning-making is a political activity because the discourses describing reality come out of (and help create) non-discursive practices and
structures” (Theriot, 1990, p. 6). This includes such examples as the state, institutions of professional and public authority, media, and the family.

We construct our identities and surrounding world through language, creating new discourses and perpetuating existing ones. Hence, our identities are discursive constructions that we make through the application of language and its associated ideologies (Tomaselli & Wright, 2007), which popular culture and media contribute to with its visual representations (Fornas, 2008). And since identity is performed, our bodies become sites of resistance, both in the spaces they occupy and how we use them (Alexander, 2007)—much like the Thai fans of THG series described in Chapter One. Since media offers spaces for community dialogue, this also contributes to the construction of our identity (Tomaselli & Wright, 2007). Therefore, written, spoken, and visual “words” are more than application of language, they represent discursive practices that shape and mold our individual and social thinking, and can even motivate us to action. Huckaby (2010) writes:

We not only weave worlds with words, but words and the actions they inspire, even when the words are untrue, form who we are. These discourses are at once productive and reproductive; someone comes into an identifiable being within social context, and the new unity is then discursively reproduced. (p. 73)

Considered part of discourse are all the ways of organizing society, including the ways we group people into categories (Scott, 1988). Such groupings include gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as groups based on common interests, like fans of a popular culture franchise. These groupings function as texts and documents to be read and examined. St. Pierre (2000) explains “discourse illustrates how language gathers itself together according to socially constructed rules and regularities that allow certain statements to be made and not others” (p.
Social rules then become “Truths” and are assumed to consist of objective knowledge that serve to legitimize their function. Scott (1988) views the importance of Foucault’s work to feminism in the way he challenges simple solutions to the complexity of gender. Applying the concept of discourse allows for a more creative way to think about the contextual construction of social meanings (Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). It teases out the notion of difference, both the inherent meaning and what may be lacking.

_Difference_, according to Scott (1988), suggests that meaning is made through contrast, whether implicit or explicit. Language functions because there is a difference between things—an absence of something—rather than through an association between them (St. Pierre, 2000). Essentially, a particular “definition rests on the negation or repression of something represented as antithetical to it. Thus, any unitary concept in fact contains repressed or negated material; it is established in explicit opposition to another term” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 37). Analysis of meaning, then, involves discerning the negations and determining how they work in particular contexts. Categories exist because of their contrast to others, yet they are also interdependent—one cannot occur without the other. As it pertains to feminist interests of gender issues, Scott (1988) states:

Oppositions rest on metaphors and cross-references, and often in patriarchal discourse, sexual difference (the contrast masculine/feminine) serves to encode or establish meanings that are literally unrelated to gender or the body. In that way, the meanings of gender become tied to many kinds of cultural representations, and these in turn establish terms by which relations between women and men are organized and understood. (p. 37)

Additionally through their contrast, categories become hierarchical, with one establishing a role of dominance over the other (Scott, 1988). In the illustration of gender within hegemonic thinking, man exists because of its antithesis (woman), of which it is superior to. Concurrently,
woman exists in contrast to man, of which it becomes inferior through discourse. This relationship applies to race, sexuality, and other issues of human difference as well. However, these instable associations continually change, as new meanings reinforce or challenge their difference. Poststructural feminism problematizes the simplicity of such categories; instead recognizing that groupings continually intersect, overlap, and conflict. Meaning happens beyond binary oppositions, and the aim of a poststructural feminist analysis is to deconstruct the process.

*Deconstruction*, according to Scott (1988), involves challenging, reversing, and displacing the acceptance of binary oppositions. St. Pierre (2000) further expounds, saying:

Deconstruction is not about tearing down but about rebuilding; it is not about pointing out an error but about looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces. It is not a destructive, negative, or nihilistic practice, but an affirmative one. (p. 482)

Through an analysis of their interdependence, binary oppositions are exposed as social constructions, not natural occurrences as they first appear (Scott, 1988). This deconstruction, Scott (1988) argues, significantly helps us “be critical of the way in which ideas we want to use are ordinarily expressed, exhibited in patterns of meaning that may undercut the ends we seek to attain” (p. 38). Scott uses the example of equality-versus-difference as exemplifying the limitations of binary oppositions to feminists. At first glance, it appears only two options are viable for feminism when approaching a subject matter: we must endorse the thing that fosters equality or reject its difference. She asserts, “the antithesis itself hides the interdependence of the two terms, for equality is not the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality” (Scott, 1988, p. 38). It is the relationship between the two and the absence of all other options that interests poststructural feminists. Scott (1988) calls for a new way of thinking—one
involving a rejection of any opposites. She ways we should attack categorical thinking, particularly gender, and asserts attaining sameness is not the goal of rejecting binary oppositions. Rather, she argues for a more “complicated historically variable diversity” that is “differently expressed for different purposes in different contexts” (Scott, 1988, p. 46). Moreover, the interest is also in how these differences work to suppress other groups. This involves probing how language, discourse, and difference all construct knowledge, as well as implement and justify institutional, political, and social power (Scott, 1988). Next I turn to a discussion of this theory in relation to adult learning.

**Focusing on the Adult Learner**

Poststructural feminism offers two key contributions to understanding gender and the Other: systematic criticism of categorical difference to reject their ultimate “Truths”; and a recognition of the plurality of differences (Scott, 1988). To understand how these crucial ideas augment an understanding of the adult learner, I draw upon Tisdell’s (1998) discussion of poststructural feminism and its relevance for educators and adult learners. First, she highlights gender issues and their connection with other forms of oppression that impact knowledge construction. A poststructural feminist perspective ensures gender is not lost in scrutiny, and that its consideration forefronts consideration of the learning experience. In a foundational work, *Women’s Way of Knowing*, the authors contend women’s learning cannot be predicted or generalized, as they have varied experiences of both voice and self (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). While systems of oppression affect all women, they do so in very different ways. Hence, the emphasis moves beyond just a social application of gender and
addresses systems of power as they impact the individual identities of women, including how systems of privilege and oppression intersect with race, sexuality, and class in the learning setting. In this context, the role of the educator is to “help learners to see with a third eye” (Tisdell, 1998, p. 151)—to question accepted knowledge and challenge the source from which knowledge is established. This inquisition includes addressing the positionality of the educator in relationship to the learner, as it pertains to the issues of difference mentioned above. This perspective queries how the gender, race, class, and sexual orientation of the educator and students affect the learning environment.

Consequently, poststructural feminism problematizes the concept of “Truth.” For example, the myth that women are biologically better positioned to function as caretakers, as compared to men who must provide for the family with financial stability. Or the myth that men are born leaders, while women inherently struggle in such a capacity due to their supposed emotional disposition. Poststructural feminist educators directly challenge unequal power relations and work proactively for social change, which Tisdell (1998) believes is neither a comfortable nor an easy charge. Educators serve as change agents to contest systems of oppression affecting adult learners, particularly women and other oppressed groups.

Third, Tisdell (1998) notes educators positioned from a poststructural feminist perspective understand individual identity continually shifts in its connectivity with social systems. “As learners examine the impact of social systems of privilege and oppression on their own identity, including their beliefs and values, the ‘discourse’ is disrupted, thus shifting their identity, as well as increasing their capacity for agency” (Tisdell, 1998, p. 146). When an adult learner examines socially prescribed gender roles and becomes aware of the way in which one has accepted these gender roles a “normal”, identity may begin to shift. Or as it pertains to this
study, a woman may embrace her agency to affect change and becomes an activist for social justice causes. Here, the notion of “Truth” is worked out, as the individual begins to recognize that truth varies depending on a person’s positionality, as well as with the historical and social context (Tisdell, 1998). Learners may begin to understand that determination of “Truth” resides with those who hold the power to shape the discourse.

Finally, Tisdell (1998) draws upon poststructural feminism to highlight the complexity of challenging binary oppositions with regard to the relationship between rationality and affectivity in adult learning. She emphasizes how our emotions connect to what we rationally know about the world. Feelings play an important role in the learning process, critical thinking, and working for social change (Tisdell, 1998). She explains:

If an idea is too contrary to our belief system, to the way we have lived out our social roles, it may be too “scary” to even consider. The emotion of fear may not allow us to consider an alternative idea to that which we have held as truth. Conversely, the truth of a new idea might so resonate with us on an emotional level that it is just what we need to propel us forward to new ways of thinking and being in the world. (p. 147)

This concept offers a measure of understanding on how women may reject or accept new ideas that conflict with their previous lived experiences—perhaps evening shedding light on what motivates them to take action based on that emotion.

Further, rationality and affectivity become more than dichotomous categories, but interconnected influencers. Weedon (1997) contends “we need to understand why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men and the mechanisms whereby women and men adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interests” (p. 12). I argue, we also need to understand how women develop a critical
consciousness from engaging with popular culture and learn to subsequently challenge systemic oppression. Poststructural feminism offers the mechanism to do both by theorizing how adults learn about these systems of social organization and meaning, as well as the impact on their individual consciousness. It compels educators to seek out the experiences and voices of learners who have been historically marginalized and to challenge adult learning environments by disrupting the dominant discourse (Tisdell, 1998).

Applying a poststructural feminist framework to my study affords the opportunity to examine how women, who identify as fans of THG series, construct an activist identity through media and pop culture productions, as well as in dialogue with a community of other likeminded fans. Furthermore, this perspective illuminates the solidification of an evolving identity through performance of activism for social justice causes (Alexander, 2007; Gauntlett, 2008). This performance highlights the importance of emancipatory possibility within our physical and metaphorical bodies (Darder & Miron, 2007). Be that as it may, I seek to understand the role of media and popular culture in the identity construction process. Gauntlett (2008) explains these discursive practices are essential to modern life, while gender and sexuality represent the core of how we view our identities. Thus, in the next section I turn to a discussion on the origin of media studies and social critique, calling particular attention to the educational roots of cultural studies and its political connection to feminist ideas.

**The Educational Roots of Cultural Studies**

Taking time to remember our roots proves a useful exercise, particularly when one desires to reinvigorate a long-held passion, renew a sense of purpose, or realign a path forward.
In other words, sometimes we need to circle back to the beginning in order to advance forward. As such, I begin this section of the literature review with such a remembering, by engaging with a body of scholarship linking the foundational beginning of cultural studies with the field of adult education. Reexamining the roots of cultural studies lays the groundwork for understanding how social critique, along with advocacy for social justice causes, carries a long educational history that continues today, despite the fact that cultural studies developed into an entirely unique and separate field of study. The link between cultural studies and adult education is often foreign knowledge to those outside of these fields, as well as long forgotten by many who work within each. In addition to their close ties, both disciplines were founded with a purpose to bring deeper meaning and understanding to life experiences, particularly in context of social influences. To begin, I revisit the progressive beginnings of adult education.

Lindeman (1926) notes the field of adult education grew out of the hope that “some day education might be brought out of the college halls and into the lives of the people who do the work of the world” (p. xv). He argues that education held more potential than simply helping adults become literate in particular areas. Rather, Lindeman believes such a calling in higher education meant engagement in practices to transform the value of life for adults and bring meaning to the totality of their experiences. As unveiled in the following discussion, this perspective undergirds the fields of adult education and cultural studies, thereby creating a common thread forever connecting these specialties within a tapestry of social critique and cultural understanding. Lindeman also challenges academia to consider the function of adult education as one to help the intellectual development of people “glow with the warmth of honest feeling” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 105). Upon first consideration, this statement appears sentimental and overindulgent with emotion. Yet, when one considers the consequences of Lindeman’s
declaration, the insight springs forth that learning activates the mind and heart, thus compelling the individual to take action. This activation of intellect and passion then lends itself to a curiosity about the world and our place within it, naturally yielding an examination of culture and questioning the normalcy of the supposed natural social order. Accordingly, there exists a rich, intriguing history on the origin of a formalized process for cultural curiosity and critique. A history originating from within the field of adult learning.

**Recalling the Genesis of Social Critique**

Lindeman (1926) predicted a derivative of adult education that examines society and its artifacts, stating “education proceeds by means of communication, and all forms of communication are social products” (p. 148). He points to the organic desire of adults to examine the vehicles by which we learn, as well as those informing an understanding of the world and ourselves. This speaks to the notion introduced by French theorist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, that our social existence determines our human existence (Gazetas, 2000). The focus on the social closely aligns to the importance of activating intelligence and using imagination to solve social problems. In narrating the evolution of North American adult education from 1919-1970, Grace (2013) calls attention to the way Lindeman emphasizes the need for learners to be intelligently brave by using creativity and self-expression as powerful, intelligent, and freeing exercises in challenging social issues. She explains, “as Lindeman understood it, this meant that the intelligent person is able to link individuality to uniqueness and difference as well as to empowerment and emancipation in the quest to lead a full and meaningful life” (p. 189). In short, many adult educators view learning as a life-long endeavor for empowering and engaging
citizens to advance a better world. But how did this perspective in adult education launch the massive field of cultural studies we know today?

Sandlin (2005) describes cultural studies a contested discipline, with many intellectuals arguing as to its definition and demarcation as a field. While opinions on its exactness vary, several scholars agree the discipline evolved from the smaller sub-set of British cultural studies (Smith & Riley, 2009; Thompson, 2001), one that originated from the field of adult education (Sandlin, 2005; Shiach, 1999; Steele, 1997; Thornham, 2000; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009a). More precisely, the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson during the 1950s, within literary studies, is credited with launching British cultural studies. Steele (1997) chronicles this evolution in great detail, commencing with a discussion of Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson, who worked within the academic discipline of English studies. Steele connects the origins of English studies to adult education: “English studies was regarded as the most important key to a fully humanised society in which individual creative potential could be allowed to flower in line with a maturing democracy” (Steele, 1997, p. 50). The irony, Steele notes, was the intent of English studies to condition students to feel united in identity with their country; yet, its’ offspring of cultural studies subverted the “ideology and institutional efficacy” of this purpose (Steele, 1997, p. 70). Initially, English studies concerned itself with educating adults about British society. Yet, Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson saw the potential for much more than fostering national identity. They concerned themselves with the lives of working-class adults and their daily experiences under oppressive circumstances in Britain. Drawing upon leftist ideas from Marx, Althusser, Barthes, Lacan, Gramsci, and others, the “founding fathers” began writing about issues impacting adult learners in their everyday lives (Sandlin, 2005; Steele, 1997; Thompson, 2001).
While British cultural studies was born out of the interdisciplinary study of adult education (Sandlin, 2005; Shiach, 1999; Steele, 1997), the idea of studying popular culture was present in the adult learning discipline as early as the 1930s in the form of film studies (Steele, 1997). During this time period, American and Canadian adult educators recognized the importance of studying emerging technology, like the motion picture, as a “formidable tool for both the training and the indoctrination of citizens, young and old alike” (Gazetas, 2000, p. 2). Later, in 1974, Raymond Williams wrote about the transformation of educational practice being given over to media, specifically calling attention to the instructive nature of television (R. Williams, 1990). Williams understood that visual narratives offer audiences a form of experiencing a phenomenon, rather than just cognitively learning about subjects in a formal educational setting (R. Williams, 1990).

Hence, adult educators across the globe saw the importance of studying culture and media for its impact on the learner and wider society. The scholars who launched cultural studies viewed education as part of the process to change society (Sandlin, 2005; Shiach, 1999; Steele, 1997). During the mid-19th century, adult education transitioned from one based on economic drivers to an education for critical and social consciousness. Paulo Freire, the radical adult educator, spoke of this education for critical consciousness in his 1971 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He saw education as an opportunity for people to “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire, 2013, p. 83). Importance was placed on reflection and subsequent action, a shared perspective held by the founders of cultural studies.
While Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson began as adult educators in the fields of English and Sociology, their scholarship fell within the peripheries of accepted academic study. Steele (1997) notes: “cultural studies began as a political project of popular education amongst adults” (p. 15). These men were interested in advocating for social change as it affected adult learners. Even Stuart Hall, the well-known critical cultural scholar, attributes the emergence of this field from teachers who worked in the margins of English studies. He described Richard Hoggart as “not a university professor of English at all, but a teacher of adult working-class students in what was called the extramural department of the university” (Hall, 1990, p. 12).

Hall continues, saying:

We thus came from a tradition entirely marginal to the centers of English academic life, and out of an engagement in the questions of cultural change—how to understand them, how to describe them, and how to theorise them, what their impact and consequences were to be, socially—were first reckoned within the dirty outside world. (p. 12)

Hence, it’s important to remember, these foundational scholars were primarily interested in changing society—they just happened to teach adult students in the fields of English and Sociology at the time their ideas of critiquing society emerged (Steele, 1997). Cultural studies, then, materialized not from the hallowed halls of mainstream academia, but from within the fringes of radical teaching and learning.

Of great relevance to the rise of cultural studies is the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, established by Richard Hoggart in 1962, which focused considerable attention on the study of popular culture (Hall, 1990; Sandlin, 2005; Steele, 1997; Thompson, 2001). This curiosity likely stemmed from Hoggart’s engagement with educating adults and studying the elements of culture impacting their lives (Steele, 1997). Consequently,
cultural studies organically evolved as an academic discipline, one that specifically considered the relevancy and importance of examining popular culture as a means to social change. Hoggart saw this connection of culture to adult education, because the latter helped set the stage for contesting ideology embedded within cultural meanings. As part of this effort, Hoggart recruited Stuart Hall to provide sociological and theoretical insights for cultural studies; something Hoggart himself felt unequipped to do (Steele, 1997). This idea of studying culture, in particular the creations of the working class, came from the notion that “working people constructed and were constructed by a notion of a common culture” (Steele, 1997, p. 33). The idea of popular culture came into being through the study of working-class culture, a new notion that was distinct from high-culture, or the “highest forms of achievement in art and thought of the period” (Steele, 1997, p. 86). As a sub-set of cultural studies, examination of film and television in relation to broader cultural and historical contexts became an essential exercise (Gazetas, 2000). Before the development of film and media studies, little was written about these communication narratives, including their educational function and larger social impacts.

Interestingly, the notion of dissident cultural creations existed long before the musings of future adult education and critical education scholars. Both Hoggart and Thompson believed that subversive popular culture existed and could challenge hegemonic ideas of the time, even if it appeared to use the language of the dominant culture (Sandlin, 2005; Steele, 1997; Thompson, 2001). They initially considered popular culture as distinct from mass culture, viewing it as originating from working people, but closely linked to moral movements. Thus, emphasis on challenging dominant ideology through everyday experiences provided the foundational hope for the field of cultural studies. Steele (1997) explains “working people and other subordinate groups have always placed a high value on education, both for individual enlightenment and
social progress” (p. 37). But many shied away from higher education, as it meant alienation from the very group of people they wanted to represent. Hence, Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson—as well as Hall and other critical educators at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies—sought to connect to adult learners both within the halls of higher education and with those living among the masses.

The significance of examining popular culture is tied to the notion of culture as a battleground, whereby struggles over social ideas and values are played out (Alexander, 2007). Williams (1990) contends popular culture—more specifically film and television as it relates to representation on screen—illustrates the contradiction within the social system itself with regard to conflicting social values. Jubas (2008) argues cultural struggles exist around the globe, as democratic societies have always included some characterization of marginalizing people groups. Therefore, she states that “civil society and its cultural practices are inherently contested ground” (p. 79). She underscores the long, historical connection of adult education and social critique in this struggle.

Jubas (2008) also argues adult education, even before it became formalized as an originally radical field of academic study, possesses a long history of fighting for social justice through cultural critique. Her case study on British women’s 18th and 19th century abolitionist boycotts, historicizes adult learning within a context of social struggles. She says critiquing culture, along with other social struggles, involves a learning that often goes unrecognized. Explaining further, she says “much of the learning that accompanies collective social action is not purposeful or planned” (p. 81). This informal, incidental learning helps citizens (Jubas calls particular attention to women) to learn about civil society and the function of culture. This points to an unintended political learning that occurs during everyday activism and civic
engagement. Thus, as critical education and cultural studies overlap, the notion of popular culture as public pedagogy (reviewed later in this chapter) becomes a moral and political practice, as there exists within culture a struggle over identity, meaning, and power relations between groups (Giroux, 2007; Sandlin, 2005). Popular culture offers:

the ground of contestation and accommodation and is the site where young people and others imagine their relationship to the world; it produces narratives, metaphors, and images for constructing and exercising powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others. (Giroux, 2007, p. 220)

While studying culture and wrestling with social issues represented an opportunity to advocate for subjugated groups, women were not always on the minds of these academic thinkers.

**Advocating for Women**

Though adult educators were foundational to the development of cultural studies, some feminist scholars criticize the “founding fathers” as neglectful of women in their social philosophy and critiques (Shiach, 1999; Thornham, 2000). Thornham (2000) explains Williams and other foundational scholars, with the exception of perhaps Thompson, simply had “no place for women” in their theories of change (p. 61). Thornham challenges the schemes presented by Williams as ignoring the history of women’s oppression. She notes while Williams welcomed the emergence of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s, he did not see women’s history as distinct from men, thereby his suggestions for cultural change represented a “wholly masculine history” (Thornham, 2000, p. 62). However, feminist thinking holds a deeper connection to adult education and cultural studies than first apparent.
First, it is important to point out that feminism possesses a long and distinct history, one preceding adult education and cultural studies. However for the purposes of my study, I draw attention to the originating intersection of these areas. While women’s studies and cultural studies eventually develop into independent fields, they intersect at a critical point during second wave feminism, and continue to draw upon and inform one another even today. As a note of reference, women’s studies can be traced to four foundational mothers: a) Mary Wollstonecraft and her work in the late 18th century on vindicating the rights of women; b) Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her work in the late 19th century on examining women’s position in culture from a socio-economic perspective; c) Virginia Woolf and her work in the early 20th century on the representation of women, consciousness, and identity in relation to literary production; and finally, d) Simone de Beauvoir and her work in the mid-20th century on exploring ideology and women’s complicity in their subordination to men (Thornham, 2000). The last name represents an enormous body of work, contributed to by a multitude of other feminist scholars, whom collectively initiated the 1960s – 1970s political movement for women’s equality in many countries around the world.

Considering second-wave feminism emerged in close historical proximity to cultural studies, it seems only natural for British feminist theorists during the 1970s to engage and challenge the emerging ideas of Williams and others during this period. In fact, feminist ideas of the time are described as a disruptive and invasive force that transformed cultural studies (Thornham, 2000). Reflecting on the era, Stuart Hall considers “a [theory] of culture which cannot account for patriarchal structures of dominance and oppression is, in the wake of feminism, a non-starter” (as cited in Thornham, 2000, p. 65). His assertion points to the pivotal juncture at which the introduction of second-wave feminism radically changed the field of
cultural studies, just as adult education fundamentally changed the notion of educating individuals for the purposes of individual and social betterment (Sandlin, 2005; Thornham, 2000). Thornham (2000) notes the founding principles of cultural studies and feminism are quite similar, except the former, in defining culture, left out women, which necessitated the emergence of a theory to address what was intentionally or unintentionally left out.

Feminist critique of culture, then, emerged from political roots, as did cultural studies from the political agenda of adult educators in Britain (McCann & Kim, 2003; Sandlin, 2005; Thornham, 2000). While adult education sought to develop learning for social change, feminism sought to challenge the male-centric perspective of cultural studies (among other things). Feminists critiqued society beyond an examination of class, to include the intersection of gender and other issues of human difference (Thornham, 2000). An example of such revolutionary feminist work of the time is Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* from 1963, which Thornham views as an attempt to examine the everyday experiences of women in relation to a patriarchal culture in America. Beyond her own critique of culture at the time, Friedan believed adult education a vital component to the development of a larger critical consciousness among women, and the men who support them in their quest for equality. She says “ideas are not like instincts of the blood that spring into the mind intact. They are communicated by education” (Friedan, 1963, p. 46). Friedan called for the development of women’s minds, challenging both academia and the producers of popular culture. Another pivotal feminist scholar in this area includes Sheila Rowbotham, who wrote *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* in 1973, and presents the notion of the colonization of women’s minds in a male-dominated culture. Rowbotham draws upon the work of Raymond Williams in her critiques of culture, illustrating the profound connection between feminism and cultural studies. Feminists around the world at
the time (and well into the present) were concerned with, among other things, social influences on women’s identity. Thus, activism among women in relation to cultural issues exploded during the 1960s – 1970s (McCann & Kim, 2003).

Over time, feminism found many causes for which to advocate, leading to a fractured identity, which many scholars found troublesome. Yet activist and educator, bell hooks, problematizes this impression by claiming feminism can by anything you want/need it to. She says backlash to this thinking, “indicates a growing disinterest in feminism as a radical political movement” (hooks, 2003, p. 50). hooks argues the aim of feminism should not simply fight for equality between women and men, since this equality never existed; rather, the aim should focus on ending sexist oppression through the eradication of the dominant, repressive ideology pervasive in much of Western culture. hooks (2003) argues such an emphasis creates a bond that transcends biological similarity (i.e., all women should care because they belong to the same sex). Jubas (2008) asserts this fractured identity among feminism is normal for any large resistance group and should be expected. She says: “Insistence on consensus and uniformity denies the always inherent differences among members of a group or a movement, and ultimately works against its dissident, democratic aims” (p. 89). Jubas’ point is crucial to consider. Returning to the radical roots of adult education and cultural studies, as well as feminism, is a stretch and not reflective of the holistic goals for each field or perspective. However, the nexus of learning through activism and a return to the educational roots of cultural studies is of great interest and applicability to the purpose of my study.
Returning to the Radical

Thus far, our journey through the origins of cultural studies, demonstrates the political underpinnings of adult learning, with particular focus placed on the relevancy and applicability of critiquing culture for the adult learner. Armstrong and Miller (2006) point to a continued strong connection between the fields, as both disciplines glean theories and ideas from each other in their similar efforts to advance social change. While not as widespread within the field as it once was, the authors note adult educators with passion for social justice still draw upon critical theorists for the purposes of “challenging ideology, contesting hegemony, unmasking power, overcoming alienation, learning liberation, reclaiming reason and learning democracy” (p. 298). This critical perspective, so closely tethered to cultural studies, is seen in the foundational scholars from adult education. For instance, Steele (1997) says before “feminism” was even a notion, Richard Hoggart demonstrated feminized thinking, in that women and subjectivity were central to his rational. Steele contends this was likely due to Hoggart’s working-class upbringing and the impact of women on his life. Yet somewhere along the way, the larger field of adult education became more doctrinally sanitized of leftist ideas.

In their qualitative study of adult educators who entered the field from 1975 – 1985, Armstrong and Miller (2006) explain how the field evolved from one with a propensity toward social change, to one where a) the meaning of social purpose changed, b) thinking shifted to the right, c) global and international forces exercised influence, and d) perspectives of the field shifted. Yet, many adult educators call for a return to radical teaching, along with adopting a perspective that gives attention to global issues and critiquing culture (Armstrong & Miller, 2006; Darder & Miron, 2007). In particular, Darder and Miron (2007) argue the return to the roots of adult education as radical social transformation is a moral issue. They view it as
infusing love into a critical pedagogy, in that love is a political principle “through which we
struggle to create a mutually life-enhancing opportunities for all people” (p. 150). Concurrently,
Giroux (2007) says all levels of education should be viewed as something more than a public
| good and service. He challenges educators to recognize the social responsibility of their
academic labor—one that “becomes meaningful when we use it to find ways to connect private
troubles with public concerns” (p. 219).

As this section comes to a close, I revisit Lindeman’s proposition where he notes while
adult learners want to improve themselves in relation to a whole host of areas; there is a force
more powerful at work, a desire to transform the world. He says, “But [adults] want also to
change the social order so that vital personalities will be creating a new environment in which
their aspirations maybe properly expressed” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 14). He explains when
individuals begin to understand what inhibits, frustrates, and subjugates them, they take the first
step toward liberation. It’s a reminder that almost a century ago, scholars challenged the adult
education field to become a radical one.

Even so, the purpose of my study focuses on the role of media and popular culture in the
process of critiquing culture and challenging dominant, oppressive ideology. For centuries,
human beings applied the tool of storytelling to pass along all types of social values. And with
the advent of modern technology, narratives took on a whole new educational impact. As such,
in the next section, I review literature within the field of adult education on the notion of learning
from stories and the impact this holds for society.
Popular Culture as Public Pedagogy

Sitting down in front of the television, heading to the movies with friends, spending a lazy afternoon reading a best-selling novel—all these activities offer a look into the varied sources for escapism and entertainment today. Bearing in mind popular culture serves to fulfill a desire for fun and enjoyment, one understands why people invest considerable time consuming it. In contrast to high culture, popular culture offers a form of entertainment that is mass produced, or at least available to a large number of people (Briggs, 2007; Street, 1997), making it widely distributed, consumed, and a part of people’s everyday lives. Immersion in entertainment material provides an environment where individuals more easily accept messages from written and visual texts, particularly as it relates to shaping audiences’ vision and perspectives on varied social matters (Sandoe, 2013). During these times, media conveys cultural knowledge and audiences more readily engage with messages, as compared to other methods of ideological communication and persuasion (Pauly, 2003). Even the most critical consumer of media and pop culture experiences moments of seduction and allows an intentional suspension of reality when engaging with texts (Sandoe, 2013).

hooks (1996) asserts popular culture narratives have a certain power over us. She contends they shape, in part, our individual and social perspectives on issues like race, class, gender, and sexuality through entertaining storylines and characters. Beyond the consciousness of audiences and their recognition (or not) of the educative nature of movies, shows, books, and other popular culture mediums, these texts carry powerful messages with significant personal and social consequences (Sandoe, 2013). Popular culture has an ability to “produce and articulate feelings [that] can become the basis of an identity, and that identity can be the source of political thought and action” (Street, 1997, p. 10).
Ideologies are shaped and molded by authors, writers, directors, actors, etc., not to mention advertisers and the production companies that provide financial backing for popular culture texts (hooks, 1996). Audiences make political statements through consuming and producing it. Each time we switch the channel, pick up a book or magazine, or buy a movie ticket, we decide what types of popular culture are better than others (Street, 1997). Through these choices, we unintentionally reinforce the work of producers who create the texts, which are filled with oppressive and/or challenging values and beliefs (Sandoe, 2013). Accordingly, we often relinquish power to others in order to be entertained. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) notoriously cautioned that popular culture “remains the entertainment business. Its influence over the consumer is established by entertainment; that will ultimately be broken not by an outright decree, but by the hostility inherent in the principle of entertainment to what is greater than itself” (p. 9). They believe popular culture texts are never neutral. Rather, these texts are productions of people and media companies with deeply held beliefs and value systems (Sandoe, 2013). The warning by Adorno and Horkheimer alert us that much more is at stake than simply audience enjoyment and seasonal ratings metrics.

Beyond the entertainment value of popular culture, one can see the heart of social struggles between dominant, mainstream interests and dissenting ideologies (Brookfield & Holst, 2011; Graham, 1989). Popular culture contains, within its discourse, layers of meaning that reveal significant veracities about society (Sandoe, 2013). In fact, the soul of a society and its most vivid realities are found in popular culture; and this complex relationship works itself out in often-obscure ways (Kittelson, 1998). Within its narratives reside a continuous struggle between politics, people, culture, values, and identities, each shaping the other through a process of institutions and ideas (Street, 1997). The persuasive power of popular culture resides in its
ability to engage with society’s members, influencing and responding to contestations of the collective psyche. It is an “important vehicle for the transmission of political ideas and values” (Brynen, 2000, p. 73). The conveyance of significant knowledge and beliefs occur because we enjoy popular culture. It “makes us feel things, allows us to experience sensations that are both familiar and novel. It does not simply echo our state of mind, it moves us” (Street, 1997, p. 7).

People learn about social issues and construct their identities through its images and narratives. Americans are “increasingly nurtured by media messages and their reality is becoming not what they experienced or read but what they say and heard on television, the movies, and the radio” (Schultz, 2000, p. xiii). And concealed within its content, the imagination of a culture reveals an ongoing struggle over values, policies, beliefs, and ideologies. The imageries of popular culture flash in front of audiences, relentlessly shaping, molding, and influencing their conscious and unconscious minds—teaching them what is acceptable and what is not, including what may be potentially revolutionary (Goren, 2013).

Society contends with fundamental issues within popular culture discourse, offering a copious and multifarious area of study that divulges social fears, desires, struggles, and triumphs; while also functioning as an informal pedagogical tool to educate and shape individual ideologies (Sandoe, 2013). The manner in which situations are defined in social discourses affect current and future behaviors of individuals and the public. Meaning does not originate out of a vacuum, but is created through media texts and other forms of popular culture discourse, which are signifying practices (Sandoe, 2013). These signifying practices are neither impartial nor innocuous; instead they materialize from ideology. Hall (2009) asserts “meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean. Language and symbolization is the
means by which meaning is produced” (p. 121). R. R. Wright (2010a) underscores the influence of these pedagogies in our everyday lives:

Entertaining, engaging stories become popular. They become narratives that shape our cultures. Popular cultural narratives are embedded in our daily existence. They take particular forms such as epics, fables, parables, biographies, fairy tales, bildungsroman, tragedies, comedies, or dramas. They are worked into genres, mediums, and venues that appeal to the entire spectrum of personalities.

There are metanarratives that become so pervasive in popular culture that they shape our accepted “norms”. (p. 49)

Popular culture influences what and how we think about ourselves, about others, and our roles in society (Sandoe, 2013). Audiences invite popular culture narratives into their living rooms, with characters shaping our individual and collective experiences of them, thereby influencing the construction of our own identity (Tisdell, 2008).

Critically examining popular culture presents an opportunity to examine whose interests are being served by the visual representations presented in these public pedagogies. Within this context, “representations” result from the production of meaning occurring through an organized system containing signs to symbolize real and imaginary ideas, objects, people, events, feelings, etc. Representations are essential to the shared meaning making process between members of a culture (Hall, 1997). While meaning is created and exchanged through numerous channels in America, popular culture offers an infinite source of meaning producing, educational practices. Each photo, magazine, book, song, television show, character, movie, and other social discourse create meaning in culture and shape how members of its society view the world (Sandoe, 2013). These systems of representation “organize, construct, and mediate our understanding of reality,
emotion, and imagination” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 13). Looking more closely at popular culture reveals deep, cultural myths, as well as offering new and potentially dissonant messages (Graham, 1989; R. Williams, 1990).

**Learning Informally from Popular Culture and the Media**

Lindeman (1926) posits that adults learn daily from countless experiences outside the walls of higher education. He argues life itself is education, along with all of the nuanced experiences that fall outside the realm of structured learning. In contrast to “formal” learning, which occurs when a facilitator utilizes a set curriculum to lead students through a particular subject matter and assesses their learning progress; the adult education field categorizes “informal” learning as arising from everyday living (Hager, 2012). This is not to say that *all* experiences foster informal learning. Rather, adult educators recognize certain life experiences offer opportunities for learning in a variety of ways and settings, outside of formal instruction. Informal learning has been described as unplanned, opportunistic, less predictable, tacit, highly contextual, holistic, and generally focused on the individual learner (Hager, 2012). While sometimes undervalued by the formal education system, informal learning has also been recognized as an influential and evolving process, helping to shape individuals in very powerful ways (Hager, 2012). Informal learning encapsulates a comprehensive scope of activities, including such things as hobbies, crafts, sports, and other recreational activities. Another instance of the learning that occurs informally, albeit significantly, is the result from experiences of surviving difficult situations, like job loss or unemployment, incarceration, or other oppressive
circumstances (Hager, 2012). Hence, many believe more learning actually happens outside formal educative environments than from within them (Blewitt, 2011).

Emerging literature also highlights informal learning experiences fostered by engagement with popular culture (Akar-Vural, 2010; Collier, Lumadue, & Wooten, 2009; Guy, 2007; Hutchins & Bierema, 2013; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas, 2008; Jubas, Johnston, & Chiang, 2014; Mclean, 2013; Paul, 2000; Stack & Deirdre, 2006; Taber, Woloshyn, Munn, & Lane, 2014; Tisdell, 2007, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; van Zoonen, 2005; R. R. Wright, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2013b, 2007; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b; Yosso, 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found 70 percent of all adults engaged in some form of informal learning through avenues like television, computers, videos, etc. (Brookfield, 2010). A report by The Neilson Company notes that U.S. households spend upwards of 60 hours each week consuming media content across a variety of screens (The digital consumer, 2014). It appears that consuming media and other forms of popular culture is another full-time job for Americans. In addition to its entertainment value, popular culture also teaches its consumers what to think regarding social matters. Blewitt (2011) asserts media and popular culture provide learning environments that shape our culture and individual minds. Consequently, popular culture is considered a form of public pedagogy.

The term “public pedagogy” first appeared in academic literature in the late 19th century, and has since been used quite extensively as a theoretical construct in education-focused research (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011). Public pedagogies are the varied spaces, locales, and languages of teaching and learning that happen outside formal education (Sandlin et al., 2010b). These public pedagogies are “just as crucial—if not more so—to our understanding of the development of identities and social formations as the teaching that does on within the
classroom” (Sandlin et al., 2010b, p. 1). Examples of public pedagogies include cultural institutions, like libraries, museums, and zoos; figures and sites of activism, like grassroots social movements or public intellectuals; and cultural sites like commercial spaces, the Internet, media, and popular culture (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011). Public pedagogies produce cultural meaning, social practices, individual desires, and shape social discourse, making them both educational forces and functions of political and institutional power (Giroux, 1999).

Giroux (2000) argues “public pedagogy is defined through its performative functions, its ongoing work of mediation and its attentiveness to the interconnections and struggles that take place over knowledge, language, spatial relations, and history” (p. 354). Thus, public pedagogy has a moral and political component to its nature (Giroux, 2007). Within this context, examining public pedagogy becomes part of critical practice that “aims to uncover lived relations of power, their discourses, representations, structures of affect, networks of diffusion and socio-economic conditions and contexts of production” (Blewitt, 2011, p. 724). Scholars who study public pedagogy seek to understand, in part, how large spheres of public influence shape cultural beliefs and individual experiences.

Historically, theorizing and research on public pedagogy possesses close ties to cultural studies, as this field offers “education researchers a way to critically investigate public and popular culture spaces for their pedagogical aspects and for the ways these spaces reproduce or challenge commonsensical and oppressive configurations of reality” (Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011, p. 343). Cultural studies and sociology provide the vehicle for understanding the impact of popular culture on society, while the field of adult education helps to unpack the learning that takes place when audiences engage with texts. In this way, “popular culture as public pedagogy
teaches audiences particular ways of being, through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates” (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b, p. 536).

Some scholars, like Henry Giroux, even view popular culture pedagogies as a “potential site for social justice, cultural critique, and reimagined possibilities for democratic living” (Sandlin et al., 2010b, p. 3). Briggs (2007) gives credence to the consumers of popular culture, which challenges the earlier warning posted by Adorno and Horkheimer. He highlights the ability of adults to “appropriate and reinvent popular texts in ways that are empowering and sensitive to the range of possible uses, interpretations, and pleasures people take from such texts” (Briggs, 2007, p. 130). Thus, time spent with popular culture texts offers more than just a relaxing evening in front of the television, enjoyable night at the movies with friends, long awaited concert for a favorite rock musician, or enchanted afternoon lost in the fantasy land of a popular novel; Americans are learning about themselves, about others, about a multitude of critical social issues, including how to resist oppressive ideologies. Accordingly, a number of adult educators call attention to the importance of examining popular culture as public pedagogy, because within this space most people learn about themselves and others—it functions as a site where identities are formed (Collier et al., 2009; Gazetas, 2000; Guy, 2007; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas, Taber, & Brown, 2015; Sandlin, Wright, et al., 2011; Taber et al., 2014).

For adult educators, the issue then becomes how “culture, especially media culture, has become a substantial, if not the primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions” (Giroux, 1999, p. 3), including what is means to be a man, woman, citizen, and other roles that significantly impact our individual and social identities. Giroux (1999) contends media and popular culture pedagogies offer contested terrains that reproduce oppressive ideologies, but are
also subject to “disruptive translations and negotiations” (p. 7). The critical element of this argument is while media and popular culture have the propensity to reproduce structural power relations based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, they can also challenge such power relations (Gazetas, 2000; Stack & Deirdre, 2006; Tisdell, 2008; R. R. Wright & Wright, 2015). It’s important to recognize the ability for popular culture to do both, as well as to understand the power resides with the people engaging with its material.

Scholars who examine popular culture note the importance of its function to shape and resist power relations in both society and education (Gazetas, 2000; Stack & Deirdre, 2006; Tisdell, 2008). While it often delivers oppressive, stereotypical, and socially damaging material, popular culture can offer resistant messaging, “a form of defiance, a weapon with which to deny power” (Street, 1997, p. 12). This form of public pedagogy then becomes a part of the political struggle—a battle to advance or challenge a particular view of the world, as well as a fight for or against the dominant social discourse. As such, popular culture can double as a form of creative expression, exploring particular issues in ways that both oppress and liberate. Sandlin, Wright, et al. (2011) explain how popular culture both oppresses and challenges, often within the same text. The importance rests with the meaning an individual makes of this material:

...adults are not the fully autonomous, agentic beings of traditional adult development and learning literature but are shaped or constructed by the media and popular cultures within which adults live and by the cultural institutions with which they interact. Adults are also, however, not the wholly passive creations of the culture industries…. [They] learn to resist the dominant ideologies that are perpetuated through various public pedagogies. (Sandlin, Wright, et al., 2011, p. 5)
In essence, the emphasis belongs to how and what people do with the material—not necessarily the material itself.

Popular culture, then, functions as a powerful tool for learning, as well as for challenging oppressive social structures and social injustices found in the world (Gazetas, 2000; Guy, 2007; Taber et al., 2014); in part, due to the fact that popular culture provides an enjoyable platform from which to engage in difficult subject matter. Tisdell (2000) notes, teaching “for social change is difficult, requiring a willingness to deal with conflict, resistance, and strong emotions as groups engage in critical dialogue and, hopefully, move to social action” (pp. 308–309).

Tisdell and others recognize popular culture pedagogies provide a common ground for exploration, critical reflection, and dialogue of these difficult subjects. Further, popular culture can also double as resistance “art” whereby it breaks with the familiar, offering another way of knowing the world. Brookfield and Holst (2011) use the term *radical aesthetics* to describe this type of popular culture that functions as a way to “inform and activate community and movement members about the history and dimensions of a particular struggle” (p. 150). The power of radical aesthetics resides in its educative function (which is briefly outlined in this chapter) to provide a basis of understanding of how popular culture texts, and the representations contained within, can potentially challenge social “Truths” and oppressive social discourse (Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

First, *sounding warnings* within popular culture texts provide solidarity for emerging movements, as well as raising awareness that something is happening. Second, these pedagogies *build solidarity* with audiences, binding groups together for a common cause. Third, messages that *claim empowerment* inspire people to challenge the status quo. Fourth, popular culture pedagogies can present *alternative epistemologies and ontologies*, organizing problematic and
complex subjects in concise and enjoyable forms. Whether in song, on stage, or on screen, a simple message carries significant meaning for people to wrestle with. Fifth, affirming pride and building self-respect for historically marginalized individuals, groups, or movements is an important characteristic of radical aesthetics. Finally, teaching history through popular pedagogies informs future generations on many social struggles from the past. Yet, while looking at popular culture as radical aesthetics provides a understanding about how these texts function, Street (1997) cautions “the constant stream of representations in popular culture only paints part of the picture. It matters what people do with the barrage of images and identities” (p. 11). We should not convey all the power to the text, for people are the creators of meaning—both the values intended by the creators of the text, and by those who consume it.

Examining Popular Culture in Adult Education

Thoman and Jolls (2004) contend that although learning happens continuously for adults in almost every situation, they learn most powerfully through the convergence of media and technology. Visual media “offers viewers a wealth of sensory information, fiction, facts, spin, myths and examples in its news and entertainment programs. Thus [it] should be viewed as a site for meaning-making and adult development” (Wright & Sandlin, 2009b, p. 535). There is a deep connection between media consumption and education as a significant source of learning in today’s world, whether adults are aware of this occurrence or not (Gazetas, 2000; Jubas et al., 2015; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009a). Scholars note the pervasive influence of media and popular culture on society, as well as affirm the importance of developing critical media literacy skills to help people—from children to adults—understand the influence of popular culture, both
positively and negatively, in their own lives and in relation to society (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Graham, 1989; Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011; R. R. Wright, 2007). Tisdell (2008) asserts “the media are a significant arena for adult learning that has been given only limited attention in both the adult education and critical media literacy literature” (p. 49). With the exception of Robin Redmon Wright’s groundbreaking study on adult, informal learning through a popular culture television show, along with a few other recent studies (Botzaki, 2009; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas et al., 2014; Mclean, 2013); the majority of research in adult education focuses on the use of popular culture to foster learning in the classroom or other educational settings (Akar-Vural, 2010; Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Carr, 2009; Gazetas, 2000; Harste & Albers, 2013; Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Paul, 2000; Pauly, 2003; Stuckey & Kring, 2007; Taber et al., 2014; Tisdell, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; R. R. Wright & Wright, 2015; Yosso, 2002). Common themes in the adult education literature center on using popular culture as a platform for discussion of controversial social issues, fostering self-reflection and raising critical consciousness in learners, and functioning as a contested site for dominant and resistance ideologies. More recent literature in adult education focuses on textual analyses of popular culture to provide material for educators in their critical pedagogical efforts. The following more closely reviews some of the conceptual and empirical literature on the use of popular culture in adult learning.

Present research highlights the importance of using popular culture and media as a common platform for discussion, considering its consumption by mass audiences and the mutual bond it creates. People take great pleasure in watching their favorite shows and movies; but engaging in dialogue with others about narratives and characters also serves to heighten their joy. Some of the current adult education literature makes the case for using popular culture and media
as a neutral foundation for examining various social issues, as these texts provide common
ground for discussion (Botzaki, 2009; Jubas et al., 2014; Pauly, 2003; Stuckey & Kring, 2007;
Taber et al., 2014; Tisdell, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; R. R. Wright, 2007; Yosso, 2002).
Tisdell (2008) says “given the pleasure element, it’s generally easy to engage discussion about
movies and television shows people enjoy” (p. 55). Yet, she cautions that popular culture and
media can also serve as deterrents, because people develop deep attachments to these narratives
and characters. Exemplary of this, R. R. Wright (2007) found a deep, cherished connection the
women in her study formed with the show’s lead character. This connection ultimately resulted
in a positive outcome, as the women challenged social norms of that time (1960s era) and
resisted dominant ideologies of the British culture. But it is worth noting, attachments may not
always produce such positive outcomes. In fact, Stuckey and Kring (2007) share from their
personal experiences that bonding with a particular text can get in the way of viewing popular
culture and media text critically. Nevertheless, the authors believe engaging students in
structured critical reflection exercises helps learners become more aware of the underlying
influences potentially shaping their personal identity and reproducing oppressive social norms.

Moreover, some researchers note the importance of popular culture and media texts as
neutral territory to explore contentious issues with their participants (Bing-Canar & Zerkel,
1998; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Paul, 2000; Stuckey & Kring, 2007; Taber et al., 2014; Tisdell &
Thompson, 2007). Popular culture offers fictional scenarios and imaginary characters as models
for people to engage their concerns and dialogue, doing so in a manner they may not have
otherwise considered for fear of retribution. These texts also help to bridge the gap between
teacher-student power disparities, offering a site for shared experiences to discuss common
social issues. Paul (2000) used rap to help teachers understand its utility for collective inquiry in
the classroom, as well as a vehicle to “critically explore significant issues attached to language, culture, and power through texts to which students relate in their everyday lives” (p. 251). Tisdell and Thompson (2007) found adult learners appreciate popular culture and media for its power to catch them off guard. This speaks to the less politicized essence of popular culture and media texts, or so it seems at first glance, as people seek to participate in shared experiences and generally engage with media and popular culture for entertainment purposes.

Another key theme in the literature on popular culture and adult education involves the notion of its ability to raise the consciousness of learners, both in terms of recognizing implicit messages within the texts, as well as the importance of incorporating critical media literacy in higher education programs. This is of particular importance with regard to visual representations found in popular culture that affect women and other issues of social difference. For example, Bing-Canar and Zerkel (1998) and Yosso (2002) used popular culture in the classroom to help learners identify oppressive stereotypes and negative representations regarding race and ethnicity in the media. Their participants recognized the serious implications of this culturally oppressive social discourse on their own identities. Taber et al. (2014) used analyses of superhero characters from various popular culture texts to foster critical discussion of gender representations in the media among female college students with learning disabilities. In addition to students, current research notes the significance of using popular culture to develop a critical consciousness in teachers as well (Harste & Albers, 2013; Lewison et al., 2002; Paul, 2000; Pauly, 2003). In an era when living rooms are dominated by digital devices and movie nights delineate the notion of family time, this body of research affirms the importance of helping adult learners become aware of the way in which media and popular culture texts work, in order to assist their choices, and those of their students, with becoming critical consumers of
media. The significance of this research illustrates the pedagogical nature of popular culture, to be used as the interplay between difficult social issues and the learning environment.

Additionally, literature in adult education greatly emphasizes media and popular culture as social constructions, serving to both reproduce, and at times challenge, dominant discourse. Tisdell (2008) notes the plausibility of using popular culture as a vehicle for reflection and to cause a shift in perspective. Her research demonstrates that engaging with popular culture helps to expand students’ thinking about marginalized people in new ways, as well as to develop an understanding of the hegemonic processes at work in media texts. Some of her participants noted a particular film “made them feel a bit uncomfortable, in that it called them to look inward at themselves and see their own pain and/or prejudices” (Tisdell, 2008, p. 58). This intriguing introspection demonstrates the potential for engagement with popular culture to initiate self-examination. A study by Tisdell and Thompson (2007) provides additional support of this theme. The authors believe in the power of media to catch audiences off guard and provide compelling content for consideration and dialogue through its ability to initiate deep, critical introspection from dissenting or alternative messages. While much of the research notes the significance of using popular culture to raise the consciousness of students in the classroom, few scholars have looked beyond the formal educational setting.

Finally, with the 2015 release of *Popular Culture as Pedagogy: Research in the Field of Adult Education* (Jubas et al., 2015), recent scholarship points to a surge of interest by adult educators in exploring the pedagogical importance of learning from popular culture, especially within a context of critical pedagogy. As editors of this collection, Jubas et al., 2015 believe engaging with popular culture represents an active, educative process, whereby consumers of popular culture interact with stories and characters that inform, influence, and shape both
identities and perspectives. Adults learn about themselves and others, what may be problematic or missing in their lives, and imagine the possibilities of what the world could become. Moreover, although people recognize characters in fictional stories do not necessarily reflect the real world, these references nevertheless become a part of our lives in deep and meaningful ways (Jubas et al., 2015). While the majority of the scholarship included in this book focuses on textual analysis of films and various television series, there are several crucial points worth noting—with implications both for the field and for the purpose of my study.

One key point is the notion of adult educators using popular culture texts as instructional material to complement their critical pedagogy. For example, R. R. Wright and Wright (2015) conducted a critical content analysis of the *Doctor Who* television series, offering readers pedagogical instances of how the show critiques social injustices, systems of oppression, corporate control, and government power. This idea of using popular culture to raise social consciousness of adult learners is echoed in the study by Odgren (2015), who examines *The Lego Movie* and its illustration of complex character development for critical awareness of important social issues. Odgren (2015) and R. R. Wright and Wright (2015) believe in the importance of adult educators incorporating this type of learning from popular culture into the classroom.

Of particular relevance to the purpose of my study is the profound connection of fans to a popular culture franchise, as an even greater potential for developing a critical consciousness. R. R. Wright and Wright (2015) explain people become immersed in a series as they are drawn to entertaining stories lines and fascinating characters. Thus, “popular culture narratives are embedded in our daily lives and seamlessly interwoven into our own developing and unfolding personal stories” (R. R. Wright & Wright, 2015, p. 14). This entrenchment into our lives is
increasingly more potent as popular culture stories now reach into spaces like the Internet, social media, video games, and more (R. R. Wright & Wright, 2015).

Another key point emphasizes the usefulness of examining representations in films and television series, as it relates to shaping individual identities from adolescence into maturity. Taber (2015) and C. Jarvis (2015) both examine gender representations in popular culture within the context of childhood narratives. Taber explores the intersection of childhood, adulthood, fantasy, and reality in her feminist discourse analysis of the television show, One Upon a Time; while C. Jarvis (2015) investigates how various fictional stories aimed at young women both accommodate and resist patriarchy. The authors argue that even narratives targeted for younger generations carry implications for adult learners as they interact with the material throughout their lives. Jubas (2015) provides another example of the applicability of examining representations in popular culture. The author conducted a qualitative study to examine how nursing students integrated cultural messages about nursing into their understanding of this profession. More specifically, the study by Jubas (2015) reveals what participants learn about themselves as gendered professionals from the television show, Grey’s Anatomy, as the show informed their sense of identity and experience as social beings.

This leads to the third key point, as representations in popular culture also help to shape public perception about important social issues. For example, Treffry-Goatley (2015) analyzed post-apartheid films, demonstrating how narratives could potentially shape public understanding of HIV. Additionally, Brown (2015) examined film narratives about teachers, calling attention to the changing (mostly negative) representations of this profession on screen. The author contends this type of discourse contributes to an ongoing backlash against teachers. Finally, Timanson and Schindel (2015) explored representations of adult and workplace learning in the
television series, *Nurse Jackie*. The authors explain films and television shows create a “cultural space where adults can learn knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours through observing the relevant performances of others in various contexts” (Timanson & Schindel, 2015, p. 67). Of central importance in all the literature previously mentioned, these spaces and narratives for learning hold significant consequence for the adult learner and larger social context.

Even with the recent work collected by Jubas et al., 2015 (most of which involves textual analyses of popular culture films and television shows), a gap exists in adult education research on what people learn, and how they develop a critical consciousness, from popular culture in situations outside the formal classroom. A few exceptions do exist, which are worth highlighting, as they inform my study. The first is research by Robin Redmon Wright and her examination of popular culture on the critical consciousness of women. This pioneering study focuses on a popular British television program, *The Avengers*; which featured a feminist female lead role that captured the imaginations of women viewers in England during the years 1962-1964 (R. R. Wright, 2007). Participants experienced a significant shift in the way they view themselves and their role in society through engaging with this television show. This study “shows the power of learning experiences found in the space between viewers and their television sets. It offers evidence of transformational, lifelong learning in living rooms” (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b, p. 533).

Another exception is the qualitative study by Collier et al. (2009) who examine the ways in which women challenge social stereotypes of lesbians through the use of particular popular culture texts with resistant messages. Participants in the study utilized television programs to inform their sense of sexual identity as lesbian women. They drew upon the narratives and characters of television shows to a) normalize and affirm their lesbian experiences, b) decrease
negative feelings of their identities, and c) decrease their sense of social isolation. Yet, the study
is situated with an audience reception context, with the researchers discussing the results from a
critical reading perspective rather analyzing the results using a learning lens.

Finally, research by C. Jarvis and Burr (2011) supports this important connection
between identity development and popular culture. Their qualitative study examines the
responses of viewers to moral dilemmas presented in the television series, *Buffy the Vampire
Slayer*. Participants in the study note how the narrative and characters challenge their frames of
reference on regarding contested social issues, in additional to helping the viewers acknowledge
previously unacknowledged aspects of themselves. The researchers explain, “viewing prompted
critical reflection that challenged [participants’] sense of themselves and their beliefs about
complex moral issues” (C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011, p. 177). These findings elucidate how popular
culture can potentially cause a transformation in thinking.

While the above studies provide great insight and offer foundational material for my
study, they fail to illuminate the connection between learning, fandom, and social action. Further
research is needed to understand in how women fans learn, make meaning, and construct
identities from engaging with popular culture that leads to their actions with advancing social
justice around the world. The work by Robin Redmon Wright and others provide a springboard
from which to dive into a largely unexplored pool of study. There is great political significance
in these unchartered waters, as popular culture assumes its political significance through the way
it helps to constitute identity. Street (1997) explains:

The sounds and styles, words and images, of popular culture gain their political meaning
through the way they form part of an identity which entails a particular view of the world,
and which is part of a performance, a way of being…. People’s sense of themselves has
direct consequences for the way they view their interests and their relations with others.

And popular culture is often linked to their constitution of identity and its politics. (p. 38)

While many situations inform a person’s sense of self, we must understand how something as influential, political, and pervasive as popular culture impacts the lives of women. Popular culture then becomes a form of political activity through its creation, consumption, and application. Street (1997) warns that if we fail to take this connection seriously, “we impoverish our understanding of the conflicting currents and aspirations which fuels politics” (p. 6).

As demonstrated throughout this section of the literature review, popular culture influences our everyday lives. Through visual representations in popular culture pedagogies, people comprehend and make meaning of the world, including politics. Gazetas (2000) says:

Today, film and television are the most pervasive media, providing children and adults alike with a diversity of visual experiences that both inform and persuade these viewers about our world through a wealth of images. Experiences of this illusionistic world and the person and objects in it are apparently equivalent to our perceptions of actual existence within a real time/space continuum. (p. 167)

Reality and fiction, at times, blend together effortlessly (Gazetas, 2000; Street, 1997). However, simply examining the learning that occurs from popular culture pedagogies also does not fully explain the profound affinity that fans hold to their favorite franchise, nor how they connect with other fans in the physical world and online spaces to collectively challenge oppressive ideologies. This link is explained by applying a third and final theoretical construct called convergence culture. In the following section, I discuss this notion as it informs an understanding of fan activism.
Convergence Culture

Returning, once again, to insights from Lindeman (1926) and the origination of the adult education field, he conjectures on the importance of individual, conscious freedom in the process of becoming active agents in social change. Lindeman believes when adults seek to utilize their total personalities, when they embrace their agency and capacities; and when then they grow in response to a changing environment, they have the power and freedom to become active agents for change. He challenges adult educators to consider the power of facing conflicts in life as opportunities for creativity and self-expression. And in relation to the purpose of my study, this ingenuity, creativity, and self-expression represents essential characteristics of fans, especially those who use popular culture as a platform for activism.

This creativity functions as an important component of citizenship and is profoundly connected to the radical roots of adult learning. Lindeman (1926) warns “when the function of citizenship loses its creativeness it also loses its meaning” (p. 127). Part of the creative process involves informal and incidental learning from popular culture—demonstrated by the literature reviewed in previous sections—but also in conversation and collaboration with others. Thus, learning among fans potentially serves as a vehicle to change one’s life and the world around them. For while adult education offers an “agitating instrumentality for changing life” (Lindeman, 1926, p. 165), fandoms offer the material, relationships, and opportunities to potentially enact change on a local and global scale.

In what follows, I describe the essence of fans and fandoms, followed by a review of convergence culture as a theory explaining the ability of fandoms to transcend and traverse physical and virtual worlds. Finally, I discuss literature on fan activism, examining how some emboldened fans take up causes that position them as activists.
Examining Fans and Fandoms

What exactly does the term “fan” mean to you? Likely, this word conjures up a myriad of mental images, including both positive and negative stereotypes. As with all language, this term holds meaning and power. It also possesses a long history. The term “fan” represents an abbreviated form of the word “fanatic”, a derivative of the Latin word “fanaticus”, relating to the idea of a devoted person (Jenkins, 1992). To be called a fan was once a stigma, something society previously considered a pathology, a deviance from the norm, or simply an exaggerated commitment to popular culture (Alvermann & Hagood, 2012; Jenkins, 1992, 2006b). For decades, the media represented fans as divergent, obsessed, and even dangerously fanatic (W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). Historically, society tended to fear fans and fandoms due to a misguided perception that individuals with such a designation typically withdrew from modern life (Baym, 2000). Fans were thought of as social recluses. Much like other sub-groups not representing dominant interests or those refusing to conform to hegemonic expectations, fans became marginalized as the “Other” and ostracized to the fringes of mainstream culture (Jenkins, 1992).

In recent years however, this negative perception of fans transitioned to one of acceptance in mainstream culture. Scholars within fan studies attempt to reframe the meaning of “fan” by comparing it to any other hobbyist or individual with a cultural loyalty, similar to an opera buff, bird watcher, or sports enthusiast (Alvermann & Hagood, 2012). The importance of this evolution leads to an understanding that many types of fans exist, and the history of fandom fits more generally into a long-held debate (and power struggle) over popular consumption of cultural material (Harris, 1998; Jenkins, 1992). With the emergence of cultural studies in the 1960s, academia found great relevance in examining popular culture, and the relationship of fans, to production of mass media (Jenkins, 1992). More specifically, the history of media
fandom represents, in part, a history of organized efforts by fans to influence programming decisions by networks (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, the history of media fandom could be described as a history of targeted and bounded activism. To fully appreciate this connection, I provide a brief history on the evolution of fan studies.

Fan studies began with the work of Michel de Certeau in the 1980s, followed by foundational explorations of popular culture and fandom research by John Fiske in the late 1980s to 1990s (Jenkins, 1992; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). Fiske, in particular, provides insight into the tendency for some fans to develop resistant readings of popular culture and create a sub-cultural resistance movement to dominant society. Studies of fans in this second phase reflect the romanticism of constituting a fan as something one performs (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007). In this context, they are poachers of material who take what they desire from a text and use it to construct an alternative community, culturally bounded by an affinity toward a particular franchise (Jenkins, 1992). Thus, fans and fandoms were (and are still) understood as prolific in their attractions and constantly in flux (Harris, 1998).

During the second phase of fan studies in the late 1990s, researchers began to look at the spread of new media through the Internet and the emergence of new types of fan culture (Gray et al., 2007; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). Quickly, fans became a common aspect of our shared world, something most people could identify with in some capacity. Zhang and Mao (2013) explain “through their identification with fan objects, people helped to define themselves” (p. 47). Thus, research during this period looked at the construction of fan identities through their interface with online fan communities. A central name in research on fan culture is Henry Jenkins, as he made waves with the principal work, Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture. Within this ethnographic study, Jenkins found five distinct dimensions of fan culture: a)
its relationship to a particular means of reception; b) its function as an informational and interpretive community; c) its particular traditions of cultural production; d) its purpose to serve as an alternative social community; and, of great relevance to the purpose of my study, e) its role in encouraging viewer activism (Jenkins, 1992). While the type of activism Jenkins describes relates to fans rallying against the actions of film producers and television executives, I call attention to the importance of fans mobilizing, collaborating, and advocating together for a particular cause.

The third phase of fan studies in the early 2000s explored the notion of how identifying as a fan, with all of the associated expectations and activities, now represents an important part of the fabric of people’s everyday lives (Gray et al., 2007; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). While fandom always reflected the infusion and adoration of popular culture into the lives of fans, the introduction of the Internet profoundly changed the nature of identifying as a fan and engaging with other fans. Furthermore, the introduction of new media and technology brought fandoms into the mainstream, as more people identified with various communities due to the speed and ease of connecting with cultural material and each other. But fan culture exemplifies more than just consumption of pop culture; it also refers to the production of personalized fan material. Fans engage with texts multiple times, and as they do, the meaning deepens and changes with each reading/viewing (Alvermann & Hagood, 2012). Therefore, participation in fan culture profoundly alters the way individuals relate to popular culture texts, along with the meanings they derive from its content and the material they produce (Jenkins, 1992, 2006b).

Jenkins (1992) also believes in the defiant nature of fan culture to challenge dominant social beliefs and values. He says “fan culture stands as an open challenge to the ‘naturalness’ and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies, a refusal of authority, and a violation of
intellectual property” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 18). Fan culture tests the belief that bourgeoisie high-culture holds more social value than that of the masses. This insubordination, Jenkins argues, cannot be easily dismissed or ignored. He explains:

Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature if the mass media and their relationship to it. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 86)

Jenkins goes on to say, fans are not simply passive consumers, rather active agents who not only critique their favored texts, but also evaluate them in relation to real social issues, systems, and structures that impact the world they live in. Baym (2000) notes four aspects about fans: a) they interpret and personalize characters and storylines; b) they pool perspectives and inform one another about developments of a series; c) they criticize messages and collaborate on creating a group identity; and d) they build meaningful relationships with other fans. Therefore, Jenkins (1992) says “within the realm of popular culture, fans are the true experts; they constitute a competing educational elite, albeit one without official recognition or social power” (p. 86). He believes in their intelligence, their passion, their loyalty, and their deep sense of community.

Fandom also offers a vehicle for democratic collaboration and an opportunity to use popular culture material for personal and group creative impulses (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 1992, 2006b). In a world controlled by those with the most money, participation in fan culture affords the ability to perform a new kind of citizenship, one mostly operating outside money and class. In her ethnographic study of Internet soap opera fans groups, Baym (2000) found a fan’s relationship to a popular culture text offers a form of currency. Knowledge represents the
material other fans respect. Additionally, the process of participating in fan culture was just as rewarding of an experience as watching the show itself.

Particularly for women and other subjugated groups, fandom offers an alternative space to express personal and social agency. Thus, fandom functions as mechanisms for people to “pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations; [and] fandom is a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests” (Jenkins, 2006b, p. 40). While women have always been a part of fan worlds, recent scholarship on gender in fandoms draws attention to the influence and impact of women in these communities (Jenkins, 2011). But what propelled fandom into mainstream culture? Certainly, the creation of the Internet represents a crucial benchmark. Yet, something more complex and organic happened when the physical and virtual worlds collided.

**Merging Offline and Online Worlds**

Many of us recognize the profound influence and complete restructuring of social life resulting from the introduction of the Internet into mainstream cultural. From the various ways people now gather information, to how they communicate, to how they construct identities, this is a globally networked world—one generating a specific type(s) of culture and collective identity(ies) (Castells, 2010). Within context of my study, the online world offers an emerging, intriguing, and important field site for feminist scholars to investigate numerous subjects. Bjork-James (2015) asserts “the proliferation of cyber-communities and computer-mediated communication has radically altered how we live, communicate, and gather, share, and produce knowledge” (Bjork-James, 2015, p. 113). Virtual spaces no longer reside in the margins of
society, but are central to most cultures around the world, as they transform the ways in which people live out their daily lives (Hallett & Barber, 2014).

This infusion of digital technology touches elemental aspects of humanity, including our understanding of race, class, gender, sexual identity and orientation, and able-bodiedness. Bjork-James (2015) says “the interactive nature of online media create new ways for gender to be produced, consumed, and analyzed, making the study of digital ecologies of interest to feminist scholars” (p. 113). Rather than the Internet evolving into a world independent of “reality” as some thought, online environments now blur the lines as to what constitutes “real” spaces, experiences, and relationships. In other words, the distinction between the physical and virtual quickly vanishes. Drawing upon poststructural feminism, this perspective challenges the binary of offline/online identities. Virtual worlds and relationships are now created in tandem with real world identities and communities as part of everyday living (Bjork-James, 2015).

The physical and the virtual blend into something Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture. Also known as “cultural convergence”, Jenkins introduced this concept during the late 1990s as a way to theorize how, and in what ways, fans use numerous media at the same time. Often described as a type of participatory (online) culture community (Brooker, 2001), convergence culture does not occur from the integration of media appliances, but within the minds of consumers (or fans) and their social interactions with others (Jenkins, 2006a). Convergence culture also helps to explain the differentiation between media audiences and fans of a popular culture text. For example, simply watching a film or television show, even on a regular basis, does not equate to participation in fan culture (Baym, 2000). Fans go beyond the action of consumption and expand the world of a popular culture franchise, making it bigger than its initial product, like a film or television series (Jenkins, 2006a).
Convergence culture also explains the political aspects of fan culture, as fans participate in forms of democratic debate through their production of dissenting texts within the fantasy worlds of pop culture (Hamilton & Heflin, 2011). The essence of convergence culture, like online fandoms, allows for participation and collaboration among fans (Jenkins, 2006a). The political effects of fan communities then, “come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical reading of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural production (participatory culture)” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 257). Online fan cultures provide new ways of thinking about citizenship and social change. As it applies to my study, applying convergence culture as a theoretical construct affords the ability to consider the varied ways some fans negotiate and resist dominant ideologies using both media and popular culture (Hamilton & Heflin, 2011).

As with all theories, convergence culture is not without weak points. Brooker (2001) calls attention to the class privilege of convergence culture, in that an individual must have the economic means to engage with multiple technologies, in addition to having the means and access to the Internet. As it applies to freedom of democratic thinking, Hamilton and Heflin (2011) note the exclusionary nature of convergence culture, due to the economic requirements of engaging in such junction of media. They critique convergence culture, as it relates to fandom, believing it serves to reinforce capitalism by offering new and increased revenue streams related to popular culture franchises. For example, it may boost the effects of marketing and advertising efforts, or require fans to purchase products and services to enhance their experience of the franchise. The requirement of Internet access, by default, excludes some of the most vulnerable and oppressed groups from important conversation and debate, thus reinforcing economic inequalities. Some critics warn we must not celebrate the democratic potentiality of convergence
culture, without also understanding the danger of commodifying resistance in the process. If not careful, participation in this type of democracy leads to consumption instead of critical reflection (Brooker, 2001; Hamilton & Heflin, 2011).

Still, examining fan activism through the lens of convergence culture appreciates how and why fans can further immerse themselves into the fantasy world of popular culture within online spaces. These narratives become lifestyles to experience and use for other purposes, like activism, as fans know characters intimately and immerse themselves in the life of protagonists (Brooker, 2001). In fact, many fandoms, like The Hunger Games, have become hybrid communities with a blend of both online and offline interactions and experiences (Bjork-James, 2015; Jenkins, 2006a). The Internet allows for numerous types of relationships to form in online communities that would have not otherwise existed (Bjork-James, 2015).

While cyber communities transcend geographic boundaries, they are still rooted in historical and social contexts (Bjork-James, 2015). Therefore, messages are not uniformly created through new media, but ultimately defined within the broader cultural context in which the fan lives. In essence, content may be globally distributed, however meaning is attributed by the user within their local historical and social understanding. Accordingly, researchers studying these groups, particularly those involving fans, desire to understand how people forge identities, develop relationships, and build communities in digital social spaces that transcend geographic boundaries (Baym, 2000; Hallett & Barber, 2014; Jenkins, 2006a). In particular, fan studies explores how individuals draw upon their personal agency as they take possession of a text, rereading it multiple times to make it their own, but in conjunction with others to create shared meaning. Jenkins (1992) explains fans make popular culture an active resource by integrating media back into their everyday lives and by closely engaging with its materials and meanings.
Fandoms, therefore, represent a vibrant exchange of information, meaning making, idea formation, and cultural production in dynamic spaces that foster collaboration and action. And sometimes, action takes the form of advocating for social change. Jenkins (1992) explains why:

Fandom’s very existence represents a critique of conventional forms of consumer culture. Yet fandom also provides a space within which fans may articulate their specific concerns about sexuality, gender, racism, colonialism, militarism, and forced conformity…. Fandom contains both negative and positive forms of empowerment. Its institutions allow the expression both of what fans are struggling against and what they are struggling for; its cultural products articulate the fans’ frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives. (p. 283)

This does not guarantee all fans and fandoms lead to social progress and change, but it does offer a deeper understanding of the potential for such conditions of activism to emerge, as with The Hunger Games fandom and organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance. Furthermore, not all popular culture texts provide empowering and challenging messages; and even those dissident texts offer no guarantee fans will engage with the material in radical ways. Yet, the work by Jenkins, Baym, and others validate the potential for such revolution from fandom to emerge. So how does one move from fan to activist?

**Becoming a Fan Activist**

Many scholars believe in the potential for fans to actively shape the world and potentially even transform it through their passion, collaboration, and democratic processes. Scardaville (2005) describes fans as active players who decode, resist, and reinterpret meanings generated
within the fictional universe of pop culture narratives. Jenkins (2011) believes “fans now represent an important force pushing the industry toward a fuller representation of what America looks like—fans as influencers in a different sense” (p. 29). I would take this one step further and assert, through the findings of my study, fans also push society toward a representation of what society should be—a democratic culture where justice prevails and people have equal opportunities to live free and meaningful lives. Thus, considering fans as active agents differs from the view of “activism” in the traditional sense. Instead of picket lines and protest marches, fan activists create and share videos, memes, and other digital creations containing divergent messages online. In addition to affecting change at the policy level, fan activists also attempt to influence the media and entertainment companies whose reach touches millions across the globe.

Furthermore, within gender studies, examining cyber cultures offers important research to feminist scholars for two key reasons: a) the Internet provides new spaces for performance of gender identities, as well as inequalities to be reproduced or challenged; and b) the Internet provides new arenas and opportunities for political and social activism (Bjork-James, 2015; Hallett & Barber, 2014). The emergence of advanced digital communications and technology creates the environment for fan communities to form in virtual spaces, with individuals actively choosing to join particular causes from around the world, thereby increasing the possibility of social and even global resistance (Hamilton & Heflin, 2011; Scardaville, 2005). Moreover, alternative messages and dissident campaigns are now possible due to the creative and strategic use of digital platforms and social media (Bjork-James, 2015). For example, in their study of virtual activism among Chinese fans, Zhang and Mao (2013) note “the online space supported by Web 2.0 technologies not only provides a locale for these fans to gather and interact, but also facilitates new ways to conduct the activities that the fans enjoy doing together” (p. 45). While
no less political as compared to other forms of activism, as active agents for social change, fans are unique in their contemporaneous feelings of fun and enjoyment alongside the passion and vigor of fighting for significant social causes.

Even so, Scardaville (2005) clarifies an important difference between “active fans” and fans who engage in “activism”. She defines active fans as those who participate in activities like fan clubs and online forums, which offer the pleasure derived from identifying as a fan and acting accordingly. Whereas an “activist fan acts strategically, usually in concert with others, to achieve a particular goal” (Scardaville, 2005, p. 882). Zhang and Mao (2013) also point to the distinct agendas of passive audiences versus fans versus fan activists. Hence, for the purposes of my research, I sought to examine more than the cyber cultures of active fans, but to explore, describe, and interpret the online and offline spaces, behaviors, and learning experiences of fan activists who work together to make the world a more equitable place for all.

Within this type of resistance, fans produce digital-media not for monetary gain, but for to “(re)make their own world and, in doing so, (re)make themselves” (Hamilton & Heflin, 2011, p. 1055). This form of resistance leads to digital-media work from people striving to create a more equitable, humane world. Hamilton and Heflin (2011) describe this form of digital activism as a “provocative instigator” for profound social change (p. 1057). Thus, some popular culture, in context of convergence culture, offers a potential path into fan activism—a journey not often on the minds of people as they explore a fictional world or fantasy narrative. Scardaville's (2005) research on fan activism in the soap opera community exemplifies this type of happenstance social action. Many of the participants in her study did not identify as activists before and/or after their involvement in a fan-driven movement to keep a particular daytime drama on the air. Although not about politics in the conventional sense, the political actions of
Scardaville's (2005) participants sheds light on how fans may become activists for a bounded timeframe, whereas others spend a lifetime advocating for various causes. Fan campaigns help amplify the voices of a group, whereby collective declarations transcend the opinion or objective of one person (Scardaville, 2005). Therefore, fans recognize the power and effectiveness of collective social action and use their passion for both popular culture and social change to make a difference in areas important to them.

The notion of cultural production for democratizing life and radical social change connects back to the work of Raymond Williams and other adult education scholars, described earlier in this chapter. As it relates to the purpose of my study, Jubas (2008) discusses the unintended political learning happening when women engage in activism. From her research on women’s eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionist activism, she notes how women learned important skills like mobilizing, publicizing, sharing information, and protesting against various issues. Developing these skills are crucial for people to struggle for their own political and civil rights (Jubas, 2008). Involvement in activism, whether for an interim campaign or for a lifetime, can empower fans, help them discover dormant skills, and learn new abilities (Scardaville, 2005).

Within a poststructural feminist perspective, activism denies that power is solely structural. Rather, poststructural feminists understand power as intersectional and relational, with a multitude of strategies to challenge this disequilibrium and the process that contributes to perpetuating inequality (Schippers & Sapp, 2012). This understanding holds particular relevance for third-wave feminists (like myself) who often position themselves as “critical consumers of popular culture, a positionality they argue enables activist work” (Walters, 2011, p. 363). Meaning, cultural work can also function as activist work. The relevance of discussing third-
wave feminism within the context of convergence culture draws attention to the fact, activism
can occur within everyday life and within new spaces (Walters, 2011). This appreciates the way
fans, especially women, find passion and purpose in advocating for particular causes in ways not
typically associated with “traditional” activist activities.

Walters (2011) believes fans find personal and meaningful ways of performing feminist
critique of popular culture and acting upon that criticism in everyday life. She asserts women re-
read female characters in popular culture and adapt them to their own purposes. For example,
some women fans focus on Katniss Everdeen from *THG* narrative as a symbol for fighting
injustice happening in the “real” world. Another illustration is the work by Walters (2011), who
uses the Riot Grrrl scene as exemplary of this connection, showing how fans used popular
culture to critique and participate in cultural activism. She notes, sometimes popular culture
serves merely to entertain, but there exists opportunities whereby messages function as a form of
consciousness raising and ignite fans to act. Walters (2011) also calls attention to the importance
of popular culture for third-wave feminist activism, using the agenda of the Riot Grrrl movement
as an example. The Riot Grrrls did not fight for equal access in the workplace (as second-wave
feminists did before them), but they fought for equal access into the male-dominated music
scene. Both causes challenge patriarchy in different, but equally important ways. This type of
cultural activism (using favored pop culture texts as material) represents a critique of power, and
so it’s political, but it also doubles as a source of desire and enjoyment. Traditionally, cultural
activism emerged from the music scene, but increasingly can be found within other popular
culture fandoms, like *THG* world.

From her research on television fandoms in virtual spaces, Walters (2011) argues online
fansites can function as sources of everyday cultural activism. She believes activism can become
something organic to our lives—a natural reflex to injustice and inequality in the world. She explains “the everyday life surrounding TV fandom and online fansites—watching shows regularly, posting synopses, commenting, and reading other fans’ comments—marks it as a crucial site for everyday activism” (p. 367). Fans are drawn to this type of everyday activism as it negotiates the challenges of advocating for social change, while also adhering to the demands of life, within a context of pleasurable engagement with fantasy worlds. Walters (2011) believes even small changes can lead to large-scale transformation when considered on a collective level, emphasizing fans can access the power right in front them.

The importance of convergence culture is that virtual spaces offer didactic environments, ripe for critique, reflection, and dialogue. Walters (2011) explicates:

Fans reflect on their own personal lives, but by doing this in the space of the online fansite community, they create a balance between the everyday activism they produce in their own lives, such as questioning gender roles, and the more sustained models of everyday activism they produce for others, such as identifying misogynistic discourses and relating it to larger social structures. (p. 369)

Additionally, Walters and others call attention to the lack of research on fan activism. Concurrently, Zhang and Mao (2013) note the importance of convergence culture, as a construct, for its ability to highlight the impact of fan activism to influence society and change the political climate. Fan activism of any kind, not matter how big or small, helps people apply what they learn as consumers of popular culture toward their efforts for social change. Baym (2000) also calls on academics to study fan communities, especially those flourishing within online spaces:

When we look closely and holistically at the actual behaviors of online communities, it becomes clear that these groups develop complex and distinctive identities, identities that
result unpredictably from combinations of preexisting factors, participants’ appropriations of those factors, and the emergent forces that those appropriations generate. We cannot understand these complex dynamics by just thinking about them. Online social worlds are accessible to researchers in ways that few other worlds are. If we want to understand them, we need to look at them with rigor and detail. (p. 198)

Much of the work on convergence culture and fan activism reflects conceptual scholarship, whereby academics are “thinking” about these dynamics. There exists a lack of rigorous and detailed studies looking more closely at the intersection of popular culture, learning, and fan activism in online spaces to advance social change. With the immense, global success of *THG*, the future is ripe to explore how this fantasy world informs and shapes real world activism for fans. In the next and final section, I review emerging literature on this popular culture phenomenon.

**When Academics Enter the Arena**

Before delving into the literature on *THG*, it is helpful to first provide an overview of the narrative and some key points in each story. *The Hunger Games* takes place in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic society. Every year, the Capitol of the nation of Panem (ruins of North America) forces each of its twelve districts to send a male and female tribute into a televised battle to the death, called the Hunger Games. From District 12, Katniss Everdeen volunteers to compete, in order to save her younger sister. Katniss must rely upon her intellect and instincts to survive in the arena. *Catching Fire*, the second part in the series, begins with Katniss and fellow surviving tribute, Peeta Mellark, embarking on a mandatory Victory Tour, commissioned by the Capitol to
celebrate their triumph in the arena and extend the televised festivities. Throughout their voyage, Katniss and Peeta witness a rebellion building in the districts. In an exercise of authoritative power, the Capitol’s President, Cornelius Snow, establishes a special Quarter Quell in which past victors of the Hunger Games will compete. President Snow fully expects Katniss to die in the games, and along with her, the growing resistance across Panem. In the final segment of the narrative, *Mockingjay*, Katniss awakens after being rescued from the Quarter Quell games by District 13 rebel forces. She agrees to become the Mockingjay, a symbol for the rebellion, and participates in the creation of revolutionary propaganda in order to embolden the districts into fighting the oppressive Capitol and the tyrannical President Snow. Along the way, Katniss witnesses actions by District 13 and rebel forces that cause her to question the legitimacy of the rebel war. She finds too many similarities between her role in the Capitol’s Hunger Games and the rebellion, feeling as though she is just a piece in a much larger game. In the end, she removes herself from the rebellion and chooses to exit the war games altogether.

While most often classified as young adult fiction, readers might also deduce from the aforementioned description, *THG* story falls within the category of futuristic dystopia; a genre often noted for its attempt to address social and political issues of the time in which it is written/created (Connors, 2014b). Rodriguez (2014) says the “telling of stories through literature, especially through adventurous, post-apocalyptic novels with death-defying odds and trials, serves the purpose of informing readers about other worlds and introducing them to societies they may recognize as resembling their own” (p. 157). *THG* series fulfills this role, using an exaggerated storyline to comment on several relevant social issues of today. Scholars assert the genres of science-fiction and fantasy offer a myriad of film narratives where modern cultural myths are created to offer audiences imagined possibilities of themselves and their
identities in a futuristic world (Gazetas, 2000; Pharr & Clark, 2012). Within these narratives, reality versus imagination combine and challenge the perspectives of audiences.

Beck (2013) says “problem movies set in the science-fiction universe throw open a horn of plenty of imagination and invention” (p. 29). And some of these narratives challenge and contradict existing myths of social power (Gazetas, 2000). For example, one of the divergent myths within THG narrative confronts the oppressive and destructive supremacy of hyper capitalism and its dominant social order. It presents a troubling view of an extreme economic system (Clemente, 2012). As will be shown in the following discussion, THG series offers contested material that both challenges and reinforces dominant ideologies and social values, all within the same text (Dreyer, 2016; Garcia & Haddix, 2014; Lupold, 2014; Shepard & Wojcik-Andrews, 2014; Tan, 2014). This is not unlike much of popular culture, as these texts wrestle with conflicting ideas about society and its anxieties over countless issues. Thus, “our texts do not have to be pure or perfect….but nearly all texts can serve well our critical purposes to unpack art as it unpacks the real world captured in that imagined world” (P. L. Thomas, 2014, p. 222). I believe that popular culture often contains opposing ideas and conflicting messages within the same narrative, and this complexity can cause fans to pause and consider how the material applies to their own lives. Accordingly, some texts do offer the potential to disrupt dominant messaging and provide dissident material upon which fans can act. Why? Because, sometimes divergence sells. Playing with metaphor to discuss the relationship between culture and film, Beck (2013) says our modern society is complex, much like a movie theater with many different shows playing at the same time and in the same theater complex. As long as the movies fill seats, the theaters will play them. As it relates to the centrality of youth in THG narrative,
writers and producers often use popular culture depictions of youth to deal with adult anxieties about the world (Beck, 2013; Pharr & Clark, 2012; Tan, 2013).

It’s important to note, at the time of my study, *THG* represents a recent popular culture phenomenon, with the literary series released from 2008-2010 and the films released from 2012-2015. As such, scholarship related to this cultural sensation is only just emerging and primarily includes conceptual work and textual analyses of the books and films. Nevertheless, this series holds considerable interest among those in the fields of cultural studies and films studies. To date, common themes on *THG* include examining representations of power and rebellion within the narrative and embodied within the characters. Additionally, many authors take up issues of morality and ethics presented in the series. Another key theme encompasses the way issues of human difference are problematized in the series—particularly within the film adaptations as it relates to race and gender. Finally, several scholars address the opportunity to use *THG* as a pedagogical tool for learning within the classroom, as well as for audiences and fans. The following more closely reviews the literature in each of three key areas.

**Analyzing Power, Rebellion, Morality, and Ethics**

Emergent literature highlights the way numerous scholars engage with *THG* from a conceptual standpoint, applying various critical constructs to draw out issues of power, politics, rebellion, morality, and ethics in the series (Brewster, 2014; Clawson, 2012; Dreyer, 2016; Eskin, 2012; Jansen, 2015; McDonald, 2014; Montz, 2012; Rodriguez, 2014; Simmons, 2012; Wilson, 2016). For example, some scholars delve into the background material that Suzanne Collins, author of *THG* literary trilogy, used in developing the story. Soncini (2015), Trites
(2014), and Hansen (2015) describe the influence of Greek mythology on Collins’ vision for the
*THG* story, particularly the notion of a female gladiator who challenges a tyrannical government
and becomes the leader of a revolutionary movement. McDonald (2014) approaches *THG* from
a similar perspective, using Greek philosophy in his analysis of power and morality within the
narrative. He points to the heroic quality of the main characters, noting their dedication to
relentlessly questioning the normalization of oppression, their capacity for critical reflection, and
their dedication to act on their moral judgements. Accordingly, scholars also address the youth
of the main characters, as Collins put violence in the hands of children. Since our society is not
accustomed to seeing children acting violently, some scholars believe this provokes anxiety
within readers and viewers, causing them to reflect on the meaning of such an anomaly
(Mcguire, 2015; Pavlik, 2012; Skinner & McCord, 2012). Western society may be used seeing
violence applied *to* children, but it’s the violence *from* children that disturbs many. The
application of youth in the story, then, becomes a jarring message for readers and audiences to
reflect upon and consider whether violence, in pursuit of the ultimate goal, is a tolerable means
to an end.

From a literary perspective, Soncini (2015) provides a critique of *THG* books, noting the
heavy reference of the material to the Shakespearean work of *Coriolanus*. She says the narrative
draws upon the hunger paradigm to offer a “scathing cautionary tale about the social and
political order of today’s global age” (p. 102). In similar vein to Soncini’s literary critique,
Latham and Hollister (2014) utilize Michel Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge to
demonstrate how the series reflects, models, and critiques the media and cultural practices of
Panem, and by extension, those of today’s society. Latham and Hollister (2014) assert:
By becoming adept at interpreting and using information and the media, Katniss not only survives, but also outwits the Gamemakers, undermines the power of the Capitol, and sparks a revolution. The “game,” then, at the heart of the trilogy involves a power struggle over information and media, and it is a game Katniss ultimately wins. (p. 34)

Latham and Hollister (2014) believe the *THG* suggests media literacy offers a powerful tool for people to resist the oppression of totalitarian governments. Garcia and Haddix (2014) agree, saying the narrative presents a powerful tool to develop critical consciousness; while Macaluso and McKenzie (2014) draw attention to the importance of the citizens possessing the ability to activate their agency and exercise power and resistance to an oppressive government.

Nonetheless, not all scholars find *THG* a flawless model of cultural critique. Gibson (2013) questions the heroic nature of Katniss, instead viewing her character as possessing a dark side, one that struggles with issues of morality and ethics in the series. Garcia and Haddix (2014) also question the emphasis on Katniss as a true revolutionary character. They believe the heroism belongs to Rue, a young black girl from a neighboring district whose death in the games sparks the rebellion. Questions of ethics, blurring of moral boundaries, and challenging the dominant reading of characters emerges quite often in the literature; thereby causing readers and viewers to consider the complexity of such issues and move past dichotomous decision making (Risko, 2012; Soter, 2014).

Beyond the narrative and characters, some scholars call attention to the power of *THG* as a tool for global storytelling (Wilson, 2016; Wolk, 2017). Ringlestein (2013) notes the power of transmedia storytelling, as a literal and metaphorical connection to the *THG*. This popular culture franchise encompasses books, films, and a plethora of other online and offline resources created by producers and fans. However, this powerful mode of transmediated storytelling
continues inside the world of THG as well, with the broadcast of these “reality TV” games in conjunction with online and offline activities (K. Wright, 2012). Keller (2016) points to the power of mediated storytelling to entertain and persuade audiences. Literature also reflects the power of songs to move, inspire, and foster spirituality, both within the narrative and as ancillary media texts released to support the films (Fitzgerald & Hayward, 2015; Gant, 2012).

Another interesting area covered by scholars, includes the use of symbolism and metaphor within the THG and in relation to the real world. For example, some scholars discuss the representation of food in the narrative to examine social issues power, control, and rebellion (Despain, 2012; Parks & Yamashiro, 2015). Others use the series to draw parallels between the law and power as it relates to social and political reform (Clemente, 2012; M. Thomas, 2013; Wolk, 2017). Moreover, some expound on Collins’ application of “panopticism” in the narrative, using it as a metaphor for disciplinary power and a critique of audience’s voyeuristic gaze in our current surveillance society (Connors, 2014b; Day, 2012; Mortimore-Smith, 2012; Wezner, 2012; Wilson, 2016). These authors highlight the importance of people learning to resist and counter these controls, even under the constant gaze of surveillance mechanisms.

Finally, Hackey (2015) uses THG as a metaphor to discuss the duality of health care in America, describing the power differential in modern society of high-tech medical treatments versus traditional folk medicine.

The significance of the above mentioned work, beyond the importance of reviewing current literature for the purpose of this study, is the way in which THG narratives offers a cornucopia of material for critique, discussion, and application. Fisher (2012) and Cettl (2015) call attention to way the narrative explores the development of a revolutionary consciousness, as well as its critique of global capitalism—topics of great relevancy in today’s anxious world.
wrought with violence and severe economic inequality. Benson-Allot (2012) and Frankel (2012) further remark how producers smartly critiqued the intimidation of society through the use of digital violence. In this age of instant information, with unlimited access to news and other programming, constant displays of violence in the media stokes the fear of anxiety within society. These fears spill over into struggles of human difference and issues of racism, classism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, etc. I discuss these issues of human difference, as represented in THG literature, within the next section.

**Problematizing Issues of Human Difference**

Another key theme in the recent literature on THG relates to the use of texts as material for problematizing issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and even the traditional understanding of the family (Guanio-Uluru, 2016; King, 2012; Meeusen, 2014; Simmons, 2012; Tan, 2014). While exaggerations of class differences represent a strong tenet to the THG storyline, scholars apply a variety of interesting concepts to tease out this use as it relates to modern society. For instance, Sullivan (2014) examines class dynamics in the first two films, arguing THG “creates a space for critical reflection on the currently intensifying levels of global inequality under late capitalism through its creative imagining of the future relationship between fashion and class” (p. 181). He argues the films challenge audiences to reconsider fashion in the real world as a “fetishistic regime of consumption” (p. 181), particularly the role of fashion and celebrity in class dynamics. Whereas, Hanlon (2012) examines the parallel between District 12 and Appalachian history, noting the injustice and deprivations suffered by working class people due to industrialization.
Problematizing race in *THG* story offers a hotly contested topic well. In one of the few qualitative studies on *THG* to date, Moore and Coleman (2015) analyze fan backlash to the representation of race and ethnicity in films, particularly the skin color of actors chosen for various characters. They view this audience criticism and dispute as exemplary of the complex relationship between issues of race in America and the commercial media. Shepard and Wojcik-Andrews (2014) agree, saying Hollywood chose to make the default casting choices of white actors for the films, when they had the opportunity to be more progressive. Shepard and Wojcik-Andrews assert the movies gloss over “the historical realities of American race relations, a history that structurally privileges a white majority at the expense of a black minority” (p. 198), thus perpetuating damaging cultural stereotypes. Along the same research focus, Garcia and Haddix (2014) examine online fan communities and public social networks, revealing the contested readings by fans of race in *THG*. More specifically, Garcia and Haddix (2014) “problematize hegemonic readings of the Hunger Games and, in particular, highlight how racialized political life beyond the confines of this work clouds how mass media interpret and respond to youth of color in young adult literature” (p. 204). They view the books and films as informing civic identity and can be used as a powerful platform for critical reflection and discussion.

As one might expect, discussions of gender issues offers another key interest for scholars to explore. Gender representations of characters, particularly with Katniss, remains a scorching debate among scholars (Connors, 2014a; Guanio-Uluru, 2016; McCaffrey, Hanson, & McCaffrey, 2010). For example, Kelly (2013) and Hansen (2015) believe Katniss challenges traditional patriarchal fairytales (i.e., the prince saving a princess), instead offering a progressive representation of females taking care of themselves. In accordance with such thinking, some
scholars believe the character of Katniss offers enlightened representations of gender ambiguity that afford the opportunity for girls to imagine new possibilities with regard to their gender identity (DeaVault, 2012; Lem & Hassel, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Oliver, 2014; Pharr, 2012). This ambiguity moves beyond binary constraints of male/female, masculine/feminine, paternal/maternal, and heterosexual/homosexual. Oliver (2014) explains, “Katniss’s ambivalent desires and ambiguous gender identity open up possibilities for girls beyond the traditional patriarchal constraints of wife and mother” (p. 676). From a poststructural feminist perspective, her character often falls within the nuanced space of the gender binary.

However, Dubrofsky and Ryalls (2014) perform a critical analysis of THG films and problematize the films, stating they function as a mechanism for reinforcing the performance of authentic femininity and whiteness. They note that Katniss earns the trust of audiences as she refuses to perform to the expectations of the fictional society in THG world, thereby demonstrating herself as authentic, true, and heroic. By doing so, Dubrofsky and Ryalls argue, the films reinforce the naturalness of femininity and whiteness. They claim presenting Katniss as heroic is not decidedly feminist, because her heroism is “premised on her authentic whiteness, her naturalized heterosexual femininity, and her effortless abilities as a potential future wife and mother” (p. 407). They challenge the commercialized feminism presented in the films, as compared to the more gritty feminist representation of Katniss in the literary versions. Essentially, Dubrofsky and Ryalls believe in the potential of her character in the literary versions, but problematize the modified representation of Katniss in the film adaptations. Other scholars also call attention to the occasional problematic nature of Katniss (Firestone, 2012; Tan, 2014). For example Tan (2014) notes how the narrative ends with Katniss in the traditional, domestic role of wife and mother.
In line with this thinking, the role of a woman within the family intrigues scholars, as does the complex relationship between children and adults (Murphy, 2012). Lupold (2014) says *THG* films, along with other movies about women warriors, exemplify social anxieties regarding the state of the nuclear family and women’s rise to power. She notes these types of films offer both regressive and progressive messages:

> As women continue to gain equality in the workplace and find fulfillment outside the home, as fathers are seen to be failing to maintain healthy relationships with their children, and as young girls are portrayed as being left to develop on their own without traditional parental models to guide them, filmmakers continue to express unease about what they see to be the breakup of desirable nuclear family structures. (Lupold, 2014, p. 20)

Lupold, along with many other scholars reviewed in this section of literature, view *THG* as a tool for learning, both within the class room and informally for audiences and fans. The literary versions and film adaptations represent stimulating mechanisms for exploration of ideas and teaching lessons. The following reviews some of those applications.

**Offering Curricula for Learning**

The last key theme in the literature on *THG* reflects the trend for educators to use the books and films in their pedagogical practices (Connors, 2014b; Dreyer, 2016; Wolk, 2017). For instance, Shepard and Wojcik-Andrews (2014) apply Marxist theory to their critical analysis of the movies and problematize how the film adaptations lose their potency to serve as social warning and critique. Their argument rests not necessarily with a critique of the films, rather to
show how analyzing film adaptations of novels through the lens of critical theory “reveals valuable information about each genre and provides insight into the culture in which the texts were created and the shaping influence of market forces in the production and distribution of the texts” (p. 189). They believe in the importance of teaching critical literacy to young audiences, as do Lucey et al. (2013) who view *THG* as an opportunity to teach children about citizenship. A report published by Phi Delta Kappa International (2016) illustrates how teachers at a secondary school in Texas used *THG* to explain the various forms of government between World War I and World War II. The teachers show the usefulness of integrating contemporary literature into classes on various subjects.

Scholars also draw attention to the application of using *THG* as a tool for developing critical literacy in students, while encouraging their engagement in social action. Simmons (2012) notes how *THG* series relates to social injustices in our society, and by using a classroom activity to foster literacy, teachers can help students understand violence and brutality against children exist in the real world too. Rodriguez (2014) agrees, saying literacy educators can use *THG* novels to guide students in examining their own lives, with the intent of assisting them in their identification of social injustice. He hopes students become more socially conscious with responsible identities, and be good stewards of the world they inhabit. Rodriguez (2014) says:

> As teachers, we can connect students with literature that heightens their awareness of their responsibility to work for change, equality, and equity. At the same time, however, we must equip them with the tools they need to read those texts critically. (p. 165)

Simmons (2016) also believes using popular culture as mentor texts in the classroom helps to engage student interests in traditionally disfavored subjects like grammar education. For instance, Caudle and Daniels (2015) demonstrate how educators can use fictitious data from
THG to teach statistics, while Cook et al. (2014) use the narrative as material to teach students about genetic engineering.

Learning extends beyond the classroom as well. Curwood (2013) highlights the relationship between literature, literacy, and technology, as evidenced in the various ways adolescents engage with THG series. She argues for teachers to incorporate young adult literature and technology into their pedagogical practices. In their qualitative study, Lammers et al. (2012) examine the informal learning of young adults as they participated in online spaces, including fansites related to THG series. They specifically focused on the development of digital literacies in students resulting from online engagement.

From an adult learning perspective, the literature on THG is sparse at best. One exception is the qualitative study by Saunders and Ash (2013), whereby they use THG series as material to help strengthen the disciplinary literacy practices of middle-school preservice teachers. They found THG story engaged adult learners, its narrative and characters connected easily to particular subjects (i.e., disciplinary literacy), and its combination with particular exercises helped to prepare teachers for their profession. Another exception is a study by Dreyer (2016) who found that reading fiction enhanced college students’ understanding of politics. Yet, the author fails to articulate the age ranges of participants, so readers are left to assume they likely represent traditional undergraduate students.

**Conclusion**

As this chapter draws to a close, I want to re-emphasize the importance of each body of literature reviewed as it relates to my study. I began by orienting my study within a critical
philosophic perspective, further refining the conceptual framework to poststructural feminism and highlighted its focus on deconstructing language, meaning, and power as it relates to gender identity and performance. My research draws heavily upon an examination of power relations and identity construction, along with the various ways people accept and challenge such power in their life and the world around them. Second, I offered a historical look at the educational roots of cultural studies, drawing attention to the long-held connection between adult learning and a critique of culture. Since popular culture underpins my entire study, it was important to establish the legitimacy of learning from this cultural material, in addition to noting the potential social impacts from such public pedagogy. This led to the third body of literature, in which I discussed popular culture as functioning for more than entertainment purposes. These influential and impactful cultural productions also offer a site of informal and incidental learning that hold the potential to initiate social change. This idea continued into the fourth body of literature, where I discussed the notion of convergence culture and fan activism. It was imperative to explain the difference between audiences, fans, and fan activists, while also discussing how the latter group can stumble into activism unintentionally. Finally, I would be remiss had I not reviewed emerging literature on THG, as this popular culture phenomenon and associated fandom represents the overarching context for my research.

While the depth and breadth of scholarship in each of these areas vary, the key point I want to highlight relates to the strong foundation each provides for my research. Hundreds of scholars journeyed before me into unknown territory of research on such areas as adult learning, popular culture, and fan activism. Yet, just as the physical world is full of unexplored spaces, so too is the opportunity for discovering new insights into the way adult fans (particularly women),
learn from popular culture in ways that lead them to advocate for social causes and strive to make the world a more equitable place for all.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Pop culture fans. These unique groups of people have been the focus of media and cultural studies for decades (Gray et al., 2007). Much of this research examined how and why popular culture became an important contribution to our modern life (Gray et al., 2007). Recent work in this area challenges the traditional stereotypes of fans; for example, the image of “nerds” spending hours in front of the TV or with their noses buried in comic books (Gray et al., 2007). Thus, the notion of a fan has changed dramatically (Jenkins, 2007). No longer committed to the confines of marginal “geek culture”, fans are now a prominent part of mainstream society. In some contexts, fans use their favorite popular culture franchise to challenge oppression, as was the case in 2014 when fan activists from Thailand used symbolism from *The Hunger Games* (*THG*) series in their political resistance movement (Mydans, 2014; C. J. Williams, 2014). Yet, the majority of fan scholarship focuses on the effect of popular culture texts on people (i.e., audience reception), with little research related to the informal learning occurring as people engage with their favorite popular culture franchise (Sandlin, Wright, et al., 2011). Further removed is the impact of pop culture on the identity construction of women fans, specifically with regard to the formation of an activist mindset. As such, the purpose of my study is to critically examine what women fans informally learn about activism from *THG* series; and to understand how their identity is shaped by this popular culture pedagogy in online and offline spaces, as it pertains to advancing social justice causes. The research questions guiding my study, as it relates to women fans of *THG* series, include:

1) How did the narrative help shape an activist identity in participants?
2) What did participants informally learn about activism and advancing social justice causes from engaging with this popular culture pedagogy?

3) What is the role of fellow fans in digital (online) spaces, as it relates to participants’ learning experience regarding activism in the real (offline) world?

The following chapter presents an overview of the qualitative research paradigm I employ in this study, followed by a review of a feminist research design, and discussion on using a cyber ethnographic approach to study fans and fandoms of *THG* series in virtual environments. I then offer my background as a researcher and detail the selection of primary (interview) and secondary (observed) participants. Finally, I describe how the data was collected and analyzed, including verification strategies utilized to ensure the dependability of my study.

**Qualitative Research Paradigm**

Within the vast scope of academic research resides two different, albeit valid and beneficial, perspectives of examining a phenomenon. Quantitative research seeks to determine cause and effect relationships about some attribute of a population (Merriam, 2009). Whereas, *qualitative researchers* desire to uncover “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Simply stated, quantitative inquiry focuses on causative relationships between variables, while qualitative inquiry focuses on a person’s unique experience. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). While both paradigms offer relevant and valuable contributions to our understanding of the world, they differ significantly when
researching a topic. When exploring human matters, the unique nature of qualitative research
becomes quite clear. Qualitative inquiry asserts:

The world, or reality, is not the fixed, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is
assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead, there are multiple
constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time.
(Sharan B. Merriam, 2002, pp. 3–4)

Scholars working from this perspective believe meaning and experience cannot be systematically
isolated and measured, rather realities are fluid and unique to each individual (Merriam &
Associates, 2002). Qualitative research produces richly descriptive accounts of how people
interpret their worlds and attribute meaning to their lives (Merriam, 2009). In place of number
counts and predictive statistics, qualitative inquiry uses words and explanatory verbal pictures to
convey what the researcher, as the primary instrument of collection, discovered about a
phenomenon. This inductive process allows the researcher to subjectively gather relevant and
applicable data through interviews, observations, assembly of artifacts and documents, and other
collection methods, with the end purpose of building upon concepts and theories, as opposed to
the deductive testing and predictive nature of positivist, empirical research (Merriam &
Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

As it relates to the focus of my study—to understand what and how women fans
informally learn from THG series, including the meanings they make from engaging with its
narratives and fictional characters—qualitative inquiry provides the best approach for examining
this phenomenon. Here, the interest resides in the experiences of women as they interact with
cultural material, recognizing each account will vary as women fans appropriate and incorporate
popular culture into their lives in different ways. Numbers, tables, and statistical significance
cannot offer a meaningful explanation of what women fans potentially learn about their own identity through engaging with this popular culture franchise and their experience with reading the books, watching the films, and engaging with other fans online. Further, in order to bring a more profound understanding to how popular culture functions as a site of public pedagogy where women fans develop an activist mindset, research must narrow and go deeper into exploring this phenomenon, which is possible with a qualitative approach. Only through direct inquiry, which is both adaptive and immediately responsive (Merriam, 2009), can the researcher explore the complex and changing reality of women fan activists. The difference of individual experience is critical to the adult education field, as the learning environment and context varies with each person (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As such, the objective of my study seeks not to offer a universal cause-and-effect answer to a problem, but to begin unpacking the multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple interpretations (Merriam, 2009) of what it means to informally learn via popular culture as it shapes cultural understandings and lived experiences of women fans. Consequently, a feminist research design is most applicable to begin such an exploration.

**Feminist Research Design**

Working from a poststructural feminist perspective, my study contributes to a body of theoretical and qualitative knowledge highlighting “the variations of women’s lives and identities and to ask how they are perceived and shaped, both by themselves and by others” (Frost & Elichhaoff, 2014, p. 42). This perspective seeks to explore the diversity of womanhood in relation to identity construction through popular culture—to pursue multiple truths,
viewpoints, and voices constructed through women’s experiences with these pedagogies (Frost & Elichaoff, 2014). This type of inquiry can be defined as feminist research, which Hesse-Biber (2014) describes as one that “positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process” (p. 3). Critical scholars explain a feminist research design privileges women’s issues, forefronts their voices, and highlights their unique lived experiences (S. Hesse-Biber, 2014a; Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As it relates to my study, I uncover the varied experiences of women fans as they engage with the narrative and characters of THG series. A feminist research design, then, gives credence to the distinct ways in which women informally learn from popular culture pedagogies and other fans to develop an activist mindset.

The importance of engaging in feminist research is it problematizes the tendency of some scholarship to treat all women as if they are the same (i.e., all women learn from popular culture pedagogies in similar ways). Instead, feminist research forefronts the importance of variations in class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference. So, further refining qualitative inquiry to one of a feminist research design positions my study to focus on matters of interest for women and other oppressed groups (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Beyond the advancement of academic knowledge, my study offers findings to better understand what influences women, specifically pop culture fans, to become civically engaged (i.e., activist mindset). The answer offers a complex web of influencing factors, but it is critical to develop a better understanding of how society, history, and various aspects of culture contribute to help shape women’s identities (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014).

Still, the initiating interest of my study works from a critical perspective, which seeks to understand how individuals work toward matters of social justice and transformation around issues of structured power and dominance. The question of how women learn to resist
oppression and unequal power relations in society through activism learned from popular culture, speaks to the radical purpose of my study. Frost and Elichaooff (2014) state the “essence of critical theory is to respond and adapt to perceived power relations and resulting subjugations and oppression of individuals and groups” (p. 54). They note, blending together a critical and poststructural feminist perspective into a single research design allows for richer examination of the multiple axes that constitute women’s identities and lives. Further, Merriam (2009) states the goal of this type of inquiry is to “critique and challenge, to transform and empower” (p. 34). Thus, the focus moves from solely the individual to also include a closer examination of systemic oppression, specifically issues affecting women and other subjugated groups on an individual and structural level.

Moreover, Merriam and Associates (2002) posit “those who engage in critical research frame their research questions in terms of power—who has it, how it’s negotiated, what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power, and so on” (p. 327). For the purpose of my research, I examine issues of power within the context of gender, the “politicalizing of women’s experiences” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 328). Hence, as it relates to my study, popular culture is examined for its contribution towards informing and initiating an activist identity in women fans of *THG* series. Discussion with women from varied backgrounds queries the diversity of experiences with this public pedagogy, helping to reveal issues of power at work in popular culture. Underlying this blended approach to qualitative research is the desire to “identify and challenge oppressive practices against women. This aim inspires and motivates feminist researchers, but also challenges them to move out of academia in their work and to be truly inclusive in their research practice (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014, p. 67).
Cyber Ethnography

Within qualitative inquiry resides several research strategies, offering specific dimensions from which to understand a phenomenon, including: basic interpretive, phenomenological, postmodern/poststructuralism, grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical/feminist research, and ethnography (Sharan B. Merriam, 2002; Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Due to the limited scope of this study—not intended to generalize for a larger population, rather to begin understanding the unique and highly-varied experiences of a select group of women fans—I employed an ethnographic approach to examine how women fans construct meaning from popular culture pedagogies, specifically *THG* series. Moving between the ivory halls of academic inquiry into the dynamic spheres of online fandom requires a unique type of ethnographic research—one that again necessitates a specific approach in order to study this distinct group: *cyber ethnography* (Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Before delving into the specifics of cyber ethnography, it is important to first define ethnographic research and highlight its key assumptions.

Buch and Staller (2014) define *ethnography* as a “form of research that attends to the social relations and cultural practices of groups of people, and works to understand these aspects of social life within broader political, economic, and historical contexts” (p. 107). Accordingly, Merriam and Associates (2002) describe ethnographic study as describing and interpreting human society—the culture of a group. Ethnographers are interested in understanding how people in a particular culture “experience, perceive, create, and navigate the social world” (Hallett & Barber, 2014, p. 307). Thus, ethnographies offer descriptions, analyses, and interpretations on various aspects of a group’s social life, including their religion, politics, language, work, relationships, etc. (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 107). As it pertains to my study,
utilizing an ethnographic approach shapes the research process and write-up in such a way to focus not just on individual experience, but also on the culture of fandom. Further, since ethnographic research incorporates the social relations and cultural practices of a group, it affords the opportunity to examine how fandom relates to civic engagement and women advancing causes for social change in both small and big ways.

Originally founded in the field of anthropology, ethnography is both a process (i.e., method) and an end product (i.e., description of a culture) (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009). It can be characterized by two significant elements: research in a natural setting and researcher experience. This type of investigation attempts to understand the life world of another culture (Buch & Staller, 2014). In order to truly understand the daily activities, lived experiences, and social/political context of a group; the researcher must do so in the natural setting where social life happens (Buch & Staller, 2014). Unlike other types of research where participants are removed from the environments in which certain experiences naturally occur, ethnographic researchers go to the source to gather data. Additionally, knowledge about a culture comes from direct experience by the researcher. That is, the researcher invests enough time in the field to gain a comprehensive understanding of a culture through both careful participation and extensive observation (Buch & Staller, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Ethnography is unique from other types of research in that:

Knowledge is created in and through the ethnographer’s relationships with those he or she studies. By this we mean that ethnographers study human social relations and culture by both observing and participating in social relationships with those whose lives we are interested in. By engaging in these relationships as well as observing them,
ethnographers are able to both experience and record the social norms, rules, and practices that shape diverse forms of human sociality. (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 108)

In addition to the above, four additional key elements make this type of research distinct from others: a) a focus on a specific culture, b) spending significant time in the field, c) production of thick-rich descriptions and interpretations, and d) the use of pre-existing categories or themes to present findings (Buch & Staller, 2014; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Regarding the first element, culture is central to ethnographic research, as it observes the regular behaviors, beliefs, and activities of a group of people. Accordingly, culture can be viewed as either the knowledge that structures people’s worldview—as embodied in the signs, symbols, and language of a people group—or as the nexus of the historical, social, and economical situations that structure a human society (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Because the end result necessitates a deep understanding of a particular culture, the researcher must invest considerable time in the field as a participant observer, intimately examining all aspects of a human society. Merriam and Associates (2002) note the researcher is the primary method of data collection, using such methods as interviews, analysis of documents and artifacts, and the composition of a field diary with notes of daily happenings, feelings, ideas, and impressions. These data collection tools result in a compilation of material offering thick, rich descriptions to convey meanings and interpretations of a particular culture. These interpretations often result from pre-existing schemes emerging from the data, a process referred to as an emic construal of meaning. The point is to move beyond simply describing a culture, and for the researcher to provide an illuminated understanding of this unique community.

While ethnographies represent the second most common type of qualitative research, besides a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009), drawing in a
feminist perspective further refines the group of interest. The notion of “fandom” encompasses numerous groups of people. Hence, the need to pinpoint a more specific culture to examine. As it relates to the purpose of this study, I focus on women fans in *THG* fandom. Buch and Staller (2014) note ethnography, within a feminist context, “attends to the ways in which gender is understood and made meaningful in social life, as well as the ways gender is related to the distribution of power and resources” (p. 107). In essence, the interest focuses on how gender shapes lived experiences in a particular culture. Thus, an ethnographic study conducted within a feminist framework positions women fans as the group of interest. But how can one examine women fans as they interact with *THG* material and each other online, as well as engage in activist behaviors?

Since the introduction of the Internet, some researchers utilized *digital ethnography* or *cyber ethnography*, which “explores the cultures and worlds that exist in cyber space” (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 112), including various social media platforms. Similar to conventional ethnography, studies conducted in digital spaces require the same four elements previously outlined, where the researcher is immersed in online culture for an extensive amount of time. All ethnographies, including cyber ethnographies, are about telling stories (Murthy, 2008). However, a cyber ethnographic approach affords the opportunity to traverse geographic boundaries that limit traditional ethnographic research (Bjork-James, 2015). While cyber ethnographies are situated within historical and cultural contexts, they must re-conceptualize the contextual framework (Hallett & Barber, 2014). Instead of a participant-observer, the researcher becomes a participant-expericer, as it is more important to share in the experience of an online community (Bjork-James, 2015). Rather than face-to-face interaction like traditional ethnographic methods, cyber ethnography offers different ways to interact with members of a
group online. Hence, this approach offers the most relevant and applicable type of research to examine online communities (Hallett & Barber, 2014; Ward, 1999).

Yet, the existence of online communities does not mean the researcher ignores the physical world. In fact, the opposite is true. Bjork-James (2015) notes the real world and cyber worlds overlap in such a way, they become difficult to isolate as distinct elements in our lived experience: “Virtual worlds are created in tandem with real world identities and communities, and virtual relationships are integrated into everyday life” (p. 114). In other words, our lives represent a hybrid of online and offline activities (Hallett & Barber, 2014). The habits of people now include a significant amount of online actions, which must be considered (Ward, 1999). The opposite also applies, with many online communities bringing those activities and behaviors into their offline world. As it relates to my study, this hybrid approach of examining online communities in relation to offline practices, presents the opportunity to examine new spaces for activism (Bjork-James, 2015). This “balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods to tell social stories, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents in these account” (Murthy, 2008, p. 839). Moreover, Bjork-James (2015) notes the “interactive nature of online media create new ways for gender to be produced, consumed, and analyzed, making the study of digital ecologies of interest to feminist scholars” (p. 113). Digital technologies provide new ways of studying various relationships, including how they are formed and structured. For feminist researchers, there is vital work to explore how social inequalities are produced, challenged, and transformed in online spaces (Bjork-James, 2015).

As with other types of research, cyber ethnographies present numerous challenges to overcome. Bjork-James (2015) provides some areas for caution, including: identifying
authorship of material found online; the potential for researcher interference, as one becomes an experiencer in the online community; difficulty in discerning what data to collect; securing informed consent with virtual identities; maintaining confidentiality; struggling through the ethics of the researcher creating an online identity versus maintaining an offline one; and the ethics of blurring what constitutes private versus public content. Additionally, conventional methods of data collection become challenging. For example, in-person interviews may not be feasible or even appropriate. So the researcher may substitute face-to-face interviews with a phone or video format. Responses may also be collected over email. Another illustration is the focus group method, which again may not be feasible depending on the context. Instead, chat rooms provide a virtual space for these discussions to occur. The importance, here, is to recognize new media and digital technology as providing an exciting field for study, but also present unique challenges for the researcher to consider and address. Within the forthcoming data selection section, I discuss how elements of cyber ethnography were include in my study. But first, I offer my background as a researcher and connection to this topic.

**Researcher Background**

Within qualitative inquiry, the researcher functions as the primary instrument for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). This perspective recognizes that the unique experiences and perspectives of the one conducting the research inevitably influence the research process. Unlike the theoretically objective nature of quantitative inquiry, the qualitative researcher offers one, subjective viewpoint on an issue that could assume numerous veracities depending on the individual conducting the study. As such, qualitative researchers cannot stand
outside of inquiry as impartial observers, but embraces their partiality. They endeavor to make their biases known through self-reflection, then openly share those subjectivities with participants in the study and in the final report—a strategy known as *reflexivity* (Creswell, 2014). Merriam (2009) notes the importance of reflexivity, as “such a clarification allows the reader to better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (p. 219). Taking this into consideration, it became critical to maintain transparency about my background and personal interests in this topic, as well as to be aware and upfront concerning my own subjectivity in relationship to the subject matter.

First, my experience as a woman living in the United States profoundly impacts my perspectives on women’s oppression, informal learning, and fan activism. For years, I personally experienced cultural sexism and the limitations of gendered stereotypes in America. These experiences deeply shaped (and continue to) my position on advocating for issues impacting women. I seek to expose the insidious ways society positions women as second-class citizens. I also possess a deep passion for discovering ways to challenge and transform this problem. As it relates to this study, I find myself sympathetic to how women experience social oppression, as well as being particularly attuned to the various ways they resist social subjugation. Yet, as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman, I also recognize my privileged position in relation to systemic oppression in other areas of human difference. These advantages also inevitably mold my outlook. Thus, I must be cognizant of assumptions I hold regarding how women experience and resist oppression. Participants in this study may feel, even if not articulated, some measure of apprehension in sharing their experiences with someone who represents dominant interests in particular areas.
Second, as a fan of *THG* series, I bring to this study my own subjectivity, interpretations, understandings, and personal applications of the narrative and its characters. While I found relevance to particular issues presented in the books and films, I was careful to not project those same assumptions onto participants and in situations I observed online. Additionally, my affinity to this pop culture franchise likely impacted how I observed and interpreted fan culture and activities, what fans informally learned from the series, and how they incorporate this public pedagogy in their community activism. One could view this as a limitation, as I might look for a connection or influence that may not exist. However, my enthusiasm for *THG* could also be perceived as a strength for the study, in that my identification as a fan allows me to authentically connect with others who feel similarly about the series. Bearing in mind fans are protective of their particular pop culture franchise (Jenkins, 2006b), some participants seemed more inclined to interact openly with me as a researcher because I am also a fan. Additionally, possessing an intimate familiarity with the franchise and an understanding about its relevance to fans afforded me the unique ability to more quickly establish rapport with participants and understand their language and activities as it pertains to *THG* fandom.

Finally, the idea for this study originated with my interest in the inspirational nature of women characters featured in *THG* and the applicability of its narratological meaning. As a fan of the series, I discovered others who felt the same way about the series through my colloquial conversations and previous, casual online research. Of particular relevance to me is the informal learning occurring when fans engage with popular culture pedagogies, especially as sites of resistance. Hence, my attention to discovering the everyday ways people blend their passions to help create a more equitable world underlies my entire dissertation study. As part of the recruitment, interview, and observation process, I shared my journey discovering this subject,
along with my passion for using popular culture as a platform and vehicle for activism. This offered a way to connect with participants, as well as brought deeper understanding and a unique perspective to analyzing the data. Participants were thrilled to talk with another fan activist.

**Participant Selection**

Examining a human or social issue in-depth represents a great strength of qualitative research. Doing so requires the intentional selection of participants and documents to provide information most relevant to study (Creswell, 2014). Merriam and Associates (2002) refer to this deliberate selection of participants as a *purposive* or *purposeful sampling*, which they argue is essential for information-rich studies, as well as to help the researcher best understand the problem. While qualitative research naturally uses a smaller number of participants in a study, it is important enough data is collected to provide ample information to produce thick-rich descriptions. Creswell (2014) defines this as reaching *saturation*, where data collection stops “when the categories (or themes) are saturated: when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties” (p. 189). Thus, interviews with participants are often coupled with review of documents, and/or other additional data collection methods.

As it relates to the purpose of my study, fans of *THG* series provide the best selection of participants to understand how women informally learn from popular culture pedagogies and potentially construct an activist identity using its narrative and characters. Participants are categorized into two groups: *primary participants*, for whom I interviewed, and *secondary participants*, for whom I observed online through reviewing their social media and blog posts, along with observing the discussions they had with each other. Additionally, I collected relevant
documents and artifacts identified during the 2-year observation portion of the study. Each of these data collection methods are described in more detail below.

**Primary Participants**

I used four foundational criteria to guide the selection of primary participants for this study: a) participants represented adult learners, defined as those around the age 25 or older; b) they present as or self-identify as women; c) they self-identify as fans of *THG* series, defined as those who consumed the literary and/or cinematic versions of the series and engaged with other fans of the series; and d) those who participated in some form of activism, whether the activity occurred in online and/or offline spaces. Each selection addresses a specific component of my study, which was critical to ensuring the participant pool would provide the most information-rich data for analysis and interpretation.

The first criterion ensures participants represent adult learners, typically recognized in the field of adult education those within the age range of around 25 to 64 (Wlodkowski, 2008). The second criterion limits the pool of participants to those who self-identify as women—either in their biological determination and/or their gender identity. The third criterion provides qualifications for fans of the series, rather than just casual consumers of pop culture. This would be determined by collaboration with other fans, like participation in an online fan site, blog, or social media page (i.e., submitting comments or posting fan creations). The primary differentiating factor is a fan participates with other fans in activities related to their favored pop culture franchise. Jenkins (2006a) explains that “fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to
become full participants” (p. 135). Which leads to the final selection criteria, where participants not only engaged in fan activities, but also actions of an activist nature. This could be defined as any activity, in either online or offline spaces, aimed at resisting dominant political, social, and/or economic culture (Sandlin, 2007). For instance, some fans activists did not initially have an awareness they exemplified activist behavior. Yet, through their answers, they acknowledged they are working to raise awareness about a particular cause or social justice issue.

In total, I interviewed 10 women, ranging in age from 25-63. While diversity in race and ethnic origin was less than I hoped (i.e., only one participant identified as something other than white), I did have three women who provided an international perspective. Two women are citizens of countries outside the United States, with one American citizen teaching internationally at the time of this study. All of the participants were highly educated and held professional careers, in addition to their activist efforts. More detailed descriptions of each participant, including a table summarizing demographic data, is located in Chapter Four. During the interview process, many of the primary participants referenced documents and artifacts, which I then collected for further review and analysis.

Secondary Participants

Since my research represents a cyber ethnographic study of fan culture, it was also important to observe participants online, while collecting documents and artifacts from a variety of online spaces where fan activism occurred. An extensive online search of numerous sources, like fan sites, blogs, and social media platforms, provided a variety of settings to observe fan activities, behaviors, and engagement in digital spaces. Examples of fan sites I initially
reviewed, include ones like http://www.jabberjays.net and http://www.hungergamesdwtc.net, which represent publicly accessible websites that list their site staff with accompanying bios. These bios provide enough publicly available information to pre-screen potential participants. Some bios even include age, occupation, geographic location, and contact information (ex: email or social media handle). Examples of initial social media platforms reviewed include Facebook fan pages, Twitter hashtag feeds, Pinterest boards, Tumblr blogs, and more. Additionally, one specific activist organization was chosen for observation and participant cultivation: the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA). The HPA (http://www.thehpalliance.org) touts the mantra of turning “fans into heroes”. As it relates to my study, the HPA launched a three-year campaign, titled “Odds in Our Favor”, which drew parallels between the THG narrative and real-world concerns about economic and social inequalities around the globe. I reviewed this campaign in great detail, including an investigation and analysis of the associated websites (i.e., www.oddsinourfavor.org and www.myhungergames.org), as well as campaign Tumblr blog accounts (http://myhungergamesstories.tumblr.com/ and http://wearethedistricts.tumblr.com/) to collect stories of fans. Additionally, I reviewed social media platforms to track THG fan activist activity associated with the campaign, using a variety of hashtags—most notably: #MyHungerGames. In total, I collected over 320 documents and artifacts related to THG and its associated fan activism, while spending two years formally observing their behaviors and conversations online. More complete descriptions of the virtual environments observed appear in Chapter Four.
Data Collection

Qualitative research often utilizes three primary sources of data: interviews, observations, and documents. These multiple methods of data collection enhance the validity of the findings and provide several ways for examining a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Associates, 2002). I utilize all three modes of qualitative data collection in this study. Using fantasy theme analysis, I first draw out shared perceptual frames by fans (Bormann, 1985). I then employ a critical discourse analysis of THG films, in addition to data collected through interviews, online observations, and digital documents. Each is discussed in further detail below.

In-Depth Interviews

Data from interviews is derived through a process of conversational engagement between the researcher and participants, stemming from questions related to a study (Merriam, 2009). Several interview styles exist, from a highly structured format, to one that is semi-structured or flexible, to an unstructured or informal design (Merriam, 2009). I utilized a semi-structured interview format to ensure specific information was gathered from primary participants, while allowing a measure of flexibility to explore unexpected issues or topics that emerge during the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2014b). Understanding the specific culture of interest for this cyber ethnographic study is delimited by a shared interest of THG, rather than geographic boundaries, it was likely that in-person interviews would not be a viable option. Instead, I made all attempts to conduct face-to-face conversation through Skype or Google Hangout. In the end, 7 interviews occurred via visual calling method, one occurred in person, and the remaining two happened through an email exchange. The live interviews lasted anywhere from 90 minutes to
2.5 hours, while the email interviews happened through multiple exchanges over several days. The interview guide (reference the Appendix) provided a variety of queries for the interviews, including background questions, experience questions, knowledge questions, hypothetical questions, devil’s advocate questions, and interpretive questions (Merriam, 2009). I asked primary participants to describe themselves, including how they became a fan of THG, while also probing into their reflections on the story, characters, and meaning. I also asked what they learned about themselves from the story, along with how it shaped their understanding of activism. And finally, I asked about the role of other fans in their learning process. With the explicit permission of each primary participant, the interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed by myself to afford more immersion in the data.

**Online Observation**

Collecting observational data provides the researcher with a firsthand encounter of a phenomenon, as compared to interviews that provide secondhand information derived from participants (Sharan B. Merriam, 2002; Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Within this method, data collection occurs within a natural setting in order to observe how people act and behave in a given context (Creswell, 2014). During this process, the researcher takes extensive field notes, in either unstructured or structured ways, to record activities at the site of interest (Creswell, 2014).

Within ethnographic study, the researcher often serves as a participant-observer, whereby the role of the researcher is known but he/she also participates in the culture to become intimately familiar with a group (Sharan B. Merriam, 2002; Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Creswell (2014) notes several advantages to observational data collection, including: the researcher gaining firsthand experience, the ability to record information as it happens, noting unusual aspects not otherwise derived from interviews, and exploring topics otherwise uncomfortable to discuss during the interview process. Conversely, Creswell (2014) lists several limitations the researcher must also consider, including: a) their role may be seen as intrusive, b) private information may be observed that could not be reported, c) limitations on what can feasibly be observed in any given context, and d) some situations offer difficulties with establishing rapport.

Understanding observation represents a vital component of ethnographic research, including studies conducted within digital spaces (Sharan B. Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), this study required me to spend considerable time in virtual environments where fans of *THG* interact. I spent a total of two years observing these secondary participants. As previously mentioned, these digital spaces included numerous fan sites, social media pages, blogs, discussion boards, etc. To limit what I observed online, the focus centered on three methods of resistance: a) following the online campaigns of The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a fan activist group with an initiative called “Odds in Our Favor”, using *THG* series to raise awareness about various social issues; b) following the hashtag, #MyHungerGames, on various social media pages, which fans use to connect with each other and advocate for social causes personally relevant to them; and c) tracking the “three-finger salute” fans use as a visual representation of their resistance to oppression. As it relates to investigator transparency, I exercised discernment for when to make my presence known as the researcher and when it was appropriate to simply engage as a complete participant or observer. Warner (2009) notes while there can be no privacy on the Internet, I must identify myself as a researcher at the earliest opportunity and assure
participants their privacy will be maintained to the extent I can within the limitations of this study and the Internet in general—which I did on both accounts.

**Digital Documents**

During the interview and observation process, several documents presented themselves as relevant for collection and review. Merriam (2009) states “society produces materials designed to entertain, inform, and perhaps persuade the public” (p. 143). The author includes visual texts within the category of a document, stating they provide an excellent source of information. McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) contend they serve as important objects of inquiry:

> Because these texts are constructed within a particular set of cultural, social, economic, and political contexts, and they inform the values audiences receive about themselves, others, and the world around them, their analysis can reveal much about the social context in which they are produced and received. (p. 268)

As it pertains to ethnographic research, documents enable the researcher to obtain the language of a culture and represents data to which participants have given their attention (Creswell, 2014). Conducting a cyber ethnographic study of fan culture included such documents as blog posts by fans and other creations posted online, memes about the narrative or characters, photos and other images, interview transcripts actors and directors, videos, musical tracts, and more. As it relates to my study, focus centered on digital documents related to fan activism. Examples of documents collected include 45+ online news articles reporting on fan activities, 120+ social media posts, 105+ blog postings and toolkits created by fans, 35+ resistance videos, memes, and images created and circulated by fans, etc. These represent a sampling of the over 320 digital
documents collected during the study, a few of which I include as figures in Chapters Four and Five. To aggregate the data, I printed PDF versions of the online articles, took screen shots of relevant social media posts and websites, and saved toolkits, images, memes, and videos. I then organized all the data into descriptive folders for reference during the analysis and final write-up. It is worth noting that collecting digital documents offered unique challenges, such as transcribing (ex: audio recordings or music) and saving for future reference, as well as difficulty with determining authenticity, accuracy, and authorship (Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

Analysis of data occurred throughout the course of this study, as is often the case in qualitative research, whereby, data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (Merriam & Associates, 2002). To augment the trifecta of interviews, observations, and document data, I employed a fantasy theme analysis of key concepts emerging from the primary participant interviews and secondary participant observational data. Additionally, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the film versions of THG series and their relationship to the fantasy themes identified. I discuss each of these methods in further detail below.

Fantasy Theme Analysis

To draw correlations from the data collected through in-depth interviews, online observations, and digital document analysis, I first employed a fantasy theme analysis on the THG fandom. I began with the interview data from the 10 primary participants, and then moved to include observational data from secondary participants, and finally digital documents. Fantasy
theme analysis emerges from the larger symbolic convergence theory of communication, introduced by Ernest Bormann. By conducting a fantasy theme analysis, the researcher identifies perceptional frames (both real and fictional) shared by a particular group. This type of analysis elucidates how “shared fantasies provide group members with comprehensible forms of explaining their past and thinking about their future—a basis for communication and group consciousness” (Bormann, 1985, p. 128). These shared fantasies represent collective “dreams” for the future; thus, illuminating how groups, like THG fan activists, appear to have a collective conscious with shared emotions, motives, and meanings. This insight moves beyond explanation of individual thinking and daydreaming, and instead focuses on socially shared narratives and fantasies (Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997). Furthermore, this method of analysis points to “consciousness-creating, -raising, and -sustaining [as] a conscious, open, interactive process, directly observable in the rhetoric which, in turn, is wholly explainable and produces reliable predictions of human behavior” (Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 2003, p. 369). In other words, activist fantasies shared by THG fans is an observable, explainable, and verifiable phenomenon that provides added understanding to emergent themes and guided the focus of the CDA that I conducted on the four movies of the THG series.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

Within a poststructural feminist framework, CDA is commonly used to examine visual and written texts. This approach seeks to understand how women’s realities are constructed through media, as well as to observe these cultural influences on subjective experiences (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014). This method of analysis focuses on the way people and institutions use
language, including images and written word; specifically focusing on social problems and critically analyzing power relations between dominant and subordinate groups (Richardson, 2007). CDA examines words and language within chosen texts and, in particular, how they convey social values, judgments, and beliefs (Richardson, 2007). The focus on language is based on the foundational idea that power and knowledge are inextricably linked through language (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014). The purpose, then, is to deconstruct the inherent meaning behind the language used (visual and spoken) in order to expose the ideological values embedded within the discourse. Focusing on language, discourse, and images, pays particular attention to the ideological and political dimension of the texts (van Dijk, 1991). Examining visual representations as discursive practices also allows the researcher to analyze potential meanings, as they are part of a wider social discourse.

Through a CDA of the films, I examined the THG narrative to reveal how this popular culture pedagogy reflects and/or challenges social values produced from dominant ideologies, from which women make meaning and construct knowledge. Considering this popular culture pedagogy resides within a constellation of pre-existing discursive practices that contribute to the reproduction of current power relations, I examined the films individually and as a part of a popular culture discursive genre on women advancing social justice causes. By analyzing the narrative, along with the interview transcripts and digital documents, CDA offers the essential link to understanding women’s perspective and reason for engaging in activities to advance social justice causes (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b). In essence, combining ethnographic data collection methods with a fantasy theme analysis and CDA helps to theorize on the social function and individual impact of popular culture pedagogies featuring a narrative with strong representation of activism.
Process of Analysis

Following the first interview, I recorded initial, emerging themes to explore during successive interviews and online observations, as well as to ascertain if the interview questions adequately addressed the purpose of my study. I repeated this process after each interview to adjust my interview approach and exploration of emerging themes. I transcribed each interview shortly after it took place, which afforded the ability to further reflect on each primary participant story. During the interview and transcription process, I kept a field journal to track my thoughts, reflections, and any additional points of interest. I used this same field journal during the observation process as well. This allowed for a concurrent immersion and analysis of the data. As suggested by Merriam (2009), I also prepared researcher memos (as part of a larger field journal) throughout the data collection process, noting keywords and general, emerging categories.

Following the interviews and observations, I used the transcriptions and my field notes to conduct a fantasy theme analysis on emergent themes. I coded the interview data, observational data, and digital documents accordingly. Coding techniques included colored-coding, writing comparison notes, mind-mapping, and outlines to create sub-set categories and discover how they connect and inform one another. To illustrate how an emergent theme became a fantasy theme in this process, I use a finding described in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. One emergent theme identified during the interview process was the fact that none of the primary participants identified as Katniss, or with her character, from THG series. I found this theme repeated with the secondary participants observed online and even in the collected documents and artifacts. Initially I was unsure what to make of this notion. While they did not identify with Katniss, she did represent an important part of their stories and activist efforts. After conducting a fantasy
theme analysis, I recognized Katniss embodied the *ideal* of fighting against oppression, for which they connected with. She represented a legend and myth to fans. Hence, the fantasy theme analysis provided deeper meaning to the initial emergent theme. I repeated this process of conducting a fantasy theme analysis on the remaining emergent themes. In total, I identified four fantasy themes, which contribute to one overarching rhetorical vision for *THG* women fan activists: fighting for justice and equality.

Next, I conducted a CDA on the *THG* four films to analyze the language and discourse of the narrative as it relates to the four fantasy themes identified as part of the *THG* fandom. Using the previous example, the fantasy theme analysis identified Katniss as a legend and myth, but the CDA revealed how the films and fans venerate Katniss from a flawed personality to a mythic character. Again, I repeated the process of conducting a CDA on the *THG* films and *THG* fandom to add further meaning and understanding to the remaining fantasy themes. Each step along the way, I re-grouped, sorted, and refined categories until the final fantasy themes and CDA themes represented all relevant data. Merriam (2009) refers to this process as the *constant comparative* method of qualitative data analysis.

**Verification Strategies**

Within qualitative inquiry, researchers address issues of credibility and trustworthiness to ensure the dependability of their study and confirm the ethical manner in which it was conducted (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Attending to these concerns warrants the study was conducted with appropriate rigor so as to withstand academic scrutiny, as well as to provide the reader with enough detail to demonstrate the findings make sense. *Credibility* refers to how
well the findings match participants’ construction of their reality, whereas trustworthiness refers to the consistency of the results among the data collected (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I addressed these concerns through four strategies recommended for qualitative research: triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, peer review, and researcher reflexivity.

Regarding triangulation, Merriam (2009) notes four types of triangulation to increase both the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research: a) multiple investigators, b) multiple theories, c) multiple methods, and d) multiple sources of data to confirm findings. I employed the latter three types for this study. First, as outlined in Chapter One and Chapter Two, multiple theoretical constructs provide the conceptual framework for examining the development of an activist identity in women fans of THG series, including poststructural feminism, popular culture as public pedagogy, and convergence culture. Examining findings through multiple conceptual lenses provides additional opportunities to understand participants’ construction of reality, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Next, in-depth interviews, observation of fans in digital spaces, and collection of digital documents represent triangulation through multiple methods for data collection. Merriam (2009) explains the value of this type of triangulation as “what someone tells you in an interview can be checked against what you observe on site or what you read about in documents relevant to the phenomenon of interest” (p. 216). Finally, multiple sources of data refer the comparing and crosschecking of data at various times and in different spaces, as well as from follow-up interviews with the same participants. For this study, triangulation of multiple data sources means visiting the same virtual spaces (i.e., fan sites and social media platforms) at varying times and conducting interviews with multiple participants at varying times through the entire cyber ethnographic study. Additionally, conducting a fantasy theme analysis of the ethnographic data
collected, as well as a CDA of the THG films and THG fandom, offers additional sources of data from which to draw insights. Collectively, these varied sources add depth to the conclusions outlined in Chapters Four and Five.

It is worth noting, from a poststructural perspective, the notion of triangulation is less an attempt to reach objectivity; rather a focus on *crystallizing* the angle of analysis (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Just as crystals offer an infinite array of colors and patterns, depending on how one uses the prism, so too does poststructuralism recognize there are multiple ways in which to approach research of a given topic (Merriam, 2009). Rather than attempting to reach a fixed point, as triangulation intends, crystallizing recognizes what the researcher perceives will depend on their individual positionality and the angle from which they choose to study a given topic (Merriam, 2009). As it pertains to my study, the point of crystallizing is to clarify for the reader the patterns of data collection and analysis employed, so as to make apparent the unique perspective from which I examined the phenomenon.

Turning to the second strategy I employed in this study, *adequate engagement in data collection* required me to gather information (ex: interview enough participants, spend sufficient time in the field, and collect ample documents) until both the data and emergent findings felt saturated. Saturation occurs when a researcher beings to “see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). Additionally, this approach calls for the researcher to consider alternative understandings to a given phenomenon. This addresses the credibility of the researcher, as attempts were made to consider evidence to the contrary. In so doing, this demonstrates the strength of the researcher’s original explanations (Merriam, 2009). As it pertains to my study, the very nature of ethnographic study demands lengthy time in the field, in order to fully understand a given culture (Buch & Staller, 2014).
Regarding the *peer review* strategy, this study falls under the direction and oversight of a university-approved dissertation committee, consisting of four members who possess specialties in essential areas for my research. Each committee member read and commented on the study multiple times, to ensure the findings were plausible based on the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, this strategy enhanced the accuracy of the cyber ethnographic account and ensures the descriptions resonate with readers, other than just myself, as the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Finally, Merriam (2009) describes *researcher’s position* or *reflexivity* as a strategy that calls upon investigators to “explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken” (p. 219). This allows readers to better understand how the researcher likely arrived at a particular conclusion (Merriam, 2009). For the purposes of the described investigation, reflective notes were recorded in a researcher journal following each observation session and participant interview. This journal was reviewed during the coding and analysis process. This measure of researcher accountability ensures the findings developed from participants’ behaviors and words, as opposed to emerging from my own disposition or biases (Creswell, 2014). Hesse-Biber (2014b) notes the importance of remaining mindful of the connection that qualitative inquiry makes with larger feminist interests:

As a feminist [researcher], I am aware of the nature of my relationship to those whom I interview, careful to understand my particular personal and researcher standpoints and to understand what role(s) I play in the interview process in terms of my power and authority over the interview situation. (p. 184)
Ethnographic research depends heavily on personal interactions and interpretations of the researcher (Buch & Staller, 2014), hence reflexivity offers an imperative step toward maintaining transparency and presenting findings in an ethical manner.

As it pertains to the findings of a qualitative study, results differ from quantitative research, as the purpose is not to generalize for a larger population. Instead of replication, Merriam (2009) states, qualitative research is concerned with *transferability*, meaning the extent to which findings from a study can be applied or transferred to other situations. More specifically, “in qualitative research, a single case or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Buch and Staller (2014) note for ethnographies, it is virtually impossible to replicate the study because this methodology depends too greatly on the personal interactions of the researcher in a particular culture. Therefore, the researcher provides enough depth and explanation of the phenomenon to afford readers the ability to make applications elsewhere. This approach is often described by as building knowledge horizontally, rather than vertically (Merriam, 2009). Accordingly, contributions of the findings will benefit readers who seek to make an application in other relevant contexts. To enhance the transferability of findings, thick-rich descriptions must be present in a study (Buch & Staller, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Thick-rich descriptions refer to both a detailed description of the setting and participants for a study, as well as to adequately describe the findings by presenting evidence through direct quotes from interviews, references to field notes, and drawing associations to documents collected (Merriam, 2009). In the following chapter (Chapter Four), I provide detailed accounts and descriptions of the four fantasy themes that emerged during the research process.
Chapter 4

FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS

“Sci-fi and fantasy rely on these very real narratives of oppression that are rooted in our history and rooted in our present”.
- Raven, Study Participant

Are fan activists simply dreamers? Do pop culture narratives really shape the identity and perspectives of people? The purpose of my study aimed to answer these questions and others as it relates to the nexus of adult learning, popular culture, and fan activism. More specifically, I sought to critically examine what women fans informally learn about activism from *The Hunger Games* (*THG*) series and in collaboration with other fans. Additionally, I sought to understand how their identity is shaped by this popular culture pedagogy in online and offline spaces, as they seek to advance social justice causes. The findings presented in this chapter and the following (Chapter Five) demonstrate the crucial role of a shared rhetorical vision to organize and mobilize groups of people toward a common goal, including the function of resistant pop culture narratives to help shape the fantasies, or dreams, of fan activists.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section provides information about fan activists and how their stories unfold. I introduce each primary participant interviewed for this study and discuss some of their unique qualities as fan activists. The next section provides information on the virtual spaces in which I observed secondary participants. Specifically, I describe a particular campaign and its associated online spaces, which functioned as a facilitator of learning about activism and shared storytelling among fans. The third section presents the findings of a fantasy theme analysis conducted on *THG* fandom, using data from in-depth interviews, online observations, and review of digital documents and artifacts. I end with a
brief analysis of the themes of findings in relation to the notion of fan activists as a rhetorical community of learners.

**Primary Participants: Interviews with Fan Activists**

The participants in this study represent women from different socioeconomic backgrounds, diverse ethnic identities, and varied nationalities. With regard to educational attainment and racial identity, the representation of diversity among the primary participants was less than I hoped. All the women were highly educated, and only one (Lisa) identified with a race other than Caucasian. Their ages ranged from 25 to 63, with a mean of 33 years. Two of the women (Helen and Lizzie) were citizens to countries outside the United States; and at the time of this study, one woman (Gemma) was an international teacher in Doha, Qatar. The social issues of interest to the women varied, from access to quality education for underprivileged pre-school children (Lisa), to debunking stereotypes about Muslims and using social media to educate on women’s issues (Gemma), to advancing LGBTQ rights (Averi), to advocating for environmental sustainability and addressing the effects of climate change (Jack). Their activism also ranged, from participating in protest marches (Helen), to using social media for information sharing (Gemma), to arranging large-scale campaigns (Raven), to planning a fund-raising rock concert (Ashley), to hosting online discussion forums (Lizzie), and more.

Table 4-1 provides a summary of the demographic information on each woman interviewed, including age, current residence and birth country (if applicable), socioeconomic status growing up, race, ethnicity, and general area of interest for social causes. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of participants, with most of the women choosing the name of a
character from their favorite fictional story. It’s important to note, the main social cause listed in the table for each woman reflects the topic mentioned most during the course of the interview, and not intended to insinuate the women do not have other areas of interest and/or involvement.

Table 4-1. Primary Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Socio-Economic Background</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Social Cause of Interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Upstate New York</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Doha, Qatar (American)</td>
<td>Lower Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Women’s Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Averi</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Las Vegas, NV</td>
<td>Upper Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>LGBTQ Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Harrisburg, PA</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Mixed (White/Black)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Pre-School Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mount Joy, PA (South African)</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>South African</td>
<td>Fighting Oppressive Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bethlehem, PA</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>German/Irish</td>
<td>Environmental Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Omaha, NE</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Immigration Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Asheville, NC</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Homeless Veterans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minerva</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Los Angeles, CA</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Varied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While summarizing the demographic information of the primary participants offers a quick reference for readers, it certainly fails to convey the rich detail needed to understand how fan activism shapes their identity and the role of pop culture in that process. As such, in the following sections, I introduce each primary participant individually, providing more color to their life as a woman learner, fan activist, and avid consumer of pop culture.

Raven

Raven is a 30-year-old career activist living in upstate New York, roughly three hours North of New York City. Professionally, she works as Campaigns Director for the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a non-profit organization with a mission to change the world by making activism more accessible through the power of story. Raven holds a Bachelor’s degree in sociology and a Master’s degree in social work. She’s been in youth organizing for over a decade. Her work focuses on developing various methods of engaging young people in conversations on how to make the world a better place and fighting systems of injustice. A self-proclaimed nerd and Comic Con geek, Raven began volunteering for the HPA in 2013 after falling in love with the organization, as it married her interests of social justice and pop culture. Raven values the optimism of fan activism and the importance it places on people becoming the heroes of their own story. Reflecting on her appreciation for fan activism, Raven says:

I think the HPA uses a lot of fan activism methodology—talking about things through a sense of hope and a sense of “there is action we can take” and “everyone can be a hero” and “we don’t have to despair because the problems are so big, but we can take action and make a difference”. That was really nice! Sometimes, when you’re listening to the
news and everything seems so grim, [fan activism] is a lot more compelling and a lot more exciting for me.

She enjoys fan activism for the impact it makes in fighting for social justice, but equally as much in helping to connect the important role of activism through the power of story. Raven deeply believes in the work of the HPA. She shares what first drew her to fan activism and the HPA:

It was really the Harry Potter Alliance’s methodology of talking about social justice issues through this silly, very pull-on-the-heartstrings way. And talking about it through the idea of heroes was really exciting to me. It was very exciting to think these nerdy things I invested so much time in could actually be useful to the world and be helpful to other people.

Raven calls attention to an important aspect of fan activism: this work legitimizes the material fans activists feel passionate about as a tool for social change. Pop culture represents something all fan activists invest their time and resources into; but fan activism helps direct their focus to move beyond the living room and theaters and into real spaces and challenging conversations.

In describing her experiences with fan activists, Raven also notes the high-level of participation by women. She theorizes that “people who are going to act on social justice are people who are more likely to have their identity fall somewhere on the marginalized side of things”. As a leader in advocating for social justice, she notes “organizing just came very naturally to me”, as she led groups of people since her childhood. Raven views pop culture, especially THG series and other similar stories, as an influential vehicle for people, including herself, to reflect upon and dialogue with others about issues impacting the world. She calls her work “cultural acupuncture” and thinks “it’s very powerful to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the heroes” and how we amalgamate the traits of those we admire from stories into our identities.
Gemma

Gemma is a 27-year-old novel activist and educator living in Doha, Qatar, where she teaches second grade international students. Newly relocated from Lubbock, Texas, Gemma taught internationally for over four years, most recently in South Korea. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education and boasts a list of hobbies, including the love of travel and reading young adult literature. Gemma connects to stories with strong female leads, who want to take charge in a given situation. She appreciates genuine characters and desires to reflect those qualities in her life: “I try to be always very authentic and honest with people about who I am, what I think, and my opinions, while having good conversation”. Gemma does not shy away from difficult topics and uses social media as a vehicle to challenge oppressive beliefs, whether by sharing informative articles, reposting satirical memes, or writing thought-provoking blog posts. With regard to fan activism, Gemma’s actions reflect more of an everyday activism, as she strives to educate people through the mechanism of social media platforms, sharing information she finds personally relevant. She says, “I post things that probably make some people uncomfortable, but I feel like that are important”. Gemma values the role of some pop culture narratives to offer female characters women can look up to. Regarding *THG* narrative and what people could learn from the story, she says:

I think they would learn how to stand up for what they thought was right; but also how to work with others and communicate with people in a way that helps the group realize, “even though we’re different and we’re from different places and we have different skills, we can work together to make a difference”. 
Gemma’s statement reflects another important aspect of fan activism, the move from individual thinking to a consideration of the collective good. Gemma, along with the other primary (interview) participants, spoke in plural form quite often. Their mindset continually reverted to the well-being of others—even those they never met. Regard THG narrative, Gemma admires Katniss and other strong female characters in the story for seeing the wrong in their world and taking action to change it. Accordingly, Gemma’s passion resides with advocating for women’s rights and challenging xenophobia.

Averi

Averi is a 25-year-old therapist living in Las Vegas, Nevada. While newer in the role of fan activist, Averi has challenged the norms of society for much of her life. A career academic, Averi holds a Master’s degree in Marriage Family Therapy and is a doctoral candidate in a human development program, with an emphasis in Marriage Family Therapy. In addition to teaching, supervising, and researching, Averi also works as a marriage and family therapist. An avid pop culture consumer and “big Harry Potter fan”, she proudly boasts attending Harry Potter-related conferences since she was 14-years-old. Combining her passion for psychoanalytic treatment and all things pop culture, Averi often uses storylines and characters from movies and television as a platform for discussing difficult issues with her clients. She says, “I try to watch things I can bring up to clients and help with whatever we are going through”. This technique proves quite valuable, as her clients provide honest responses as they speak through fiction. Identifying as gay and queer, much of her research and therapeutic practice focuses on LGBTQ
issues. However, this facet of Averi’s identity caused severe emotional trauma in her doctoral studies. With an abusive adviser, and other teachers berating her interests in LGBTQ research, Averi felt quite defeated and worthless. She says, “they did everything they could to shatter my confidence”. She began volunteering with the HPA as a data analyst, and this connection helps her feel valued and impactful. She says, “It’s been very helpful for me, because the Harry Potter Alliance builds your confidence up so much”. Averi credits the HPA as the main reason she did not drop out of her doctoral program. Working for social justice through fan activism also helped Averi build her confidence and self-worth.

Averi also believes in the value of pop culture to introduce adults to new ideas and perspectives, offering rich material for discussion with others. She says:

A lot of times adults don’t think they can learn much from young adult things. That is a huge flaw of adults, because the genre of young adult is a genre about being thoughtful and introspective…. Because most things I love, the world would call kid things and wouldn’t take my love of it seriously. But I have learned so much about being a person and being a therapist and an academic from Buffy, from Harry Potter—the things people would choose not to engage in because of the label placed on it….There’s no reason why you can’t learn from The Hunger Games because you are over the age of 25 or you’re over whatever the threshold is that is on the back of the book….You don’t stop enjoying something because you’re an adult.

Like some other pop culture narratives, Averi values THG story for helping people make meaning of their world. Accordingly, she contributes most of her personal growth to the fiction, as pop culture stories and characters shaped who she is and the work she does in the world.
Lisa

Lisa is a 30-year-old novel activist and physical therapist, living in an urban neighborhood of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. After receiving her Bachelor’s degree, Lisa worked all over the spectrum in the field of physical therapy. A wife and mother to a 3-year-old little girl, Lisa attributes the birth of her daughter as the initiating factor for her entry into fan activism. She reflects, “I think a lot of it started for me when I had my daughter. It became really clear to me that I had to be more intentional about the way I interacted with my community”. Lisa describes her difficult pregnancy, where she was confined to the couch for four months. She picked up THG books as quick reads to escape her discomfort. She didn’t expect to fall in love with the story:

Someone had recommended [the series] to me, because I wanted a book that was easy to read. I was kind of in a crummy mood, and I wasn’t trying to read War and Peace. I didn’t need something that is a super heavy and literary thing. I just wanted something fun. But I found myself really surprised when I was handed this young adult book. I found my surprised at the quality of it and how much I legitimately enjoyed it. While she enjoyed the escapism of reading an intriguing story with interesting and complex characters, she began to draw parallels from THG to her own life. Like Katniss, Lisa felt unprepared for a major journey thrust upon her. For Lisa, the journey was motherhood:

I was reading it at the same time I was preparing to become a parent. Reading all of these things about what a mom is supposed to do—which is apparently everything. You’re supposed to be super mom immediately without any flaws or problems. And that was really overwhelming.
Lisa found hope and strength in the *THG*’s central character (Katniss)—her flaws and humanity—yet also connected with the sense of commitment to making changes in the world. Lisa’s passion centers on a commitment to her neighborhood and surrounding community. She notes, “We moved to the city with the intention of not having to drive home from the bar afterwards on the weekends. But we didn’t realize how much we would end up ingrained in the community”. With the addition of her daughter and passion for literature, especially pop culture texts, Lisa and her husband decided to embark on a journey of developing a pre-school for underprivileged kids in her community. In addition to a passion for access to quality education, Lisa organizes group clean-up events and other beautification projects around the Harrisburg area. She says, “This neighborhood has to be more important to me than the easy decision of moving to a big house with a driveway, a yard, and a good school district. I hope that selflessness, from Katniss, is reflected in me a little bit”. Lisa often turns to pop culture and other fictional narratives to navigate situations she experiences. As it relates to *THG*, Lisa related to Katniss becoming an activist without even knowing it:

I didn’t wake up one morning and say to myself, “I am an activist today, look at that! And now I’m going to do activist things now, isn’t that amazing?”…. Looking at my life and how things have shaped themselves over the past several years, I now think, “Wait a minute, I feel really strong about standing up for my community”. And now I’m doing that in a really intentional way. I didn’t realize what happened, but I guess this is what we are doing now.

As reflected in her statement above, Lisa’s journey into activism reflects an evolution of identity. She didn’t make an intentional decision to become an activist, but saw a need and wanted to
help. Only after some reflection did Lisa recognize her work as activism. Her story exemplifies the notion that the work of activism assumes many types.

**Helen**

Helen is a 50-year-old adult educator and lifelong activist, currently living in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania for the past two years. Native to South Africa all her life, Helen came to the United States to study in an Adult Education doctoral program. Helen is an Episcopal priest, with Bachelor’s degrees in theology and English literature and a Master’s degree in Adult Education. She grew up during the age of apartheid, which deeply impacted her sense of social justice and activism for human rights. Helen understands the importance of charismatic leadership and symbolism, especially the role of pop culture, to channel people’s emotions and passions into social justice movements. In her own activist journey, she often connects with pop culture characters, including “V” from *V for Vendetta* and “Katniss” from *THG*. Referring to Katniss, Helen says:

> She is a complex character. She discovers her own strength, which I think a lot of women are in the process of doing. I think there are social expectations of us. But when are pushed, we discover we have more strength than we imagined.

Helen believes by reading and watching pop culture texts like *THG*, consumers may subconsciously see the possibility for change and it begins to shape their thinking and self-identification toward making change happen.

Helen also explains the relevancy of stories like *THG* to help someone understand themselves better. She says:
I think when we read someone else’s story there is a metaphorical telling of your own story. You cannot help but learn something about [yourself]….I think we test out possibilities and learn things about ourselves and the way we think. The way we feel in fiction is not always possible in real life.

Understandably, Helen’s background of living through the age of apartheid in South Africa shaped her passion for activism. She is particularly interested in challenging oppressive government and working to raise the critical consciousness of people. She reflects on the current oppression under which many Americans live:

It has been very hard for someone who comes from a human rights oriented context—because South Africa has possibly the most progressive constitution for human rights in the world—to come to America and see how impoverished this nation is when it comes to human rights. How badly the workers are treated. How badly they are paid. How few benefits they have. How women are paid $0.70 on the dollar compared to men, and that includes clergy. How the police can kill people and there is no national uprising.

Helen hopes Americans discover their power to challenge and change the oppressive economic and social systems in the United States, and believes some pop culture narratives can initiate that process through raising the critical consciousness of citizens.

Jack

Jack is a 27-year-old photographer living in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. On the activism spectrum, she’s been resisting social norms her whole life. An interesting note about her (male) pseudonym, she selected the name for this study after reminiscing how, as a child, she demanded
to be called “Jack” from her family and friends and wouldn’t answer to anything else. It holds amusing, warm memories for her. Having traveled and lived in places all over the world, Jack holds a passion for upending social inequalities and fighting for environmental stewardship. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Communications and previously owned a freelance photography and graphic design business. Jack finds comfort and purpose in leadership roles where she is helping others. Her passions reside with assisting children in after school programs and teaching people to live more sustainably. She focuses on the way most Western cultures treat the planet, and strives to live a zero waste lifestyle.

An avid pop culture consumer, Jack recognizes the role of challenging narratives to provide fictional scenarios for people to cognitively wrestle through real world issues. She says:

I think people feel guilty about the fact they can’t and don’t want to see all of these negative things. Because it’s overwhelming. It’s incredibly overwhelming. I think these are ways for people to come to terms with some of the negative things in the world…. People have an easier time talking about it in a fictional sense than they do in the real world sense.

Through pop culture characters, Jack learns about herself and the larger world. Rather than escapism, Jack finds value in reflecting on these stories and using examples in texts and films to bring awareness to others. She says:

I think when people can connect to a story like The Hunger Games, there is a chance they think, “Maybe I’ve been doing this. Maybe I’ve been ignoring these problems”. There isn’t something you can individually do about these bigger problems. But if you compare it to the characters in The Hunger Games, they all helped in some way. They all did their own part to make something bigger happen. They all came together to do something.
So, you don’t have to change the world, but you can change part of it. That could spark other people to change their part, and it could eventually spread. Or you could change the life of one person who goes on to do something phenomenal.

She believes these stories bring people together in ways not always viable when discussing real world issues. Jack contends that members of society like to share experiences and talk with one another. She believes pop culture provides a language to discuss difficult matters, and she uses this tactic often in her own activist work.

Felicity

Felicity is a 30-year-old everyday activist and science researcher working for the University of Nebraska Media Center. Her father is from Northern Ireland, while her mother is American. She currently resides in Omaha, Nebraska. Felicity holds a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology and a Master’s degree in Neuroscience. Felicity boasts a long list of hobbies, including reading, cooking/baking, painting/drawing, cycling, hiking, camping, watching movies, and throwing themed parties. She is also the Chapter Organizer for the local HPA Omaha Chapter. Felicity connects with fellow fan activists through various social media platforms, and appreciates how “curious, open-minded, and kind” they are. She notes “those are all things I also try to be”. Rather than tied to a particular franchise, Felicity appreciates the assortment of narratives used by the HPA. She is a fan of many pop culture stories and enjoys the variety of using those narratives to work for social change. Through her volunteer work, she became more engaged in her community and the larger global campaigns initiated by the HPA. She says:
I’ve learned that it doesn’t take a huge number of people to make a positive impact on society. Just a lot of determination and a willingness to stand up for what you believe in. Every change starts small.

As Chapter Organizer, Felicity also learns a lot about herself, including how she can funnel her energy and love of pop culture into something meaningful. She says, “I think it’s important to examine how you are using your ambition to motivate yourself and for what purpose, and to realize not everything needs to be perfectly organized/structured in your life”. Felicity notes that she loved popular culture ever since she was a kid. As an adult, she continually connects her life experiences to fictional (and real) stories, especially those with a good moral narrative. She finds comfort in the way people can reimagine the future through story and share those dreams with others.

Lizzie

Lizzie is a 26-year-old everyday activist and graduate student, living in a small town in Belgium. She holds a Master’s degree in biochemistry and is finishing her doctorate in Medical Genetics. In her free time, Lizzie loves to read books and watch Netflix. Also involved in the HPA, as Chapter Organizer for the Dutch and Belgian HPA Chapter, Lizzie appreciates the low entry point for fan activism. She believes fan activism begins with a passion for story and builds from there. She feels quite connected to *THG* through its affective influence, and likes that it offers the opportunity for further reflection and dialogue with others. She says:

When I first read it, it completely overwhelmed me. It was such a strong story about oppression, poverty, and trying to survive, but staying human. It was a tough story.
When I put the last book down, I needed a reality-check. I was so sucked into it and was extremely emotional at the end…. It changed my view a lot on certain topics, because we organised discussions. We are all human and fighting for social justice and/or being in a powerful position isn’t easy, for men and for women.

Lizzie calls attention to the heavy weight of fighting for social justice and its drain on activists. Thus, she finds it helpful to connect with other fans for support and dialogue. She turns to social media as an avenue to connect with other fan activists. Accordingly, Lizzie often arranges video web calls to discuss important issues, or as a mechanism to recruit volunteers for campaigns and events implement in her local community. She says:

Together with our HPA chapter, we organised a series of Google Hangouts with our members to discuss topics we drew from the series and talked about the impact of economic inequality. Topics were media access, homelessness, violence, unemployment, literacy, etc. For each topic we discussed the situation in Panem and in the real world. Finally, we made a blog post summarizing what was discussed. Thanks to the series, I had the opportunity to draw parallels and think more complexly about our world. It will definitely help me in the future in my support of social activism related to economic inequality.

Lizzie believes in-depth discussions leading to action represents what fandom, and fan activism, is all about. She says it starts by sparking “an interest in the minds of fans”.

Ashley

Ashley is a 25-year-old recent activist and graduate student living in Asheville, North Carolina. While working toward a Master’s degree in Library Science, she also fulfills the role of Chapter Organizer for HPA’s Asheville Chapter and collaborates with other regional Chapter Organizers online and through social media. She says, “When I’m not being an activist or a student, I work at a radio station”. She also enjoys reading, photography, and managing her boyfriend’s band. Ashley reflects on the important capability of fan activism to “draw parallels between the stories that are big in pop culture and what’s happening in the real world”. Within fan activism she finds her passion and a sense of purpose, because “if you don’t feel strongly about it then you’re not going to put as much effort into it”. Regarding her involvement with the HPA, Ashley reflects:

Using a part of the Harry Potter Alliance alone has made me so much more aware of issues in everyday life that we normally wouldn’t really pay much attention to. But it’s still there, and having help pointing out the parallels definitely helps as well.

She discovered *THG* series when Lionsgate, the company producing the film series, shot the first movie in Asheville, as her town reflects what the producers envisioned District 12 to look.

Saddened by the large homeless population of veterans in her town, Ashley and the Asheville HPA Chapter focus much of their activism around fundraising to help homeless veterans. She believes activism begins with dialogue. Ashley values fan activism for using story to expose oppression and injustices in the world. She says:

Wanting to talk about it. That alone is activism to me. It doesn’t have to be raising thousands of dollars to build a shelter, or build a house for a homeless veteran. It doesn’t have to be anything like that. It can be just a matter of, “Hey did you know we actually
have a really large homeless population here and that’s not ok?” Or, “Hey, how can I help bring awareness to this issue I don’t have any particular experience with? However, this is a big issue, so how can I help bring awareness to this issue without making it seem like it’s all about me?”

Ashley believes her activism also spills into her work as a librarian, where she helps direct people to radical resources they might not otherwise consider. And because books have tremendously impacted her life, a career in library science felt like a natural fit, and one that also dovetails nicely into her fan activist work. Whether in her research, profession, or volunteer efforts, Ashley views each of these capacities as an opportunity to advocate for change:

I can’t see myself not being as an activist, if that makes sense. Even though I’ve only been an activist for three years—only doing it for three years—I can’t see myself not trying to change the world…. [Fan activism] is such a large part of my identity, to try and help others.

Ashley’s statement reflects another key point of fan activism: this work permeates all aspects of participants’ lives. While some make a career out of fan activism, Ashley’s story reflects how it becomes a way of thinking and being in the world.

Minerva

Minerva is a 63-year-old life-long rebel and Registered Nurse living in Los Angeles, California. In addition to a successful career in the medical field, Minerva finds great joy in reading fantasy and science fiction, including participating in the HPA community. She also enjoys traveling and volunteering for numerous causes, including Democratic political
campaigns. While the oldest of the participants interviewed, she is no less passionate or energetic about pop culture and fan activism. In fact, Minerva is quite vocal about her reasoning for joining the HPA:

One of the reasons I wanted to participate is I think there’s a lot of ageism in the fandoms. They are not always accepting of old folks who are really into it. My goal is to promote the fact that they need to accept us old folks. Especially since we have money.

We can contribute to their programs and things.

Thus, Minerva’s activism even spreads within the fandom itself. But her story also exemplifies the deep connections made among fan activists. She says, “Along the way I’ve met all these incredible people who like all my children and family”. Quite literally, the woman Minerva refers to as her “daughter” is actually a fellow fan activist—the one who introduced Minerva to *THG* books. The two met about five years ago on a Harry Potter themed trip. They developed a mother-daughter bond, which both view as an adopted family. A similar connection happened with her adopted “sister”. She says, “You know your friends can be your family and they are”.

When it comes to fan activism, this way of life came naturally to Minerva, who says she’s rebelled her whole life: “I was rebelling against my family, who never accepted me for being a nerd”. Growing up poor, Minerva believes in the importance of helping others in need. Referring to the narrative of *THG*:

I think I connected with it first because the people were so poor, and struggling to live their lives and get by. These people in the Capitol were living it up, having all this money and all these things, and could care less about the people out there. They were almost like slaves, working so the Capitol could have all this stuff, then they would get
the pittance left over. I think that really resonated with me because I was so poor growing up.

Through the HPA and other fan activist collaborations, Minerva marries her love of pop culture and making the world a better place. She has great hope for the fan activist community to change the world. She says, “Don’t stop believing! It’s real for us. You have to believe in yourself, and the people you’re working with, that you can succeed and then you will”. While an activist her entire life, Minerva discovered fellow fan activists by accident. She was searching for fellow lovers of the *Harry Potter* series online and came upon the HPA. The rest, she says, is history.

**A Different Type of Fan**

Before moving on to a description of the virtual spaces in which I observed secondary participants (detailed in the next section), I first want to speak to the notion of fan activists representing something different than typical fans. While I mentioned a few of their unique qualities in the participant descriptions, some of these aspects deserve a closer look. This is important, because understanding their common perspective on pop culture and activism provides added insight into their shared fantasies detailed later in this chapter.

To begin, as one might expect, the primary participants in this study share a general love of pop culture, but it’s something they’ve carried with them their whole lives. Felicity says:

I was drawn into pop culture as a kid and never grew out of it! I love a good story, especially if that story has a good moral with which I can relate….The world we live in is not ideal, but it’s comforting that other people are striving to make it more so/expressing
through a story that they wish it were different, too. And also, who doesn’t love magic and dragons and tales of great adventures? Pop culture is an excellent source of imagination and fun.

Felicity’s response highlights the passion these women fan activists have for a good story that is entertaining, but also one that addresses series issues they see in the world. They see past the stigma of pop culture as being trivial, particularly the young adult genre, and recognize the significant potential for individual learning and social influence. Minerva says:

I think there’s nothing shameful about being a nerd, about reading a book that was written for teenagers. It can impact you. Look at these books like *The Hunger Games*, *Harry Potter*, and other trilogies like *Divergent*. They are aimed at a certain age group. Yet, you have people of all ages who not only read the books, but embrace them and love them and took away from some powerful stuff.

Minerva understands the anxiety some fans hold over expressing their love of pop culture, but she also speaks to the shared vision many fan activists share for its potential social impact. And some stories offer particular relevance for advancing change in society. In fact, all the women interviewed found value and significance in *THG* narrative and characters, particularly as a story that demonstrates the power of rebellion and revolution. But they also value the complex identities within the story. For example, Raven says:

In *The Hunger Games*, there’s a very clear line between the oppressed and the people who are well-off. I mean, they are all stuck in the system that maybe they don’t want to be in, which is where you get Plutarch, Cinna, and everybody else. That is the one thing about the books I think about. When you’re talking about it as a teaching tool, it helps
people explore how part of their identity is being part of the Capitol and part of their identity is also being a part of District 12. It’s not clear-cut.

Here, Raven views *THG* narrative as an opportunity to help people learn about their role, both as privileged and oppressed, in working towards a more equitable world.

Thus, as I listened to their stories, it became apparent these women represented a different type of fan. Helen says, “In terms of fandom, I’m not your typical fan person. I don’t follow movie stars and do that kind of thing”. Jack provides some clarification:

I feel like there are probably two kinds of fans. One who loves it for the fictional aspect of having a really solid character—this lead character who they all wish they could be…. And then I feel like there is probably another group of people who are reading the book because they understand exactly why it was written.

Ashley echoes this sentiment, saying:

I feel like there are two factions of *The Hunger Games* fandom. There’s the faction that focuses on purely the love story between Katniss and Peeta. Much like with *Twilight* or any other story where they focus just on the relationships. And then there’s the other faction that focuses on the true story, on the traumatic things happening in this fictitious world where it’s terrible.

Hence, fan activists value story as material for discussion with other fans, but also as a potential consciousness-raising tool for those not as critically minded.

Consequently, the participants in this study connected with the *THG* for more than being a great story with complex and interesting characters. They connected with its raw and authentic reflection of horrors happening in the United States and around the world. Helen draws a correlation between *THG* and her experiences with fighting for human rights in South Africa:
There was a critique of present society, whether it be in South Africa or in America, of the haves and have nots, of the people struggling, hand to mouth, to survive. Having to hunt to find enough food to survive. With the wealthy vomiting so they find more space to eat more. South Africa has the second highest Gini coefficient in the world—the gap between the rich and the poor. Brazil has the highest. And I’ve watched that. Literally, I have watched the political leaders on the stage, drinking champagne and eating cake, saying to the masses of hungry people, tens of thousands of them, “When we drink the champagne with our lips, we drink it on your behalf”. Now that could have been a flipping line out of The Hunger Games! Yet it happened in politics, in South Africa.

Accordingly, fan activists possess an empathy and passion for helping those in need. While other members of society may feel similarly and take action in other ways, fan activists utilize their love of story as an entry point for discussion, motivation, connection, and inspiration. For instance, one fan shared on Pinterest an image of two children with text overlaying saying, “Without a doubt, I would have volunteered for my sibling also” (see Figure 4-1) (Phan, 2014). The post included the following commentary: “Although this image does not portray social activism on a large scale, it does illustrate how The Hunger Games has inspired people to be good-hearted, selfless individuals” (Phan, 2014).

Phan highlights the link between story and person. While this type of association is not uncommon—people feel emotional connections to stories all the time—fan activists feel compelled by story to act.
Figure 4-1. Fan noting the qualities of other fan activists.

Ashley explains:

If someone was originally a fan of a story and then they actually see how it parallels something happening today in the world we live in, and they want to do something about it, that alone is fan activism.

The important point I want to emphasize is not the deliverable of what fan activists accomplish, but how particular stories compel some fans to move beyond the world of fiction, and move into real spaces to affect change. Ashley continues with this thought:

A fan activist would be someone who sees the real story—of sacrificing anything for the people you care about or for the greater good. They go out and try to raise awareness of
those similar injustices in our real world. Not even injustices, but issues presented from the fictitious world that parallel the real world.

Averi shares this thinking:

I think fan activism, at our core (our values and our well-being) is being considerate and being good people…. I think because we don’t care about the outcome. We care about the process. It helps. That sounds weird with activism, because we should care about the outcome. But I think people get stuck in being [outcome focused], because you see your way as being right and therefore everyone who doesn’t agree with your way becomes the enemy. But that’s different from fan activism, where we just want people to be informed. And then they can figure out their own way.

Thus, a fictional story holds the potential to shape the perspectives and identities of some fans. And this study focuses on the learning takes place in that process.

As reflected in their descriptions, *THG* narrative caused these women to seek out others to dialogue with. In doing so, they connected with other fan activists in a variety of settings, both online and in person, like chatting in Facebook groups, through Google Hangout and Skype, at pop culture conferences, or even simply chatting with friends over coffee or a shared meal. Their dialogue and interactions with other fan activists do not solely reside in either a virtual or physical spaces, rather they fluidly connect in overlapping ways. The women desire to share their stories to others who will listen and help them navigate through the heavy material, including how to apply their convictions toward efforts resulting in real world change.

As such, it’s important to understand the virtual spaces in which many of these interactions occur. The following section describes some of the online spaces where other fan activists share their personal stories of oppression, struggle, rebellion, and change.
Secondary Participants: Virtual Spaces as Facilitators for Activism

While in-depth interviews offer copious amounts of rich data for use in a fantasy theme analysis, it was important to also include data from stories of other women fans and fan activists shared in virtual spaces. Though the purpose of this section is to describe the virtual spaces where I observed secondary participants, I also feel compelled to convey the spirit of fan activists. I hope to pronounce, in great detail, their ability to share messages, support one another, challenge big government, influence corrupt corporations, and spread hope—all through sharing their personal stories and collaborating online. In essence, the forthcoming sub-sections detail important methodological aspects of this observational research, while also conveying the heart and soul of fan activism.

As detailed in Chapter Three, this study required me to spend considerable time in virtual environments where fans of THG interact. These digital spaces included fan sites, social media pages, blogs, discussion boards, etc. In order to center on relevant spaces to observe, related to the purpose of this study, I focused on three spaces of resistance using THG narrative: a) observing the online activities of the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), a fan activist organization that launched a three-year campaign called “Odds in Our Favor” using THG to raise awareness about social inequalities; b) following the hashtag #MyHungerGames on various social media pages, which fans use to connect with each other and advocate for causes personally relevant to them; and c) tracking the “three-finger salute” fans use as a visual representation of solidarity and their shared resistance to oppression. Interestingly, the second two tracking mechanisms continually pointed to the HPA and its campaign using THG. As such, I will spend the following sub-sections describing the three phases of this campaign, and other associated virtual spaces, as facilitators of learning for fan activism.
HPA Campaign Phase 1: Building Solidarity and Sharing Resources

The “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, launched by the HPA, provided numerous virtual spaces for fans to share their personal stories of struggle and efforts to overcome oppression. This campaign helped to build solidarity among fans, while offering opportunities to share information and resources. The first virtual space included the campaign website: www.oddsinourfavor.org. While the campaign ended at the beginning of 2016, and the associated website expired, I spent two years engaging within this virtual space. The initial version of the website functioned as a central location where fans could take selfies while holding up the three-finger salute and any written sign, then uploading it to the site. Fans were further encouraged to spread the word on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr by sharing their pictures with the #MyHungerGames hashtag, as illustrated in Figure 4-2 (Sarnecki, 2015). Sharing and uploading pictures of the salute and the associated hashtag lasted for the duration of the campaign—through the end of 2015.

Figure 4-2. Fan tweet using three-finger salute.
The website header was titled “Odds in Our Favor: Join the Resistance” and underneath resided a two and a half-minute video paralleling the injustices of THG with real world issues. The website functioned as a main gathering place for fan solidarity and finding additional resources for resistance. When the website first launched in November 2013, in conjunction with the release of The Hunger Games: Catching Fire film, the HPA stated on the site [text italicized below for purposes of clarity; bold text as it appeared in the original format]:

**ODDS IN OUR FAVOR: THE RESISTANCE IS CATCHING FIRE**

Economic inequality knows no boundaries — it is pervasive and persistent, and it affects every city, region, and country across the world. The gap between the wealthy and the poor grows wider every day, while the middle class shrinks and more people find themselves short of what they need to get by.

**Who controls the narrative?** The rich and powerful tell us that if we put our heads down and work hard, we can overcome the odds and join the ranks of the victors — the wealthy and privileged few. However, it’s increasingly clear that the game is rigged, and that we have an important role to play: At best, we are the loyal consumers. At worst, we are the ones who slip through the cracks.

**And that’s why we’re taking back the narrative.** The Hunger Games explores numerous themes that are relevant to the imbalances that exist in our world. In Catching Fire, Katniss Everdeen solidifies her role as a symbol for change and sets the resistance in motion. Thus, the release of the Catching Fire film represents a perfect opportunity to establish a dialogue about our own problems and set the wheels in motion for positive change. Instead, Catching Fire is being used as an opportunity to sell makeup and fast-food sandwiches.
And we have a very simple response to that: **Not on our watch.**

This time we’re taking the resistance straight to the Capitol. Using their own marketing website as our platform, we’re assembling an army of Katniss Everdeens and flooding every Capitol advertisement with three-finger salutes, information about economic inequality, and links to resources where followers of the Capitol can learn more about the people of the real-world districts and the worthy goals they’re trying to achieve.

Want to get involved? **Join the resistance** at OddsInOurFavor.org. You’ll be added to our action network and you’ll receive regular calls to action over the next few weeks. Additionally, you’ll be able to join our in-theater action around the release of the Catching Fire film, and you’ll be part of a dynamic movement that grows out of these initial actions. (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2013a)

The language on the site presents a sharp critique of corporate consumerist power and an invitation for THG enthusiasts to join the growing rebellion of fan activists. Resources on the website included a press release by the HPA with more details on the campaign, social media avatars for fans to use on their personal pages (see Figure 4-3), DIY stickers for sharing with friends, and a movie night script where fan activists could take their resistance into the physical spaces of movie theaters and ask movie goers to participate in the HPA’s campaign to combat global economic inequality (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2013b). Fan activists engaged other fans in sharing their stories of oppression. As illustrated in Figure 4-4, one woman held up the three-finger salute with a white board reading, “My clinical anxiety has been untreated for 3 years to save money. #MyHungerGames” (myhungergamesstories, 2015b). Another woman replicated the same position with a message board that read, “I am a rape and abuse survivor.”
#MyHungerGames” (myhungergamesstories, 2015a). These images, along with hundreds of others, were uploaded to a HPA Tumblr blog for fans to share their stories.

Figure 4-3. Social media avatar.

Figure 4-4. Movie night fan shares story.
This initial phase of the campaign created the context and provided the language and resources for fans to share their personal stories of struggle and oppression. But the HPA was also intentional in their efforts to connect fan to resources for activism and to each other for further collaboration. By doing so, the website served as a classroom of sorts, where fans gained access to “curriculum” (ex: scripts, toolkits, worksheets) and taught each other about opportunities to advocate for social change.

**HPA Campaign Phase 2: Educating and Collaborating for Resistance**

When the second wave of the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign launched in November 2014, in conjunction with the release of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* film, the HPA re-launched the www.oddsinourfavor.com website, and capitalized on the power and reach of the #MyHungerGames hashtag. The HPA created additional opportunities to use these and other resources as mechanisms to foster personal storytelling, as well as to offer fans more ways to connect and resist together through education and concrete strategy. The re-launched website read [text italicized below for purposes of clarity; bold text as it appeared in the original format]:

**ODDS IN OUR FAVOR: TAKING BACK THE NARRATIVE**

*Economic inequality knows no boundaries — it is pervasive and persistent, and it affects every city, region, and country across the world. The gap between the wealthy and the poor grows wider every day. The ladder of opportunity is nearly gone. The middle class shrinks and more people find themselves short of what they need to get by. These are our Hunger Games.*
Around the world, people are pushing back and fighting for policies that create a more equitable world. These rebels are sharing stories about economic injustice, prison reform, climate change, health care, and discrimination. They’re fighting racism, organizing labor unions, calling for greater mental health care resources, working for clean energy, and more. They - you - are refusing to be silent. These acts of rebellion, these are our Hunger Games, too.

The Hunger Games is a blockbuster of massive proportions, but we have the chance to use that largeness as a space in which we can fill our own stories. The daily realities, the struggles and the triumphs big and small, that’s what we’re interested in: How does income inequality manifest in all of our lives? What are we doing to rebel against systems of inequality? It’s time to shine a light on those stories. Share your stories, your experience, and see how the catharsis of telling your truth can reach out and affect change. Race, gender, sexual orientation, bodily status, familial origin — all of these are crucial intersections present in the experience of class and economic equality in America, and #MyHungerGames is your chance to share your stories of it all.

The #MyHungerGames hashtag aims to open up the pervasive personal narratives of the daily realities of income inequality in much the same way that the great #YesAllWomen did with the daily realities of misogyny. It’s also an opportunity to highlight the work being done to change that reality. There’s a reason the Hunger Games series has resonated so deeply with audiences, and it’s not just because of the charms of its stars: There is a lot within the narrative of the Hunger Games that reminds us of our own stories, even if it’s dressed up as a dystopian fiction.

Let’s take back the narrative.
**Join the resistance.** The internet is our sphere of power and influence. Let’s use it. Share your Hunger Games stories and tag your posts with #MyHungerGames. Use your three-finger salute as a sign of protest in the face of economic inequality.

*Join District 13.* Rebel against inequality and take action.

*When we shift the narrative, we can shift the culture.* (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2014b)

The re-launched website included a “Take Action” section, offering fan activists concrete strategies, like the opportunity to join District 13 and defy the Capitol (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2014d). In the *THG* narrative, District 13 was the origin of the rebellion movement against the Capitol; hence, the HPA incorporated imagination and role playing into their campaign as a form of adult education. Fans could sign-up to join an “elite team of activists” who help to hack the narrative of *THG* away from corporate interests. The HPA emphasized that no activist or “revolutionary” experience was required. The site also encouraged fans to contact their legislators and demand they raise the minimum wage in their state.

The final section of the 2014 re-launched website included a #MyHungerGames section, where fans could share personal stories and experiences about issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, bodily status, familial origin, and more (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2014a). The HPA encouraged fans to tell their own truths and see how their stories can reach others, as illustrated in Figure 4-5 (C. Zhang, 2014). Resources on the re-launched site included links to other websites for more information and education on various social justice issues, as well as new social media avatars and resistance stickers (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2014c). Additionally, the site offered educational worksheets on helping to “End the Hunger Games” at Walmart and McDonald’s. These worksheets targeted corporate greed and provided fan activists
with information, language, and steps to help advocate for $15/hour wages for workers. Several fan activists shared personal stories of protesting with fast food and services workers, as they advocated to these mega companies to pay a living wage.

Figure 4-5. Fans share their story on Twitter.

This second phase of the campaign took more of an engaged and active approach to offering spaces for learning and resistance. The HPA recognized, as confirmed by Raven (primary participant and HPA Campaigns Director), that many fans are first-time activists, so it was important to offer a low-entry point to activism. They used creative strategies to engage fans in virtual and physical spaces, like creating online scavenger hunts to learn about oppression, or easy activities fans could facilitate at movie theaters. Along the way, the HPA
revealed the importance of making activism relevant to fans and involving their personal experiences in the process of advocating for social change.

**HPA Campaign Phase 3: Encouraging Further Action and Education**

When the third and final wave of the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign launched in November 2015, with the release of *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2* film, the HPA built upon the www.oddsinourfavor.com website, further emphasizing the power of personal storytelling. Again using the #MyHungerGames hashtag, the site offered fans more ways to connect with each other and fuel their passion into action. The “We are the Districts” project, a subset of the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, empowered local HPA chapters to share stories of their individual campaigns and events. Resources included all the tools mentioned in the previous two phases, in addition to offering more educational resources and further encouraging actions of resistance. Again, the HPA served as a facilitator of learning, as they provided fans with tools and step-by-step instructions to act. For example, the website provided the following activity [text italicized below for purposes of clarity]:

*Help others put the Odds in Our Favor when you go to see Mockingjay Pt 2.*

*Here’s some ideas for action:*

- *Hand out tickets to the Hunger Games theme park, inviting others to “experience breathtaking inequality and spine-tingling injustice”. Download the tickets here!*
- *Bring markers and paper or a whiteboard and encourage fellow moviegoers to tell their #MyHungerGames story.*
• Invite people in line and in the theater to have their photo taken doing the 3-finger salute.

Remember, we’re taking back The Hunger Games narrative and helping put the odds in everyone’s favor. Share your #MyHungerGames stories and actions with us on Twitter and at MyHungerGames.org. (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015d)

In addition to activities like the one above, the HPA offered a Tumblr blog for chapters to share their stories, ideas, and resources. They invited the larger THG fan activist base to share stories of resistance, including what worked for chapters and what didn’t, along with lessons learned. The HPA described the “We are the Districts” blog (http://wearethedistricts.tumblr.com/) as “a collection of individual initiative and community action….our three-finger salute, a demonstration of solidarity, and an ever growing collection of ideas, resources, and solutions” (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015c). While first launched in 2013, the collaborative blog became a heavily referenced source during the last two phases of the campaign.

The HPA also offered digital, educative toolkits for chapters to use as a resource for taking action in their physical communities. Social issues suggested by the HPA to focus on, include: a) healthcare access, b) homelessness, housing, and gentrification, c) media access, d) voting access, e) unemployment, f) transportation access, g) literacy and education access, h) unequal pay and gender disparities, i) food insecurity, j) environmental justice, k) undocumented workers and refugees, and l) violence and poverty (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d.-a). Chapters could pick a topic to focus on in their local community. For instance, Ashley describes how the Asheville Chapter focused on the topic of homelessness among local veterans. Her chapter coordinated a fundraiser to purchase provisions for those in need, as well as initiated a discussion within their community about ending homelessness among veterans.
The larger HPA campaign spread internationally as well, with chapters from several continents working toward change. One example was a collaboration of the European HPA Chapters. These groups developed a more specific toolkit focusing on the international refugee crisis. As quoted in the toolkit [text italicized below for purposes of clarity; bold text as it appeared in the original format]:

*In the Hunger Games, the districts of Panem revolt against the Capitol, fighting for an end to President Snow’s totalitarian and violent regime. The gruesome civil war that followed killed thousands of Panem’s citizens, and forced many more to seek refuge in District 13.*

*Sound familiar? That’s because these stories aren’t fictional. They are happening around the world right now.*

*The goal of this toolkit is to help you learn more about the global refugee crisis that is currently going on. By giving you a basic overview of the issue and pointing to resources, we hope to help you gain a better understanding of the issue. And then, after your Tribute Training, comes the most important part: action.*

*We have compiled a list of actions your can do, either by yourself, with friends, or with your chapter, to help refugees and to show that we welcome all Districts.* (European Harry Potter Alliance Chapters, n.d., p. 2)

They hoped to bring awareness and understanding to the global refugee crisis by offering educational resources, information, and discussion prompts to open up a larger dialogue. Ultimately, the chapters sought to inspire people to take action by donating clothing, toys, and learning materials, volunteering with various refugee organizations, educating others, and financially supporting various refugee services.
Concurrently, the HPA launched a separate blog on Tumblr, titled *My Hunger Games Stories* (http://myhungergamesstories.tumblr.com/), a space for additional personal storytelling. Here, the HPA invited people to share their experiences of economic inequality, including all of the various ways this intertwines with other injustices. For example, one fan wrote:

“#MyHungerGames is that I grew up on welfare and food stamps and I still have to have conversations with people who argue that feeding people who can’t feed themselves isn’t worthy of our time and money” (tawdrysquid, 2014). The blog functioned a platform for people all over the world to share their knowledge, as well as various methodologies for resistance. The latter is key, as this blog offered more than just tales of despair, but stories of hope and change. For example, fans fought back against the irony of Subway using *THG* popularity to sell sandwiches (see Figure 4-6) (myhungergamesstories, 2015d).

![Image of a Subway advertisement](image)

*Figure 4-6. Fans fight against consumerist marketing.*
Finally, the HPA used Storify, a social network service, to create a timeline capturing the #MyHungerGames hashtag on major social media platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. The copy on the main page says, “The #MyHungerGames movement tells brave stories of economic inequality and adversity. While big media outlets run with the love triangle and celebrity gossip angle, fans are using the Mockingjay premiere to take back the narrative” (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015e). The site aggregated stories of fans from across the world, using the #MyHungerGames hashtag as a tracking mechanism. Here, people shared personal narratives of how economic inequality and other intersecting injustices affected their lives. For some, like the “Fight for $15” movement, sharing their individual stories of advocating for decent living wages gave fans a sense of control and power to share their voice. In other instances, fans were overcome with emotion at the knowledge that others experience similar struggles. This connection online fostered a sense of shared experience.

By the third phase of the campaign, the HPA recognized this would be the last push to ride on the popularity of THG films. When the last film left theatres, the national attention to THG narrative came to an end. Raven mentioned the HPA’s intent to offer resources for further education and action, once the campaign ended. Thus, this last phase worked to link fans to causes meaningful to them, and to connect fans to each other. The latter effort hoped to create lasing connections for fans to continue collaboration and action toward social justice.

In sum, across the three-year “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, thousands of fans, fan activists, and those seeking to share their personal narratives of oppression and resistance, uploaded selfies, tweets, memes, pictures, posts, blogs stories, videos, artwork, and more. I spent two years sifting through abundant data, jotting down notes in my field journal, taking screen shots of representative posts, capturing quotes, and tracking developing themes. After
studying this material, along with data from the in-depth interviews with women fan activists, I recognized the need for a different type of analytical filter to not only describe developing themes from the data, but to make sense of the shared perceptual frames apparent across multiple virtual and physical spaces. Hence, this study benefits from the application of a fantasy theme analysis to reflect the motives of this passionate and impactful group.

**Findings of the Fantasy Theme Analysis**

Before discussing the themes, it’s important to first provide an overview of the relevancy and applicability of using a *fantasy theme analysis* on the *THG* fandom. This type of analysis originates from a theoretical framework called symbolic convergence theory, first introduced by Ernest Bormann (1985). While typically found in the fields of communications and sociology, fantasy theme analysis offers a relevant and significant tool to uncover and understand how common viewpoints result from a single message. Within fantasy theme analysis, a fantasy is not “unreal” but a shared perspective (Bormann, 1985; Bormann et al., 1997; C. E. Williams, 1987). Fantasies represent shared visualizations among a group, which helps to explain their collective motives. Fantasies often result from stories and dramas, like *THG* narrative. Thus, shared fantasies represent perceptual frames of a group, and explain their past, present, and future thinking about an issue or issues (Bormann, 1985; Bormann et al., 2003, 1997). Simply stated, shared fantasies represent collective “dreams” for the future. They illuminate how groups, like *THG* fandom, appear to have a collective conscious with shared emotions, motives, and meanings. They also explain how individual thinking and daydreaming evolves into socially
shared narratives and fantasies (Bormann, 1985; Bormann et al., 2003, 1997). Thus, the fantasies shared by *THG* fans offers an observable, explainable, and verifiable phenomenon.

The analysis of the primary participant interviews, observation of secondary participants online, and aggregated documents resulted in four main fantasy themes: a) a central legend/myth is key to a shared vision among fans; b) the hero’s journey becomes internalized by fans as they advocate for causes important to them; c) the fight for justice transcends focus on the individual, and moves to a desire for collective change; and d) revolution is a moral, political, and immediate game for fans, with very real consequences for themselves and society. These fantasy themes coalesce into a larger rhetorical vision shared among fan activists, as they work for a more just and equal world. The follow presents detailed discussion on each of the four themes, followed by a discussion of the overarching rhetorical vision shared among fan activists.

**Shared Fantasy #1: The Legend and Myth are Key**

Katniss Everdeen: the volunteer tribute from District 12, the girl on fire, the Mockingjay, the anchorite with PTSD, the broken warrior, the rebel. Pick your description of this complex character. Yet, there’s no denying she is the central narrator and focus of *THG* story. But, is Katniss the hero of the story? When I first explored this question with primary participants in the interview process, their initial reaction was in the affirmative. She appeared as the obvious hero to them upon first reflection, though mostly because they connected with certain aspects of Katniss as a character. Minerva’s experience describes this well. She says:

So I read it and was like, oh my goodness! It just resonated with me. It’s like, this girl was a rebel. But she was an unwilling rebel in the beginning. She did it because she had
no choice with her family situation of being poor and not having enough food and
everything else. That brought back a lot of memories for me of when we were poor.
Similar to Minerva’s experience, Gemma and many of the other primary participants could not
directly identify with Katniss; rather, they connected with her situation or other qualities.
Gemma explains, “I identify with her stubbornness and adventurous, brave spirit and her
leadership skills. And how she just wants to take charge”. Yet, when I probed further, asking
the women what made Katniss the hero, they began describing something different altogether.

Beyond an affinity for her abilities, or empathy toward her situation, the women reflected
on the possibilities of what Katniss, as a symbol, represents. Instead of the essential hero,
Katniss became an icon—a rallying cry for revolution. She transcends imaginary personhood to
become the Mockingjay, both in the fictional narrative and in the discourse of fan activism. She
became a legend and myth. Fans venerate her, not because of her character, but of what she
signifies: standing up to the oppressive Capitol. Fan activists connect with the cause, more than
the character. Speaking about her background in relationship to Katniss and THG, Helen says:

I am highly attuned to abuses of human rights, to the abuse of power by government, to
the abuse of power by police and the military. I am also very, very aware of the power of
a charismatic leader as a catalyst to excite and mobilize the masses in order to overthrow
an oppressive government.

Thus, Katniss symbolizes the iconic representation of the ideal and a catalyst for social change.
She exists as an elevated figure for citizens in the fictional narrative and fan activists in the
physical world to rally around. Gemma reflects on this piecing together of story and reality,
describing how the symbol of Katniss functions in both spaces:
I think they really did need a symbolic person to stand up and point out what they already knew. I think a lot of people felt they shared this common sadness and heartbreak, but they didn’t know where to begin. I think once they saw Katniss was willing to stand up and do the right thing, time and time again, and point out on TV she wasn’t going to play their rules, I think that gave them the inspiration and the symbol they were all waiting for to band together.

Felicity believes Katniss epitomizes standing up for what you believe is right, even if you’re standing alone: “just because no one else is sticking up for a cause doesn’t mean you shouldn’t”.

Thus, it rapidly became apparent the first fantasy theme shared among fan activists spoke to the dream of one day toppling systems of injustice and inequality. Within this fantasy, Katniss functions as a symbol—a catalyst for social change. Gemma explains, “I think it points out that all it takes is one really passionate person to get those fires lit under people”. Fan activists share similar meaning of what Katniss represents, even while their causes may vary. She represents the entire narrative of overcoming oppression and taking down the Capitol, without the need for retelling the story. With one word or one image, Katniss unites fan activists all over the world in a shared meaning.

When a fantasy is so widely shared, it becomes an archetypal fantasy theme, which helps to explain related experiences that occur under different circumstances (Bormann, 1985; C. E. Williams, 1987). This brings understanding and meaning to how the various women fan activists I interviewed and observed, whom never met each other, share the same perspective as other fan activists all over the world. Further, an archetypal fantasy theme explains how fan activists (as film audiences) share the same perspective as citizen audiences in THG fictional world. In essence, these worlds blend together, whereby the mission of each fan activist and group differ,
but they feed into the larger fantasy theme of topping systems of social injustice. Fans work for
causes important to them, not because they “are” Katniss, but because they share the dream of
fighting for equality. Gemma explains, “I think her strength and bravery is something that is
ingpiring”.

Thus Katniss moves beyond the status of a hero and becomes a legend and myth. She
symbolizes the greater moral goal of fan activists. And as with any respectable story, legends
overcome a formidable opponent. In *THG* narrative, the symbol of oppression, social injustice,
and inequality is embodied in the character of President Snow and the idea of the Capitol.
Collectively, they represent the *villains*. Beyond just characters, *settings* also become symbolic,
like the racial and economic divides in *THG* narrative. Averi shares:

> The story taught me the world isn’t fair and you have to do whatever you can to level the
playing field. It told me a lot about equity and social justice. Because you only fight that
hard to keep something, when you know you have something that doesn’t belong to you.
Like, the Capitol should not have had all that wealth. It was wealth that could have easily
been spread to everyone. So if they would have done that, there would have been no
need to kill anyone. There would have been no need to separate people. There would
have been no need for all of this…. Honestly, I think the series taught me a lot why I care
about being an activist, why I’m a Democrat, and why all of these things matter,
regardless of where I am in the structure of privilege.

Interestingly, many of the women I interviewed also challenge those who stand by and allow
oppression occur. Gemma explains, “I mean, there are the obvious enemies they want you to
realize. But even more so would be a lot of people that just stood by and let it happen for so
long”. Regarding the Capitol citizens, she says, “They are so desensitized to the fact that these
are real humans”. In addition to Gemma, Raven and Jack also describe how the Capitol citizens revel in their ignorance and lack empathy towards the rest of Panem.

Further, some fans struggle to identify with Katniss because they align more with the Capitol citizens and those from District 1 and District 2, the wealthier wards in the fictional narrative. Raven explains:

Because we really want to identify with Katniss. But I think we live in a world of The Hunger Games in which a lot of us would fall into the Capitol side of things. Knowing there are problems, but also like, “Look at this makeup line!” and “Oh, look at these cool outfits!” and “Oh, let’s watch reality TV”. I’m not criticizing, because I love all of that stuff too. That’s what makes me part of the Capitol also.

As exemplified in Raven’s sentiments, these women draw parallels to the real world, where people often ignore discrimination happening right before their own eyes. Yet, it is their ignorance that blinds them. Hence, fan activists converge around the ideal of Katniss to bring critical awareness to these issues and change the world for the better. This leads to the second shared fantasy: We’re all champions for this important cause. We all become heroes.

Shared Fantasy #2: We are all Heroes

The three-finger salute. From the iconic Boy Scout pledge, to the new symbol of solidarity and resistance in THG narrative and fandom, holding up just three fingers embodies the power to unite groups around the world. And as part of this larger narrative, fan activists represent unlikely heroes. Jack says, “I think there are a number of people who took those lessons [from THG narrative] to heart. They went about their day trying, in whatever way
possible, to make it better for themselves, for others, and for their community.” These characters in very real stories accomplish remarkable feats in the name of critical pop culture and moral justice. They are not who you might expect, as the women I interviewed exemplify. They are teachers, scientists, photographers, bloggers, nurses, physical therapists, priests, graduate students, marriage and family therapists, moms, daughters, readers, and more. As one fan activist blogger describes: “A story like the hunger games resonates rather powerfully, though it’s because too many people can identify with the heroes of the story—the poor, the oppressed, the people driven to the brink against a corrupt and oppressive system” (Mad Fairy’s Realm, 2015). In this story, the oppressed become the heroes, rising up against their oppressor to free themselves.

Adult educator and activist, Paulo Freire, once contended, “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (Freire, 2013, p. 44). He further contemplated “only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (Freire, 2013, p. 44). Freire understood only the oppressed could restore the humanity of both themselves and the ones who subjugate them. Thus enter the HPA, an organization with a mission to turn fans into heroes, not by “doing” anything to the fans, but by using the power of story to explain conflict and help people learn to become heroes and reach their goals for social change. On their website, the HPA describes a philosophy of using story to move people into action:

We believe in magic. We believe that unironic enthusiasm is a renewable resource. We know fantasy is not only an escape from our world, but an invitation to go deeper into it. We celebrate the power of community—both online and off. We believe that the weapon we have is love. (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d.-c).
The HPA provides tools for learning, reflection, dialogue, and action. Raven notes, “I think there is also a lot of power in being able to envision yourself as a hero and saying all those things you admire in the people you read about”. Yet, I found with primary participants who were not a part of the HPA, they still spoke to the shared fantasy of joining the fight toward a more fair and just world. Fan activists, like Gemma, Lisa, or Helen, share in this perceptive without engaging with the HPA (all were unaware of the organization).

Notably, all the women viewed their role as supporting characters, which they understood as no less important than the myth and legend of Katniss. As it relates to the THG narrative and making a difference in the real world, Jack contemplates:

I think for certain parts of the book and certain parts of the story, there were definitely more heroes than just Katniss. Every time there was any sort of big problem, there was somebody to step up. So I feel like there are probably other people who had a huge role in being a hero and making the story come around like it did, and for it to be kind of a happy ending.

Lisa shared the same ideal, describing her personal evolution into activism and realizing she was a hero in her own right. In her mind, heroes represent any person advancing a cause. She notes:

A leader doesn’t necessarily have to be the face of something. A leader can fulfill a support role. Or leader can lead much more gently and quietly, like Peeta. I like those things. I think leaders who fulfill supporting roles tend to get overlooked.

Through the THG story, fan activists like Lisa discovered the agency to initiate change and recognized their supporting efforts and commitment are vital for large-scale change to occur. As it relates to the THG narrative, the women I interviewed connected to the humanity of the supporting characters and could more easily insert themselves in that role. Averi notes:
I think I would most end up like Finnick or Haymitch. Both of them were burdened with the realization they couldn’t change things, but they had to keep trying to change things. They were brought down by the system a lot. There were lots of times when it would have just been easier to let go of their moral compass and their integrity and just give in. But I think they both realized they couldn’t.

The heroes identified by primary participants, and described throughout the THG fandom, are flawed characters with palpable internal struggles. Interestingly, while the character of Katniss shares these weaknesses, but her elevation to a legend and myth prevents fans activists from connecting with her character in the way they identify with the supporting heroes.

Thus, the second fantasy theme shared among fan activists represents common people, collectively forming a rebellion, as illustrated in a Tweet featured in Figure 4-7 (AFGE, 2014).

Figure 4-7. Talk of rebellion on Twitter.
As compared to the mythic, they are ordinary. Yet together, they achieve extraordinary things. In their collective unity, they signify revolution. The role of the mythic and the heroes work in tandem, whereby the mythic (Katniss) activates change, but the heroes (fan activists) carry out the work. They transform the myth into reality. The mythic needs the rebels, the unsung heroes, to succeed. Lisa further details this thought:

Someone who’s really in the trenches doing stuff, like background things, that’s something I find really important. It’s not something that always gets the right amount of recognition. There’s a lot of people around Katniss who are able to be the face of a movement, and people who are able to rally a crowd. As much as I would like to identify with Katniss in all these flashy ways, I kind of don’t. I used to convince myself I did. That I was this amazing public speaker, who could motivate people. But I just don’t really think that is my skill-set. Sometimes I need to be okay with hanging back and rallying the people around. Or just doing some more caretaking of people who are working towards something or the people who are in the middle of a movement like that. It’s okay to not be the Katniss on stage and screen. It’s okay to be Prim, who’s treating wounds and keeping track of people. Hanging back is ok too. Sometimes I think that is more where my skill-set lies. That is something I remind myself of.

Lisa conveys the importance of fans working behind the scenes. Their supporting function makes them influential and impactful, because they effectuate change under the radar. Their presence becomes known when the movement activates large-scale change. For instance, Ashley describes a time when the HPA used collective fan activist power to influence Warner Bros. to change their Harry-Potter branded chocolate from sources that use child slave labor, to fair trade sources. The HPA website refers to this situation as “marking an unprecedented victory in the
realm of fan activism” (The Harry Potter Alliance, n.d.-b). Supporting fan activists also realized significant reform with the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, as their efforts illuminated to a national stage the effects of economic inequality and other intersecting forms of injustices.

The second theme then becomes an archetypical fantasy, as fans across the globe share the perspective that change happens not because of one person, but from a movement. Felicity describes the importance of this value for fans:

You aren’t doing it alone, so you have others to support you. Doing things alone is scary. Doing things with friends and like-minded individuals is less scary. Also, there is a certain perceived strength in numbers. I think people feel like they will have more impact if they have others helping them. A common mindset is, “I can’t change anything by myself” but when there is a group, even a small group like mine, there’s so much more impact.

Felicity draws attention to the role of the HPA in providing a network of collaboration, where fan activists can seek out one another for support or to band together. They are drawn to the opportunity to make a difference, as part of a larger group. Raven explains the HPA’s philosophy of engaging fans:

We base all of our work around hero’s journey idea. People come as individuals from this call to action of, “Hey, there is a disturbance in the force and something is going on.” You meet your mentors, you build your team, and you go through the whole [training] cycle. But I think, if anything, the HPA is less like Katniss and more like the collective Rebel team: Peeta, Haymitch, Plutarch, etc…. We are very collaborative within our own team. All of our work is looking for who we can partner with, and then reaching out to others. Even though you always identify somewhat with the hero, I think in my own
work and in the HPA’s work we’re more like the collective supporting cast than we are like Katniss.

Raven emphasizes the importance of recognizing the varied skill-sets people bring, and maximizing those for the cause. Felicity reflects, “It’s important to delegate tasks based on skills of the people who are going to carry out those tasks”. Hence, everyone plays a part in fighting oppression and toppling systems of injustice.

Within this shared fantasy theme is where fans forge feelings and emotions about the narrative. They channel their anger, pain, hurt, and energy towards the fictional and real-world Capitol. Emotions from real experiences are understood through the narrative (Bormann, 1985; Bormann et al., 1997; C. E. Williams, 1987). A blog post from the My Hunger Games Stories Tumblr account displays this emotive connection from the story to a personal cause: “In The Hunger Games, parents are forced to stand aside as their children are taken and imprisoned in the arena. For parents of incarcerated children, this story feels all too familiar” (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015b). In the interviews I conducted, when asked if feelings and emotions are an important part of activism, Ashley said:

Oh yeah! I couldn’t see myself being a part of this organization or being as invested if that wasn’t the case. Like, if there is a campaign I don’t really feel much about, then I’m not really going to push to be involved with it. But if it’s something where I’m like, “this is important”—if it strikes a nerve with me, then I recognize this is something important. Averi also describes the emotive connection to stories like THG and why they resonate with people, especially fan activists:

I feel like most stories, or the ones I enjoy most and other people enjoy, are the underdog/hero journey. Coming from a place where you are kept down and then rise up
from it… I think if we like those stories, then we have to allow them to live out in our real life. Because our system right now only has the underdog part. We don’t allow for people to overcome. We have all of these injustices that keep people just as underdogs. I feel like it is unfair of us to enjoy watching these underdogs make it in fiction, and then in real life they stay underdogs.

Yet in fan activism, and in context of a shared fantasy, real-world impact results from what people bring to the stories. This triggers something inside fans and moves these individuals to act collectively. Helen expounds:

I brought [my] whole understanding of human rights and the ability of one charismatic leader, like Nelson Mandela, to galvanize people’s discontent, fear, and anger, and get them to push through that and channel it into activism; to channel it into a movement, including all of the symbols and ways of communication, verbal and nonverbal, that go with it. I brought all of that to *The Hunger Games*.

Helen’s description brings understanding to the success of the HPA to galvanize the experiences and emotions of fans, helping them channel their skills and resources in to action. Outside of more formal organized fan activist movements, it was clear throughout the interviews and observation, the fight for fan activists is both personal and shared among friends and strangers.

**Shared Fantasy #3: Collective Call for Justice**

May the odds be ever in your favor. These eight simple words signify both a question and a rallying cry within the narrative of *THG* and among fan activists worldwide. This phrase also conveys a solemn realization of how close our real world reflects that of Panem in *THG*
narrative. Lizzie explains, “I don’t think anyone celebrates the story as we do with other fandoms. This is because the story makes you realize how close we are to it in real life. In-depth discussions is more what the fandom is about.” For fan activists like Lizzie, the narrative takes on a subjective and personal meaning, but one where they desire to reflect upon it with others and collaborate toward change. Using the HPA’s “Odds in Our Favor” campaign to illustrate, their discourse questions the normalcy of inequality and challenges this as acceptable. In the inaugural issue of W.A.N.D. (Wizard Activist News Dispatch), an activist magazine produced by the HPA to share the latest fan activist news, the organization conveys to readers the criticality of the fight before them, as fans attempt to address the intersectionality of oppression: “The future of Panem is upon us already: 25 million Americans cannot find full time jobs, 22% of children live in poverty, and a black woman earns only 8 cents to a white man’s dollar” (Slack & O’Brien, 2013, p. 18). The magazine also discusses the challenge of identifying the source of our personal experiences with oppression, but that doesn’t make it any less real or important to fight at on a collective level:

The real-world Capitol many not be as easy to pinpoint as the one in The Hunger Games, but that doesn’t make it any less terrible or dangerous. Change may not be easy, but it’s possible if we stand together and fight. Join us as we go forward to fight against inequality wherever we find it. We are the change. We are the resistance. We are the districts. (Slack & O’Brien, 2013, p. 20)

Thus, when fans band together they validate the experiences of one another and find ways to collectively challenge oppressive forces at work. Felicity mentioned early on the importance and power of numbers. So, the resistance becomes a collection of unique opinions, experiences, fears, hopes, ideas, and dreams; but together they become one voice, crying out for change!
Accordingly, the third fantasy theme shared among fan activists conveys an understanding the fight is personal, but together, fans fight to make the world a better place. This shared fantasy legitimizes the individual struggle, raising it an awareness of the collective injustice happening around the world. Averi speaks to the importance of fan activists, particularly those who experience oppression and injustice, to feel a part of a larger movement:

I think it helps people not feel alone, but stay optimistic and stay kind and gentle. Almost everyone who is interested in social justice has a personal reason for being interested in social justice. They have motivation for rebellion and could commit murder and do things to wreak havoc on the world. These stories help them recognize, “That is not what I want. I don’t want revenge. I don’t want them to suffer as I have suffered. I just want to be fair. And if I just want it to be fair, then this is how I get that”.

This is where the three-finger salute and phrases from the narrative build solidarity. In *THG* story, the phrase “May the odds be ever in your favor” was used by the Capitol as a condescending good-luck idiom, as citizens faced the cruelty and trauma of the Games and throughout their daily lives. Yet, fans hijack this phrase, and it becomes representative of their efforts to change the lot of those less fortunate. For example, Figure 4-8 illustrates how one fan blends symbols from the films and American culture to share a provocative message about immigration reform (((Allie Morse)), 2014). In talking about its meaning and purpose, Ashley says, “it’s trying to point out the odds aren’t in anyone’s favor right now, but we want the odds in everyone’s favor”. The notion of shifting the odds to the favor of everyone is shared far beyond the women I interviewed. Over and over again, this message is found its way to various social media posts, memes, videos, etc.
Accordingly, the third theme becomes an archetypical fantasy, as fans activists around the globe recognize the importance of relying upon one another to achieve a greater objective. Felicity notes, “While it doesn’t take a million people to change the world, every person brings something different to the table, and every perspective matters”. Fans recognize each individual brings something special to challenge a larger issue. This offers hope, as many feel overwhelmed with trying to individually tackle systemic issues of inequality and injustice. But
when they know others battle alongside them, this fuels their passion to keep fighting. Minerva shares how fan activists celebrate even the smallest of victories:

Even a small success is a success. And sometimes you have to have those baby steps.

Because baby steps you get to the top of the staircase. Even if you take one step at a time. Someday if you take enough steps you’re going to get to the top of the staircase.

So, whether it’s starting a pre-school for underprivileged kids, like Lisa; or, raising money for homeless veterans in a small community, like Ashley; or, holding a book drive for kids in need, like Minerva; or, educating people on the refugee crisis and asking for help, like Lizzie; these collective efforts make advances toward the larger goal of upending economic inequality and other social injustices. Minerva describes how her actions (albeit seemingly small), and those of other fan activists, having a ripple effect on a larger scale:

I just feel like [The Hunger Games] books helped me realize I’m a rebel. The HPA helped me realize the joy I get from helping others, even though we don’t get to meet them. Somewhere, someone is reading a book, eating a meal, playing with a toy because I helped. Maybe that little girl who gets the stuff will wind up being just like me. You know, growing up to overcome poverty and then pay it forward.

Thus, fans share in a vision of how simple actions will impact the life of another. They hope these efforts will lead to something greater.

When considering the collective understanding of individually experienced oppression, the setting of the fantasy theme becomes key. The context of a story becomes another symbol, discussed in dramatic form through storytelling (Bormann, 1985; C. E. Williams, 1987). The setting becomes a vehicle through which to discuss difficult issues. Jack explains, “I definitely think that is why people like things like [The Hunger Games] so much. I think sometimes it
opens doors to talking about it in the real world”. Within the narrative of *THG* and the shared fantasy, the setting includes racial divides, economic divides, and other social divides like immigration reform and refugee assistance, as well as other systems of privilege and oppression, like a lack of access to mental health resources. Through a war-like setting, Averi draws attention to the way *THG* narrative dealt with mental health and personal trauma:

> I was into how well I thought the books dealt with PTSD and dealt with how people behave from trauma and from secondary trauma; which makes sense because I was working as a family therapist at the time. I’m very interested in how [PTSD and trauma] is often neglected within the real world, as well as fiction. That was one of my favorite elements of *The Hunger Games* actually, was how well they dealt with mental illness and with people’s responses to trauma. It felt very genuine.

Reflecting on the segregated setting of Panem, Jack drew out the concept of “othering” from the way *THG* narrative utilized district separation to segregate citizens, which she sees as relevant to our current reality:

> I think the Districts remind me, very much, of the consequence of “othering” that we have going on in society right now. Where, if you are not like me, and you don’t think like I do, or you don’t agree with me then you are in this other group. I think the Districts were constituted as this “other” group. The reason that worked so well for President Snow was because they were each the “other” to the other districts. Once they united for specific cause, they became a whole. They became a nation and a society. They were parts moving together as one.

Understanding the role of the media to connect people, and overcome this othering, Jack further explains the importance of communication, dialogue, and personal and group reflection:
I think the biggest part of the books was [the Districts] were separated for so long. They didn’t know how to come together. When they eventually did, they did something really great. I think that is something more people need to understand. While we don’t try to, we often “other” people. We forget how other people feel. We forget how we feel uncomfortable when somebody does that to us…. I think we forget other people are just like us and are going to feel the way we feel. We just have to learn how to communicate. In the books, they figured out how to talk with each other and how to communicate. Once they found out what was really important to them all as a whole, then they really succeeded.

Moving beyond individual experiences, and working together to address larger issues, allows fans to overcome social, hierarchical categorization and see the hope for social change. They find great personal fulfillment, even if the change has yet to occur. Thus, the success that Jack, Minerva, Lisa, and the other women fan activists describe, as well as the collaboration and resistance referred to by the HPA, represents the final shared fantasy theme: These are moral and political games with very real consequences.

**Shared Fantasy #4: Real Games with Material Consequences**

The Hunger Games. Within the fictional world of Panem, the Games epitomize a pageant of bread and circuses—an exaggerated representation of the elite manipulating the oppressed masses through control of access to resources and fear of retribution should one resist. Yet, as the story unfolds, the rebels hack the games and use the arena as a platform for initiating rebellion among the Districts, with Katniss as the central raving cry. Moving to the world of the
THG fandom, fan activists transform real world rebellion into a game, with the ultimate challenge of overthrowing oppressive systems of inequality and injustice. Their actions reflect those typically used in almost any game: strategy, competition (i.e., fighting the villain), and working as a team—all while interweaving elements of fun within the hope of winning against President Snow and the Capitol. Gemma explains the sense of control and optimism reflected in THG narrative and through fan activist work:

I enjoy how they took a really bad situation, and eventually, a few of them overcame it and realized they just didn’t have to be pawns. That was a really strong image for me, because it was relatable in the sense of a lot of times as citizens, we feel out of control or not involved in the politics of things going on that affect our futures. Once we realize we are all in this together, and we’re all part of the same team, then we recognize we shouldn’t be fighting among each other. We should be looking at the bigger picture.

Gemma references a critical element of this shared theme—recognition one can choose not to be a pawn in a system of opulent distraction, unequal power, and citizen division. People may not have the ability to immediately break free from the systems that subjugate them, but change begins when they become aware of their oppression. Again referencing the work of Paulo Freire, he believes when “people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality” (Freire, 2013, p. 104). Through THG narrative, fans activists envision the whole of their current reality, as well as the possibility for something better. The story offers a vehicle through which some fans come to this critical consciousness and decide to reframe their own story. Averie also speaks to the attractiveness of fan activism as a low-cost
entry into working toward social change. She says that is because “reading *The Hunger Games* is not the same as me telling you to go look up literature on why it’s wrong to do x, y, z.”

Therefore, the final fantasy theme shared among fan activists represents a collective hacking of the pop culture game—turning the media machine on its head. This retelling of their personal stories through the lens of *THG* narrative becomes a form of cultural acupuncture, as Raven calls it. Fan activism becomes a game, whereby the entry point for participation and collaboration is relatively low, but with the potential for high impact. Ashley describes the consciousness raising campaigns of the HPA:

That’s why the HPA exists. Because sometimes you aren’t as aware of an issue unless you read a story. Or you aren’t aware of an issue, and then you happen to read a book that relates back to it, and you’re like, “Oh my god! These two things can combine in such a weirdly perfect way that I need to do something”.

Ashley believes in the power of using story to draw parallels to real world issues. She sees this as a useful tool to make, what should be obvious, so explicit one cannot help but reflect upon the consequences of its real-world application. She further explains:

It’s one of those things where even if you were living under a rock and missing all of the news stories for the past five years, there’s still this book you read and have an intense connection. Then it’s like, “Oh we need to find a way to stop this, or we need to find a way to make a change. We need something”. Sometimes the parallels are very obvious, like within *The Hunger Games*. Then other times, it has a parallel you don’t even think about. But you still feel connected to the story or the cause and then suddenly there’s a lightbulb moment.
Ashley’s description emphasizes the point of this connection happening with or without organized rebellion, like that of the HPA. Lisa, Gemma, Helen, and Jack found this fictional-to-real world connection without the help of the HPA. They were all inspired to take action, due to the parallels they found in connecting the story to their personal experiences.

Interestingly, the women activists interviewed and fans observed noted the games of resistance is more about the experience, relationships, and connections forged than the end results. Felicity says, “For me it’s more an interesting way to add fun and structure to a volunteer/activism group. I like [these stories], but I like the actual process of volunteering and participating in the campaigns more”. This perspective is likely due to the way in which fan activists make the games of resistance fun, collaborative, creative, and purposeful. Raven notes:

There’s a lot of really powerful elements to [fan activism] that are very motivating to a lot of people. And it’s fun! It’s a lot more fun than thinking about climate change, and the floods are coming, and everything is very dark. Thinking about it instead like, “We’re going to be heroes! And we’re gonna send howlers to the government to tell them to make change on climate, or whatever”. It’s just a different angle of dealing with everything.

Andrew Slack, the founder of the HPA, reflects on why the organization found such success with organizing fans and making real, large-scale change happen in the real world. In an article, he states:

Research on us has demonstrated that most of our members would not be civically engaged if we didn’t make this work so accessible and imaginative. And with such a thriving community, we’ve been able to do what few organizations can: synthesize advocacy, service, and the empowerment of our members. (Slack, 2013, p. 3)
Fan activism becomes a beacon of light in the darkness of oppression, and these individuals are drawn to that hope. They find opportunities to funnel their talents, passions, and resources into forging lasting relationships, both with each other and with causes important to them.

This fourth theme, then, becomes an archetypical fantasy, as a multitude of fans understand their activism holds real consequences, both positive and negative. Yet, working within the fantasy narrative of THG provides a means of escapism and joy. The pleasurable experience of collaborating with others helps to fuel their passion. Felicity reflects, “I think having something like the [HPA] makes the experience of volunteering and activism just seem more fun and engaging”. Raven describes one method the HPA uses to infuse fun and adventure into helping people learn about important and morally heavy issues:

One of the things we did that was kind of cool was held a digital scavenger hunt leading District 13 around to different partner websites. They were looking for a sign from District 13, and it had some sort of keyword like “Rebel” or “Mockingjay” or stuff like that. But it led them to check out all of these different sites. We talked about it in a way, where “you need to go visit all of these different Districts in Panem to learn how the Capitol doesn’t oppressed people in the same way all over the place”. [Oppression] looks different in different communities—which it does in the book also.

This example illuminates the blending of fiction and reality. Just as the rebels hacked the Games for fueling the rebellion in the fictional story, fan activists hack the literary and Hollywood narrative for fueling social activism in the real world, in both virtual and physical spaces.

Another example of this cultural acupuncture approach to raising critical consciousness is found in the street teams the HPA encouraged. Raven describes how these groups of fan activists took
*THG* narrative into the streets of the real world to activate change. The teams were themed, based on a particular campaign. She explains:

For *The Hunger Games*, it was District 13. They were getting messages from the rebels, as to what they should work on this week. We did some training and live-streams, while making everything dark and dim-looking when talking about the mission. These missions become adventures, moral games with real consequences. Lizzie describes why they appeal so much to fans, thus their ability to make a difference:

It is an easier way to get started, to do something good in the world. It’s difficult to go up to an organisation and say, “Hey, I want to volunteer for you”. Fan activism lowers that barrier for [fan activists], you start from what you know and roll into it.

And while these games (i.e., themed campaigns) eventually came to an end when the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign concluded, the fight continues. Fan activists realize the work must continue even when people lose interest in a pop culture franchise. Raven views the HPA campaigns as a platform from which fans launch into a life time of activism. She explains:

We were wrapping up the campaign and it’s a very dark movie, but we have not solved economic inequality. So where do we take it from here? We did a lot to reach out to partners and say to our audience, if these issues have gotten you fired up, here’s how you continue the work. You are the people working on the ground in areas that intersect with matters of economic inequality.

Minerva reflects on her fellow fan activists and the profound change this work has on their lives: “I think being involved in the fandom has helped push a lot of these kids to become more active and more aware of what’s going on in this country”.
Interestingly, the HPA’s mantra, for which its members tout continuously, proudly boasts: “The weapon we have is love”. As it relates to *THG*, Averi believes the story helps people learn to empathize with the oppressed:

I think my first hope of what [people] would learn is empathy. Because that is what I think is spurs activism. We usually don’t behave until we feel like we need to. So I hope they would be reading the story and trying to grapple with, “What would I do if I was Katniss? What would I do if I was in this world? How awful would that be to live in this world? How are others dealing with this? Would I be able to deal with it that way?”. Because once you grapple with having empathy and walk in the shoes of these characters, there’s not really a way you can still be a good person and not care about these social issues.

Interestingly, this call for love, compassion, and care is reflected in the words of the women activists I interviewed who were not involved with the HPA. So, is love the bond which draws many from varied backgrounds to care for their fellow citizens? Paulo Freire argues so. He says, “love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others” (Freire, 2013, p. 89).

During the interviews, a few of the women mentioned the understanding of their close association with Capitol citizens—that by default, they belong in the group of the oppressors. Yet, they recognize their role to connect in solidarity with the oppressed and work to upend the systems that create such divisions. Freire notes:

Discovering himself to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed…. Solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary; it is a radical posture…. true solidarity
with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these “beings for another”. (Freire, 2013, p. 49)

Love becomes the weapon of fan activists, as they battle for, alongside, and as one with the oppressed. But lest not you be fooled, these women fan activists and their male counterparts are not pacifist protestors. They actively fight using non-violent means of resistance and provocation. To them, these games are very real.

**Rhetorical Vision: Community of Learners and Activists**

The four fantasy themes detailed in the previous sub-sections represent the perceptual frames shared among *THG* fan activists, as it relates to their dreams and aspirations for the future. While deriving from fictional pop culture material, these themes help to explain the motives of *THG* fan activists, as they work towards change in the world. As with any story or drama, shared fantasies rarely function as isolated dreams. Instead, they *chain out* (i.e., work in tandem), explaining how audiences get caught up in a larger drama (Bormann, 1985; C. E. Williams, 1987). In *THG* narrative, Katniss as the Mockingjay was critical to the inspiration of rebel forces to challenge their experiences of personal struggle and overturn the Capitol’s system of oppression and District subjugation. The Games literally and ideologically carried real consequences. This same thematic connection exists among fantasies shared by fan activists. They draw in symbols and settings from the narrative to bring perspective and understanding to their reality. Katniss may be a fictional rebel from District 12, but as a legend, she exists as a real icon of revolution. Moreover, while Panem citizens become heroes in the war against the Capitol; fan activists embody material heroes with real stories of exploitation, affecting change
for the larger society. Fan activists understand the games they play are for no one’s
amusement—they play to win the war against oppression.

Within a fantasy theme analysis, the ultimate legitimizer represents the bottom line value,
justifying the decisions and actions of a group and linking the shared fantasies (Bormann, 1985;
C. E. Williams, 1987). For fans of the THG narrative, fighting for justice and equality provides
the driving force, pointing to the hope for a better world. Fans rally around the call for social
change, which legitimizes their decisions and actions. But it is their courage to envision a better
world that knits them together as an effective, mobilizing force. Raven describes the criticality
of this hope in advancing the work of fan activism:

You got to give them hope. Because fear can be a very powerful motivator, but it’s
draining. It doesn’t lend itself to the kind of creative energy that really allows people to
make new solutions. Being afraid can be a very good motivator for drawing in and
everything. But it’s not a great motivator when you’re trying to say, “Let’s make the
world more just and more open and more creative”.

Raven further expounds on the role of pop culture to provide optimism and a fictional
representation of what the real world could look like:

That’s something in pop culture, and in popular stories, which is very important. It’s
something they talk about in The Hunger Games a lot. We have to give people imagery
that makes them hopeful and happy, even in a very dark situation. I think that is probably
one of the biggest things that I draw from. When doing any type of leadership
messaging, or even feedback with people, is not doing messaging in a way that is scary,
but doing messaging in a way that makes you feel hopeful.
Therefore, while *THG* narrative exists within a dark and dystopic setting, the story conveys that even in the bleakest of circumstances goodness prevails and people can change an oppressive system. From a fan activist’s perspective, Minerva shared why stories like *THG* resonate with people and what they potentially learn from these stories:

If you look at all those books, there is almost always one single character in trouble. I think a lot of people aren’t happy with their lives. And when they are reading those books, to take them away from their own misery and see somebody else has more misery than they do, they also see a rebel. Because it’s fantasy. The whole idea is take yourself someplace away from the misery you in your own world. You don’t have to be in your own world.

While the escapism of fantasy books and movies provide a means for people to leave behind the desolation of their current situation, *THG* narrative helps audiences envision their role in changing their current condition. Minerva further explains:

But the interesting thing is almost every single one of those books there is a rebel. And all those books with rebels are planting little seeds in the minds of the people who are reading them, saying rebels are a good thing. It’s good to be a rebel. And if you are a rebel, you can achieve. Because let’s face it, most the most of those books show the rebel succeeds in the end. So it’s giving them the hope they can succeed with their rebellion or with anything they want to accomplish or do.

Therefore, rebels represent a vital component to the fight for justice and equality. Shifts in large systems and social structures simply does not occur without a rebellion to overturn them. This unites fan activists—they are rebels with a common dream.
Through the ultimate legitimizer, the four fantasy themes chain-out to become one rhetorical vision, which befits a composite drama that unifies fans in a shared symbolic reality (Bormann, 1985; Bormann et al., 1997; C. E. Williams, 1987). As described by one fan activist on her Pinterest board:

Parallels in social structure and societal issues between Panem of The Hunger Games Trilogy and the primary world serve as a platform to inspire fan communities to create social change. The intimate fan communities are connected by shared interest in The Hunger Games, and the desire to be a hero/heroine primes these individuals to live out their dreams through social activism by controlling issues such as economic disparities, poverty and exploitation. (Phan, n.d.)

This rhetorical vision transcends THG fictional story and becomes a unique tale, with characters (i.e., fan activists) who give life to the symbolic reality and share in a group consciousness. The unique rhetorical vision of fan activists also elucidates how some audiences of THG take radically different views on a drama. This explains the blissful ignorance of “typical” fans, which the primary participants differentiated themselves from (detailed early on in this chapter).

Yet, THG is not the only story that contributes to the work of fan activism. While my study focused primarily on THG, other narratives help to inform the rhetorical vision of fan activists. Additional dramas mentioned throughout the course of the interviews included: the Harry Potter series (young adult fantasy book and film series), Buffy the Vampire Slayer (fantasy television series), V for Vendetta (dystopian political film), the Divergent series (young adult science fiction book and film series), The Maze Runner (young adult science fiction), Steven Universe (American animated television series), and Supernatural (fantasy horror television series), as well as Disney movies, like Zootopia and Frozen, and other texts from the young adult
genre and children’s literature. Minerva explains how fan activism is informed by and subsequently acts to change the world through multiple stories, beyond just *THG*:

They are not just fans of one particular fandom. Some are. But most people that are nerds read all those books. They are fans of everything. So when a series is over, and you’re hungry for more but, but it isn’t there, you find other things that are like-minded that you can get into and read.

Minerva touches upon an important characteristic of this shared rhetorical vision, the connection of fan activists transcends one narrative. While a particular story perhaps represents the entry point by which fans become activists; they become part of rhetorical community, which appropriates multiple dramas to further their vision for a more just and equal world.

As this chapter concludes, I revisit the questions posed at the opening: Are fan activists simply dreamers? Do pop culture narratives really shape the identity and perspectives of people? Applying a fantasy theme analysis approach to unearthing the answers to these questions elucidates how some individuals with an affinity for pop culture become powerful influences to live out their heroic dreams of a more fair and just world through social activism. The Internet and online platforms connects these fans, offering a vehicle to attach their individual experiences with larger movements. Sometimes these crusades formalize into legitimate activist organizations, like the Harry Potter Alliance. Yet, whether part of a formal movement or simply sharing in the rhetorical vision of the larger community of fan activists, the primary and secondary participants in this study learned about themselves as heroes from *THG* narrative. They developed an activist identity, finding meaning in *THG* story through connecting their personal experiences to a larger story of rebellion.
"I think that every now and again, the right person will stand up and say, ‘Yes, but why? Why are you quietly, in your fear, accepting a system that is blatantly wrong? Look what I can do’. The moment she shows that possibility, they all realize they can do it too”.
- Helen, Study Participant

From real to reel to real again. How do real-life experiences become intertwined with fictional narratives, which then shape what and how we learn about ourselves and the world around us? What is the role of pop culture in creating shared fantasies, and ultimately the rhetorical vision, of women fan activists? Beyond just a platform for discussing difficult subjects, or a vehicle through which fan activists understand their world, *The Hunger Games* (*THG*) narrative takes root in the deep psyche of fan activism, with its words and images contributing to a discourse of revolution. At the heart of this study, I sought to examine what women fans informally learn about activism from *THG* series, including how this popular culture pedagogy shapes their identity in online and offline spaces, as they advance social justice causes important to them. The findings presented in this chapter, a continuation of the dialogue started in Chapter Four, elucidate the criticality of language and power of discourse to influence the shared fantasies of fan activists, including how they identify with and as part of the revolution that began in the *THG* fictional narrative and continues in the real world.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section provides a summary of *THG* narrative. I offer a synopsis of each film, including key developments in the overarching plot line. The second section opens with an overview of the relevancy and applicability of using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) for this study, in order to further unpack the rhetorical vision of fan activists and the role of language and discourse in that process. I then move on to a more
detailed discussion on the findings of the CDA conducted on THG films and THG fandom, the latter using data from interviewing primary participants, observing secondary participants, and reviewing digital documents and artifacts.

**Film Series Summary**

This section provides a synopsis of each of the four films in THG series, which provide context and setting for the CDA. By way of background, the cinematic version of THG franchise consists of four films based on a trilogy of novels written by Suzanne Collins, who also assisted with writing the film screen plays. This science fiction, dystopian adventure series follows protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, and a coalition of rebels as they challenge an oppressive government and overthrow an exploitative economic system. The setting takes place in futuristic Panem, a country created from the ruins of North America after a devastating civil war.

**Film #1 Synopsis: The Hunger Games**

The first film in the series, The Hunger Games (Jacobson, Kilik, & Ross, 2012), takes place in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic society. Each year, the Capitol of the nation of Panem (ruins of North America) forces each of its twelve Districts to send a male and female tribute, between the ages of 12 to 18, into a televised battle to the death, called the Hunger Games (“the Games”). The Games are an extravagantly organized and televised production of the Capitol, reminiscent of a reality TV program. A team of Gamemakers run the show, from set design for the arena, to running the tribute training program, to controlling the video and broadcast of the
Games. The head Gamemaker functions as the Director and Executive Producer, holding the power to potentially influence the outcome of the Games.

From District 12, Katniss Everdeen volunteers to compete, in order to save her younger sister, Primrose (“Prim”). As a sign of support and camaraderie, District 12 citizens give Katniss a three-finger salute during the choosing ceremony after she volunteers. Katniss, along with her male counterpart, Peeta Mellark, venture to the Capitol for intensive training, along with the tributes from the other Districts. During their preparation, Peeta reveals his long-held adoration for Katniss, providing the foundation for a budding love relationship, for which the Capitol later exploits. They both witness the strengths of the other tributes, particularly from District 1 and District 2 ("the Careers"), who train for the Games all their lives. Katniss’ stylist from the Capitol, Cinna, attaches a Mockingjay pin to her outfit for the Games, as a reminder of her sister and of her home in District 12.

Once in the arena, Katniss must rely upon her intellect and instincts to survive. During the Games, she becomes an ally and friend to Rue, a young black tribute from District 11. They create a special whistle/song to communicate. In the process of ambushing the Careers’ supplies, Rue is killed, prompting immense grief from Katniss. She places flowers around Rue’s body, in honor and love for her friend. Katniss then gives the three-finger salute to the camera, a communication of respect to District 11 for the loss of their young tribute. This prompts rioting from District 11 citizens, provoking concern by Cornelius Snow, President of the Capitol, of a larger rebellion across Panem. Haymitch, previous District 12 victor and mentor to Katniss and Peeta, convinces the head Gamemaker to play on the love story and allow two victors if both are from the same District. After the rules change is announced, Katniss searches for Peeta, whom she finds with a severe leg injury. Katniss then battles the Careers for medicine, which heals
Peeta and causes him to fall further in love with her. As the Games come to a close, the Gamemaker unleashes vicious creatures to destroy the remaining tributes. Katniss, Peeta, and one Career survive. After an intense fight, only Katniss and Peeta remain. The Gamemaker changes the rules once more, stating only one victor can win. In an act of defiance, Katniss and Peeta both attempt to consume poisonous night lock berries, before the Gamemaker stops them. Katniss and Peeta, together, win the 74th Annual Hunger Games. Following the Games, Haymitch warns Katniss of the gravity of their defiant actions. The film closes with Katniss and Peeta returning to District 12, trying to forget all that happened in the Games.

Film #2 Synopsis: *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*

The second film in the series, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Jacobson, Kilik, & Lawrence, 2013), begins with Katniss and Peeta preparing to embark on a mandatory Victory Tour, commissioned by the Capitol to celebrate their triumph in the arena and extend the televised festivities. Before leaving, President Snow visits Katniss, warning of a building rebelling in the Districts. He instructs Katniss to convince the people her actions in the Games were out of love for Peeta and not in defiance to the Capitol, or else he will kill her family and destroy her District. Throughout their voyage, Katniss and Peeta witness the rebellion growing. Haymitch warns Katniss and Peeta they must continue their love story, despite the unrest, in order to distract the people and protect them from a bloody civil war. Katniss suggests an engagement with Peeta. After returning home, President Snow orders Peacekeepers to suppress the spark of rebellion in the Districts. Katniss’ close friend, Gale, is publicly whipped for resisting. Katniss, Peeta, and Haymitch intervene, further infuriating President Snow. He
announces the 75th Annual Hunger Games, also called the Third Quarter Quell, which will feature tributes from the existing pool of victors. At the choosing ceremony, Katniss and Haymitch are selected, but Peeta volunteers as the male tribute. During their training in the Capitol, Haymitch reveals the victors are angry and suggests Katniss and Peeta make allies with some. During the interview ceremony, just before the Quarter Quell begins, President Snow forces Katniss to wear a wedding dress, which Cinna tweaks to transform Katniss into a Mockingjay when she spins.

In the Games, Katniss and Peeta becomes allies with Finnick and Mags, victors from District 4. As they trudge through the arena, Peeta runs into a force field, which almost kills him. Finnick performs CPR and revives Peeta, proving his commitment to being allies. After facing a poisonous fog (during which time Mags dies) and pack of vicious mandrills; Katniss, Peeta, and Finnick meet up with Wiress and Beetee from District 3 and Johanna from District 7. They discover the arena functions like a clock, with a new threat every hour. Shortly thereafter, Wiress is killed by the Careers. Beetee then formulates a plan to electrocute the remaining tributes, by running a coil from the beach to a tree, where lighting strikes at noon and midnight. The group splits up, with Peeta, Finnick, and Beetee staying at the tree, and Katniss and Johanna running the wire to the beach. Along the way, Katniss and Johanna are ambushed. Johanna hits Katniss over the head and cuts the tracker (i.e., tracking device in the arena) out of Katniss’ arm. Johanna then draws away the attackers. A confused Katniss makes her way back to the tree, only to find Beetee paralyzed and unconscious. Finnick returns and convinces Katniss that he is not the enemy. Katniss grabs the end of the coil, wrapping it around an arrow, before shooting it at the arena sky as the lighting strikes. This causes a massive power failure, taking down the arena force field and the Capitol’s surveillance. Katniss is rescued by a hovercraft, where she
awakens to find the head Gamemaker (Plutarch), Haymitch, Finnick, and an unconscious Beetee on the plane. Plutarch tells Katniss she was their mission from the beginning—to rescue her as the Mockingjay for the rebellion. Katniss finds out the Capitol has Peeta, along with the other remaining victors, and President Snow destroyed District 12 in retaliation for her resistance.

Film #3 Synopsis: The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1

The third film in the series, The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1 (Jacobson, Kilik, & Lawrence, 2014), opens with Katniss recovering after she was rescued from the Quarter Quell games. She is reunited with her mother, Prim, and Gale in District 13, an underground rebel force leading the rebellion against the Capitol. There Katniss meets President Alma Coin, who informs Katniss that her actions sparked rebellion across the Districts. Katniss reluctantly agrees to become the Mockingjay, as a symbol for the rebellion, in exchange for President Coin’s commitment to rescuing Peeta and the other captured victors. Plutarch, Haymitch, Effie (Capitol escort and close friend to Katniss), and a film team attempt to shoot a propaganda video. They quickly realize Katniss performs best in authentic situations and not when scripted. Katniss, Gale, and her film team travel to District 8 to visit a rebel hospital, which is subsequently destroyed by Capitol bombers. Katniss and Gale shoot down the bombers, after which she gives a rousing speech that is captured on film. Plutarch transforms these events into a stirring propaganda video, which is shown through the Districts and the Capitol. Moved by the video, District 7 rebels, killing an entire team of Peacekeepers while declaring the same line Katniss used in the propaganda film.
Yet, the Capitol attempts to counter the rebellion with propaganda videos of their own, featuring a visibly weakening Peeta. Katniss and Gale return to District 12 to shoot a video of the destruction. There, the film team captures Katniss singing “The Hanging Tree”, which becomes the anthem of the rebellion. District 5 rebels sing it as they attack and disable the hydroelectric dam, the Capitol’s primary source of electricity. That evening, the Capitol broadcasts an interview with Peeta, during which he shouts a warning of an attack on District 13. President Coin orders a mass evacuation and District 13 survives the attack. They emerge to find thousands of white roses, a trademark flower of President Snow, littering the ground as a warning to Katniss that he will kill Peeta. President Coin then authorizes a special team to rescue Peeta and the other imprisoned victors. Despite President Snow taunting Katniss that he is aware of the mission, the rescue is successful, indicating the Capitol reduced security on purpose. When Katniss attempts to greet Peeta in the hospital, he tries to strangle her. Boggs, the head of District 13 security, stops Peeta. Katniss awakens to learn the Capitol invoked torture methods to “hijack” Peeta’s brain and turn him into a weapon to kill her. Medical personnel work to reverse the hijack, while President Coin announces plans to capture the Capitol’s military stronghold in District 2.

**Film #4 Synopsis: The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2**

The final film in the series, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 2* (Jacobson, Kilik, & Lawrence, 2015), continues with the civil war between the Districts and the Capitol. The movie opens with Katniss recovering from injuries inflicted by Peeta’s attack. Deeply troubled by his condition and a desire to kill President Snow, Katniss requests to leave and fight in the ongoing
civil war. President Coin declines, stating Katniss is too valuable to the resistance. Instead, she is sent to District 2 with her film team to influence the District to join the rebellion. During the process, a Capitol loyalist shoots Katniss, but a bullet-proof vest saves her. After recovering, Katniss sneaks onto a cargo plane destined to bring supplies to the front-lines of the rebellion, outside the Capitol. Unable to bring her back, President Coin instead sends a team to join Katniss, including Boggs, Gale, Finnick, her film team, and other soldiers. They follow behind the actual invasion and function as the televised face of the revolution. Boggs uses a holographic map to help the team navigate through the Capitol, which previous Gamemakers besieged with booby-traps. Finnick refers to this as the 76th Annual Hunger Games.

Shortly after arriving in the Capitol, Present Coin then sends a still unstable Peeta to join Katniss and her team. Boggs believes this an attempt to ultimately kill Katniss. While moving deeper in to the Capitol, Boggs is fatally wounded by a land mine. He transfers the holographic map to Katniss and instructs her to complete what she came to do. After navigating through another triggered pod of lethal black tar, the group hides out in an abandoned building until Peacekeepers arrive. Narrowly escaping, the building is destroyed and the Capitol broadcasts the announcement of their death. President Coin follows with her own broadcast, calling upon the rebellion to fight harder in memory of Katniss. Knowing the team could now move undetected as they are all presumed dead, they travel through the underground sewer system of the city. While the team avoids pods, their movement is captured on security cameras and President Snow unleashes creatures (“mutts”) to attack. Several members of the team are killed, including Finnick. The dwindling team surfaces and takes refuge in a clothing shop, owned by a former Hunger Games stylist and supporter of the rebellion. Katniss and Gale decide they will venture on their own to kill President Snow. As the rebels advance, President Snow invites all remaining
Capitol residents to his mansion for protection. There Peacekeepers take the children and create a human shield around the perimeter. A hovercraft with Capitol markings drops what appears to be care packages. These explode, killing hundreds of people, including children and Prim, who was part of a medical team delivering aid to the injured. Katniss is injured in the bombings.

While recovering, Katniss learns the rebels defeated the Capitol and captured President Snow. When she confronts Snow, he explains the hovercraft was in fact deployed from President Coin as a means to crush any remaining support. Katniss realizes this plan resembles one Gale previously schemed, which later he does not deny. Coin declares herself interim President of Panem, with no immediate intent to hold a free election. She requests Katniss to execute Snow in a final ceremony. At the execution, Katniss instead kills President Coin. As she is taken into custody, the crowd beats Snow to death. While awaiting her fate, Haymitch reads a letter from Plutarch who indicates the unfolding events were exactly as he hoped. Katniss destroyed the real enemy—unbridled power. Katniss is later pardoned and returns to District 12 to live out her remaining years. Peeta, having recovered from his condition, joins both Katniss and Haymitch. The film ends with Katniss and Peeta, years later, playing with their two children and reflecting on the trauma of the Games and the hope for a brighter future.

Summary of Critical Discourse Analysis

When considering the role of this pop culture narrative on the learning experiences and identity construction of women fans, I recognized the need for another analytical filter to draw out the relevant language used in the fictional story and in the shared fantasies among fan activists. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) functions as an effective tool to examine visual
and written texts; thereby bringing meaning to how women’s realities are constructed through media, as well as to observe these cultural influences on their subjective experiences (Frost & Elishaoff, 2014). CDA focuses on the way people and entities use language, both written and imagery (Richardson, 2007), particularly as it relates to social struggles and addressing imbalances of power between groups. Through CDA, I examine the language of the THG films and THG fandom to ascertain their embedded social values, judgements, and beliefs (Richardson, 2007). This approach shows how power and knowledge are inextricably linked through language (Frost & Elishaoff, 2014). By deconstructing the inherent meaning behind visual and spoken language, I then expose ideological values embedded within the discourse, exposing the political dimensions of THG text and THG fandom (van Dijk, 1991). Further, by analyzing visual representations as discursive practices, I also extrapolate potential meanings as they are a part of a wider social discourse (Frost & Elishaoff, 2014; Richardson, 2007). Therefore, using CDA as a tool of analysis for this study allows me to closely examine THG films, including how fan activists appropriate language from the texts to build a discourse of resistance. I can then examine the political and ideological underpinnings of fan activism for its implications on adult learning and social change.

Analysis of THG films and THG fandom resulted in identification of four key CDA themes, as they relate to the fantasy themes described in Chapter Four: a) both the films and fan activists transform the person/character of Katniss into a legend and myth; b) the films create a shared currency consisting of symbol, salute, and song, which fans exchange in support of one another; c) both District citizens and women fan activists personalize the risk and reward of rebellion; and d) within the reel and real spaces, activists hack THG narrative and use media to create a hunger for justice among the larger population.
In the following sections, I detail each CDA theme, deconstructing the inherent meaning within the language of the films and fandom to expose the ideological values rooted within the discourse of revolution, and analyze the potential meanings as they are part of a wider social discourse. I unveil how *THG* narrative both reflects and challenges social values produced from dominant ideologies, and show how women fan activists construct knowledge through the fictional story and their related social justice efforts. Each theme begins with a discussion on the findings from the CDA conducted on the film narrative (the “reel”), then turns to dialogue on how the discourse of the films permeate fan activism (the “real”).

**CDA Theme #1: Creating a Legend and Myth**

The first CDA theme focuses on transforming a person into a symbol, and then from a symbol to a legend and myth. As the findings in this chapter reveal, one does not arbitrarily become a legend and myth. They are created through an intentional venerating process. Like any hagiography (i.e., writing the story of an idealized subject), even a fictional one like Katniss Everdeen from *THG*, there is a process of stripping the person or character of their flaws and elevating their virtues to that of sainthood. I argue in this section, both Panem citizens in the fictional story and women fans in the real world venerate Katniss through a similar process. In doing so, they learn about themselves as rebels and activists as they fight for justice and equality. Interestingly, when I interviewed Helen (primary participant), she spoke of this idolizing practice with Katniss. She noted how legends like Nelson Mandela, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, Joan of Arc, and Mother Teresa all represent historical characters mythologized through a practice of rewriting their history, where you’ve “taken out all of the bad bits, so they are heroes”. So, how
does a fictional character, like Katniss Everdeen, evolve from a poor girl in District 12, to a symbol of hope for the Districts, to a legend and myth shared among women fan activists in the real world? I first examine the evolution of Katniss in the films, primarily focusing on the text and documents from online observation. I then move to a discussion her valorization among *THG* fan activists, which includes discussion by primary participants interviewed and observations of secondary participants.

**Reel: The Transformation of Katniss**

Audiences initially experience Katniss Everdeen as a teenager living in the impoverished area of District 12. The daughter of a coal miner, Katniss loses her father to a mining accident at a very young age. Due to her mother’s deep depression and lack of access to mental health services, she cannot take care of her family and Katniss becomes the sole provider. Within the world of Panem, each time parents request additional provisions for their family, they must enter the names of their children into the tribute drawing. So, as they need more food, the chances of their children being selected for the Games increases. Instead of succumbing to this control, Katniss illegally hunts in the neighboring woods to gather food for her family. Thus, from the beginning, Katniss represents rebellion against oppression, albeit within the limitations of her human abilities and understanding.

**The Girl Becomes a Symbol**

The first instance the narrative compares Katniss to a symbol comes prior to the selection ceremony (the “reaping”). She purchases a Mockingjay pin at the local black market from an
elderly woman who looks at Katniss with sadness. Even here, she remains a mortal young lady with little hope for a bright future. Katniss returns home to give Prim the Mockingjay pin, saying, “as long as you have it, nothing bad will happen to you” (Jacobson et al., 2012). When Katniss volunteers as tribute at the reaping, Prim gives back the pin for protection. Through this series of exchanges, the Mockingjay becomes a symbol of protection over the one who wears it. Yet, the Mockingjay symbol remains independent of Katniss until later in the story. At this point, Katniss remains a vulnerable girl who was plucked from the masses at the public reaping out of desperate attempt to save her sister.

Only when Katniss volunteers to become tribute does she gain the respect of her District. To Panem, she represents an object of sacrifice. The first instance she is valorized occurs when District 12 citizens extend to her the three-finger salute at the reaping. They did not tender this honor to Peeta, thereby demonstrating the elevated place she held in their perspective because of her sacrifice. Katniss further loses her humanity and becomes an object of fascination when she is forcibly stripped of her familial relationships, as the Capitol cuts off all communication between tributes and their friends and families. The only connections enabled are those formed through the Games. In essence, the Capitol objectifies tributes as players, with TV hosts referring to them as a “crop of recruits” (Jacobson et al., 2012). The lives of the tributes hold no value, other than to serve as entertainment for Capitol citizens and instill fear in the Districts. Tributes only gain favor with audiences by killing each other and winning the Games.

The narrative illustrates tribute objectification through two key scenes in the first movie: the tribute parade and the tribute rating for odds of winning. In the former, the tributes participate in an elaborate procession before Capitol citizens. Their names and histories hold little significance, other than the Districts they represent. Capitol stylists dress the tributes in
costumes, creating a spectacle for visual consumption by audiences. Cinna, the stylist for 
Katniss and Peeta, desires to help them stand out. He dresses the two in costumes that catch fire, 
enrapturing the attention of the Capitol. Caesar Flickerman, the TV host of the Games, declares 
“the importance of this moment cannot be overstated” (Jacobson et al., 2012). Through the 

costume and televised spectacle, Katniss assumes an otherworldly quality as the “Girl on Fire”, a 
title attributed only to her, even though Peeta wore a similar flaming costume. In the skills 
assessment scene, tributes are rated from 1-12 based on their skills and ability to win the games. 
Katniss is given an 11 by the head Gamemaker, attributing to her both power and prominent 
status among the other tributes, even elevated above the Careers.

From this point onward, Katniss is referred to as the “Girl on Fire”. Cinna further 
reinforces this symbolism during a televised interview, conducted prior to the Games, by 
donning Katniss in a red dress that catches fire when she spins. Yet, not until her actions in the 
Games, particularly her protection and grief over the death of Rue, does Katniss reach heroic 
status and become known as the Mockingjay. After winning the Games, she wears the 
Mockingjay pin to the crowning ceremony, further reinforcing her representation of the symbol. 
While Katniss initially wears the pin for protection, District citizens attribute her defiant actions 
in the Games to the symbol of the Mockingjay. Thus, Katniss herself becomes a symbol of 
protection and resistance. In fact, President Snow affirms this notion when he confronts her in 
the second film. Referring to the Districts, he says:

In several of them, people viewed your little trick with the berries as an act of defiance, 
not an act of love. If the girl from District 12, of all places, can defy the Capitol and walk 
away unharmed, what is to prevent them from doing the same? What is to prevent, say,
an uprising that can lead to revolution? And then in a fraction of time, the whole system collapses. (Jacobson et al., 2013)

Here, President Snow speaks of the Mockingjay as a symbol independent of Katniss as a person. At this moment, he attributes power to the idea of the Mockingjay, as representative of the oppressed rising up against their oppressor.

Soon, the Mockingjay becomes synonymous with the face of Katniss and her actions against the Capitol, but not because of her personhood. While discussing the need to destroy Katniss, President Snow and Plutarch, the head Gamemaker of the Third Quarter Quell, watch footage of the Districts rioting, with protestors holding handmade signs bearing the Mockingjay symbol. Snow says, “She has become a beacon of hope for the rebellion. And she must be eliminated” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Plutarch retorts, “We need to destroy the symbol and the people will do the rest” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Thus, the person of Katniss evolves into the symbol of the Mockingjay and the idea of revolution. She embodies the representation of challenging oppressive ideology, toppling repressive government, and restoring power to the people. As the Mockingjay symbol, Katniss represents deep meaning and purpose for the Districts and for fan activists—she becomes both a legend and a myth.

**The Hero Becomes a Legend**

Referring to Katniss as a legend, this type of lore typically originates from a partially true story, passed on from person to person. The story holds important meaning and often includes heroic characters and fantastical settings, based in some element of truth. During the process of sharing the story, people attribute personal meaning and symbolism to the narrative. The story
and its characters take on a mythical quality. So is the case of Katniss Everdeen. While *THG* story resides in a fictional world, her story resembles an historical one. The Districts romanticize her actions as larger than life. This becomes ever so true in the third film, when President Coin uses Katniss to influence the Districts into rebellion. The head Gamemaker turned rebel, Plutarch, exclaims: “That anger-driven defiance. That’s what we want. And we can redirect it…. She’s the lightening rod and they will follow her. She is the face of the revolution” (Jacobson et al., 2014). The magnetic quality of Katniss became mythical.

As a person, many view Katniss with annoyance or exasperation, but as the Mockingjay, she’s revered. This is true within the film and the fandom. In the story, when visiting wounded rebels at a hospital in District 8, Katniss balks at how she (a human) might help them. Cressida, the director of her film team says, “Just let them see your face” (Jacobson et al., 2014). As Katniss walks through the hospital, the rebels immediately recognize her and ask, “You here to fight with us?” for which she responds, “I am. I will.” and they give her the three-finger salute (Jacobson et al., 2014). The rebels know nothing of the life Katniss has in District 12, nor of her personal values and intentions. Nonetheless, they elevate her as the iconic representation of their hopes, dreams, and aspirations to overthrow the Capitol. When antagonized by President Snow in the third film, Katniss decries her intent to subvert him, claiming: “I never asked for this. I never asked to be in the Games. I never asked to be the Mockingjay. I just wanted to save my sister and keep Peeta alive” (Jacobson et al., 2014). Yet, none of this matters. The rebels cling to their Mockingjay, as they attribute to her their hope of toppling systems of injustice.

By the fourth film, Katniss is no longer just a girl from the seam or an expendable tribute. She personifies a legend—one with a relatable past, yet conveys an epic story of triumph. When Katniss escapes to the front lines of battle in the final film, on a personal mission to kill Snow,
President Coin remarks, “She can’t come back now. She’s mythic. Whatever she’s doing, we conceived it. It was our plan all along” (Jacobson et al., 2015). Thus, Coin seeks not to control the person, but the Mockingjay symbol. Panem’s civil war, while a physical one, also becomes a battle of ideologies, with Katniss at the center. This notion is best exemplified after President Snow and President Coin both believe Katniss died while fighting in the Capitol. Snow speaks first via broadcast to all of Panem:

Katniss Everdeen—a poor, unstable girl with nothing but a small talent with a bow and arrow—is dead. Not a thinker. Not a leader. Simply a face, plucked from the masses. Was she valuable? She was extremely valuable to your rebellion, because you have no vision. No true leader among you. (Jacobson et al., 2015)

Snow attempts to play on the weaknesses of the girl, the human being with flaws and fears. He tries to humanize the legend back to a vulnerable and defeated person. Coin immediately responds with her own broadcast:

A brave young woman. A face picked from the masses, he called her. As if a leader, a true leader, could be anything else. I had the privilege of knowing a small town girl from the seam in District 12, who survived the Hunger Games and the Quarter Quell, and rose up and turned a nation of slaves into an army. Dead or alive, Katniss Everdeen will remain the face of this revolution. She will not have died for nothing. Her vision and ours will be realized. A free Panem with self-determination for all. And in her memory, we will all find the strength to rid Panem of its oppressors. (Jacobson et al., 2015)

Notice the two accounts of the same series of events. Coin removes the flaws of Katniss, elevating her personhood and story, and venerating her image to that of sainthood. Boggs, the military leader of District 13 and close friend to Katniss, later reflects on Coin’s speech, noting
only the demise of Katniss could add more fuel to the rebellion. Yet, Katniss continually defies death, further adding to her mythic qualities. The legend of the Girl on Fire becomes the myth of the Phoenix, rising up from the ashes—literally as she is from a coal miners town, and metaphorically as she the flaming Mockingjay—to overtake the oppressive Capitol and destroy the wicked President Snow.

The Symbol Becomes a Myth

Referring to the Mockingjay as myth, this type of lore builds on the tradition of a legend and holds deep, symbolic meaning. Rather than based on real events, it typically conveys a truth or value of a culture. While sometimes rooted in historical events, like the fictional life and journey of Katniss Everdeen, these accounts have been transformed by symbolic meaning. Myths hold the power to shape our understanding of the world. The construction of the Mockingjay myth is no different. It represents symbolic storytelling to convey the important values of banding together under a common vision to upend oppression. Based on the legend of Katniss, the Mockingjay was transformed from a simple pin to a compelling myth with the ability to shape the perspective of the Districts and influence widespread rebellion. And as I will show in the next section, the Mockingjay myth crosses from the reel to the real. But first, a look how the Mockingjay myth was shaped in the films.

During the Victory Tour in the second film, Katniss and Peeta visit each of the twelve Districts to pay homage to the fallen tributes. When speaking to District 11, the home of her friend and fallen tribute, Rue, Katniss becomes overwhelmed again with grief. She shares her broken heart of losing Rue. An elderly District 11 citizen whistles the Mockingjay song and
gives Katniss the three-finger salute. The Peacekeepers immediately arrest and execute the man. In the scene following, a distraught Katniss begs Haymitch to help her get through the tour. He quickly rebukes her, stating she holds a larger responsibility. He asks, “What about them? Who protects them?” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Hence, the film attributes the duty of protecting District citizens to the Mockingjay. Clearly Katniss, as a person, cannot protect the people; but the myth of the Mockingjay possesses the ideological power to protect the people.

Moreover, several times in the film series, the personhood of Katniss is engineered into a mythical being. In the first film, it happens via her costume for the parade and interview dress, both turning into fire. The second film also features her tribute parade costume catching fire. These scenes build toward the symbol of Katniss as the Girl on Fire. Then a pivotal moment occurs in the second film, during the pre-Games interview, televised across Panem. President Snow forces Katniss to wear a wedding dress in an attempt to trivialize her impact and detract from the rebellion by emphasizing the love story between her and Peeta. Without anyone knowing, Cinna rigs the dress to catch fire and disintegrate into a bird-like costume, literally transforming Katniss into the likeness of the Mockingjay. This scene reflects the first time Katniss transmogrifies into a symbol for the people. At this moment, Katniss becomes synonymous with the Mockingjay.

Yet, the myth holds ideological power beyond the legend. When referencing the brewing rebellion, President Snow asks Plutarch, “The idea of her? The idea of the Mockingjay?” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Here the film clearly alludes to the supremacy of an idea over a person. Moreover, the second film offers an allegory to convey the power of a myth. When Katniss shoots an arrow at the arena sky, she blows out the force field. Snow questions what happened, and a voice in the background is heard saying, “Sir, we’ve lost power” (Jacobson et al., 2013).
Not only did the arena lose physical power, but Snow lost control over the Mockingjay and the power of the Games. The second film closes with the Mockingjay symbol transforming into something like the Phoenix—the flaming Mockingjay rising from the ashes to take back control.

From this point onward, when addressed in context of the revolution, people most often refer to Katniss as the Mockingjay. When she is rescued from the Quarter Quell and first introduced to President Coin of District 13, Plutarch declares, “There she is, the Girl on Fire. Madam President, may I present you with the Mockingjay” (Jacobson et al., 2014). He bestows the honor to the Mockingjay symbol, which Katniss happens to embody. Plutarch further conveys the importance of the myth in advancing the revolution. He beseeches Katniss to help, stating, “We need to show the Mockingjay is alive and well. And willing to stand up and join this fight” (Jacobson et al., 2014). Through propaganda videos, he says, Katniss will “stoke the fire of this rebellion. The fire the Mockingjay started” (Jacobson et al., 2014). The film also illustrates how those in power attempt to suppress symbols to crush resistance. In a broadcast to Panem, President Snow warns the people about the danger of resistance. He says:

Each District supplies the Capitol, like blood to a heart. In return, the Capitol provides order and security. To refuse work, is to put the entire system in danger. The Capitol is the beating heart of Panem. Nothing can survive without the heart. The criminals who kneel before you use symbols for the purpose of sedition, which is why all images of the Mockingjay are now forbidden. Possessing them will be considered treason, punishable by death. Justice shall be served swiftly. Order shall be restored. For those who ignore history, be prepared to pay the ultimate price. (Jacobson et al., 2014)

This declaration reads strangely familiar to the real-world Thai resistance in 2014, when the military-imposed government banned the use of the three-finger salute and pulled *THG* films
from the theaters, claiming symbols from the narrative provoked protest (Mydans, 2014). Myths need not hold historical facts to take root in the psyche of a social movement.

The Myth and Legend Become One

For the majority of the series, Katniss as legend and the Mockingjay as myth function as mutually exclusive characters advancing the narrative. That is until the final segment of the fourth movie, when Coin addresses the crowd at the execution of Snow. She declares:

Today the greatest friend to the revolution will fire the shot to end all wars. May her arrow signify the end of tyranny and the beginning of a new era. Mockingjay, may your aim be as true as your heart is pure. (Jacobson et al., 2015)

Katniss proceeds to fire her arrow, killing Coin and ending totalitarianism in Panem. At this moment, the legend and myth permanently adjoin into a singular symbol—not just for the fictional story, but as a valuable representation for fan activists in the real world. In the following sub-section, I turn to real stories of women fan activists and examine their discourse on the value of symbol, legend, and myth in advancing real world change.

Real: Writing the Hagiography of Katniss

_THG_ film series functions as a hagiography (i.e., biography of a saint or venerated person), writing the story of Katniss as the Mockingjay. Through the fictional narrative, the Districts venerate Katniss, which fans continue with their activist efforts. While recognizing the story exists purely within a fictional setting, fan activists attribute real world meaning and values to the story, settings, and characters through their language—both written and visual. As
discussed in Chapter Four, fan activists share in the fantasy of Katniss as their symbol, legend, and myth of fighting for justice and equality.

**Protecting an Icon of Revolution**

The primary participants interviewed in my study relate to certain human qualities of Katniss, but elevate her to a legend in their advocacy work. They desire to preserve the idea of Katniss as the Mockingjay myth. Helen says:

> Once you’ve shown that you can change something, other people then follow. There’s got to be that avant-garde in military terms. The groundbreaker. Somebody who goes ahead and says, “Well, look what I can do”. And then the others follow.

Helen describes Katniss as the example to the Districts and fan activists of forging new paths to resistance. Katniss symbolizes a character fans learn from and emulate. Katniss also conveys the understanding of what happens when a woman fights for what she believes in: others will follow. Minerva echoes this sentiment, referring to Katniss as a reluctant rebel and symbol:

> All of those people who helped her be a rebel, when she didn’t want to be, they were like, “Listen, you are the face of this. People look up to you. So you have to get out there, whether you like it or not. You’re a rebel and everybody thinks you’re our queen. You’re the queen of the rebels. So you have to get out there and help them”.

Fan activists understand the power of symbol—of a person, or character, to embody the values of a movement. While Katniss, as a person, initially resisted designation as the Mockingjay; the rebels preserved her as their icon of revolution. And fan activists, as real world rebels, also preserve Katniss as a symbol for advancing moral justice in an unjust world.
Learning to Reject Media Influence

Fans also learn from the THG narrative to reject what mainstream media uses to undermine the legend and myth. Fan activists reject distraction from the greater fight for justice and equality. For example, much like the Districts rejected the love story concocted and exaggerated by the Capitol, THG fan activists reject the mainstream media’s focus on the love triangle in the film series and the Hollywood glamour. One fan wrote on the My Hunger Games Stories Tumblr blog, “The focus was always supposed to be how the government was treating the people, but society took it and did exactly what Panem’s media did: turned it into a drama about love” (outspokenyouth, 2015). Several women I interviewed held disdain for how much of the media attention focused on the love triangle between, Katniss, Peeta, and Gale. Gemma said, “I don’t like the whole love triangle thing. I think it’s just feeding into the age of the audience who was going to see the movies….I just felt like it drew away from her strength as an individual”. Lisa held similar thoughts, saying:

I feel like no one is going to blame a teenage girl for being a little confused in love. But if she could just say, I love both of these people and we’ll just figure it out when we get there. Or just pick one. Or focus on what she was doing and say neither. Rather than this back and forth of, “I'm thinking about Gale, while I’m in the cave with Peeta”. It’s just back and forth and back and forth. It was a lot to me. I think it distracted from her focus. I think she would have gotten more respect if she had cut the drama on that one.

Both Gemma and Lisa, along with other women fan activists, attribute blame to mainstream culture for this diversion. The confusion within Katniss of her feelings toward Peeta and Gale does occur within the narrative, therefore one could also attribute blame to the author of the books and screenwriter for the films, Suzanne Collins, for even including the love triangle in the
story. However, fan activists recognize the tendency for marketers of major corporations and entertainment reporters to manufacture hype around superficial matters, like obsessing over a love story in *THG*, which was an ancillary sub-plot. If anything, this occurrence in the real world, reflects the efforts of the media in the reel world of Panem. Throughout the entire series, the love triangle and beauty of Katniss became a distraction from the message of revolution in the narrative. In the films, President Snow attempted to use the relationship between Katniss and Peeta to nullify her rebellion against the Capitol and its oppression of the Districts. If Panem could see her as a love-sick girl fighting for her soul mate, then she wasn’t a rebel.

Moving from reel to real, the entertainment media across the Hollywood spectrum played upon the love triangle and physical attraction of the actors in the films. They attempted to lure audiences into the drama of the love story. But just as the Districts saw through President Snow’s attempt, so too do fan activists see through the distraction. They call attention to the real message in the story. For example, in a video produced by the HPA and used as part of the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, the women narrator states, “Enough with the distractions, the Hunger Games are real….Does the Hunger Games have hot guys in it? Big f***ing deal. It also has something else: Us! People who want justice” (Bernstein, 2013). Thus, both the fictional rebels and fan activists critique the trivialization of Katniss as a love object. She is a symbol for justice, and they challenge how the media co-opts this icon for exploitation and commercialization.
Navigating Conflicting Cultural Ideologies

Interestingly, during the interview with Lisa, she calls attention to the way *THG* narrative reinforced the importance of beauty:

The men were marketed as strong and all of the women were marketed as beautiful. I think they did find beauty in strength, but it was always in the context of physical and commercial beauty. I think that’s a reflection of our society, where it is okay to be a strong woman. It is good to be a strong woman, so as long as you’re not too muscular. It’s this impossible balance…. So if you’re too strong, then you’re too manly and not beautiful enough. And if you are not strong enough, then you’re too feminine, and feminine as a negative. I saw a lot of that in the book and in the movie.

Lisa notes the way popular culture wrestles through complex and conflicting issues in society. One could see the paradox present within the writing of the narrative. Where on one hand, beauty would not save a tribute from the Games, yet it became an important aspect to gaining value in the eyes of a sponsor. In the same way, Lisa’s explanation reveals the tension between beauty and strength for women in the real world. Beauty can be used as a weapon for influence and a prison to gendered expectations. This both reinforces and challenges oppressive ideologies of women in Western culture. Yet in some ways, the transformation of Katniss into a symbol satisfies this friction. A symbol, much more than a person, may transcend these gender prescriptions and normalcies. But the important aspect to highlight here is that most fan activists hold the myth and its symbolic meaning in esteem, rather than the physical appearance of Katniss or other characters. While *THG* does encompass some other problematic issues within its narrative, fan activists work to overcome these barriers in their efforts. Raven explains this challenge in the work she does with the HPA:
Raven highlights the intentional efforts of fan activists to draw out important lessons from pop culture stories, even those texts that might seem quite problematic at first glance. In essence, fan activists often function as critical media literacy educators, albeit informally.

**Protecting their Dreams and Aspirations**

The literal and metaphorical transformation of Katniss (i.e., person and/or character) into a symbol holds great significance for fan activists. The symbol can shed the stigmas and stereotypes associated to people and genders. Helen explains:

Because Joan of Arc, Katniss, and Wonder Woman all show us the possibility of change. They depict for us a visual image, a symbol, of metaphoric change. We project our longings for change on to those people and on to those characters. So, we venerate Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. Those people have become mythical. They’ve gone beyond being people. Nelson Mandela had several wives. He got divorced twice and married a third time. Martin Luther King was apparently unfaithful. We don’t
remember that stuff. We remember them as heroes on pedestals. They become mythical. We need the mythic. So we reach for literary heroes to symbolize our aspirations.

Katniss as legend and the Mockingjay as myth—collectively the symbol of fighting for justice and equality—allow fan activists to project upon their dreams and aspirations, without attaching themselves to a flawed and politicized person. Not that Katniss and the Mockingjay escape politics. In fact, their very existence offers a political statement. But humans are flawed beings, and fan activists recognize this verity. Thus, the fictional character of Katniss offers both humanity and symbolism. They draw upon her qualities, like rebellion, determination, and sense of justice; while also revering the idea of revolution encapsulated in the Mockingjay symbol.

Helen shares her perspective on this intriguing relationship between people and symbols:

> Everybody, even in South Africa, thinks it was Nelson Mandela who headed the ANC and led the movement. In fact, there were a whole handful of them. About 10 different people from all colors and races and backgrounds. A lot of them lawyers. But nobody remembers them. They remember Nelson Mandela, because human beings need a figurehead. It is what we do. Bernie Sanders became a figurehead for a whole group of people who are working to change a system—a socioeconomic and political economic system that is unjust….People need to hang on to a person….We need to follow somebody we can idolize, put on a pedestal, and say, “We are behind that person. We are going to follow that person”.

Thus, the fictional nature of Katniss provides a figurehead for fan activists to follow and learn from, without getting trapped into the dogma of political parties or the larger political system. They venerate the values she represents and they project their aspirations upon her as a symbol,
rather than the person or character. Personhood is political, but a legend and myth may detach from political baggage. Thus, shared symbolism is critical in the fan activist sphere, in order to create a common discourse among fan activists, as well as to raise the critical consciousness of the larger public.

**CDA Theme #2: Creating a Shared Currency**

The second CDA theme focuses on creating a shared currency among fan activists. When a group adopts a medium for exchange, this system represents the common place method by which members of the group recognize stored value in a particular item and exchange something of value for it. In the world of fan activists, their primary currency includes the Mockingjay symbol, the three-finger salute, Rue’s whistle, and the sentiment “May the odds be ever in your favor”, along with a few other phrases from the *THG* films. The stored value in these mediums offer solidarity, resistance, and hope. Fans exchange this currency to support and encourage one another, express opposition to oppression, and share their optimism for a better future. I argue in this section, the fictional rebels in *THG* story initially create the shared currency, which fan activists then exchange in their efforts to advance real social change. I begin with a look at the reel and focus on how the films create a visual and audible currency. I then look to the real to understand the role of this currency in supporting a global rallying cry, as well as how it traverses geographic boundaries and language barriers to connect fan activists from all over the world.
Reel: Building Value in Symbols

When the \textit{THG} narrative begins, the films make explicit the Capitol’s attempt to segregate the Districts through physical boundaries and suppressing communication. In the first film, we see District 12 surrounded by a high-voltage wire fence. Notably, the fence isn’t electrified, as Katniss moves through it several times to hunt in the forest contiguous to District 12. This alludes to the notion of the Districts self-policing. They stay within their boundaries, no longer by force but through self-discipline and fear. Furthermore, the totalitarian government in Panem controls the media and the messages broadcast to the people. Beetee, the victor from District 3, highlights this fact in the third film saying, “The Capitol has always suppressed communication between the Districts” (Jacobson et al., 2014). This suppression of contact between the Districts provides a ripe setting for revolution once they connect. In fact, one of most effective weapons used in the civil war inflicts no physical harm, but uses propaganda videos with intentional language, symbols, and song to link the Districts and transform Panem. Throughout the last two films, Beetee hijacks the Capitol’s communication system to broadcast these propaganda videos. The rebels use language to establish a shared discourse and build solidarity among the Districts. Through language, they change the meaning of symbols to create a shared currency. The Capitol attempts to devalue and eliminate the currency, but to no avail.

Building value into this shared currency happens over the span of the four films. For example, the Mockingjay pin shifts meaning as Katniss fights in the Games and the Quarter Quell. In the first film, it began as a symbol of protection (detailed in the previous section), and then became a sign of defiance when Katniss and Peeta endeavored to eat poisonous berries in boldness against the Capitol’s one victor rule. Later, protestors use the Mockingjay symbol on handmade flags and paint it on walls, demonstrating their commitment to the rebellion. Finally,
the symbol was used by President Coin and the rebellion as a common currency under which the revolution operated. Thus, throughout the films, the Mockingjay served as the visual representation of the resistance. And while the Mockingjay symbol was used prolifically throughout the films by the rebels, it’s the three-finger salute that functions as the primary symbol of revolution in fan activism.

*Creating Solidarity: Three-Finger Salute*

The three-finger salute follows a similar pattern of evolution over the course of the films (compared to the Mockingjay). It first resides solely within District 12 as their unique gesture. This salute remained bounded within the District, until the moment Katniss volunteered for her sister as tribute. During the televised reaping, audiences witnessed as District 12 citizens give the salute to Katniss. They learned this gesture meant support and oneness. However, not until the Games, when Katniss become allies and friends with Rue, does the gesture transcend geographic boundaries. When Rue is killed, the people witnessed for the first time a tribute grieving the loss of another. As Katniss mourned the death of her friend, she sought to honor the young life by making a memorial of flowers around her body. When Katniss gives the salute to the cameras, she hijacks the Games to communicate to District 11 her grief, respect, and unity with their loss. At this moment, the gesture becomes a shared currency for an emotive connection among people who never before thought of each other as comrades in the larger Games of the Capitol. Although a simple, televised exchange between Katniss and District 11 citizens, the remaining Districts share in the understanding and personal connection to the salute.
This meaning further solidifies and deepens during the Victory Tour, when Katniss and Peeta visit each District to honor the fallen tributes. Peeta speaks gently to the people of District 11, saying, “Our lives aren’t just measured in years, they are measured in the lives we touch around us” (Jacobson et al., 2013). He then announces both Katniss and himself will donate one month of their winnings to the families of the fallen tributes, for as long as they live. Katniss follows, reflecting on her relationship with Rue, “She wasn’t just my ally, she was my friend” (Jacobson et al., 2013). An elderly man then whistles the tune Katniss shared with Rue and gives her the three-finger salute, with the remaining citizens following his lead. Within this scene, District 11 appropriates the gesture as their own, showing solidarity with Katniss and honoring her actions in the Games. Peacekeepers immediately arrest and execute the man; yet through the exchange, the symbol gained added value that could not be removed. Perhaps not intentional, but District 11 citizens hijack the broadcast of the Victory Tour, and for a moment, changed its purpose from the Capitol’s intent. Instead of parading victors in front of the families and citizens of lost tributes, this exchange between Katniss, Peeta, and District 11 citizens showed a resistance to such abuse and created a connection beyond its entertainment value. As the Victory Tour continues, more Districts participate in the exchange of the salute with Katniss and Peeta. Thus, the Mockingjay and the three-finger salute become symbols of the rebellion. These symbols represent inclusivity and collective resistance. Rather than segregated Districts, citizens unite through a shared currency.
Uniting Behind Symbol: Fighting the Odds

Additionally, Katniss as the Mockingjay becomes the “defender of the hopeless” by the fourth film, giving people the courage to challenge the Capitol. She changes the significance of the popular phrase, “May the odds be ever in your favor”. It shifts meaning over the unfolding storyline and adds to the shared currency. Effie, the Capitol escort for District 12, expresses this sentiment at the reaping in the first film. Following a propaganda video produced by the Capitol, she energetically gives this sentiment as a “good luck” charm to pool of children from which tributes are chosen. Yet, over the course of the films, the rebellion appropriates the phrase to mock the Capitol and challenge President Snow. They declare its falsity, demonstrating to Snow they will no longer accept their lot as oppressed citizens—abused, beaten, misused, and exploited for the benefit and amusement of the Capitol and its wealthy citizens. Through their activist efforts, they attempt to raise awareness and educate about the severe inequalities that debunk this statement. Thus, both the rebels and fan activists call for their countries to band together and fight so the odds are in everyone’s favor.

Channeling Empathy and Emotion: The Power of Song

Yet, one last important piece of currency remains: song. In the opening scene of the first film, Prim awakens, screaming from a nightmare. Katniss soothes her through a lullaby. Seemingly harmless and sweet, it becomes apparent the importance of song in the revolution. In the first Games, Katniss uses a whistle tone, and Rue a hum, to communicate. This melody becomes part of the Mockingjay call. When rebels give homage to Katniss or to each other, the whistle is often used in conjunction with the three-finger salute. Additionally, in the third film,
Katniss sings a woeful song called “The Hanging Tree”. She bellows, “Are you, are you coming to the tree?... No stranger would it be, if we met at midnight in the hanging tree” (Jacobson et al., 2014). Her media team captures this on film and uses it in one of the propaganda videos encouraging the Districts to rebel. While *THG* books go into greater detail on the origin and meaning of the song, the films celebrate its effectiveness as the anthem of the rebellion. In the literary version, Katniss explains she learned the song from her father. Initially, she thought the words denoted an eerie, almost creepy, meaning. But after living under the tyranny of President Snow, experiencing the oppression of the Capitol, and surviving two times in the arena, the song takes on a new meaning for her. She contemplates why the man referenced in the song might sing such words. Katniss says in the book, “maybe he thought the place he was leaving her was really worse than death” (Collins, 2010, p. 126). In essence, death was better than life in the context of the song. The films also suggest this meaning, as District citizens risk death for the rebellion. They recognize unless something changes, living in Panem was worse than risking death for liberation. So many gave their lives for freedom. In one particular scene of the third film, District 5 rebels sing the Hanging Tree anthem as they embark on a suicide mission to destroy the hydroelectric dam, which supplies power to the Capitol. By destroying the dam, this gives rebel forces a strategic and military advantage. Thus, song becomes an emotive currency, linking District citizens to a greater call. This emotional connection moves them into action.

*Symbolizing a Rallying Cry*

Returning to the opening of this section, currency becomes effective when it holds an exchange value among members of a group. In some instances, the commodity with stored value
takes the form of precious metals (i.e., coins); while at others times, the commodity becomes valuable due to a shared meaning attributed to the item. For example, the value of the Mockingjay icon is an ideological exchange passed between the rebellion and the Districts. In the first film, Cinna says to Katniss, “I’m not allowed to bet, but if I could, I’d bet on you” (Jacobson et al., 2012). He repeats this proclamation in the second and third films, referring to the value of the Mockingjay. The symbol holds great value, and he attributes his commitment to it. In the final film, when Katniss requests to join the front lines, Coin refuses, saying, “We’ll need you for the ceremony. You’re very valuable to us” (Jacobson et al., 2015). The value of the Mockingjay, the three-finger salute, Rue’s whistle, Katniss’ song, and other sentiments reside in the shared currency of these commodities. They contain within them not just an association to human life (i.e., people died in the process of building their value), but also the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of an oppressed people fighting to liberate themselves from their oppressors. They exchange this currency not for individual gain or for wealth accumulation, but to aid in the reformation of their country. These symbols become the focus and rallying cry for a people rising from the ashes victorious, just like the phoenix.

**Real: The Exchange Value of Solidarity**

Returning to the real, the question then becomes: What is the role of symbol in helping fan activists generate solidarity behind a movement? We only need to look to back 50-60 years to understand the importance of symbols (both visual and song) in the discourse of social movements and campaigns. Examples of such symbols include the peace sign of the anti-war movement, the black panther of the Black Panther Party, the song “We Shall Overcome” of the
civil rights movement, the feminist symbol of women’s rights; or more recently, the red ribbon of AIDS awareness, pink ribbon for breast cancer awareness, or the rainbow for LGBTQ rights. These symbols signify their causes, and thus, play an important role in the discourse of the associated movement. Symbols serve as rhetorical functions of campaigns to explain and inform, raise awareness, and sanction action; and they function as a part of the persuasive process to imbed the ideology of the campaign or movement (Goodnow, 2006). Furthermore, many of these symbols remain seemingly ageless and continue their relevancy, as they are adopted by many various social causes (Solano, 2008)

_Offering a Common Language_

Within the world of fan activism, symbols function much the same way as those from previous social movements. While in the fictional world of Panem, where the citizens speak the same language, fan activists span the globe. Cultures, values, governments, and ideas all vary. Yet, the shared currency created in the _THG_ films helps to transcend language and cultural barriers in the real world. Ashley explains a fan perspective on the three-finger salute, the most prevalent of the symbols in fan activism: “It’s a show of solidarity…. It’s about showing, we are on your side. We are for a peaceful protest. We are for backing you up, however we can. It’s just an interesting way to show solidarity”. Helen conveys a similar perspective, saying, “It is an image that is immediately recognizable as having meaning. So, Katniss’ salute has become that in the same way as the mask in _V for Vendetta_ has become an immediately recognizable symbol”. From fast food workers in America to pro-democracy activists in Thailand, the three-finger salute offers a personal connection to larger collective movement. An article published by
the Huffington Post includes an image of three Thai women fans giving the three-finger salute, as they protest the military coup of their government (see Figure 5-1) (Sifton, 2014). Other news channels widely distributed the image, including both mainstream media and through viral sharing on social media platforms. The women fan activists in the photo convey their opposition to the military coup of their country by placing a red “x” over their mouths, signifying an attempt by the government to mute their voices. Yet their protest expresses a powerful critique of a totalitarian government through the symbolism of the three-finger salute. This image transcends language and cultural barriers for consumers who share an understanding of what the three-finger salute represents within the context of THG narrative.

Figure 5-1. Thai women fans and pro-democracy protestors.

**Fulfilling a Marketing Function**

Within today’s world, symbols also function as logos in marketing and awareness campaigns for fan activism. For example, the HPA used an illustration of the three-finger salute
as their icon for the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign. They took to Twitter and other social media platforms using the logo, with text overlaid saying, “Tell Your Story” with the #MyHungerGames hashtag (O’Neil, 2014). The logo functioned as an identifier to the campaign, but more so to the cause of fans working to change the world. However, other fans created logos tying THG story to advocacy for social change. The Internet is full of examples of fan creations, which are transferred to websites, blogs, stickers, t-shirts, memes, and more.

For example, the HPA also used the three-finger salute in connection to current events with the Black Lives Matter movement. They created a series of four memes, each with the title, “THE HUNGER GAMES: NOW PLAYING IN A TOWN NEAR YOU”. The memes feature images from District 11 riots in the THG films and parallel them to similar photos of protests in Ferguson, MO. In Figure 5-2, this meme features a film still of rebels holding up the three-finger salute and mirrored it next to a photo of Ferguson protestors using the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture, along with a side-by-side of protestors in the streets (The Harry Potter Alliance [thehpalliance], 2015a). In Figure 5-3, the meme highlights the violence expended upon protestors by police (The Harry Potter Alliance [thehpalliance], 2015b). In Figure 5-4, the meme draws attention to the increased militarization of police (The Harry Potter Alliance [thehpalliance], 2015c), as does Figure 5-5 (The Harry Potter Alliance [thehpalliance], 2015d).
Figure 5-2. Panem rebellion compared to Ferguson, MO protests.

Figure 5-3. Panem rebellion compared to Ferguson, MO protests.
Figure 5-4. Panem rebellion compared to Ferguson, MO protests.

Figure 5-5. Panem rebellion compared to Ferguson, MO protests.
All of these memes, along with so many others, were widely shared on numerous social media platforms, particularly during the height of the Ferguson, MO protests. These memes—not just their creation, but also how widely they were shared—supports Ashley’s assertion that fan activism wouldn’t exist without social media. She says:

Social media is the best tool for fan activism. Because even if you are not raising money, if you were sharing statistics, and then someone else shares the statistics and posts on your page, and people like your page and can share it, then it can go viral. Then this sticks in people’s minds…. So I think social media and stories going viral has made fan activism what it is today. Because I don’t think we would even have fan activism as a term or as an actual thing without social media.

Here, Ashley conveys the inextricable link between fan activism and social media. I argue that a shared currency is the third element required for such success. For sharing material online does not equate to understanding. Speaking a “common language” is key to this connection, and the shared currency fulfills this role.

Paying it Forward

As mentioned previously, the three-finger salute represents the symbol most shared and used by fan activists. It offers flexibility in two key ways. First, unlike the Mockingjay symbol, fans can use their bodies and nothing else. Fan activists may exchange this currency with each other, at any moment and in any context. Second, the three-finger salute also offers solidarity with numerous movements against oppression. Fan activists use it to show support for increased minimum wages in the service sector, gaining access to affordable mental health services,
advocating for environmental justice, highlighting the struggle of student debt, fighting for economic inequality, calling for immigration reform, and more. It also offers a way, for those who do not identify with an oppressed group, to show support and connection to those in a subjugated position. Rather than appropriating a cause, or feigning empathy for a situation never experienced, this symbol affords someone the ability to show universal love and understanding. However, all the symbols work together in this shared currency and offer various meanings depending how fan activists use them.

Raven spoke to this in her interview, saying she personally identified more with the Capitol citizens in THG narrative, then she did with the impoverished District citizens. She notes, “We really want to identify with Katniss. But I think we live in a world of The Hunger Games, in which a lot of us would fall into the Capitol side of things”. Yet, Raven’s privileged position does not negate her passion and determination to fight for justice and equality. She uses the shared currency of THG symbols to connect with those who may feel similar to her situation, or come from completely different backgrounds. A meme on the My Hunger Games Stories Tumblr page reinforces this notion, as illustrated in Figure 5-6. It features an artist rendering of the three-finger salute with text overlaid, saying, “You have to fight, even if you are not personally hungry” (ejetzer, 2015). The caption underneath the image reads, “Everyone’s got a story. Everyone’s got a reason to fight” (ejetzer, 2015). Fans learn they can use the currency to support causes like fighting for minimum wage increase, ending homelessness, raising awareness and support for the Syrian refugee crisis, sharing resources for mental health needs, advocating for LGBTQ rights, and other social justice causes important to them. The causes vary, but the support and solidarity provide a common foundation.
Everyone’s got a story. Everyone’s got a reason to fight.

Lionsgate is building a theme park, but we’re building a movement. Find out what you can do to take a stand against economic inequality and oppression at MyHungerGames.org.

NOV. 6 2015 VIA EJETZER
#MYHUNGERGAMES #HUNGER GAMES THEME PARK #TAKE ACTION #SOCIAL JUSTICE #EJETZER
10 NOTES

Figure 5-6. Artist rendering of the three-finger salute.
Using the Power of Words

As previously mentioned, while the three-finger salute represents the symbol most often used by fan activists, the Mockingjay, Rue’s whistle, and various phrases also play an important role. For instance, in the third film, the film team captures Katniss on video saying “If we burn, you burn with us!” (Jacobson et al., 2014); which is later repeated by rebels in District 7. In the film, Katniss warns President Snow and the Capitol that whatever punishment is inflicted upon the Districts will be done to them. The oppressor will eventually feel the consequences of such tyranny. The people will fight back. A similar scenario played out in Ferguson, MO. While protestors took to the streets in demonstration against police brutality, an anonymous protestor spray-painted this same quote on a wall in the city center: “If we burn, you burn with us” (Wiedeman, 2014). This is illustrated in Figure 5-7 (Marie, 2014). Here, activists leveraged the power of words and the meaning of language from THG series, built within the films, to convey a very real and compelling message to the authorities in Ferguson.

Another example is the appropriation of the Hanging Tree song by fans activists. Just as the rebels in the films adopted the song for their revolution anthem, so too many fans activists espoused the song for their protest. As illustrated in Figure 5-8, a group of fan activists in Denver, CO appropriated the “Hanging Tree” song featured in THG third film and used it as they protested the death of Eric Garner, a black man whose death was attributed to a police officer placing him in a chokehold (Ajah, 2014). Thus, the shared currency connects the legend of Katniss and the myth of the Mockingjay—the ultimate legitimizer detailed in Chapter Four—to the fan efforts of real world rebellion against inequality and injustice.
Figure 5-7. Ferguson, MO protests feature phrase from *The Hunger Games* series.

Figure 5-8. Fans use “Hanging Tree” song in Denver, CO shopping mall protest
Fostering Unity and Support

This shared currency also uses common understanding and peer influence to foster a sense of unity and support. Similar to the Districts realizing the power of collective unity and rebellion, so too fan activists recognize the importance of building solidarity behind movements. They play on this concept in drawing attention to causes and asking for help. For example, the HPA partnered with Walmart protestors to fight for three key things: a) raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour, b) access to consistent, full-time work, and c) shifting the corporate policies of Walmart with how employees are treated. The HPA created a Walmart Info Sheet and asked fans to help end the “Hunger Games” at Walmart by participating alongside workers in protests (note: the HPA launched a similar and concurrent campaign targeting McDonald’s, and partnered with McDonald workers as well). The Walmart info sheet says:

We have joined forces with Walmart employees nationally to let you know that Walmart needs to relinquish its culture of corporate greed, one that is clearly aligned with the Capitol of The Hunger Games. Walmart corporate culture and coercion practices contribute to a Hunger Games culture: a society that devalues the basic humanity of its citizens and quells any whisper of rebellion. We see Walmart associates—our family, friends, and neighbors—work so hard for such low pay, and then, when they speak out, Walmart managers illegally attempt to silence and intimidate them. This is not some fictional dystopia—this is reality. We stand with Walmart employees as they risk their jobs fighting for better working conditions and better pay. (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2014e)
Protestors used symbolism from *THG* narrative in these efforts. An illustration of such is shown in a photograph of Walmart workers, standing together and holding up the three-finger salute (see Figure 5-9). The text overlay reads:

THE CAPITOL SAYS WE DON’T EXIST. HERE WE ARE. JOIN US BLACK FRIDAY…. I WONDER IF THE GAMEMAKERS ARE BLOCKING OUT OUR CONVERSATION, BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH THE INFORMATION SEEMS HARMLESS, THEY DON’T WANT PEOPLE IN DIFFERENT DISTRICTS TO KNOW ABOUT ONE ANOTHER. (FORRESPECTSOCIAL, 2014)

![Image of Walmart workers protesting Black Friday](image)

Figure 5-9. Walmart workers protest Black Friday.

These protestors called upon the larger community to protest Walmart on Black Friday in support of workers receiving a fair wage and treatment. Fan activists widely shared the image on social media, which major news outlets then picked up and further distributed. Fan activists flipped the meaning of the narrative to capture the attention of a larger audience. The wit and
irreverence of the message challenges expectations and understanding of traditional protest. Here, the call to action probes readers to consider if massive corporations suppress the voices of workers to prohibit widespread support. Protestors use language from THG films to call attention to this fact. The Walmart workers, many of them women, give the salute to the camera, as though they gesture for other Districts to join them.

**Functioning as a Call to Action**

Finally, this shared currency also functions as a call-to-action—the rallying cry for fan activists all over the world to assemble behind. Helen offers an evocative description of the three-finger salute in relation to a parallel gesture from her homeland in South Africa, as they relate to fan activism. She says:

It is the equivalent of the South African phase from the Struggle, “Viva!” Viva meant not only, “May it grow in strength. May it continue. May it prevail”. But it also meant, “I stand with you in resistance. I am in support. We are fighting together”. It has this whole big set of connotations attached to it that is captured by Katniss standing with her three fingers in the air; which became the crowd standing with three fingers in the air. For me there is a direct connection between that struggle catch phrase. It became a battle call. The other one closely aligned to that is when the leader would stand on the stage or in front of a crown and go “AMANDLA!” and the crowd would go “AWETU!” Amandla, which means power, agency, authority, against oppression. And Awetu, meaning “to us”. For me, there’s a direct connection between those. That’s what Katniss’ symbol means for me.
Helen’s description illustrates how this shared currency allows for personal identification and meaning, but still attributable to a larger cause whereby the whole movement shares in the outcomes. Thus, there is both personal and social investment, along with great risk and reward, in using these symbols. Through their efforts, fan activists strive to change the odds from favoring a few, to favoring the whole of society.

CDA Theme #3: Betting Against the Odds

The third CDA theme focuses on how rebels and activists bet against the odds and work towards freedom and liberation from oppression. The generally accepted meaning of “betting against the odds” refers to wagering on the underdog. Essentially, odds indicate the likelihood or probability of winning. In the world of *THG*, Panem citizens experience personal oppression with such severity that the odds seemed stacked against them. They appear not likely to win against the oppressive government system and a tyrannical leader. In the story, Katniss represents the ultimate underdog who overcomes great odds. Through the rebellion, the Districts bet on a fate with low odds but a high return—they bet on freedom. Through revolution, they work together toward liberty. They understand the personal risk, but also the great reward should they win.

I argue in this section, fan activists function much the same way. They recognize the odds are against most people, especially those not considered part the dominant class, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. They also know the odds of their efforts toppling systems of injustice and inequality appear bleak. Yet through their work, fan activists bet on the power of freedom and liberty to overcome seemingly outrageous odds. They take
personal risks, understanding the potential for significant change and abundant recompense for all. Like previous sections, I begin with a look at THG films, to draw out from the narrative critical scenes, script lines, and images that build toward this discourse of change. I then look to THG fandom to understand how this discourse shapes the real world of advancing social justice.

**Reel: As Luck Would Have It**

In the words of radical adult educator, Paulo Freire: “One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating” (Freire, 2013, p. 51). This truth is no more explicit than within the fictional world of THG. To audiences watching the films, the oppression in which the Districts live explicitly conveys subjugation, misery, and hopelessness. The Districts are forced to resign themselves and their families to work as slaves for the benefit of the wealthy, sending their children off to slaughter in the Games in contrition for a previous generational revolt. The first film opens with the following intro:

*From the Treaty of Treason: In penance for their uprising, each district shall offer up a male and female between the ages of 12 and 18 at a public “reaping”. These Tributes shall be delivered to the custody of The Capitol. And then transferred to a public arena where they will Fight to the Death, until a lone victor remains. Henceforth and forevermore this pageant shall be known as The Hunger Games. (Jacobson et al., 2012)*

This pageantry became an accepted and normalized part of Panem society. Did the people not know of their misery? Of course! Freire’s words convey not an assumption of people’s
ignorance to their lot; rather the oppressed assume the same consciousness as their oppressor. The despotic lives of Panem citizens became normal, as they accepted the mindset of the Capitol. Through their suffering and loss, they were unable to envision the possibility of regaining the power to resist their oppressors.

*Illuminating the Reality of Oppression*

While audiences watch the films, perhaps aghast with horror at how the Districts lived under such conditions without previously revolting, our real society is not much different. Some people may live blissfully unaware of such oppression existing in the world. But I suspect, many have come to accept these severe disparities as “normal”, albeit unfortunate. Most, however, know no other way. They accept their situation in order to survive, much like the Districts in Panem. Think the Hunger Games don’t exist the United States or other parts of the world? Think again. According to the Pew Research Center, in America, income inequality is: a) the highest it’s been since 1928, with b) the black-white income gap continuing to widen, and c) the richest fifth of the population holding 88.9 percent of all wealth (DeSilver, 2014). This divide further broadens when considering global economic inequality. According to Oxfam, an international confederation of NGOs working to end the injustice of poverty, about half of the world’s wealth is now owned by only one percent of the global population, with the total wealth of the one percent richest people worldwide equaling $110 trillion (Oxfam, 2014). Examining even further, just eight men possess the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam, 2017). Furthermore, the vast majority of the world’s population lives at or below the poverty level, with 71 percent of the global population surviving on $10 or less per day
America is not immune to this poverty, as one-in-50 people live on $2 or less daily (Kochhar, 2015b). Economic inequality is one of numerous injustices, including violence against women and minority groups, racism and xenophobia, government oppression, etc. So, why have people not revolted? Perhaps because systemic oppression is experienced not in third-party observation, like watching a movie, but experienced and understood on a personal level. Many people know no other way. And if they do, they feel powerless to overcome something immensely greater than themselves. Furthermore, those who do take a stand often experience severe backlash. Fear keeps them locked in an unjust system.

The first film illustrates this mindset, when Gale informs Katniss that his name is in the tribute pool 42 times from requesting additional food to feed his family. He remarks, “Guess the odds aren’t exactly in my favor” (Jacobson et al., 2012). The very system positioning Gale and his family in need of basic provisions for living, returns such assistance with punishment by stacking the odds against him for selection in the Games. While the citizens recognize the irony of such an oppressive system, the Capitol works to normalize it through the televised Games. For example, before the tribute selection in District 11, Effie extols to the crowd, “Happy Hunger Games! And may the odds be ever in your favor” (Jacobson et al., 2012). President Snow repeats this sentiment at the tribute parade, further placating with his words, “We salute your courage and your sacrifice. We wish you Happy Hunger Games. And may the odds be ever in your favor” (Jacobson et al., 2012). The Capitol cheers the forceful compliance of the Districts, building a false reverence to the ransom each District pays for their continued subjugation. Freire refers to this as “the depositing of myths indispensable to the preservation of the status quo” (Freire, 2013, p. 139). He notes, the internalization of myths is essential to the subjugation of the oppressed. Yet, the false hope of the Hunger Games resides with the “victor”—a winner
who overcomes the Games and is bathed in riches and glory. This reality TV spectacle only
serves to normalize an oppressive ideology. Pausing for a moment to look at the real, R. R.
Wright (2016) found several of Disney’s reality TV shows exploit the working class in similar
fashion as THG, albeit not as violent. She says these pop culture pedagogies promote a classist
narrative that reinforces damaging stereotypes casting the poor as: a) content with their lot, b)
proud of their situation, and 3) underserving of government support. R. R. Wright (2016) says,
“the actual stories of the working class and poor are not part of the ‘reality’ of reality TV” (p. 133).
So too, in THG story, does the Capitol deceivingly exclude the reality of the desperate
situation in the Districts. In fact, President Snow goes to great lengths to keep this out of the
broadcast.

**Spreading the Fire of Rebellion**

Accordingly, media play a critical role in furthering the insentience of the Districts. The
tribute selection process, the Games, the Victory Tour, etc. all contribute to the supposed
traditions of Panem. The head Gamemaker in the first film remarks, the Games are “something
that knits us all together” (Jacobson et al., 2012). Perhaps this is one of the greatest myths: the
oppressor and oppressed are inextricably linked, for which the latter finds himself/herself
beholden to the former; and without each other, neither exists. Freire remarks on the power of
these myths to suppress critical awareness among the oppressed, as myths are presented “by
well-organized propaganda and slogans, via the mas ‘communications’ media—as if such
alienation constituted real communication!” (Freire, 2013, p. 140). The rhetoric of the Games,
broadcast throughout Panem, reinforces the myth of the fairness of the Capitol and the obligatory
gratitude of the Districts. The Capitol thereby stacks the odds in their favor, offering hope in the form of a lone victor. This becomes the only avenue to escape a life of misery: win the Hunger Games and become a darling of the Capitol, in order to receive freedom. Which, of course, is yet another myth of its own. Many American reality television shows—like *The Voice, America’s Got Talent, Survivor, The Apprentice, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, etc.—mirrors a similar promise. These myths tout: win the challenge and live a life of fame and fortune.

But through the defiance of Katniss, and the hope symbolized in the shared currency of the rebellion, the Districts are given the opportunity to reflect on an alternative to the cruel and unjust system under which they lived for 75 years. Freire notes the criticality of reflection in the process of helping the oppressed to liberate themselves. He says, “Reflection upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of existence: critical thinking by means of which people discover each other to be ‘in a situation’” (Freire, 2013, p. 109). The people of Panem realize working as slaves for the benefit of the elite and sending their children to the reaping in sacrifice represents not penance, but a game whereby the Capitol bets the Districts would resign to fear and the comfort of the known. Yet, the fire of rebellion spread, fueled by the anger of District citizens’ treatment as objects, rather than human beings. This critical awakening occurs, as Katniss and Peeta embark on the victory tour in the second film. They travel through a tunnel spray painted with the phrase, “The Odds are NEVER in Our Favor” (Jacobson et al., 2013). The Districts realize the odds will never be in their favor until they bet on revolution and fight for their freedom, even if they are the underdogs.
Betting against the odds, though, requires action and intent. Until an individual works to shift the odds, their lot will not likely change. Katniss as the legend, and Mockingjay as the myth, modeled this deliberate action for the Districts. In the first film, Katniss promises Prime she will win. This commitment happens not just behind closed doors, but also during the pre-Games interview. When asked what she told her sister before leaving for the Games, Katniss replies, “I said that I would try to win. That I would try to win for her” (Jacobson et al., 2012). Then during the Games, Rue makes Katniss promise to win. In the context of the films, Katniss models to the Districts, for the first time, a tribute shifting the odds not for her favor, but in solidarity for all. Her sacrifice works not for the service of the Capitol, but in the favor of the oppressed. Katniss’ goal through the entire series aims to protect the ones she loves, not just to save her own skin. In the process, her actions then shift the odds to the favor of the Districts, as she represents fighting for the freedom of all Panem.

Later in the series, during the height of the civil war, Katniss refuses to allow either President Snow or President Coin to use her as an incendiary agent for citizens to kill one another. When confronted by a Capitol loyalist, she remarks of Snow, “I’m tired of killing his slaves for him…. I am done being a piece in his game…. We have no fight, except the one the Capitol gave us” (Jacobson et al., 2015). And therein lies the heart of the Capitol odds—they bet on the continued self-suppression and in-fighting among the Districts. Yet, one player shifted the odds, revealing the irony of the Games and the larger structure of domination at work, even with President Coin in District 13. Ultimately, the actions of Katniss caused reflection among the masses, raised their consciousness, and inspired action. Fan activists reflect this in the real, as they work to expose the irony of the “American Dream” and Western perspectives, among
other myths around the globe. For instance, they band together to raise awareness about corporate greed and the effects on the working poor. As described in the previous section, the HPA partnered with the “OUR Walmart” and “Fight for $15” campaigns to call for fair treatment and wages for the service sector. One of the greatest myths exposed in these campaigns is the notion that full-time employment is the ticket to economic stability. But many of the personal stories shared on the *My Hunger Games Stories* Tumblr blog reveal workers in the service sector work full-time, yet still go hungry and struggle to pay their bills. Fan activists recognize their efforts are only just beginning. Meaning, the revolution in *THG* narrative has yet to come to fruition in the real world. But they refuse to give up and continue working to shift the odds to the favor of the unlucky ones.

**Real: We Side with the Unlucky Ones**

Just as Katniss represents the personalization of District repression by the Capitol, so too do fan activists understand systemic oppression is experienced on a personal level. And through their activism, fans challenge the normalization of inequality and injustice. Averi uses the Black Lives Matter movement as an example of this thinking. She says:

Especially with the Black Lives Matter movement right now. There is no reason, besides white people being stupid and annoying, that this movement needs to happen. [White people] are saying, “I want my way, and for you not to have your way”. And that’s not the stories we like. Those are the people we called villains. It just doesn’t make sense to me. It’s not a consistent approach to life. It’s very selfish and small-minded.
Averi challenges the privileged thinking of white Americans who cannot fathom the need for the Black Lives Matter movement. She rejects the false belief that everyone is equal in the United States. While Averi uses a social movement for illustration, Helen spoke to this in her personal reflection of Katniss. She says:

[Katniss] sees injustice, and for her it’s a personal issue. I don’t think she thinks to herself, “Gee, this is all wrong. This is sociocultural oppression. I am going to overthrow this”. She doesn’t do that at all. She takes it personally. It’s personal that her sister is going to be slaughtered. It’s personal that she, herself, has to survive. What President Snow does to her is personal. She takes it personally. It becomes her battle. Helen touches an important aspect of fan activism, transforming personal experience of oppression into action, even at the smallest level. The women I interviewed and observed advocated for causes personally meaningful to them. Lisa desires for children in her neighborhood to access affordable, quality pre-school education. Averi works for LGBTQ rights and provides data analysis services for the HPA. Minerva seeks to help children gain access to books and other necessary provisions. Jack wants to help people live more sustainably and protect our natural resources. And the list continues. All these women experienced some form of inequality and prejudice; if not directly, then through the lives of people they know and love. This became their personal goal, which they believe contributes to a larger fight for justice and equality. Some may argue these smaller causes dilute collective efforts in fragmented directions, thereby taking away from a larger movement to upend systemic oppression. But I contend, the efforts of fan activists chip away at the ideological foundation that supports the structure of inequality and injustice in society.
Revolution in Panem began with Katniss and the rebels, as they undercut the lies and myths of the Capitol. Once the rebellion exposed the weakness of the system, the people collectively rebelled. Yet, each District resisted in their own way. Some refused to work and provide supplies to the Capitol. Others fought against Peacekeepers, while another sabotaged the power grid. One could say, District citizens found individual ways to resist, which contributed to a larger revolution. I view fan activism in much the same way. They first work to expose the illusion of the American Dream—the false idea that upward social mobility can be achieved solely through hard work and determination. How can people climb the socioeconomic ladder when they struggle to even find enough food to feed themselves and their family? For example, Tyfani shares her story as a Walmart worker on the My Hunger Games Stories Tumblr blog. In the photo (see Figure 5-10), she’s holding a sign that says, “I am worth more” and includes the following post:

Often as a Walmart worker I would choose between paying for the light bill or buying groceries. We can’t live like this, that’s why I’m fasting for $15/hour and full-time consistent hours. Will you support us in the lead up to and on Black Friday?

(myhungergamesstories, 2015c)

Her story expresses the deeply personal experience of hunger, while working full-time for a massive corporation worth $230 billion dollars. While Tyfani struggles to put food on the table, Walmart CEO Doug McMillon made $19.8 million in 2015 (Reuters, 2016). Like District citizens who finally took a stand, Tyfani took action, assuming the role of an OUR Walmart leader. OUR (Organization United for Respect) is a non-profit organization focused on the fair
and equal treatment of employees by large retailers. The OUR Walmart campaign, in which Tyfani participated, sought to raise awareness about unfair labor practices by the corporate giant.

Figure 5-10. OUR Walmart advocate and Black Friday protestor.

Another fast food worker shared a similar story on the Tumblr blog titled, “Fight for 15: Our Hunger Games”. This campaign focused on raising the minimum wage for employees of the food service sector. The blog post features an image of a woman, Latasha, in her Wendy’s uniform (see Figure 5-11), overlaid with the following caption:

“I’m 32 years old, I’m supporting 3 kids and I’m living paycheck to paycheck.

Whatever’s left after I pay my bills is not enough to raise a family on. When my kids
start working, I don’t want them to be underpaid. That’s why I’m fighting for $15 and a Union. (“Wendy’s Fight for 15 [Tumblr post],” 2014)

The caption of the photo reads, “What legacy will we leave for our children? That’s why Wendy [sic] is fighting for $15 and a union. #myhungergames” (“Wendy’s Fight for 15 [Tumblr post],” 2014).

Figure 5-11. A Wendy’s worker and Fight for $15 protestor.

Here, Latasha shares her struggle to survive in a wealthy country where she can barely feed her children and care for them. According to the UC Berkeley Labor Center, those working in the fast food sector are more likely to live in poverty. In fact, “one in five families with a member holding a fast-food job has an income below the poverty line, and 43 percent have an income two
times the federal poverty level or less” (Allegretto et al., 2013). Latasha doesn’t talk of a future college opportunity or career path for her children; she just wants them to struggle less. Her story parallels that of Katniss’ struggle in District 12.

**Broadcasting their Message**

In the previous examples, not only did fans convey their personal stories of inequality and injustice, but they also sought to raise awareness and critical consciousness in others. They do this by hacking *THG* narrative and using media to broadcast their message, much like the rebellion in the fictional story. For instance, the HPA encouraged people to share their stories as part of their “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, not only to give people an outlet for expression, but to amplify the stories and alert of the pervasiveness of issues. A Tumblr post by the HPA reads:

Not my Hunger Games…. They’re using *The Hunger Games* to sell cars District 12 could never afford. The story of *The Hunger Games* is our story. Join us in taking back the narrative. Tell your story of oppression, action, and empowerment with

#MyHungerGames. (myhungergamesstories, 2015f)

*THG* story is personal and collective—owned by everyone and no one. Thus through activism, fans try to influence the odds in the favor of the oppressed and marginalized, which includes themselves and others. Averi shares her learning experience of working with the HPA in this regard. She says:

I really took to heart, the baseline of what you can do as an activist is to be a thoughtful consumer. Being a thoughtful consumer doesn’t change the world by yourself. But if enough of us do, it does change the world. The Harry Potter Alliance really helped to
channel that in different ways. I was inclined to believe in the values I held and wanted to protect them. But being introduced to other values and other activist pursuits, in terms of how to be a thoughtful consumer—like to not purchase things that required under-paid labor or child labor, and why it’s important to get things fair trade—all of those lessons I wouldn’t have known or learned unless I was involved in the Harry Potter Alliance. For *The Hunger Games*, I knew mental health was an issue. But for their “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, they talked about economic inequality and how that compounds mental health issues. It’s something I knew, but never something I articulated. I think *The Hunger Games* helped push, personally and socially, the thoughtful consumer.

Over and over again, fan activist discourse is full of language referencing a shift in the odds, as they call for people to take back the narrative by sharing personal stories.

However, there is risk in betting against the odds, especially when it comes to speaking out against systemic oppression. But fans stack the odds in their favor by working together. While their causes vary, their collective efforts fall within the rhetorical vision of fighting for equality and justice. Instead of attacking from one perspective (i.e., all focused on economic inequality), they strike from various angles, showing how inequalities intersect in a larger system of injustice. For instance, access to mental health services is further exacerbated by a lack of income and health insurance for some.

Thus, even if Helen advocates for ending government corruption; Jack works to help the environment; Gemma fights for women’s rights; Averi advocates for LGBTQ rights; the OUR worker calls for fair treatment of Walmart employees; and the Wendy’s worker asks for a higher minimum wage—they collectively challenge intersecting systems of power and privilege.
Accordingly, collaboration and rebellion become a game for fan activists, whereby the team works together to win the fight against social inequality and injustice.

Fan activists use social media to advance their message and inspire others to join their cause. An example of this collaboration is reflected in a Facebook post by “15 at Walmart”, a page run by former and current Walmart associates. The image shows a group of protestors holding up a banner with the Mockingjay symbol and text saying, “Tell Walmart Hunger is Not a Game” (see Figure 5-12). The accompanying post reads, “A hunger games salute to Alice Walton outside her Park Avenue luxury apartment in New York City” (15 at Walmart, 2015).

Figure 5-12. Walmart protestors outside Alice Walton’s NYC luxury apartment.

Here, fans mitigate their risk by banding together to collectively fight for a cause. Yet the alliance continues, as other organizations share in the labor and risk. The Occupy Wall St.
Facebook page shared the post to their followers, as did the HPA on their Tumblr blog. Much like the Districts overcame their segregation by uniting behind a common front, fan activists work in similar fashion. Both groups fight the system by hijacking the media and entertainment platforms to reach audiences and unite people.

**CDA Theme #4: Hacking Hollywood and the Media**

The final CDA theme focuses how rebels and fan activists hack Hollywood and the entertainment media machine in order to issue a call for resistance and share a message of hope. Accordingly, the power of media is no more apparent than when you consider how the world is shaped by images and sounds projected from a screen. Beyond movie theaters and televisions, screens now include computers, smart phones, tablets, and other mobile devices. But a medium includes more than screens. In his 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan pioneered the idea that the medium is also the message, meaning there is more to examine than just the content a medium delivers. The medium itself influences society.

I argue in this section, the medium in the fictional world of Panem, and in the virtual spaces where fan activists collaborate, deserves additional consideration. While the content in both contexts plays an important role in the efforts to change society, the delivery platform itself affects the world in ways we might not consider. These mediums shape the learning environment too. In the following sections, I examine the reel to highlight how the Capitol and the rebellion use the same medium in different ways to shape reality for Panem citizens. I then look at the role of the Internet and social media as the primary way cultural dream work (i.e., the efforts of fan activists as they work toward a shared rhetorical vision) finds its effectiveness as a
space for learning and incubates an embryo of discontent—one inspiring fan activists to change their world.

Reel: The Capitol’s Reality

Throughout Panem, media functions as a cruel reminder of the severe inequality between the Capitol and the Districts, while instilling fear among the people and placating their misery with false hope. When people starve due to their inability to buy food; suffer from depression because they have no access to mental health services; or lose loved ones in workplace accidents because no occupational safety policies exist; the Capitol ensures no home or public space is without media. Wherever they go, the Districts watch their sad reality unfold before them on screens in their private homes, work spaces, and shared town centers. They became audiences to a horrific “normal” reflected back to them. Of all the means by which the Capitol could control the Districts and shape their reality, the use of media proved most effective. Within this context, President Snow created a false consciousness among citizens. For example, at the reaping in the first film, a video is shown about the origin of the Hunger Games as the consequence for past rebellion. Those who rebelled against the Capitol are called traitors, and this line of thinking continues throughout the story. Using media, the Capitol demonizes those who rebel, labeling them as selfish, reckless, and destructive. But media alone is not the primary means of sociopolitical control.
The Games in Panem function much like a sadistic reality television contest. Tributes are selected from massive glass bowls on a stage in front of the “Hall of Justice” at each District. Once in the arena, tributes gain advantages through sponsors, wealthy Capitol citizens who send gifts to the competitors during the games. In the first film, Haymitch explains this process to Katniss, saying in order to get these life-saving tools and resources, “You get people to like you” (Jacobson et al., 2012). The impoverished pander to the whims of the wealthy. Thus, the broadcasted Games not only provide content for instilling fear and distraction, they shape the social fabric of the country, including reinforcement of class divisions. The televised Games also divert the attention of the Districts from their misery, even as it’s delivered to them in a glitzy package, like a Hollywood movie. In the second film, Haymitch tells Katniss, “from now on, your job is to be a distraction, so people forget what the real problems are” (Jacobson et al., 2013). But the problems run much deeper than a televised death spectacle.

Taking a second look at the medium, something more insidious is at work. At first review, it appears an obvious choice to assume the Games solely exist to terrorize the people. Yet in the first film, President Snow explains the Games themselves represent a medium of social control beyond just fear, which in and of itself conveys a powerful message. In speaking to the head Gamemaker, he says:

Why do we have a winner? I mean, if we just wanted to intimidate the Districts, why not round up 24 of them at random and execute them all at once? It would be a lot faster. Hope…. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous. A spark is fine, as long as it’s contained. (Jacobson et al., 2012)
Thus, the point of the Games is not so much intimidation—although an important consequence—but to shape the reality of the Districts and create an illusion the people are partially in control of their destiny. The victors offer a measure of hope for people to overcome their lot in life. It gives the Districts someone or something (i.e., dreams and aspirations) to root for. The Capitol offers the Districts just enough hope to keep them placated, at least enough to prevent revolt.

But through the legend of Katniss and the myth of the Mockingjay, the Districts recognize the Games for what they really are—a mechanism for social control. When Katniss returns from the Victory Tour in the second film, she converses with Gale about her desire to keep the people of Panem from rebelling and prevent the inevitable civil war. Gale retorts: “Safe for what? To starve? Work like slaves? Send their kids to the reaping? You haven’t heard people Katniss. You’ve given them an opportunity. They just have to be brave enough to take it” (Jacobson et al., 2013). And when Katniss discusses the brewing rebellion with her sister, Prim says “something is different since the last games” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Once Katniss participated in the Games, the medium experienced an ideological shift from false control of destiny, to a vehicle by which to activate change. Katniss sparked hope through her actions in the Games and beyond. This ignited into a wildfire of rebellion, which the Games could no longer contain.

**Sharing the Message of Freedom**

As the second film unfolds, the new head Gamemaker claims he volunteered for the job after finding inspiration from Katniss. He tells her, his job is “a chance to make the Games mean something” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Later, the film reveals the Quarter Quell (the special Games
involving only past victors) functioned as kindling of hope for the spark of rebellion to catch fire. During a pivotal moment in the Quarter Quell, Johanna from District 7, yells at President Snow through the cameras, “You know, you can’t put everybody in here!” (Jacobson et al., 2013). Her point smashes the ideological façade of the Games. At this moment, the message of the Games shifts from the Capitol’s reality of social control among the Districts, to the people realizing everyone possesses some power. And if they exert their power collectively, the whole system could be overturned. The unintended consequence of the Games, then, became the catalyst for revolution throughout the Districts. The medium became the message.

Over the last two films, the medium shifts from a focus on the broadcast Games to the propaganda videos used by the rebellion. While again it’s tempting to dissect the content of the rebel films, a deeper look at the social consequences of video and technology demonstrate a shift in the non-obvious way Panem changed as a society. While President Coin attempted to use propaganda video to fuel rebellion in the Districts—which they were successful in doing—surveillance video and unscripted footage shaped the way the Districts saw each other and the Capitol. For example, in the third film, Katniss visits District 8 rebels. President Coin sends a film team to capture video of Katniss interacting with the wounded in a hospital. Along the way, President Snow spots Katniss on surveillance footage and sends in bombers to kill Katniss and the remaining rebels in the area. But Katniss and her team fight back. They destroy the two bombers and Katniss is captured on video saying:

If you think for one second that the Capitol will ever treat us fairly, you are lying to yourselves. Because we know who they are and what they do. This is what they do. And we must fight back. I have a message for President Snow. You can torture us, and
bomb us, and burn our districts to the ground. But do you see that? Fire is catching, and if we burn, you burn with us! (Jacobson et al., 2014)

While the content of Katniss’ speech is not insignificant, it distracts from the non-obvious ability of video and technology to spread the idea of revolution. In a scene shortly following, District 7 workers are shown ambushing Capitol Peacekeepers, as they yell, “If we burn, you burn with us!” (Jacobson et al., 2014). The propaganda videos become an extension of Katniss and furthered the idea of the Mockingjay. From the videos grew the conception of revolution.

Pausing again to reflect on the real, parallels could be drawn to the Black Lives Matter movement, whereby cell phone videos and police dashboard cameras fuel the crusade to fight anti-black racism. And just like in Panem, the effects of these videos materialize in the form of a shift in the social fabric of America. In *THG* narrative, President Coin speaks to this effect when she addresses District 13 and the rebels after a major victory:

With the Mockingjay and the Victors beside us, we have sent a clear message to the Capitol that we will never again endure injustice…. Let all of Panem come together, not to battle for the amusement of the Capitol. But to join hands in this fight. Let today be the day we promise never to give up. Never to give in, until we have made a new Panem. Where leaders are elected, not imposed upon us. And where the Districts are free to share the fruits of their labors and not fight one another for scraps. This new Panem is on the horizon, but we must take it for ourselves…. We can conquer this stronghold because we are one people, one army, one voice. Because today is our new beginning. Today we have freed the victors. Tomorrow, Panem! (Jacobson et al., 2014)
Coin’s speech indicates the presence of a new message—the effects of the new rebel medium. In essence, the nature of media and technology in Panem (the medium) gave way to freedom of thought, reflection, and action (the message) among the people.

This new message continues with the work of fan activists. While media and popular culture offer entertainment and distraction, much like the Games in Panem; new technology and application of *THG* fictional narrative give way to the cultural dream work of fan activists who inspire a new way of thinking, reflecting, learning, and acting in the world.

**Real: Cultural Dream Work**

It’s easy to spot the social critique embedded within *THG* narrative, as it exposes the Capitol’s reality of tyranny, government corruption, capitalist exploitation, and economic inequality. Yet some fans activists distinguish the story itself as a medium. They understand the world of Panem is not all that different from reality today. The struggles of many are wrapped up in the bread and circuses of a consumerist culture, and they need a Mockingjay to smash through the false consciousness of society, created by media-generated hegemonic ideologies. One post (see Figure 5-13) on the *My Hunger Games Stories* Tumblr account reads:

_The Hunger Games_ isn’t a story about eyeliner and lipstick, its [sic] a story about revolution. Our stories, our Hunger Games? They don’t need concealer, they need to be told. (myhungergamesstories, 2015e)
The Hunger Games isn’t a story about eyeliner and lipstick, it’s a story about revolution. Our stories, our Hunger Games? They don’t need concealer—they need to be told.

Help us narrate the story of the revolution against inequality. Tell your #MyHungerGames stories of oppression and action and check out our Take Action page for ideas about how you can make a difference.
While companies commercialize a tale of revolution against oppression, fan activists learn to use the narrative in their critical consciousness-raising efforts. Helen sees fan activists as “part of a wider movement of people who are identifying means by which people are prompted to critical consciousness”. She believes that perhaps, “subconsciously [audiences] are seeing there is possibility for change”. Other fan activists echo this perspective, noting *THG* narrative does more than simply reflect reality back to us. The HPA stated in a post on their Facebook page: “the Hunger Games didn’t just hold a mirror to the worst of our world. It championed rebellion and revolution. It reminded us that big change is possible—that it only happens when we act on our power” (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015f).

**Offering a Safe Space to Learn**

The *THG* story resonates with people for much more than its Hollywood glamor, special effects, or clever dystopic metaphors and social critiques. During the interview with Jack, she reflected on the reason *THG* narrative reverberates around the world. She says:

I think because they see things in the books that are terrible injustices, and they relate those to what is happening now…. I think they feel as though they can understand them from literary sense. I think a lot of people have a really hard time coming to terms that these things happen in real life. Just like today even, we talk about the refugees from Syria and stuff. People are so upset about bringing them over here. I don't think they really want to know what they are running away from. I think that books like *The Hunger Games* and other dystopian stories offer a glimpse of that.
Jack touches upon an important social effect of THG narrative, to offer a space where people come to an understanding about serious issues in a non-threatening way, as well as learn about their role in advancing change. Averi shares her learning experience in this regard:

I learned about the world. What I learned about myself is being like, “How did I look at that story?” Because there are a lot of different ways to read any story, and reading it this way tells me about myself. But my reading also tells me about my worldview…. I feel like most shows I watch, I do so in order to learn more.

Within THG narrative, fans activists also see the critical role of media in shaping public opinion. They challenge the false realities created through the media and pop culture. Gemma notes, “I think it shows how the media in our lives could be a metaphor for what people want you to see. But at the same time, you can do reverse propaganda”. Ashley reflects a similar view, saying people “could learn from the story how media can tell whatever story they want to tell. That alone is an injustice”. Hence, these women and other fan activists work much like the rebels in Panem. While the latter hacked the Games and used technology to advance their cause, fan activists learn to hack THG narrative and use social media to challenge injustice occurring around our world.

**Using Story to Shape Society**

Returning to McLuhan’s notion of the medium is the message, THG is a story. And while one could get caught up analyzing the content of the narrative, I focus on the importance of story to shape society. Fan activists understand the ability of some popular culture stories and entertainment to offer a discourse of revolution that inspires people to act. It happened within
the world of Panem and some fan activists believe it can happen today. *THG* offers a narrative of hope—something some fan activists use as justification for their work. In a blog post on the *My Hunger Games Stories* Tumblr account, one fan contemplates:

In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen becomes the Mockingjay—a symbol of hope and rebellion for the people of Panem. In today’s world, where new technology enables government surveillance and censorship, citizens are able to fight back by using that same technology to organize and rebel against the abuse of power. Both in the fictional dystopia of *The Hunger Games* and the real, near-dystopian rights violations faced by people across the world today, the ideas of freedom catch fire, spreading faster than governments can stamp them out. (amyhsturgis, 2014)

In reflecting on the importance of popular culture in shaping individual and social identities, Averi believes, “It’s important the media deals with things honestly and well, because you don’t know which story it will be that someone deeply needs to keep living”. Averi’s statement is less a challenge to the media as a corporate power, rather to the writers, producers, audiences, etc. to understand the profound affect media has on society.

Women like Averi, and other fan activists, use the power of story and critical pop culture to educate and inspire people to act upon their convictions. They also warn against companies commercializing stories for profit. For example, a fan wrote on the *My Hunger Games Stories* Tumblr account:

Suzanne Collins knew what she was going for when she wrote the books. The reactions of the people from The Capitol are meant to emulate news media and celebrities or the rich. The Peacekeepers were meant as a direct parallel to the military or the police. The focus was always supposed to be how the government was treating the people, but
society took it and did exactly what Panem’s media did: turned it into a drama about love.

(outspokenyouth, 2015)

Hence, fan activists take back the narrative from Hollywood, just as Panem citizens took back their story from President Snow and the Capitol. When many lack the training of formal, organized activism, some fans use their personal stories as their primary and most impactful tool to reach others. Raven calls attention to this notion, as the HPA works to educate and engage fans. She notes some people come into activism not just through story, but because of it:

A lot of the work we’re doing is with folks who are connecting with activism through story. And it’s maybe the first time doing so. It’s the first time they are getting into activism, because they have been pulled in by this great journey that their hero is going on. They are connecting with it through that lens. So there is, in the work we do, a big education component and showing how these issues play out in the real world.

Raven recognizes how story can be used as tool for learning, as well as a medium to shape society. Another example is Minerva’s reflection on her story of growing up poor, using it as motivation for her activist work and as a way to reach and inspire others to help those less fortunate. Many of the women I interviewed and observed lacked formal training in activism, yet they informally learned these skills from stories like THG, from each other, and from organized outreach efforts like the HPA.

**Imagining a Better Future**

An important aspect of story, especially fictional ones, involves imagination. The imaginings of alternative possibilities opens the mind to new potentials. As an organized body
of fan activists, the HPA embraces this perspective and uses imagination to fuel social change. In an invitation for fans to share their stories on the My Hunger Games Stories Tumblr blog, the HPA describes their faith in story to change the world:

The spark that lights a revolution isn’t oppression, or despair, or even anger. It’s imagination. It’s our ability to imagine and believe that a better world is possible. We tell #MyHungerGames stories to call out today’s inequality and to fight for a better tomorrow. The heat is on, but we don’t need Katniss Everdeen to save the future. We can do it just as well. (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015b)

These stories also bring us together. They become the common language through which people can navigate supposed differences. Lisa reflects on the way the Districts found solidarity. She notes, in similar fashion, the THG narrative allows people to find ground for common understanding through story. She says:

I like to look back on [the story] and think about seeing all the Districts not even realizing how connected they were, because they are all so different. In the way that so many social groups now don’t realize how connected we all are. It’s only once everything is up in the air and going nuts that we all look around and go, “Wait a minute. We are not as different as we thought we were. Let’s come together and focus on our goals rather than our differences”.

Lisa’s thoughts underscore the reality that segregation, whether by physical boundaries or ideological ones, keep people from finding common ground and working toward a common goal. Yet, the medium of story allows for a coming together of people and ideas to overcome this segregation. Stories like THG span continents and rally people together for a common goal—the fight for justice and equality.
Activating the Power of Language and Discourse

As this chapter concludes, I return to the opening notion of fans fluidly moving between the reel and the real. By applying a critical discourse analysis approach to both the THG films and THG fandom, I explained how fictional narratives inform and become intertwined with real-life experiences through the medium of story. Additionally, I highlighted the role of pop culture in shaping the shared fantasies, and ultimately the rhetorical vision, of fan activists. The discourse of fan activism reflects an appropriation of the written and visual language of THG films. Through interviewing women fan activists and observing them in virtual spaces, I saw the power of language, both word and image, to shape their perspectives and identities. Through a transformation of Katniss into a legend and myth, fan activists use valuable symbols to support and help one another in their cultural dream work. So, what has this study revealed about fan activists as compared to the more typical fandoms? What are the implications of these findings for the adult education field? And what are the implications for learning that happens in online and offline spaces? In the following chapter, I discuss these questions and more deeply explore the implications for theory, practice, and future research.
Chapter 6

DISCUSSION

“My license plate says, ‘MockinJ’ and the frame around it says, ‘What’s your rebellion?’.
Because I am a rebel, and have been a rebel my whole life”.
- Minerva, Study Participant

The purpose of this study is to critically examine what adult fans, specifically women, informally learn about activism from The Hunger Games (THG) series, and to understand how their identity is shaped by this popular culture pedagogy in online and offline spaces, as it pertains to advancing social justice causes. Three theories provide the conceptual framework for my research, including poststructural feminism, popular culture as public pedagogy, and convergence culture. The research questions guiding this study include:

1) How did the narrative help shape an activist identity in participants?

2) What did participants informally learn about activism and advancing social justice causes from engaging with this popular culture pedagogy?

3) What is the role of fellow fans in digital (online) spaces, as it relates to participants’ learning experience regarding activism in the real (offline) world?

The design of the study utilizes a cyber ethnographic approach to examine the online sub-culture of women learners as they engage with the THG franchise and each other in virtual and physical spaces. Data collection consists of in-depth interviews with 10 participants (primary participants), online observations of fan activities (secondary participants), and a review and analysis of 320+ relevant cultural documents and artifacts. I employ a fantasy theme analysis of the data collected, along with a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the film adaptations of the THG series and THG fandom.
The findings of the fantasy theme analysis, detailed in Chapter Four, identify four main themes: a) a central legend/myth is key to a shared vision among fans; b) the hero’s journey becomes internalized by fans as they advocate for causes important to them; c) the fight for justice transcends a focus on the individual, and moves to desire for collective change; and d) social change is a moral, political, and immediate game for fans, with very real consequences for themselves and society. These fantasy themes coalesce into a larger, shared rhetorical vision of fans collectively fighting for justice and equality.

The CDA yielded four additional themes, lending further insight and understanding to the main fantasy themes. The CDA themes, detailed in Chapter Five, include: a) the films and fan activists transform the person/character of Katniss into a legend and myth; b) the films create a shared currency consisting of symbol, salute, and song, which fans exchange in support of one another; c) both District citizens and women fan activists personalize the risk and reward of rebellion; and d) in the reel and real spaces, activists hack *THG* narrative and use media to create a hunger for justice among the larger population.

In context of the aforementioned summary, this chapter achieves several objectives. First, I assess the findings and highlight what this study reveals about some women fan activists, as they differ from more “traditional” fans and fandoms. Second, I discuss the findings within the three theoretical frameworks applied in this study and related literature, noting how this study begins to fill a needed gap in the literature. Third, I consider the implications for practice within the field of adult education. And finally, I conclude with a discussion on the limitations of this study and offer recommendations for further research, while sharing some final thoughts.
Throughout the research process, I pondered: When does a story end? Does it ever really end? Perhaps stories offer a snap shot in time of the intersection of fictional narratives and real life experiences that continue long after the initial tale concludes. Likewise, I question if fiction and non-fiction stories differ all that much, because their essence remains the same—to imagine and retell what has been, what is, or what could be. I also believe stories layer to create unique tales of human struggle and triumph, often dancing between fiction and reality. As human beings, we’ve built upon these stories for thousands of years. Take Shakespeare for instance. Western culture told and retold his stories using theater, musicals, literature, and film to reimagine tales from the past and apply them to today. And as it relates to this study, some scholars note the influence of Shakespeare, as well as Greek mythology, throughout *THG* narrative (McDonald, 2014; Soncini, 2015). So why do such stories endure, including some popular culture narratives like *THG*? R.R. Wright and Wright (2015) contend that engaging and entertaining popular culture stories “capture the imagination and remain with audiences, enduring in their hearts and minds” (p. 14). They go on to say, these narratives become embedded in our daily lives and are interwoven throughout our own personal stories. This applies to fan activists as well, who appropriate popular culture stories into their personal stories and advocacy efforts.

As I’ve attempted to elucidate through the findings in Chapters Four and Five, the stories of some women fan activists do not begin or end with *THG*. Rather, the fictional world of Panem and the narrative of a girl turned legend, and a symbol turned myth, offers a glimpse in time of a particular social and historical context; as the narrative layers with stories of women fans learning about themselves and the world around them. This great tale did not end when the
last *THG* film exited theaters, but continues on in the lives of many women fans, as they continue their own narratives of fighting for justice and equality. And their stories will carry on, long after this research ends. Thus, this qualitative study examines a fragment in time, exploring popular culture as a site of public pedagogy where some women fans informally learn about their role in society and form activist identities based on those new self-perceptions—they learn to be the heroes of their own stories.

### From Fans to Heroes

What does this study reveal about fan activists? As described in Chapter Four, one major difference is the unique characteristics shared by some fan activists, versus the more typical “fan” described in the literature on media studies and fan studies (Baym, 2000; Botzaki, 2009; Harris, 1998; Jenkins, 1992, 2006b; Scardaville, 2005; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). During the interview and observation process, the uniqueness of women fan activists stood out to me. There was something “different” about them. Primary participants confirmed this distinction, as they self-identified as unique. Helen says, “In terms of fandom, I’m not your typical fan person. I don’t follow movie stars and do that kind of thing”. Helen does not concern herself with celebrity gossip or the entertainment news aspect of *THG* franchise. Instead, she describes her love of *THG* story for its interesting characters and moral message. This difference supports the work of W. Zhang and Mao (2013), who found Chinese fans function in an activist manner as they collaborate on translating foreign films for others to enjoy. Yet, fan activities in that context were limited to the information sharing realm. W. Zhang and Mao (2013) call for further
research on the kind of conditions that link fan activism with political participation, which my study offers.

Additionally, as I discussed in Chapter Four, fan activists associated with *THG* series recognize their work as moral and political games with very real consequences. Their actions reflect intentional, political action. This helps to fill a gap in literature on how and why some fans organize toward advocating for social change. And by “games”, I mean they find great joy in their advocacy work, often making a game of their efforts. In Chapters Four and Five, Raven shares examples of how the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) turned activism into a game for fans—like the scavenger hunt for *THG* fans to learn about various organizations—that provide education, information, and resources related to various social justice causes. This supports the work of Sandlin (2005, 2007), who found everyday aspects of culture provides spaces for informal learning and a measure of fun.

Furthermore, the responses by participants about the difference between fans and fan activists emphasize the first two fantasy themes identified in Chapter Four: the legend and myth are key, and all fans can be heroes. The women I interviewed and observed did not identify with the person/character of Katniss, but as a symbol of fighting for justice and equality. They become the supporting characters—the real heroes of the story to carry out the work of social change. Thus, many fan activists view *THG* story not just as a pleasurable story to celebrate, but an ethical one to act upon. These notions reflect the third and fourth fantasy themes in Chapter Four that fans feel a collective call for justice and their work represents real games with material consequences. They feel a personal duty to carry on the story of the *THG* in the real world. They become the heroes—not because they possess any superpower, but they recognize a hero is any person who sees injustice and fights to change it. This supports the findings of Sandlin and
Milam (2008), who found the intersection of activism and pop culture: a) fosters a resistance participatory culture, b) engages fans as whole learners (body and emotions), c) creates a community of relationships thinking about the “we”, and d) creates a space where learners can develop a new way of viewing the world. However, unlike the notion of “culture jamming” (the focus of their research), fan activism uses pop culture to help people tell their personal narratives and resist oppression. My study answers the call of Sandlin and Milam (2008), who ask for more research on public pedagogies, like pop culture. They too desire to understand how people are shaped by and help to shape society. But what else makes *THG* fan activists unique? I spend the next few sections considering their qualities in context of the literature.

**Believing the World Can Change**

At first glance, it may appear that fan activists romanticize the notion of identifying as heroes who change the world using their favorite stories. However, the women I interviewed recognize this as a utopian ideal they work towards. They understand fan activism is a new and emerging idea. They have not changed the world (yet), but it doesn’t deter them from trying. So, while the Districts were liberated from the oppression of President Snow and the Capitol in *THG* story, fans use this narrative as inspiration and motivation in their continued efforts to fight for equality and justice. For example, Raven admits the HPA, with its team of volunteer fan activists, could not solve economic inequality with the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign on its own. Rather, their work served as a launch pad to introduce fans and the larger population to the real economic travesties happening today, including offering people ways to learn about the issues and get involved. Thus, my study supports the work of Jubas et al. (2015), who believe
popular culture texts become deeply connected parts of people’s lives, as they connect with stories and characters. In doing so, people make new meaning, as they wrestle through social issues (Jubas et al., 2015). And through this process, they learn about themselves and the world, including how they can make it better a more fair and just place (Guy, 2007; Jubas et al., 2015; Sandlin, 2007; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017).

The women I interviewed and observed also believe changing the world begins with dialogue. This affirms this work of P. Jarvis (1987), who says life begets learning opportunities when people can reflect on their experiences, discuss them with others, and then take action. Women fan activists reflect on THG narrative in a variety of ways. And as detailed in the fourth CDA theme of Chapter Five, they hack THG narrative to initiate these critical conversations with others. They also take action by using media and online platforms to dialogue and collaborate with each other on ways to influence social change. Their efforts reside less with the end result, and instead focus on the process of provoking inquiry, dialogue, and collaborative action. They aim to inspire others to take up a cause and contribute to larger change. These findings are consistent with the work of C. Jarvis (1999), who found critical engagement with popular culture texts initiated a political consciousness in students, leading them to challenge dominant discourse. My study adds to this understanding by showing how this happens outside of the classroom, among many women fan activists, as they work towards justice and equality.

**Valuing Justice and Equality**

Yet, what draws a fan into activism? Jubas (2011) calls attention to the debate among adult educators as to whether reflexivity leads to activism or activism encourages reflexivity.
Instead, Jubas (2011) suggests social transformation is best understood as an ongoing and complex struggle between these spaces. The findings from my study add to the conversation by drawing attention to characteristics of adult learners that might compel them to engage in reflexivity and activism. For example, Felicity believes the HPA’s success to engage fans in activism has to do, in large part, with common qualities they share. She contends fan activists may be more inclined to participate in activist-type activities because they value justice and equality, which is identified in Chapter Four as a shared rhetorical vision. Based on her experience with other fan activists, Felicity says fans who join the HPA often “tend to be curious, open-minded, and kind, and those are all things I also try to be”. She also says fans tend to be inquisitive about social issues and exude empathy for their fellow citizens, which compels them to act. And certain pop culture stories can prompt these feelings of empathy, which elicit a perspective shift that leads to action (Brown, 2011). Much of what I observed online further supports this assertion. In Chapter Four, I reference a social media post for by Phan (2014) who notes how some popular culture narratives, like THG, may trigger people to reflect on their values and instill a desire to help others, which is the first step to social justice awareness. Hence, these texts potentially function as vehicles for challenging social injustices and structured inequalities (Guy, 2007). They also connect people through dissenting stories.

**Connecting through Dissenting Stories**

The findings of my research also support the research literature on fans and fandoms. This study confirms the understanding that fans represent dynamic gatherings of like-minded people who create a unique sub-culture around shared interests (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2006b).
My research adds to the literature by demonstrating how fans build shared fantasies, from fictional pop culture dramas, of making the world a more equitable and just place. Furthermore, these findings highlight the types of stories fan activists might be drawn to. For example, the women I interviewed identify as fans of *THG* story because its call for social change to the benefit of all. The story helps participants to think about the world in different ways. R. R. Wright and Sandlin (2017) consider this type of text a critical pedagogy, whereby it explores and enacts learning that is “radically democratic, social justice-oriented, emancipatory, and anti-hegemonic” (p. 1). *THG* story provides a common language to talk about social issues and make sense of them by identifying allegories and drawing parallels to current conditions. But unique to this study, it does so outside the formal classroom.

Unlike a more typical understanding of fans, who have a passionate relationship to a particular media franchise (Jenkins et al., 2013), my study reveals how women fan activists often connect deeply with stories offering hope for change brought about by the actions of ordinary people. These fans aren’t allied to one particular franchise, as much as they connect with a call for equality and justice. Participants in this study mentioned several narratives in which they found similar inspiration, like *V for Vendetta*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Harry Potter*, and more. From *THG* narrative, among others, they gained an understanding about themselves and their role in advancing change in their communities. For them, this particular story became a source of inspiration, personal discovery, and meaning making. In Chapter Four, Ashley explains a fan activist would be “someone who sees the real story—of sacrificing anything for the people you care about or for the greater good. They go out and try to raise awareness of those similar injustices in our real world”. My examination of fan activists online reinforces this argument, as
I observed fans making connections between THG, along with other similar pop culture narratives, to events happening in the real world.

Collectively, participants note their love of pop culture to provide an entry point for conversation and the potential for provoking social change. This affirms the pioneering work by Robin Redmon Wright, who examined informal adult learning and identity formation by women audiences of the Avengers television series during the 1960s (R. R. Wright, 2007, 2010b, 2013a; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b). In this context, informal learning can lead to a perspective change and subsequent shift in behavior (Ostrouch-Kaminska & Vieira, 2015).

**Changing Perspectives that Inspire Action**

The findings of my research also illuminate how THG story impacted the lives of study participants in profound ways. C. Jarvis (2012) notes how fiction can elicit empathetic feelings, especially with the use of images and metaphor, to lift people outside of themselves and develop a deeper connection with others. In this study, some women fans funneled their feelings of empathy into a desire to fight for their fellow citizens. I described this yearning for social change in Chapter Four, as the third fantasy theme reflected a collective call for social justice.

While fans desire to change the world, they also recognize popular culture narratives, including THG, carry limited country-wide attention. Raven shared that by the final phase of the HPA’s “Odds in Our Favor” campaign, the national media excitement waned. Thus, the HPA’s call for fans across the country to unite behind justice and quality was limited to a short window of a few years. Yet, many fans activists still believe in the potential for story to help initiate social change. They use various critical pop culture pedagogies to facilitate learning about social
issues, something many scholars recognize as an important part of challenging dominant ideologies (Brown, 2011; C. Jarvis, 1999; Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015). Fans work to shift the odds in everyone’s favor by focusing on causes meaningful to them. While their focus varies, they believe their work collectively chips away at the ideological foundation that supports inequality and injustice. They aim to initiate reflection in people, causing them to question the reasons for poverty and the “isms”. In doing so, they believe this destabilizes normality of inequality. Thus, fan activists are driven by hope and imagining through *THG* narrative, envisioning what the future could look like and working toward that rhetorical vision.

Returning to my earlier argument, stories help us to know what was, understand what is, and imagine what could be. And my study reveals how many women fans engage in this imagining within virtual spaces. Accordingly, the findings confirm the literature describing how fans gather together in both physical and online spaces (Baym, 2000; Lammers, 2013), as emerging technologies allow fans to traverse geographic boundaries (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2006a, 2007; Jenkins et al., 2013). My study adds to this knowledge showing that technology also allows fans to create and use a shared currency to build a sub-culture of activist support and further non-violent resistance against oppression—the second CDA theme identified in Chapter Five. They do more than poach the text, or appropriate the narrative for their personal enjoyment, as Jenkins (1992, 2006b) contends. Many fan activists hack the narrative in their attempt to initiate social change. With this added understanding on some of the differences between traditional fans and fan activists, I now turn to a discussion on the implications for theory and practice as it relates to identity construction and adult learning.
Implications for Theory and Practice

In Chapters One and Two, I call attention to the lack of conceptual and empirical literature on how women develop an identity as “fan activists” from engaging with certain popular culture pedagogies. This relates to a sub-set of adult education, for which scholars have asked for additional research (Giroux, 2004; Guy, 2007; Sandlin et al., 2010b; R. R. Wright, 2010a; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). Giroux (2004) argues that cultural studies, particularly its intersection with adult education, remains primarily an academic discourse, often being removed from the cultural and political sites where public pedagogy takes place. Giroux (2004) calls for critical educators to consider matters of importance to the larger public, including writing about topics of greater interest and in an accessible form. R. R. Wright and Sandlin (2017) believe culture is part of our identity; and as such, they appeal to educators to investigate critical public pedagogies to assess their impact on adult learners. My study addresses these gaps, showing how many women fan activists are tackling issues of great significance and interest to people, using material they are familiar with and passionate about.

The findings in Chapters Four and Five also demonstrate one way some forms of popular culture—with critical allegories and feminist undertones—double as a form of entertainment and as a site of learning where women discover their role in helping to initiate change in the world. This supports the work of R. R. Wright and Sandlin (2017) who believe learning from everyday life offers an opportunity for citizenship and activism. To varying degrees, the women I interviewed learned about themselves, as novel or life-long activists, from engaging with THG series. Whether discovering a new identity as an activist, like Lisa and Gemma, to affirming their role as practiced activists, like Raven and Averi, to providing a lens for understanding their lifetime of work advocating for social justice, like Helen and Minerva; THG narrative shaped
their understanding as individuals and as part of society. The question then becomes exactly how did the narrative contribute to shaping their identities in this way? I turn to the literature on poststructural feminism to shed light on this inquiry.

**Developing an Activist Identity**

The findings in Chapters Four and Five reveal how *THG* narrative intersects with the *individual* and *social* identities of women fan activists—a hallmark of poststructural feminist theory (Theriot, 1990; Tisdell, 1998; Weedon, 1997). The women I interviewed (primary participants) and observed in virtual spaces (secondary participants) created new personal meaning from this popular culture text, while they wrestled through understanding difference and addressing unequal power relations in society. This knowledge- and identity-building exercise traversed individual meaning making in relation to the text, and extended to social meaning making in relation to other fans and wider society. The following section examines this phenomenon in closer detail.

**Intersection of the Individual and the Social**

Looking back to the second and third CDA theme detailed in Chapter Five, many women fan activists use *THG* story to contemplate the intersection of race, class, gender, and other systems of privilege and oppression on their own subjectivity. They consider these intersecting facets in relation to their personal experiences and everyday practices (Jackson, 2004), including how overlapping oppression impacts different groups on a social level. To illustrate, Averi has a personal connection to treating the mental health community, but on a social level, she realized
the travesty of how those living in poverty also face greater barriers to accessing mental health services, due to their economic disadvantage. Fan activists then build upon this understanding, creating new language that contributes to a larger discourse of resistance against inequality. Averi desires to raise awareness about the intersecting oppression of poverty and inaccessibility to mental health services. Another example is Lisa, who recognized a need in her community to provide access to affordable, quality pre-school education. While the issue impacted her individual community, she recognized the larger need to help others. Lisa self-identified as a leader to accomplish this initiative. After reflecting on THG narrative, and in dialogue with others, Lisa constructed a fluid subjectivity that dances between Mom, neighbor, activist, educator, and leader. Lisa realized she doesn’t need to march on the steps of Harrisburg’s Capitol Building to lobby for educational resources. She can work behind the scenes to organically organize a program to serve her community.

Averi’s story reflects a similar approach. Like Lisa, Averi identified with the supporting characters of THG narrative, connecting with their ancillary role to initiate and advance social change. Engaging with narratives like THG, as well as fan activism, provides an environment whereby Averi learns about herself as an academic, researcher, and therapist. Volunteering as a data analyst for the HPA, Averi performs a supportive role that brings personal fulfillment and contributes to a larger cause. Minerva also made meaning of her childhood experiences from THG narrative and learned how she can help others who live in poverty by contributing her time and financial resources to the HPA. These examples support the assertion by Jubas (2011), who believes that knowledge and skills typically associated with formal learning can result from informal and incidental learning contexts. Accordingly, my study shows how some women
create individual knowledge and develop personal skills from engaging with pop culture texts that lead to social activism on a collective level.

Primary and secondary participants in this study also demonstrate how individual identity is informed by, and informs, one’s social identity. They interlace in ways not easy to examine separately. Furthermore, these women fans wrestle with knowing and experiencing various positions of individual privilege and social oppression, including what this intersection means for their activist work. Take for example, Averi, who recognizes her privileged position as a Caucasian woman raised in an upper-class home. She also notes her disadvantaged position, as she identifies as queer and gay. The latter initiated tremendous social struggle and instances of discrimination in her doctoral studies. Yet these experiences also caused her to seek out opportunities with the HPA to make a difference in the lives of others. Among many other things, Averi used the *THG* narrative and dialogue with other fan activists to better understand how her multi-faceted identity intersects with her work, passion, and values. This again underscores research on how popular culture texts often become a part of the lives of adult learners, who use stories and characters to make meaning of their subjectivity and role in making the world a better place (Jubas et al., 2015).

**Beyond the Category of “Woman”**

This study affirms the poststructural feminist view of challenging the universal category of gender, particularly that of “woman” (Alcoff, 1988; Tisdell, 1998). Interestingly, most of the women I interviewed spoke little of gender when it came to their activism. I cannot be certain of the reason, but this revelation does challenge a misperception that feminists and women fan
activists focus mostly on gender-related issues. While not ignorant to the injustices experienced by women, participants understood gender does not occur in a vacuum (Flannery & Hayes, 2000). They also recognize activism isn’t suited for better for women or men, but requires a collective effort to fight for causes affecting human health and well-being. This supports the notion that critical adult learning often occurs between the nuanced space of individual and collective learning (Jubas, 2011).

Primary and secondary participants also use THG narrative to support and work for causes they can relate and contribute to, beyond just a focus on women. For example, Ashley considered how the HPA chapter she leads could help her local community. As a white woman, she felt uneasy leading a cause around race relations. So, Ashley’s chapter focused on helping homeless veterans in her community. While our society places so much weight on gender, the women I interviewed and observed focus on other issues like poverty, mental health, “othering”, environmental justice, human rights, LGBTQ rights, etc. Perhaps this was due to the fact THG narrative did not contain a metaphor of women’s oppression, rather offered an allegory for the wealth gap, corporate abuses, and political oppression. Interesting though, Raven noted that most of HPA’s members and volunteers are women. She postulates that perhaps “people who are going to act on social justice are people who are more likely to have their identity fall somewhere on the marginalized side of things”. While her assumption, and my agreement with this assertion, cannot point to exact causality, this certainly offers an opportunity for further investigation and future research as to why. Whatever the reason, the women in this study demonstrate that fan activism can provide an outlet for individual and group forms of resistance, which transcend a focus on gender and looks to the various intersecting ways people experience
oppression. Tapping into their personal agency, fan activists collaboratively share their lived experience with the larger THG fandom. Language was key to this process.

**Language of Resistance**

Within poststructural feminism, language represents a core concept, encompassing more than just vocabulary and grammar (Scott, 1988). Poststructural feminists look to the meaning words hold and their power over us (hooks, 1994; Weedon, 1997). Language serves as a site of divergence and resistance to social norms and expectations (St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). It also serves as an entry point to understand who people are and their relationship to the world (Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). Within this study, the language of fan activism took on very personal meanings for the women I interviewed. Minerva referred to herself as a “rebel”; Gemma, Raven, and Felicity referred to themselves as “leaders”; Lizzie referred to herself as an “organizer”; and Averi, Ashley, and Helen identified as “activists”. Their responses show the power of language to shape individual identity as they work to foster a more equitable world. For many of the participants, the word “activist” was a fluid part of their subjectivity; yet it was intimately tied to their current awareness and engagement in the world. Through language, words like rebel, leader, organizer, and activist derive their meaning from how fans use these terms to differentiate themselves from other fans and even other activists (St. Pierre, 2000). To them, fan activism signifies solidarity and comradery to a larger call for the greater good. These terms became an ideological weapon for the political struggle against systems of oppression. The findings in Chapters Four and Five underscore this argument, as language played a vital role in establishing shared fantasies, as well as for fans moving between the reel and real.
Thus, using language as a site of divergence is critical to the larger fan activist movement, as it fosters the rhetorical vision of fighting for justice and equality as outlined in Chapter Four. Many women fans appropriate symbols and phrases to attribute deeper meaning and connect people to their causes. Through the fantasy theme analysis in Chapter Four and the critical discourse analysis in Chapter Five, the findings reveal fans use language (text and images) to develop this collective fan activist identity. For instance, the #MyHungerGames hashtag offers a searchable phrase on social media, whereby fan activists share their stories of personal struggle tied to social inequalities and view the experiences of others. Fans use additional words and imagery, like the three-finger salute, the Mockingjay, and even song, to “speak” to one another and the larger public about social injustice and the causes behind it.

**Discourse of Revolution**

This language of rebellion contributes to a larger discourse of revolution within fan activism, with *THG* narrative and a sub-set of the *THG* fandom functioning as discursive practices to shape new forms of resistance against social oppression, including the individual identities of fan activists. Within a poststructural feminist framework, the focus resides on how the discourse functions, more than its meaning (St. Pierre, 2000; Theriot, 1990). Moreover, identities themselves are discursive practices (Tomaselli & Wright, 2007). And since these identities are performed, bodies then also become sites of resistance (Alexander, 2007). Hence, the discourse of fan activism is performed both through the language of the body (i.e., three-finger salute) and through awareness campaigns enacted in the virtual and real world. Fan activists create a discourse of resistance by weaving together fantasy and reality using language,
including both written and visual cues (Huckaby, 2010). Scott (1988) notes that part of discourse includes the way society is organized, including categories of people. Thus, examining the resistance movement associated with *THG* series, as a discursive practice, demonstrates how shared language organizes a sub-culture (category) of people known as “fan activists”. As part of discourse, language also determines and regulates accepted “truths” shared among a group (St. Pierre, 2000). The truths of *THG* fan activism were highlighted as the fantasy themes in Chapter Four and CDA themes in Chapter Five.

Further examining these shared themes within poststructural feminism affords the ability to understand the more creative ways some women fans challenge and negotiate categorical differences, particularly as they relate to larger social truths (Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). The women I interviewed and observed often resist the space of binary oppositions, by clinging to both categories and creating new meaning in the nuanced space between. Their answers and perspectives expose these binaries (discussed in the next section) as social constructions (Scott, 1988). They also challenge the power of one category over another, affording equal weight to both by usurping the hierarchy. By deconstructing these categories, the findings reveal how new meaning is (re)built and new truths established among fan activists.

**Queering the Binaries and Redefining Social Truths**

The findings from this study elucidate several key binaries some women fans challenge as they develop an activist identity when engaging with critical popular culture pedagogies, like *THG* series, including: a) youth versus adults, b) fun versus serious, c) pop culture as entertainment versus pop culture as social critique, and d) fan versus activist. By deconstructing
these binaries, fan activists expose the oppositions as social constructions and not natural occurrences (Scott, 1988). Tisdell (1998) says when adult learners examine what society prescribes as “normal”, they create new truths and their identity shifts in the process.

To begin, many fan activists challenge the notion that youth genres of pop culture rank inferior to texts meant for adults, specifically in their ability to make a significant impact on the world. They define a new type of activism that merges meaningful work with fun and collaboration, which traverses physical and digital boundaries. These online spaces reflect informal learning environments, whereby fan activists acquire the language and skills of resistance (Lammers, 2013). The women I interviewed all spoke to the ease of reading THG, which they believe holds great appeal by larger audiences, offering potential for an incredible reach. Minerva, Averi, Lisa, and others spoke to the struggle of fan activists to gain legitimacy in a world where youth is often viewed by society with tension. While Western culture promotes maintaining a youthful appearance, being young also carries a stigma of disregard. And if youth signifies naivety, then stories for youth have no serious place in the world of adults.

Interestingly, the reverse appears to be the case in many fandom circles. While most participants referenced age in discussing the challenged legitimacy of THG (i.e., the series is often disregarded because it’s situated within the young adult genre), both Helen and Minerva referenced various forms of ageism in the fandoms. Thus, this study illuminates a tension in the way age is viewed within fandoms and among fan activists. On one hand, some may view youth as inferior when it comes to the relevancy and impact of young adult literature and films. On the other hand, advanced adulthood is viewed as inferior when it comes to participation in a fandom. When viewed together, these tensions reflect a continued friction between this binaries, whereby society struggles to accept youth and adulthood in the same context.
The second key binary challenged by some women fans relates to the opposition between serious work as an activist and the joy of being a pop culture fan. Women fan activists represent a blend of both identities with varying degrees on the spectrum. This study supports the work of R. R. Wright (2008), who argues meaningful work can be personally rewarding and fun, including work that involves pop culture. Fiske (2010) believes the value of pop culture resides in its ability to be used by people in whatever way they please. Meaning, pop culture affords fan activists the opportunity to be creative, and even radical, when using narratives in their advocacy efforts. Furthermore, C. Jarvis & Burr (2011) found pleasure and emotional engagement with popular culture were central to the transformative learning process in adults. They argue many of us learn best when we enjoy the content and process. My study adds further understanding to this belief, showing how many fans merge their love of story with their activist work. During the interview process, it became apparent participants believe some pop culture texts provide a space for enjoyment, while offering material to initiate conversation and action to help make the world a better place. This supports the work of R. R. Wright (2007, 2010b, 2013a) and R. R. Wright & Sandlin (2009b), who note stories tap into the creativity of the mind. In Chapter Four, Felicity notes how she loves a good story with a moral she could relate to. This allows many fan activists to not only enjoy the fantasy of a story, but imagine a better future they can work towards (C. Jarvis, 2012). In Chapters Four and Five, Raven shares what drew her to organized fan activism, as a volunteer and then employee of the HPA, was the notion of approaching social justice work through the lens of storytelling. It’s exciting for her to use things most people call “nerdy” to help make the world a better place.

This excitement proves energizing for fans, allowing them to weather the long, arduous road of working toward social change. It demonstrates how fiction can help generate feelings of
empathy and social consciousness (C. Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). The women I interviewed were not naïve to the seemingly impossible feat of toppling systems of injustice and inequality; but being a fan activist allowed space for fun and connectivity that kept them motivated. Felicity says, “It makes you feel more a part of something. It gives you myriad of opportunities to add fun to the process of volunteering or advocating a cause”. As the findings in Chapter Four reveal, fan activists get to imagine themselves as heroes and then live out those fantasies out in their activist efforts. They do not confuse the imaginary with reality, but use both to collaborate with each other in a larger game of resistance.

This leads to the third key binary defied by women fan activists that pop culture cannot function as both entertainment and to initiate critical reflection. The work of fan activism creates a new understanding of how some pop culture can be taken seriously as a catalyst for social change, as many scholars argue (Brown, 2011; C. Jarvis, 1999, 2012; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Sandlin & Maudlin, 2015; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). Within the literature, there exists conflict as to whether pop culture dupes the masses or can also function as something critical (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944; Giroux, 2000, 2004). Most of the participants in this study recognize THG narrative as a complex text—one that challenges and reinforces dominant ideologies. The women I interviewed understand not all pop culture may offer messages to challenge dominant ideologies; rather, a few narratives offer this radical possibility.

Furthermore, participants explain it’s what fans do with the narratives that makes the difference. In Chapter Four, Helen draws a correlation between THG and her experiences in fighting for human rights in South Africa. Referring to the THG narrative, she says there was a critique within the films of today’s society. This illustrates the power of pop culture to mirror the ugliness of society back to its members. Some narratives hold the potential to challenge
unequal power relations, which can be used as an initiating mechanism for social change (R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). While participants recognize some problematic constructs in THG, and other pop culture texts, they apply segments of these narratives in their activist efforts. Thus, fan activists strive to refine their own critical view of media, while using the entertainment value to draw others into conversation.

This leads to the final key binary challenged in this study that pop culture fans cannot also be serious activists. On the contrary, many women fan activists successfully merge the reel with the real. This supports the existing literature on how everyday living experiences offers opportunities for resistance (Hemphill & Leskowitz, 2012; Jubas, 2011; Sandlin & Maudlin, 2012; Scardaville, 2005; R. R. Wright, 2007, 2010b; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013). However, this fusion is not without tension. Some participants in my study expressed their struggle with enjoying THG and other pop culture narratives, because they know these texts originate from large corporations looking to make a profit. Thus, many recognize the paradox of enjoying something that also serves to perpetuate the consumerist cycle. Averi notes her internal struggle with being a fan: “It feels very capitalistic watching The Hunger Games. When it is for your enjoyment and your pleasure, you like the story. But equality feels a lot like oppression to people who don’t face it”. The latter part of her statement speaks to the interesting reaction by some in the larger population. They may enjoy a fictional narrative like THG—where subjugated people topple oppressive systems—yet they simultaneously express a frustration and disdain for sub-sets of the population in the real world protesting against the same concepts encompassed in the story. In Chapter Five, Averi used the Black Lives Matter movement as an example to express her frustration about the current social climate in America, whereby a large segment of white people express ignorance to the oppression experienced by the
black community. White obliviousness and denial is so pervasive, a resistance movement is needed to call attention to the harassment and mistreatment happening to black Americans in cities around the country. Thus, Averi challenges the double-minded thinking of some people to enjoy a story about challenging and overcoming oppression (ex: THG), yet at the same time disregarding similar movements happening in real life (ex: Black Lives Matter). Many fan activists, like Averi, work to challenge this thinking. And they also work against the notion that fiction and reality cannot blend into meaningful work.

Through this deconstructing and rebuilding process, THG narrative contributed to the learning experiences of participants to ascertain how they might change the world for the better—this was detailed as fantasy theme findings in Chapter Four and the CDA themes in Chapter Five. They discovered how their unique qualities and individual skill-sets may function as a different form of activism. For example, Averi learned she could apply her knowledge and experience with quantitative data analysis to help the HPA further its work; while Lisa learned she could organize to bring quality pre-school education to her neighborhood. For Averi and Lisa, along with the other women I interviewed and observed, they experienced an evolution in their identity as they reflected on THG narrative and its connection to their personal life and society at large; which supports existing literature on perspective transformation from pop culture (R. R. Wright, 2007; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b).

Many scholars contend that identity continually shifts in connection with various social systems (Alexander, 2007; Gauntlett, 2008; Tisdell, 1998). My study highlights how some women fans learn to blend their love of pop culture (i.e., identity as a fan) with their passion for social change (i.e., identity as an activist or advocate). While I refer to these participants as “fan activists” this label does not exclude their association with the oppressor as well. Raven shares
that when the HPA teaches people through popular culture, “it helps people explore how part of their identity is being part of the Capitol and part of our identity is also being a part of District 12”. Thus, Raven and other fan activists work to understand what it means to be a part of the Capitol and the Districts, as metaphors in the real world. They make meaning of these different components of themselves and work through systems of oppression and privilege affecting their lived experiences.

Accordingly, this process certainly engages the rationality and affectivity of adult learning (Tisdell, 1998). THG narrative provides a bracketed, fictional space for fan activists to work through the emotional experience of personal and systemic oppression. Some scholars believe fiction offers learners the ability to understand the experiences of other people (C. Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). Through story, they navigate the overlapping spaces of thinking and feeling, using characters and plotlines to imagine next steps they might take. Averi believes THG story helps people learn to empathize with the oppressed. She hopes people learn empathy through engaging with stories like THG. And empathy, she believes, spurs activism. She says, “Once you grapple with having empathy and walk in the shoes of these characters, there’s not really a way you can still be a good person and not care about these social issues”. Averi’s statement demonstrates poststructural feminist thought, of how rationality and affectivity function as interconnected influencers in the learning process for adults, including women fans (Tisdell, 1998; Weedon, 1997). Yet, what exactly did the participants in this study learn about activism from THG? To address this question, I turn to a discussion of the implications for viewing the narrative as a form of popular culture as public pedagogy.
Learning to Resist

I’m frequently amused by the responses of people who scoff when I ask them to consider popular culture as a critical influencer of society. Their faces say it all—they’re amused. Some individuals can’t imagine how entertainment media shapes our identities and perspectives of the world. It’s all for fun and leisure—right? Yet, the 2016 United States Presidential election challenges this thinking. Donald Trump, the candidate chosen to run one of the most powerful countries in the world, rose to fame as a fake “reality” television personality. With almost no political experience, Americans entrusted a man best known for his corporate brand and fabricated television image with the future of their country. The election of Donald Trump represents one of the many examples where the screen now defines and shapes our reality in most countries around the world.

Consequently, many adult educators and scholars recognize the importance of taking popular culture seriously for its pedagogical qualities, understanding the possibility of ruinous consequences if we don’t, as well as the potential for positive implications if we do (Sandlin et al., 2010a; van Zoonen, 2005; R. R. Wright, 2010b, 2013a). Reflecting on the opportunities resulting from *THG* series and other similar pop culture texts, the findings in this study elucidate the potential impact on self and society from a seemingly trivial young adult book and film series. My study adds to the small body of literature that draws attention to the potential influence of young adult fiction on adult learners (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Jansen, 2015; C. Jarvis, 2015; Lucey et al., 2013). C. Jarvis (2015) believes young adult fiction offers complex and conflicting teachings of adulthood as learners engage with books, television shows, and movies. But the work of fan activists is not child’s play. I believe this fictional pop culture narrative, and others like it, deserves the attention of academia. My study answers the
call of adult educators to examine the impacts and learning experiences resulting from these critical public pedagogies (Sandlin, 2007; Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). I also believe the academic community must further explore the ways fans use these stories to connect, learn, share, mobilize, and affect the world together.

**Adult Education, Pop Culture, and Activism**

As it relates to adult education, analyzing how women fans use their favorite pop culture franchise as a vehicle for informal learning and advocacy allows readers of this study to see the prospect of using pop culture as a potential catalyst for social change (Brown, 2011; C. Jarvis, 1999; Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). The findings in Chapters Four and Five illustrate how many women fan activists recognize inequity and unbalanced power relations as neither a natural state nor an acceptable one. Using the *THG* narrative, they learn to challenge this distortion and help others to see the same. Grace (2013) believes in the power of creative and self-expressive exercises to help adult learners challenge social issues. My study affirms this assertion, demonstrating how informal and incidental learning happens in physical and virtual spaces (Lammers, 2013). While a worldwide revolution did not result from *THG* series or from the organized efforts of the HPA (yet), the women I interviewed and observed online acquired a language of rebellion and took steps to initiate social change. The participants in this study all demonstrate a critical awareness, particularly noting the importance of using *THG* as a platform for reflection and dialogue with others. This supports literature on the ability of adult learners to make connections between pop culture and social issues affecting one’s identity (Hutchins & Bierema, 2013; R. R. Wright, 2007; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b).
Returning to origin of cultural studies, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson consider popular culture as distinct from the culture of the masses (Steele, 1997). They view popular culture as originating from working people and linked to moral movements. This rings true for the *THG* series and the emergent activist sub-set of *THG* fandom. Many people, including numerous women fan activists, learn to challenge dominant ideology through everyday experiences, using some of their favorite pop culture stories. This study provides another interesting perspective on how cultural products and texts are used to transform society (Jubas, 2011; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Therefore, I believe my research carries forth the vision of Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson—along with many other adult educators before me, like bell hooks, Jennifer Sandlin, Robin Redmon Wright, Christine Jarvis, Kaela Jubas, etc.—to elucidate the ways some forms of pop culture shape radical adult learning in informal settings.

Along this thought pattern, my research supports the literature on how women can develop an activist identity through everyday experiences (Jubas, 2008, 2011; Jubas et al., 2015). The findings in Chapters Four and Five add to this idea by illuminating how some women develop an activist identity through engagement with critical public pedagogies, like *THG* series, as well as through interacting with other fans in virtual spaces. Further, literature in this field also highlights the informal and incidental learning experiences fostered by engagement with pop culture (Akar-Vural, 2010; Collier et al., 2009; Guy, 2007; Hutchins & Bierema, 2013; C. Jarvis & Burr, 2011; Jubas, 2008; Jubas et al., 2014; Lammers, 2013; Mclean, 2013; Paul, 2000; Stack & Deirdre, 2006; Taber et al., 2014; Tisdell, 2007, 2008; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007; van Zoonen, 2005; R. R. Wright, 2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2013b; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2009b; Yosso, 2002). My study adds to this body of research, as it examines the informal learning experiences of women fan activists who enlighten and educate one another online using *THG*
narrative. Through their work, they defy what I call the “The Fandom Mystique”—a play on the work of Betty Friedan (1963). This mystique creates a misperception that fandom and activism do not or should not belong together. On the contrary, those with an affinity for pop culture are taking up important work in the world, using their favorite narratives as a catalyst for social change. As Chapters Four and Five detail, these fans appropriate the role of heroes, working towards a collective call for justice and using story as an entry point for activism. Friedan (1963) values adult education, noting that radical ideas are often not instinctual, rather developed through education. In this study, the incidental learning of women fan activists occurred in an informal context, using THG as material for discussion, reflection, and action with other fans. If anything, my study underscores the importance and impact of understanding the relationship between informal, tacit learning and activism within the pop culture fandom.

Women fan activists in this study also exemplify the vision of Lindeman (1926), who contends adults can change society, as they express their individual aspirations in new ways and within new environments. While Lindeman never imagined fan activists sharing information, rallying together in online spaces, and mobilizing in the streets to raise awareness, his perspective underlies the root of such a movement. He believes when people understand the forces and systems that oppress, inhibit, and subjugate, they begin a journey toward liberation. Some fan activists use the Internet and social media as effective vehicles for inviting others to participate in this journey. Thus in this context, informal adult education offers an opportunity for critical thinking and learning; it has simply taken new forms outside academia.

Street (1997) calls attention to the capacity for people to develop strong feelings toward an issue from popular culture, which most certainly contributes to their identity formation. Along this thinking, R. R. Wright and Sandlin (2017) contend culture is an inseparable part of
our identity. These authors argue, if texts shape identity, then they represent sources of political thought and action. As in the case of *THG*, this series initiated a passion for challenging systemic oppression by offering women, and other fan activists, a way to funnel their emotions in political action. Thus, fan activism challenges the concern expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) that media and popular culture stupefies the masses. In some cases, fan activists demonstrate the ability to see beyond the entertainment value of pop culture.

But many fans activists also recognize the tension within some pop culture to function as a potential call for social change, while also serving as a source of entertainment—depending on how the fan chooses to use the text. Briggs (2007) speaks to this notion, saying people hold the power to appropriate pop culture material to their liking and reinvent its meaning. In the case of many fan activists, they choose to hack the *THG* narrative and use the material as cultural acupuncture to challenge systemic oppression—much like other activists who resist and recreate commercial culture to transform society through “culture jamming” (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). Fan activists acknowledge *THG* is a production of Lionsgate, whose ultimate goal is to turn a profit. Yet, in Chapters Four and Five, Raven provides examples of how people can become thoughtful consumers and fight the commercial machine. This is the educational space the HPA occupies. Raven believes that fans even have the opportunity to potentially shape the media and entertainment fishbowl they live in. Revolution began with a spark in the fictional story of *THG*, and the women I interviewed and observed strive to create similar sparks all over the world.
The Hunger Games as Critical Public Pedagogy

Turning to the notion of popular culture as public pedagogy (hooks, 1996; Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011), fan activism combines grassroots activism with commercial spaces like social media and other online platforms every day. Many of the women I interviewed and observed gained knowledge and understanding of new ways to resist from narratives like THG, along with other similar stories, and from fans. They applied this knowledge in both virtual and physical spaces. Accordingly, THG represents a form of critical public pedagogy where individuals can learn the language and tools of activism (Dentith, O’Malley, & Brady, 2014; Sandlin, O’Malley, et al., 2011; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). They also learn from other THG fans how to use various resources and activities to advocate for social change. For example, Ashley recognizes the fun and fulfillment possible from collaborating with other fans to help homeless veterans in her community. Lizzie and her HPA chapter created a THG toolkit to share with other fans online, encouraging them to help the refugee crisis in Europe. Several of the other women I interviewed imagined themselves in the world of Panem, embodying the various qualities of different characters as they wrestled through the social issues presented in the story. This reaffirms the understanding that public pedagogies acquire meaning through performance (Giroux, 2000; Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015). The women I interviewed and observed didn’t solely watch and read THG series, they performed the narrative in their daily lives.

Thus, texts like THG help to shape what it means to be a fan activist. Minerva emphasized several times how the story illuminated she was a rebel, where she learned to apply her past experiences and skillsets to help those in need. Lizzie learned it doesn’t take a large number of people to make an impact on society, but the willingness and determination to take a stand for something she believes in. Averi learned she possesses talents useful and beneficial to
an activist organization like the HPA. Each one of these women typifies the opportunities for individual growth and its potential impact on society, resulting from engaging with critical, pop culture public pedagogies. This affirms the work by Giroux (2000), Tisdell (2008), R. R. Wright and Wright (2015), and others who highlight the ability for popular culture to offer a common ground for exploration of new ideas, critical reflection, and dialogue about difficult subjects—though this literature speaks to facilitated classroom discussions. My study further adds to the conversation, showing how this happens not only through formal education, but in online spaces as fans collaborate to address real social needs. The HPA often functions as facilitator of critical learning in this educative process, using popular culture stories and online spaces to incite exploration, reflection, and dialogue among fans.

**The Hunger Games as Radical Aesthetics**

Concurrently, *THG* also functions as a form of radical aesthetics (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). The narrative offers *sound warnings* against the distractions of cultural bread and circuses (i.e., uncritical media and pop culture), as Helen spoke to in her interview. *THG* narrative also warns of the implications of segregating people whether physically or categorically, as Jack explained with her conversation on “othering” in Chapter Five. Further, it presages the trauma of war and the related struggle of lacking access to mental health services (i.e., PTSD), as Averi pointed out in Chapter Five. These are just a few of the many warnings fan activists extrapolate from the narrative. But *THG* also raises awareness about what fans activists might do to change this state of affairs. Just like the Districts joined in resistance against the Capitol, so too can fans activists band together to initiate change. Moreover, *THG*
helps to *build solidarity* and rally people behind a shared vision (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). This is the foundation upon which the HPA operates. As described in Chapter Four, the rhetorical vision shared among many women fan activists reflects a moral fight for justice and equality. Thus, *THG* offers a message for people to *claim empowerment* and challenge the status quo, which ultimately leads to alternative ways of knowing and being (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). All of the women I interviewed expressed an appreciation for learning about themselves and the world through *THG* and other similar narratives. It helped them envision a new way of thinking about and being in the world, including how they might help to change it.

Accordingly, the HPA offers one example of organized resistance, teaching critical media literacy to its volunteers and members. The HPA then encourages those fans to engage larger audiences with understanding the influence of popular culture on their own lives and in society. Thus, some fan activists take on the role of educator (while not always identifying as such), using *THG* as material for their critical pedagogical efforts. Therefore, the findings in this study uphold the existing literature on using pop culture as a vehicle to initiate self-reflection and challenge oppressive structures and social injustices found in the world (Gazetas, 2000; Guy, 2007; Taber et al., 2014). My research adds to this understanding by showing how some fans activists engage in this self-reflection individually and through organized online efforts, such as employed by the HPA. This addresses a gap in research, whereby much of the consideration on pop culture to facilitate learning is within the context of the classroom (Brown, 2011; C. Jarvis, 1999; Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015).

Recent literature examining adult learning from popular culture shows how fictional stories and its characters become a part of our lives in deep and meaningful ways (Jubas et al., 2015; R. R. Wright, 2010a, 2013a; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). My study furthers this
perspective, showing how THG story deeply impacted the lives of many women fan activists. Participants drew upon various qualities exhibited by characters to either make meaning of their own life experiences or as representative characteristics they want to embody. Additionally, the findings add further understanding as to the types of pop culture stories that impact adult learners in this context. Research by Lammers (2013), Taber (2015), and C. Jarvis (2015) suggests that narratives targeted at younger generations carry implications for adult learners. My study affirms that women fan activists not only learn from THG series (considered a part of the young adult genre), but it became an essential part of their identity. Furthermore, many of the interviewees in this study mentioned several other young adult texts as among their favorite pop culture stories. This provides additional understanding for practice, as adult educators consider the types of pop culture pedagogies they may use in their critical pedagogical efforts.

   Thus, my study begins to fill the gap in knowledge about what people learn, and how they develop a critical consciousness, from critical popular culture pedagogies in situations outside the formal classroom. Consequently, my research illuminates the connection between informal learning, pop culture fandom, and activism. Additionally, this cyber ethnographic study of women fan activists informs an understanding of how women learn, make meaning, and construct identities from engaging with one another in virtual and physical spaces, as they advance social justice causes. While the THG narrative and interaction with other fans helped to form an activist identity, what specifically did they learn about themselves through this process?
Activating Personal Agency

First, the women in this study learned they possess the power to influence society and help others (Brown, 2011; C. Jarvis, 2012). Using a shared currency (described in Chapter Five), they discovered ways to exploit *THG* story in support of their efforts. They drew upon the narrative to recognize and appreciate their own strengths and offerings (André & Hofmann, 2015). Gemma says she learned the criticality of not only standing up for what you think is right, but also the importance of communication with people—of bridging the divides and categories created in society. Averi added to this discussion by drawing attention to the collective impact of these individual learning experiences. She shares her perspective of being a thoughtful consumer—something she learned from the HPA. She says, “Being a thoughtful consumer doesn’t change the world by yourself. But if enough of us do, it does change the world. The Harry Potter Alliance really helped to channel that in different ways”. And Averi shared that while corporations may attach consumerist marketing messages *THG* franchise, fan activists attempt to challenge these companies. Realistically though, without an organization like the HPA to provide critical media literacy education and offer resources for fans to gain this knowledge and dialogue with one another, it’s unlikely the random decisions of individual fan activists to influence corporate decisions would have an impact. So, while my study adds to the dialogue on how critical consciousness can occur without the aid of formal critical educators (R. R. Wright, 2007); further research is needed to uncover other ways similar groups are learning, connecting, and mobilizing to influence society.
Weaknesses Become Strengths

Participants in this study also discovered their flaws and weaknesses did not disqualify them from fan activism. They learned through the supporting characters in THG story (detailed in Chapter Four) that revolution takes heroes from all walks of life. Averi shared her story of connecting to Prim and other characters from the THG narrative, as reflective of her unique qualities that don’t connect with Katniss. Averi understands her talents reside in non-traditional forms of activism. But through the THG story and her involvement with the HPA, she learned how her talents and experiences might be used to help others. Lisa, Raven, Gemma, and many of the other women interviewed and observed online echo similar perspectives. They recognize the flawed nature of characters in THG story, but saw how even the most troubled characters, like Haymitch and Johanna, contributed to the larger rebellion that ultimately freed Panem of its oppressors. This affirms the work of Jubas, Taber, and Brown (2015) and Guy (2007) who believe as adults relate to the stories and characters within pop culture, they learn about themselves and how they can make the world a better place.

Through the learning process, the THG story also helped these women solidify their identity as an activist. It reinforced their passion to fight for change related to causes important to them. Averi says THG story taught her “the world isn’t fair and you have to do whatever you can to level the playing field. It told me a lot about equity and social justice”. She conveys a unique quality of the women I interviewed—that while some people become disheartened by the task of challenging ambiguous systems of oppression and inequality, stories like THG remind fan activists of the greater moral good. They cling to the hope found in the stories they love. I caution readers of this study to not confuse fans activists’ positivity with naivety. Most fan activists understand the reality they face in challenging racism, classism, sexism, etc.
“isms” simply do not collapse because fans take to social media and share memes, stories, pictures, and videos. But as mentioned earlier in this chapter, these actions build on a larger discourse of revolution. They use stories like *THG* to shape and shift the national conversation about injustice and inequality.

**Understanding World Views**

Finally, *THG* narrative helped women fans better understand their worldviews. As they discussed the story with me, and shared previous conversations had with others, the women expressed they learned many new and surprising qualities about themselves, as they interpreted the *THG* narrative through their personal experiences. Averi says, “I learned about the world…. [My] reading also tells me about my worldview…. I feel like most shows I watch, I do so in order to learn more.” Averi goes on to describe how this reflection through story helps her think through areas where she may reflect privileged thinking. Helen echoed this perspective, explaining the relevancy of stories like *THG* to help someone understand themselves better. And therein lies the key: pop culture potentially offers a space where adult learners consider possibilities about themselves and their future that sometimes proves impossible solely through real life experiences. By examining how fan activists use story to share their personal narratives, we begin to see how the workings of popular culture as public pedagogy shapes, and is shaped by, culture (Sandlin & Milam, 2008). In the case of women fan activists and *THG* narrative, they contemplate how they might behave in the fictional world of Panem and then draw parallels to how they can continue this action in the real world. Of course, as many of the women conveyed, this reflection does not occur in a vacuum, but in dialogue with others.
Fighting Alongside Others in Virtual and Physical Spaces

As it relates to the notion of convergence culture, the fan activists in my study collectively function as an informative and interpretive community in online and offline spaces. But they also learn from one another on how to mobilize, collaborate, and advocate toward a shared rhetorical vision. They don’t express interest in shaping the storyline of a narrative by influencing writers and producers, as previously literature discusses (Jenkins, 1992, 2006a, 2006b). Rather, THG fan activists challenge consumer product companies who use the narrative to sell products. Not just any products, but those in clear conflict with the moral of the story. I shared the example in Chapter Five of fans fighting back against the irony of Subway using THG popularity to sell sandwiches (myhungergamesstories, 2015d). Fans challenged Cover Girl for glamorizing the Capitol by releasing a specialized makeup line, whereby consumers could make themselves look like Capitol citizens. Fans also mocked Lionsgate for considering the creation of a theme park around the THG narrative (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015a). Thus, fan activists focus less on influencing writers and directors, and instead target their collective energy on addressing injustices they see in the world.

Building upon previous research on fans and fandoms (Gray et al., 2007; Jenkins, 1992, 2007; W. Zhang & Mao, 2013), I found primary and secondary participants identify as fans of THG series; but more importantly, they identify with those who seek to use the stories they love in ways to help others. Therefore, I share a similar respect to Jenkins (1992) of the intelligence, passion, loyalty, and sense of community shared among fans. But I also admire how popular culture can foster in fan activists a deep sense of commitment to their community and a desire to make the world a more equitable place (C. Jarvis, 2012; Tisdell, 2007). Thus, my study adds to the research on convergence culture on how women fan activists impact their communities.
Additionally, the findings underscore existing literature on how virtual worlds and human relationships coincide with real world identities and communities in everyday living (Bjork-James, 2015). But the findings highlight how fans incorporate learning and activism into their everyday lives. They blend their passion for learning, dreaming, and advocating from pop culture, with each other, in virtual and physical spaces.

While some critique the notion of convergence culture as privileged to those of greater economic means (Brooker, 2001; Hamilton & Heflin, 2011), my study sheds new light on the various ways women fan activists recognize and attempt to overcome this weak point. Fan activists of THG series did not solely engage online; they took THG critical pedagogical material into the streets and connected with people who might not otherwise have the means to access the material online. Whether they engaged with movie goers in theaters or protested alongside fast food and retail service workers, fan activists took to the radical message of THG story into communities where it was needed. Thus, the participants in this study demonstrate how fan activists find ways to connect with others beyond the boundaries of the Internet—whether it was the HPA using Street Teams in their campaigns; or like Minerva, who wore t-shirts with dissenting pop culture messages to engage strangers in conversation when she was out shopping; or Lisa holding organizing meetings in her home.

Furthermore, while Jenkins (2011) believes in the power of fans to influence media and entertainment companies, I found many women fan activists also focus their efforts to influence at the political level; like Minerva, who mentioned her passion for volunteering for her local chapter of the Democratic National Committee. And on a larger scale, the HPA launched a campaign called “Wizard Rock the Vote”, which aimed to mobilize fans into making the commitment to vote in the 2016 Presidential election. As stated on a supporting website:
The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) endeavors to transform this year’s election into a magical celebration of civic duty, complete with voter howlers, wizard parties, and organizer trainings led by beloved fandom creators. We will register hundreds of new voters, inspire thousands to make the commitment to vote, and engage our large network of chapters and members in a creative and dynamic get-out-the-vote effort. We believe the future is ours to reshape, and voting is a crucial first step forward! (Indiegogo, 2016)

As part of this campaign, the HPA created a video featuring fans across the race, class, and gender spectrum, to discuss why voting is critical to the future of the country. While not directly related to THG narrative, this campaign illustrates the organized efforts of fans to engage and influence in the political process. After all, culture is identity and identity is political (C. Jarvis, 1999; Street, 1997; R. R. Wright & Sandlin, 2017). But the HPA’s use of THG series, and other similar narratives, also underscores how fan activists create alternative messages and dissident campaigns by creatively and strategically using digital platforms and social media (Bjork-James, 2015). Language was critical to this process, as the “Odds in Our Favor” campaign used hashtags and symbols to connect fan activists, as well as a Tumblr account where fans could share their personal stories.

Accordingly, the interviews with women fans underscores an important distinction between active fans and fan activists, illuminated by Scardaville (2005) and Zhang and Mao (2013). The authors describe active fans as individuals who participate in typical gatherings like fan clubs and online forums, whereas fan activists strategically work with other fans to achieve a common goal. This was certainly the case with some THG fan activists. Hamilton and Heflin (2011) describe the material produced by fan activists as provocative instigation. Interestingly, Raven, Ashley, and the HPA community refer to it as “cultural acupuncture”—where stories
function as needles to resonate within the skin of our souls and renew our spirit to make good things happen in the world.

*Entry into Activism*

As demonstrated by data from primary and secondary participants, popular culture pedagogies like *THG*, offers a path into fan activism—a journey most did not conceptualize when they first explored this fictional narrative. Yet after women fans discovered the provocative, dissenting storyline within *THG*, many recognized the power and effectiveness of collaborating with other fans to fuel social change. They employ their passion for this pop culture story into making a difference in areas important to them, a notion well established in the field of adult education (Jubas, 2011). Identifying as part of a larger community of *THG* fandom offers a sense of support and comradery to participants. Averi describes how fan activism makes palatable and realistic the work of social change. Additionally, it captures people who might not otherwise consider this path. Lisa fell into *THG* by happenstance. She says, “I just wanted something fun. But I found myself really surprised I was handed this young adult book. I found my surprised at the quality of it and how much I legitimately enjoyed it”. As Lisa describes, enjoyment of the text is key, but so too is the moral connection it offers (C. Jarvis, 2012). While some fans connect through organized movements, like the HPA; others, like Helen, feel connected in spirit through the symbolism and story.

As noted in the work of Scardaville (2005), engaging in everyday activism helps many women fans discover their agency, including how to use their strengths and skills to advocate for change. They learn new abilities and important aspects about themselves. In essence, their
cultural work as critical consumers of pop culture doubles as activist work (Walters, 2011). The women fans I interviewed and observed found passion and purpose in advocating for causes personally relevant to them, but as those causes relate to larger social change. My study, then, calls attention to what and how women fans learn about activism from THG and other fans online. Participants also reflect the assertion of Walters (2011), who states that individuals are drawn to this type of activism, as it marries the quest for social change, with adhering to the demands of normal life. Yet, the findings in my study further this understanding by highlighting how women fans not only find this work meaningful, but fun too. Furthermore, much of their work relates to educating other adults. For example, Gemma seeks to educate people about women’s rights and xenophobia against Muslims through her social media presence; Ashley seeks to educate her community about homelessness occurring in Asheville, NC; Lizzie works with other HPA chapter members to raise awareness around the refugee crisis in Europe; etc. Thus, these women carry forth the notion of education and cultural production for radical social change.

Convergence Culture and Adult Learning

But how exactly do they learn from one another in online spaces? Building upon the work of Jenkins (2006a), he describes five key attributes of fandoms in convergence culture. First, fans pool their knowledge about a franchise within the collaborative enterprise of an online fan resource. In the case of THG fandom, this is best exemplified by fans using the #MyHungerGames hashtag and blog stories. Fans built an educational resource of stories, tips, and tools on Tumblr and other social media channels, where they exchanged a shared currency
for support, solidarity, and inspiration. In doing so, fans connect pieces of information about the franchise from copious sources, a second aspect of convergence culture. Yet, as it pertains to *THG* fan activists, this shared information connects to social justice issues and how to challenge injustice and inequality. Third, they expressed their individual interpretations and feelings between *THG* and reality, sharing personal experiences with poverty, racism, homophobia, mental health struggles, etc. And finally, by sharing these creations online, they created a unique online fandom subculture. In the context of media and fan studies, convergence culture typically explains the phenomenon of fan interaction and collaboration in online spaces; yet my study adds more insights to this concept by demonstrating how fans learn to become activists from one another. Furthermore, the fandom world of the *THG* expands beyond the intimate franchise communities described by Jenkins (2006a), and includes much larger communities talking about issues of race, class, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, and more.

Digital technologies, then, allow fans to connect in virtual spaces that transcend geographic boundaries and develop relationships that provide reciprocal appreciation for a shared interest (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2006a). This was demonstrated by Minerva’s experience of literally creating a new “adopted” family from fellow fans she met by searching online for shared interests. Another example is found with Lizzie’s description on how the Dutch and Belgian HPA chapters collaborated online to discuss *THG* and how they might use the narrative to address issues in their communities. She describes how her chapter organized a series of Google Hangouts to discuss concepts from the narrative and help direct their passion for social change into actionable steps. This affirms the research by Lammers et al. (2012) and Lammers (2013), who found pedagogy at work in online fan spaces, with adolescent fans teaching and learning from one another. The findings of my study further add to this convergence of learning
by demonstrating how some women fans explore a new ways learning, knowing, creating, and *resisting* together. This subset of fan activism exists because of a shared rhetorical vision realized through convergence culture.

For all participants, discussing the narrative and its potential meanings was an important part of learning to become a fan activist, which supports existing literature on more traditional fans (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 1992, 2006b; Lammers, 2013; Lammers et al., 2012). Social media and various online platforms were most often used in this dialogue process (ex: sharing articles, connecting with other fans, etc.). Raven says, “I saw such strong links to real world issues in those stories and enjoyed talking to friends about those”. On a larger level, an important part of the HPA’s “Odds in Our Favor” campaign encouraged fans to talk about injustices they saw or experienced. Raven adds that one of the many moving parts of the campaign was “getting people to talk about real-life economic inequality they’ve encountered and that they experience in their lives”. Thus, the reach and effectiveness of fan activism likely would not happen without the Internet and social media. Jack reflects, “I feel like cultural things definitely influence more so now than before. Because we are so connected to everything, now with the Internet, we’re constantly sharing everything”. Minerva’s own experience illustrates this well. She found out about the HPA and became a part of the organization from exploring online. She says, “After I read [the Harry Potter books], I thought there had to be other people who are into them, like me. So I went online and started looking for any kind of groups or anything that was Harry Potter related”. Thus fans often stumble into activism through the love of story and wanting to discuss it with others. Furthermore, Ashley believes fan activism wouldn’t exist without social media: “I think social media and stories going viral has made fan activism what it is today. Because I don’t think we would even have fan activism as a term or as an actual thing without social
media”. It seems fan activism is closely tied to online engagement as the women in this study describe it. Furthermore, fan activism appears to be an emerging movement, one rich for future research on the varying ways fan activists create collaborative learning communities online.

Fans also learn how to use story to reach others with important messages. By doing so, they challenge the notion of how and from what sources adults learn (Haycock, 2015; C. Jarvis, 2015). Averi shared that many adults don’t believe they can learn from young adult pop culture material. She says, “There’s no reason why you can’t learn from The Hunger Games because you are over the age of 25…. You don’t stop enjoying something because you’re an adult”. Lisa speaks to this same viewpoint, noting at first of how trivial it felt to love THG series, but realizing there’s a lot to learn from the story. She says, “Sometimes I felt silly for loving The Hunger Games…. I think pointing out to people that connecting to a character doesn’t have to be cubby-holed into certain bookstore sections, is important”. These fans share the relevancy of connecting with characters and fictional stories. Collaborating with other fans brought a legitimacy to those experiences, as Lammers et al. (2012) contend. It no longer felt “silly” to connect with the moral call for justice and equality in THG. Fan activism helps this perspective feel real and purposeful. Raven notes that people come into activism not just through story, but because of it. And while they love stories, fan activists want to be taken seriously for their efforts. Consequently, this sub-group of THG fandom discover ways to merge their love of story with their passion for making a difference. Ashley hopes that once it’s clear fan activists read young adult books, but use the material to help make the world a better place, “that’s when fan activism will take off even more than it already has”.

Accordingly, women fan activists are beginning to shape the national discourse around what legitimates material for social movements. At the same time, they enjoy the fantasy worlds
of their favorite stories. Participants in my study understand they are part of a larger effort to advance social change, while believing in the power of story to imagine a better future. Thus, the love women hold for their fellow citizens, combined with the belief that things can change and a hope for a better future, underlies fan activist efforts. Perhaps this line of thinking is what draws fans to the HPA and fan activism. It’s the processing of learning about oneself and how they might touch the lives of others. Jack shares that “you don’t have to change the world, but you can change part of it…. Or you could change the life of one person who goes on to do something phenomenal”.

It’s this novel approach to activism that uses story and social media to reach fans and help them learn about issues affecting their lives. In turn, they are challenged to share with their networks. This supports the work of Curwood (2013), who found pop culture offers parallel texts to help young adults draw upon their life experiences to enhance the learning process. My research furthers this understanding, by illuminating how some women draw upon the THG as a parallel text to learn about to initiate social change and help others to do the same. Minerva says, “If you have nothing, but have hope and believe that you can do it, then you will find a way to succeed”. Whether or not one sees the impact of fan activists’ work on a large scale, each woman in this study experienced a profound shift in their thinking and identity because of THG story and others like it. In Chapter Four, Ashley shares she could not imagine herself not being an activist. Her declaration reflects the essence of my research. I aim not to measure the level of success by women fan activists, but determine what they learned about activism from THG narrative and from other fans, including how their identity was shaped by this critical popular culture pedagogy in online and offline spaces. Fans do not advocate in silos, but in support and collaboration with other causes. For instance, the HPA partnered with organizations like Our
Walmart (fair treatment of employees), Fight for $15 (raising the minimum wage), and the Black Lives Matter movement (challenging police discrimination and brutality), along with many other social justice causes. Thus, the effects of their efforts may be hard to quantify. Nevertheless, my study reveals the importance of pop culture and online collaboration in the process of women learning about themselves and their role in social change.

Conclusion

Although this cyber ethnographic study adds several insights to the field of adult learning as it relates to women and fan activism, there is much more to learn about the informal and incidental learning that occurs through critical popular culture pedagogies in virtual spaces.

Returning to the opening of this chapter, my study represents a smaller part of a much larger narrative, one even more complex than the findings indicate. Thus, it’s a useful exercise to outline the limitations of this research, along with suggestions for future research in this area. Others must carry on this story, layering their own findings and experiences to add to this exciting narrative of fan activism for social change.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

All research has limitations and this study is no different. The following describes several limitations identified throughout the course of my research, along with associated recommendations for further exploration. The first limitation connects to timing. I began this study as the national spotlight on the THG film series was ending. On the one hand, this provided me with the opportunity to discuss THG phenomenon as the last film was being
released, which offered a real-time perspective from participants. And many of the women I interviewed still had a raw connection and response to the story. On the other hand, this study didn’t benefit from the distance of time to examine the long-term effects of the narrative on the identity development of these women or to ascertain the larger social impacts of fan activist efforts resulting from the series. Further research could revisit this topic, and even re-interview participants several years in the future, to understand the lasting impact of this popular culture pedagogy on their individual selves and the impact of their efforts on society.

Second, while this study represents an ethnographic project, the interview participants represented a small sub-set of the larger fan activist population. The women interviewees were all Caucasian, except for one (Lisa), and well educated. Furthermore, most were American, with only two providing an International perspective (Lizzie and Helen). And only one individual voluntarily expressed a queer, gay identity (Averi). However, fan activists encompass a vast array of backgrounds, experiences, and demographics. Future research could further examine how race, class, ethnicity, physical ability, sexual orientation, or geographic ties intersect to inform participants’ understanding *THG* narrative and their activist efforts. This would help educators understand how different adult learners might engage with and make meaning from various critical popular culture pedagogies.

Third, this study primarily focused on *THG* series; yet during the interview process, each participant mentioned several other narratives they found meaningful and related to their activism in some way or another. One could examine similar young adult narratives, in relation to fan activism and adult learning, to draw out common themes and qualities. Additionally, one might conduct an action research study to examine how *THG* and other pop culture narratives could be used to initiate radical learning and developing a critical consciousness among adult
fans in virtual, incidental learning contexts. The HPA could even be solicited to participate in this process, tapping into their vast network of volunteers and members.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the topic of gender did not rise to the top of most conversations with interview participants. While my study focused on the learning and identity formation of women fans, applying a poststructural feminist lens meant the category of gender was not of primary importance; rather how intersecting identities shaped the learning experience. However, this does not mean gender did not play an important role in how the women viewed THG narrative or in developing an activist identity. Future research might delve deeper into the role of gender among fan activists. Raven mentioned in her interview that a majority of the volunteers and members of the HPA are women. Future research could explore the reasoning behind the apparent trend and what this means for initiating social change.

Fifth, this study focused on virtual spaces, including all platforms of social media. I focused on the ways women fans connect and learn from one another, irrespective of the online platform. Yet, each virtual network offers different benefits and drawbacks. More research could examine which type of social media proffers the best platform for informally learning and connecting. Furthermore, I only explored online spaces that were publicly accessible. Yet countless private groups and numerous membership platforms exist for further examination.

Finally, this study occurs within a specific cultural climate and social environment. THG phenomenon emerged during the height of the Great Recession, which lasted from late-2007 through mid-2009. However, the effects of this recession still linger at the time of this write-up. The first book was released in 2008 and the final film released in 2015. Therefore, the socioeconomic environment was ripe for a narrative about economic inequality and government oppression. Hence, this study offers insights into the formation of a specific fan activist
community and the experience of individual adult learners within a particular historical and social context. The findings do not prescribe a future replication, rather suggest ways in which people may look to popular culture to make meaning from their life experiences and learn to improve their lives and the world around them. One could conduct a similar ethnographic study, using other pop culture narratives within another historical context, to add additional insights and correlations to my study.

**Final Reflections**

My own story reflects the essence and origin of this study. I’ve loved popular culture my entire life. Since I was a child, I learned about myself and the world through exploring topics in both fictional and real stories, including scripture. Yet as an adult, I previously disregarded many of these stories as trivial to the “real” learning that happens in the classroom. That is, of course, until I began my journey through higher education. I quickly discovered the serious and important work of examining the impacts of popular culture on how people understand their individual and social identities. At the time I contemplated what topic to explore for my dissertation, I also became enraptured by *THG* series. As I read the books and watched the films, I escaped to a world with complex characters and exciting, traumatic adventures. Yet, I also felt compelled to act upon the moral and political calling in the story—to fight for justice and equality, something the real world desperately needs. I wondered, might other fans feel the same? So I Googled (yes, I really did) “The Hunger Games and fan activism” and clicked on the first link, which was an article from *The Washington Times* (Ehrlich, 2014). I was immediately struck by a photo of a Thai woman with one hand covering her mouth and the other hand giving
three-finger salute, standing in front of an oversized picture of Katniss Everdeen. The title of the article read, “Thailand protests meet ‘Hunger Games’ as demonstrators arrested for three-finger salute”. The opening line declared, “Welcome to ‘The Hunger Games’—Thai style”. At that moment, I knew something remarkable was waiting for me to explore. Do people still scoff when I tell them about my passion for studying how pop culture can help change the world? Perhaps. But like the extraordinary women I encountered along this journey, and the countless others who are working for social change, I have hope. I admire their passion and efforts. Likewise, I believe in the power of story. Together, I believe we can one day change the world.
Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Request permission to audio record.

1) Could you spend just a few minutes telling me about yourself? (Confirm such things as age, education, background, occupation, and other interests.)

2) How long have you been a fan of *The Hunger Games* series?

3) Tell me about what you enjoy about the series?

4) What are your thoughts on Katniss Everdeen’s character? What do you like/dislike?

5) What are your thoughts on President Coin’s character? What do you like/dislike?

6) Are there any other female characters that stand out to you? If so, why?

7) What did you learn about fighting for justice or standing up for what’s “right” from the series?

8) How did the series shape your view of making a difference in the world?

9) What did you learn about women in leadership from the series?

10) Suppose another woman might consider reading the books or watching the films, what would she learn about activism? What about women in leadership?

11) Tell me about your experience as a fan of the series?

12) What have you learned from interacting with other fans of the series?
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Vita

Kathryn J. Sandoe

Kathryn Sandoe spent most her childhood in Overland Park, Kansas, before moving to Southcentral, Pennsylvania during her high school years. After graduating from Lititz Christian School in 1999, Kathryn studied at Millersville University, receiving her Bachelor of Science in Communications (emphasis in Public Relations) in 2002. She spent the next decade working in the professional fields of communications, public relations, marketing and advertising, along with experience in the non-profit sector. Kathryn decided to pursue higher education, studying at Penn State Harrisburg from 2011-2013, under the mentorship of Dr. Peter J. Kareithi. She graduated with a Master of Arts in Communications. Kathryn continued at Penn State Harrisburg, studying Adult Education from 2013-2017, under the mentorship of Dr. Robin Redmon Wright, Dr. Elizabeth J. Tisdell, and Dr. Edward W. Taylor. She graduated with a Doctor of Education in Adult Education. As a doctoral student, Kathryn received the 2015 recipient of the Kathryn Towns Award from Penn State Harrisburg, as well as the 2017 Learned Society of Whispering Pines Graduate Student Award in Adult Education. She also co-presented with Dr. Robin Redmon Wright for the Instructional Improvement Special Interest Group session at the 2013 American Association of Adult and Continuing Education Conference. During her entire tenure as a graduate student, Kathryn continued her professional experience, working full-time in the fields of communications, public relations, and public education.