

“May the Odds Be Ever in Your Favour”: The Sacrificial Logic of The Hunger Games

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The young adult series *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008, 2009¹) has been one of the most successful franchises on page and screen of the last decade. But what motivates the popularity of this admittedly grim tale of teenagers fighting one another to the death? The French literary critic René Girard once pithily wrote that “violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred” (2013, 34), and it is this insight that I will use to examine the connection between the violence of *The Hunger Games* and its broader religious and cultural connotations. Building on the work of Girard and other key theorists of religion like Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida, I shall discuss the *sacrificial* logic at work in Suzanne Collins’ series. Even as I presume neither belief nor unbelief on the part of author and readership alike, I read Collins’ work as manifesting a deeply religious sensibility in the way that it imagines sacrifice in its dystopic future of the United States. In this paper, drawing on the rich philosophical tradition investigating the logic of sacrifice I will draw up a taxonomy of the kinds of sacrifice at work in *The Hunger Games*.

Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* novels narrate the struggle for survival of a teenage girl called Katniss Everdeen in a dystopic world called Panem (a dystopic re-imagining of the future United States), ruled by a cruel authoritarian regime from a dissolute rich Capitol. In the titular Hunger Games, teens from the 12 districts of Panem—but not the Capitol—are chosen by lottery to participate in a televised bloody fight to the death, an all-against-all competition in which only the survivor lives and is rewarded with fame and riches. Two children, one male and one female, are chosen from each of the twelve districts to participate in this gruesome televised spectacle, which recalls the Roman gladiatorial arena as much as it does modern-day reality television. Katniss’s younger sister Prim is chosen by the lottery, so Katniss steps forward to compete in the Games, thus setting into motion the events of the novels. For the districts, the forced sacrifice of two of their children every year is a reminder of their defeat in the civil war 75 years earlier, a warning against ever rebelling again from the rule of the rich Capitol. Although they are staged with the kitsch pageantry of reality TV—complete with inane hosts, stylists, makeup and wardrobe changes—the Hunger Games are a very real means of maintaining Capitol dominance over the districts; a kind of symbolic terrorising that is backed by the superior military power of the euphemistically named Peacekeepers.

Arguably, the *Hunger Games* series stages the ideologies of neoliberalism, the economic and ideological system that has been hegemonic for the last 30 years, in which the social supports of the welfare state have been decimated and a user-pays individualism rules, politically and socially. David Harvey, in his influential *A History of Neoliberalism*, argues that “neoliberalism has meant, in short, the financialization of everything” (2006, 32). As Harvey tells it, there is little left

¹ I have only used the first two books of the trilogy in this paper, as the third book lacks the conceptual clarity of the titular Hunger Games competition. Once she moves away from the arena, Collins struggles to think through a revolution in any compelling way.

outside of the domain of the market, the commodification of every object, social interaction (hastened by social media technologies), even feeling. Only sleep would appear to resist the neoliberal onslaught—and that, too, is under attack (Crary 2014). Furthermore, as Marxist theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi has put it:

in the wake of the Neoliberal proclamation of the end of class struggle, the only social categories remaining are winner and loser. No more capitalists and workers; no more exploiters and exploited. Either you are strong and smart, or you deserve your misery. (2015, 51)

Berardi asks:

what happens when competition becomes the general form of social relation, and the perception of the other becomes disembodied, functional and purely operational? What happens when every relation becomes fundamentally precarious? (201)

Traditional ethics of care have evaporated in the wake of the neoliberal financialisation of affect, what feminist theorist Julie Stephens (2011) calls “post-maternalism.”

Girard and Sacrifice

With its vision of ruthless all-against-all battle to the death, therefore, the *Hunger Games* allows us a view of the ruthless individualist ideologies of neoliberalism writ large in all their brutal glory. But it is my contention that the *Hunger Games* novels also offer a view of what sacrifice looks like in a neoliberal world in which altruism and generosity are in all too short supply. I argue that even when systemic constraints conspire to produce a social Darwinian social field of (rich) winners and (dead) losers, there is still an outside, still values other than self-interest. Religiously inflected sacrifice may in some circumstances be such a value, and with it we see in stark relief a way forward—and back—to broader collective bonds of social solidarity. What does it mean to sacrifice when it could cost you everything? What kinds of choices are possible under neoliberalism? What does it mean to sacrifice in a world where one has few choices? These are just some of the important questions that the *Hunger Games* series raises, allowing us to thoroughly investigate sacrifice, self and forced, in the neoliberal era.

The French literary critic René Girard’s corpus offers a profound and original look at sacrifice. In *Violence and the Sacred* (1978), Girard discusses “sacrificial substitution”, the ways in which the sacrificed animal in the many religions serves as a substitute for a human victim. Girard summarises the motivating theology:

[I]t is the god who supposedly demands the victims; he alone, in principle, who savors the smoke from the altars and requisitions the slaughtered flesh. It is to appease his anger that the killing goes on, that the victims multiply” (1978, 7).

Yet Girard argues that this theology misunderstands the true nature of the sacrificial act, that “the celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act” (7).

Instead, Girard argues that sacrifice performs a kind of *social* function that is decidedly profane in its effects. In his work both in *Violence and the Sacred* (1978) and *The Scapegoat* (1985), ritual sacrifice is the result of mimetic desire, of the competition between subjects over an object that is ultimately resolved by the

sacrifice of a scapegoat. Girard argues that violence has a mimetic property (33), that violence is met by more violence. As a result, sacrifice resolves tension within communities; it is a kind of internal regulating system. Girard says that the “common denominator” in all sacrificial violence is “internal violence—all the dissension, rivalries, jealousies and quarrels within the community that sacrifices are designed to suppress” (9). Sacrifice can therefore be accurately described as a kind of ritual substitution, in which there is a “certain resemblance” (12) between the sacrifice and those for which it (or they) substitute. But at the same time, there is a “degree of difference” that prevents confusion between the categories of sacrificial victim and non-sacrificial community. He argues that “ritual victims tend to be drawn from categories that are neither outside nor inside the community, but marginal to it: slaves, children, livestock” (309). Sacrifice for Girard is a form of “good” violence, one that prevents “bad” violence—the endless cycle of revenge—from occurring in a community. As he puts it, “ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of 'good' violence” (40). It is my contention that the Hunger Games contest that give the novels their name is a form of ritualised violence, and that this illuminates important elements both of religious practice and the neoliberal context in which author Suzanne Collins is writing.

In the context of *The Hunger Games*, what does it mean to analyse the novels through a lens of sacrificial substitution? In replacing her sister, who is called in the Hunger Games lottery, Katniss is most obviously a substitute for Prim. And indeed, in stepping forward, Katniss becomes a substitute for the whole of District 12. As Girard argues, “the victims multiply” (7), so the tributes are a substitution for the *whole* community of the defeated districts. As Katniss narrates it, “taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch—this is the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion” (Collins 2008, 22). The teenage tributes are marginal to their community, and thus effective sacrifices under Girard’s schema, and the “good” violence of their sacrifice replaces the “bad” violence of vengeance—endless civil war between the districts and the Capitol.

But if the Hunger Games substitute for a more substantial violence of the Capitol against the districts—one which becomes more overt as the districts rebel through-out the series—it also serves as a displacement of violence from the districts against the Capitol. The Hunger Games serve as a screen upon which the districts can project their own blood lust for the Capitol, with the tributes serving as a substitute. Though there are no tributes from the Capitol (the Capitol only spectates on the violence), the tributes from “the wealthier districts” (115) one, two and four are volunteers trained for the Games and called “Career Tributes.” These professionally-trained Career Tributes, “fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment” (115), serve as a substitute for the Capitol, for though the poorer districts are unable to strike directly at the Capitol, they are able to watch—and thus desire—violence against the Careers. The sacrificial ritual of the Hunger Games produces the Careers as a form of scapegoat for the violence of the oppressed districts against their Capitol oppressors.

If we follow the Girardian argument, there must also be the substitution of the tributes for violence in the districts among themselves, as a displacement of the rivalries and jealousies produced by the inequality of life under the Capitol’s regime—an inequality that we must recognise is inherent to capitalism itself and

neoliberalism most especially. Katniss notes that “the reaping system is unfair, with the poor getting the worst of it” (15). The system of distribution of food—called the tesserae—is a reference to the distribution of food stamps in the United States today.² The tesserae offers the poor food in exchange for their exposure to violence. The mechanisms to be entered into the Hunger Games, the ballot, is not merely one entry per person, but rather traded for food, so the poorer the person, the more ballot entries they have and the greater the chance of being drawn for the Hunger Games. Katniss notes Gale’s “misdirected” anger at Madge, the daughter of the Mayor, who only has one entry into the reaping—“even though the rules were set up by the Capitol, not the districts, and certainly not Madge’s family, it’s hard not to resent those who didn’t have to sign up to the tesserae” (16).

The sacrifice of all but one of the tributes in the Hunger Games therefore not only reminds the districts of their defeat at the hands of the Capitol seventy five years earlier, but it simultaneously creates and resolves their antagonism with one another. Though the tributes feel a shared hatred of the Capitol, they are nevertheless ultimately motivated by the desire to kill one another. As the sacrificial victims proliferate, so too does the desire for violence, encompassing the entire community. The Hunger Games thus stages and displaces a vast array of violent urges in sacrificial form, desires produced by the very form of community as well as the dissatisfactions of poverty and scarcity in an unequal capitalist world. Girard’s work shows clearly the complicated desires and investments in violence that are resolved by sacrifice.

And yet, as Girard makes clear in *The Scapegoat* (1986), religious sacrifice has a potentially emancipatory element when one examines what Girard considers the paradigmatic form of sacrifice—the sacrifice of Christ. Girard argues that “the essential factor [of the Gospels], though it is never perceived by theology or human sciences, is that the persecutors’ perception of their persecution is finally defeated” (1986, 109). The Passion narrative, then, exposes the violent heart of the sacred, but differs from other sacrificial narratives in that it exposes the guilt of the persecutors. Girard notes that “the Gospels constantly reveal what the texts of historical persecutors, and especially mythological persecutors, hide from us: the knowledge that their victim is a scapegoat” (107). Where myths elide the social scapegoating function of sacrifice, Christianity in Girard’s view lays it bare, showing that “the victims were innocent and the communities guilty” (McDonald 2003, n.p).

In *The Hunger Games*, it is clear that Katniss is innocent and the community of the Capitol is guilty for its sacrificial violence. “Whatever words they [the Capitol] use, the real message is clear. ‘Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there’s nothing you can do’” (Collins 2008, 22). Furthermore, it is not simply the Panem government and those involved in the Games that are guilty, but the audience’s complicity in the violence as a community is similarly criticised. Katniss notes that she is “here [. . .] to die a bloody death while the crowds urge on my killer” (97). Clearly, then, *The Hunger Games* is working on a Christian-derived

² In interviews, Suzanne Collins has explained that the genesis of the *Hunger Games* series came from watching TV and flicking between channels showing the Iraq war and reality TV shows. The exposure to violence for those in the US military, the majority of whom come from poor, working class backgrounds, is therefore analogous to the position of the tributes in the arena. Clearly, Collins is suggesting that sustenance from the government comes with added risk—a strikingly neoliberal proposition.

terrain in which the sacrificial victims of communal scapegoating are glossed as innocent and the communities sacrificing them are guilty.

It may seem at first glance that the high-tech world of Panem—or at least its Capitol—is too sophisticated for the ancient mythological and Christian sources of Girard's theory. But though *The Hunger Games* is set in the distant future, it combines features of the present with those of the distant past. Girard argues that it is only in “primitive” societies that the ritual substitution of “good” sacrifice for the “bad” occurs; modern societies are marked by the “transcendental” feature of law, the replacement of religious sacrifice for judicial justice. As he puts it, “our judicial system *rationalizes* revenge and succeeds in limiting and isolating its effects in accordance with social demands” (2004, 24). The Hunger Games feature a suspension of the legal system—an intrusion of the primitive into the modern, sacred violence into the rule of law. What are we to make of this movement in the text? It is my contention that it dramatises the suspension of the rule of law in neoliberal societies, in which extra-legal actions have been made for the imprisonment and assassination of terror suspects, drug dealers, and even peaceful protesters. These have been made in the service of preventing terrorist violence, protecting the interests of companies, protecting property and so on. This violence is not explicitly sacralised in the ways that Girard describes religious victims, yet there is a clear ritualistic quality to it. Those subjected to this violence have a distinct scapegoat quality: marginal, disposable, close but not too close.

Returning to the *Hunger Games* novels, therefore, we must account for the curious blend of repressive *and* ideological state apparatuses (to use the Althusserian terms) that hold the districts at bay.³ The districts are ruled by the Peacekeepers under martial law using direct shows of force, up to and including execution. And yet even this show of force needs to be supplemented by ideological state violence, and this is where the Hunger Games come in. Though there is very real violence in the arena, as a spectacle the Games are a form of ideological rule that seeks to terrorise the subjects in the districts. Collins is suggesting, therefore, that neoliberal state power cannot be simply repressive: it must be supplemented by ideological spectacle. The Hunger Games competition is a form of both real *and* virtual violence against the districts, echoing the apparent collapsing of real into hyper-real in postmodernity described by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in the 1980s and '90s that is still arguably apparent in the neoliberal world of today. Though the *Hunger Games* novels exaggerate the role of repressive state power in their estranged portrait of neoliberal America—as dystopia almost always does—it is clear that what is being staged is an intensified version of the neoliberal suspension of law and embrace of both repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

But though it critiques—and even partakes in—the neoliberal spectacle of ideological state violence, the Hunger Games as a text remains tethered to the irreducible humanity embodied in various forms of religious sacrifice. Sacrifice in the Girardian sense represents an economy of violence, and one that is not so easily curtailed. The movement from the violence of sacrifice to the transcendental system of law is not final—there is always a temptation towards scapegoating forms of violence to secure the safety of the community. The neoliberal suspension of law

³ For more on repressive and ideological state apparatuses, see the influential work of Louis Althusser (2001).

allows for, perhaps even necessitates, televised ritualistic violence. And yet there are other elements of sacrifice in *The Hunger Games*.

Bataille and the Hunger Games

Though Girard's work is compelling, it is decidedly incomplete in accounting for the religiously inflected motivations of the Capitol, who consume the Hunger Games as a pleasurable spectacle. Collins makes clear references to the culture of ancient Rome, with the very name of the country (Panem) a reference to the Latin phrase *panem et circenses*—bread and circuses. The text thus draws an analogy to the arena of the ancient Romans, with the Hunger Games serving as a similar distraction for the decadent citizens of the Capitol as the gladiatorial spectacles of the Romans. The Romans forcibly sacrificed marginal victims in the arena—slaves, prisoners of war, Christians—just as the Capitol sacrifices the marginal teenagers of the districts; citizens of Panem, to be sure, but not in the same way as those of the Capitol. And just as the Roman gladiators were divided between the prisoners and those free men who volunteered, so too are the Hunger Games divided between the Career Tributes from District One and District Two who train for the arena and those from the other districts for whom the Hunger Games means only an almost-certain death (Barton 1993).⁴

For the Capitol, this decadent ritualised sacrifice can be seen more clearly through the lens of the work of French sociologist and theorist Georges Bataille, who argues that society produces an excess, an “accursed share”, that must be expended in a variety of ways. For Bataille, “if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (1991, 21). Bataille sees this expenditure as manifesting in a number of ways—war, sexuality, potlatch, and sacrifice (including the human sacrifice of the Aztecs). For Bataille, the wasting of this energy is “luxury,” and sacrifice in particular represents the withdrawal from circulation of a useful object (1991, 76). As Jeremy Biles notes:

the imperative to waste and the related glorious modes of expenditure that fascinate Bataille are inimical to the calculations that define a restricted economy based on the tenets of limited resources and concern for securing future interests” (2011, 131).

In other words, luxury is beyond calculation.

If we follow Bataille's line of thinking, it is the very wealth of the Capitol that necessitates the expenditure of useful workers from the districts. The Hunger Games represent a tremendous wasting of energy for the Capitol's producers, viewers/fans, and competitors. With a lottery that draws from each district's youth, the Hunger Games destroys valuable workers and breadwinners, for young people like Katniss and Gale often provide much of the food and income for their families. Youth, therefore, is a resource to be squandered—gloriously from the Capitol's perspective, tragically for the poorer districts. Sacrifice as imagined in this Bataillean economy is an ecstatic destruction of the useful. Biles notes that it is only through this

⁴ Seneca asks a question pertinent to the Capitol spectators of the Hunger Games: “why are the people angered, and consider themselves injured, when the gladiator does not gladly perish? Rather they judge themselves to be despised and they turn, in face and in passion, from spectators to adversaries.” (Quoted in Barton 1993, 22)

uselessness, this luxury, that sovereignty can be achieved for Bataille.⁵ The Capitol's sacrifice, therefore, is about the glorious destruction of the human resource of the districts.

In his analysis of Aztec human sacrifice, Bataille notes that the sacrifice brings the victim into a kind of intimacy with their sacrificers:

As soon as he [sic] is consecrated and during the time between consecration and death, he enters into the closeness of the sacrificers and participates in their consumptions: He is one of their own and in the festival in which he will perish, he sings, dances, and enjoys all the pleasures with them (1992, 60).

Similarly, once Katniss and Peeta are selected as tributes, they are drawn intimately into the circle of consumption of the Capitol, eating rich food, drinking wine and enjoying showers for the first time, and undergoing beauty treatments.

It is here that the role of Effie Trinket and Cinna, the team assigned to make Katniss appear glamorous onscreen, is surprisingly key. The makeover that Katniss receives works to consecrate her as a religious object of sacrifice, as something put aside, special. As Bataille puts it, "sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates" (58). The process of making her over increases her value as a potential sacrifice. Indeed, Cinna creates a dress for Katniss that explicitly recalls the fire of sacrifice, in which "the slightest movement gives the impression I am engulfed in tongues of fire" (Collins 2008, 146).

Indeed, these human sacrifices retain something of an intimacy with their sacrificers for the rest of their lives, for the winners of the Hunger Games like Haymitch are rewarded with wealth and fame, reappearing on television every year. And yet at the same time, as their mentors, the victors also retain an intimacy with the sacrificial victims. The second book in the series, *Catching Fire* (2009), stages this intimacy by returning the older victims to the Hunger Games in what is called the Quarter Quell, a move by the Gamemakers (who control the Games) that is treated with dismay and disgust by the audience of the Hunger Games, for the victors are beloved celebrities to the Capitol. "Surely the creators of the Quarter Quell never anticipated such love forming between the victors and the Capitol." In their spectating on the Hunger Games, a relation has inadvertently formed between the Capitol and the tribute victors, who have been personalised by their interviews with host Caesar Flickerman to a degree that they are no longer solely avatars of the defeated districts. Indeed, the Quarter Quell causes something of a revolt among the audience: "People have been weeping and collapsing and calling for change. The sight of me in my white silk bridal gown practically causes a riot" (2009, 302). It is as though, having once been almost sacrificed, these survivors are consecrated, put aside from the great mass of the defeated districts, those poor who "deserve" their lot (recall again Berardi's description of neoliberalism as a battle between winners and losers, between the strong and smart and those who deserve their lot). As a disruption to the usual run of the Hunger Games, the Quarter Quell's sacrifice of

⁵ Biles notes: "Sovereignty is not, then, a state, a durable status, but rather an excessive and fleeting experience of explosive affects, of passion, as in artistic delirium, outbursts of tears or laughter, varieties of intoxication, and erotic effusions in which the God of reason is incessantly sacrificed. In fact, eroticism and mysticism, closely linked in Bataille's thought, are two privileged domains of sovereign experience" (2011, 133).

victors for a second time is a form of obscenity for even the bloodthirsty Capitol. Furthermore, Peeta's lie in his interview with Caesar Flickerman, in which he states that Katniss is pregnant, is a "bomb" that:

sends accusations of injustice and barbarism and cruelty flying out in every direction. Even the most Capitol-loving, Games-hungry, bloodthirsty person out there can't ignore, at least for a moment, how horrific the whole thing is. (2009, 309)

Thus even the Batailleian form of human sacrifice practiced by the Capitol, which treats youth as a form of luxurious commodity to be gloriously squandered, runs into limits. A pregnant former victor is too human, too close in resemblance to the dissolute rich citizens of the Capitol. As Girard points out, there must be a "degree of difference" that prevents any categorical confusion between the sacrificial victim and the non-sacrificial community that spectates on the sacrifice. Even for the Capitol, which willingly spectates on the death of twenty three young people every year in a gladiatorial arena, there are certain forms of sacrifice that are too obscene to be spectated on.

Derrida and Forgiveness

Yet if the work of Girard and Bataille shows us the religiously inflected sacrificial logic of substitution and luxurious destruction at work in the Hunger Games competition—a sacrificial logic which the likes of Berardi have shown is at work in the neoliberal world today—neither Girard nor Bataille offer us a satisfyingly ethical response to the field of sacrifice, forced and otherwise, and neither offer us a vision that ultimately takes us beyond neoliberal ideology. It is here that we must turn to the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose late work on religion and ethics compellingly shows the ways in which human agency can function in even the most restricted of circumstances. In particular, Derrida's work on debt and forgiveness provides a lens through which to view the ethical responsibilities at work in *The Hunger Games* series.

Derrida shows us the complicated and contradictory paths that debt, obligation and forgiveness may take. In a fascinating deconstruction of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, Derrida has argued that mercy is itself tied up in a Christian economy of grace and forgiveness. In act four of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia makes a famous speech that begins, "the quality of mercy is not strained." In his deconstructive fashion, Derrida paraphrases this speech, saying:

The quality of mercy is not forced, constrained, mercy is not commanded, it is free, gratuitous, grace is gratuitous. Mercy falls from heaven like a gentle shower. It can't be scheduled, calculated, it arrives or it doesn't, no-one decides on it, nor does any human law; like rain it happens or it doesn't, but it's a good rain, a gentle rain, forgiveness isn't ordered up, it isn't calculated, it is foreign to calculation, to economics, to the transaction and the law (2001, 192).

Derrida suggests that mercy is a relation between the powerful and the less powerful, that it "falls" from one person to another.

Forgiveness and mercy are a persistent pre-occupation in *The Hunger Games*, and they are inextricably tied up with an economy of debt and obligation, an economy with profound religious and ethical implications. Katniss is entangled in

obligation to Peeta Mellark, her fellow tribute from District 12 before the Hunger Games even starts. She narrates an event from her childhood in which, starving and desperate and unsupported by her catatonic mother, she searched through the rubbish bins to find food to feed her family. Seeing her, Peeta (who works in his family's bakery) burns a loaf of bread in the oven, thus requiring him to throw the loaf of bread away, ostensibly to the pigs, but to the waiting Katniss. Afterwards, it occurs to Katniss that Peeta had intentionally burnt the bread in order to give it to her, thus causing him to be hit by his mother. Katniss states, "I feel like I owe him something, and I hate owing people" (2008, 39). She wonders how she can repay her debt in the arena, given that the Hunger Games is a fight to the death of all against all: "Exactly how am I supposed to work a thank-you in there? Somehow it just won't seem sincere if I'm trying to slit his throat" (39). Katniss' choices are as restricted as can be, an ethical reduction that recalls only too well the diminution of altruistic ethics in the neoliberal world. But if mercy appears to be a hierarchical relation in Derrida's analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*, what is clear in *The Hunger Games*, where death is a kind of leveller, is that mercy can be dispensed by anyone, at any time. In a world of perpetual precarity, there is a kind of rhizomatic effect to mercy, connecting points randomly, it can be (and often is) dispensed sideways as well as falling.

Yet Derrida's work provides a kind of philosophical framework to analyse the theme of sacrifice—and hence forgiveness—in neoliberalism. Building on his work of the early 90s in *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death*, Derrida suggests forgiveness is nothing if it can be calculated. He says that, "If I forgive because it's forgivable, because it's easy to forgive, I'm not forgiving" (2007, 449). He questions the conditions for forgiveness, asking "how I can be sure that I have the right to forgive or that I've effectively forgiven rather than forgotten, or overlooked, or reduced the offense to something forgivable?" True forgiveness must therefore come without ease on the part of the forgiver, and instead consists only of forgiving the unforgivable. In one of the philosophical paradoxes of which he was so fond, Derrida states that "forgiving, if it is possible, must only come to be as impossible" (449). Forgiveness is an event, and despite its impossibility must nevertheless be done.

How does Derrida's poignant work on forgiveness therefore apply to the Hunger Games? Katniss is bound up in an archaic code of obligation, by the urge to repay—and thus forgive—debt. But it is only when she is in the Hunger Games itself, when forgiveness does become truly impossible, unthinkable in terms of self-interest, that, paradoxically, forgiveness becomes truly possible. Indeed, there are various forms of altruistic self-sacrifice at work in *The Hunger Games*, from Katniss's substitution of herself for her sister Prim in the lottery, to District 11 tribute Thresh's decision not to kill Katniss for her protection of Rue. In Katniss's protecting the twelve year old Rue, Thresh accrues a debt that must be resolved. Rather than kill Katniss, he says, "Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we're even then. No more owed. You understand?" Thresh, who refuse "to play the Games on anyone's terms but his own" is nevertheless bound by the sacrificial logic of the gift, a primeval economy of debt and obligation in which sacrifice must be met with another sacrifice.

But though there is an economy of sacrifice at work here, it would be a mistake to think that Thresh's sacrifice—in which he refuses to kill Katniss, despite the

compulsion at work in the Hunger Games competition—is totally reducible to an economy of debt and obligation. As Derrida puts it in *Given Time*, the gift, like forgiveness, must be “*aneconomic*” (1992, 7), it “must keep a certain relation of foreignness. Derrida states that, “it must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, as a gift, by the process of exchange” (7). As Robyn Horner puts it, “if the gift forms part of an economy, it is implicated in a process of exchange, and the gift is no longer gift but obligation, payback, return, tradition, reason, sweetener, peace offering, or a thousand other things” (2001, 5).⁶ In the aneconomy of the gift, there must be no expectation of recompense for, as Derrida argues, “if I’m expecting the other to thank me, to recognize my gift, and to give me something in return, in some way or another, symbolically, materially, or physically, there is no giving either” (2007, 449). Or as John D Caputo succinctly notes in his gloss on Derrida, “true gifts and radical forgiveness are not good business” (2006, 213).⁷

Thresh’s placing of obligation over even the desire to survive most definitely maintains a relation of foreignness to the economics of the all-against-all fight to the death in the Hunger Games. There is no possible exchange for this one moment of mercy, for as Thresh puts it, it is “just this one time”, exceptional, a reprieve rather than true freedom (for who can free the tributes from the compulsion to kill, besides the Capitol?).⁸ Nevertheless, in doing so, he shows that mercy where ruthlessness is expected is a foreign value to the social Darwinism of the neoliberal economy, that obligation (responsibility towards the other, in Derrida's terms) exceeds the compulsion towards self-interest, even violence—for the Hunger Games is nothing if not the staging of the emotional and physical violence of the neoliberal world. Formally impossible by the rules of the Games, forgiveness and mercy are, nevertheless, possible; an intrusion of otherness into the rule of the same. As Derrida puts it, “there is no more eventful event than a gift that disrupts the exchange, the course of history, the circle of economy” (449).

Self-sacrifice

The final form of sacrifice in *The Hunger Games* is self-sacrifice. Most notably, the end of the first Hunger Games in the novels is marked by the suicidal self-sacrifice of Katniss and Peeta. Midway through the competition, the Gamemakers had declared that there could be two winners of the Games from a district, so Katniss and Peeta formed an alliance that was not based on mutual suspicion. However, after all of the tributes have been killed, the Gamemakers declare that once again, there will only be one winner of the Hunger Games. Faced with a new demand to kill each other, Katniss and Peeta resolve to both commit suicide rather than one of them living with the guilt of having killed the other. Suicide thus offers a modicum of self-determination in the brutal arena in which violence is compelled by the Gamemakers. As Berardi asks, what can be done when nothing is to be done?

Moreover, suicide offers Katniss and Peeta, the avatars of the defeated districts, the chance to strike back at the spectacle of the Hunger Games:

⁶ Horner’s 2001 study of the philosophical and theological implications of the gift in Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion’s work is a compelling and important contribution to the literature on the gift.

⁷ Caputo’s work (2006) is a masterpiece of Derridean inspired theology that thinks through the implications of the gift economy through a Christian lens.

⁸ I have written elsewhere on the economy of the reprieve, specifically in the work of Primo Levi. See McAvan 2011.

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers' face. They'd have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully, while the cameras broadcast it to every screen in the country. If Peeta and I were to die, or they thought we were... (2008, 418)

It is here that the work of Baudrillard is relevant, with his emphasis on the reversibility of spectacle. Though Baudrillard argues that television and other image-based technologies produce a reign of simulation in which image and reality have become collapsed—and this is clearly the case with the televised Hunger Games used as a mode of power by the Capitol—he notes that the dominance of spectacle allows for a reversal in which the disempowered can strike at the heart of power. As avant-garde artists from the Situationists on have proven (not to mention the social media organising of activists in the Arab Spring), the use of image by the powerful is an ambivalent method of rule that can be re-appropriated by the disempowered at times.

There are other instances of self-sacrifice in the series. In *Catching Fire*, the second novel, Peeta is injured and carried by Finnick, another victor from a previous year who has made alliance with Katniss in the Quarter Quell. Finnick also carries Mags, his octogenerian mentor who weighs barely thirty five kilos, as they run from poisonous gas. Katniss recounts Mags' self sacrifice:

I can see Finnick's eyes, green in the moonlight. I can see them clear as day. Almost like a cat's, with a strange reflective quality. Maybe because they are shiny with tears. "No," he says. "I can't carry them both. My arms aren't working.:" It's true. His arms jerk uncontrollably at his sides.

[. . .] "I'm sorry, Mags. I can't do it.

What happens next is so fast, so senseless, I can't even move to stop it. Mags hauls herself up, plants a kiss on Finnick's lips and then hobbles straight into the fog. Immediately, her body is seized by wild contortions and she falls to the ground in a horrible dance. (2009 362)

Mags sacrifices herself so that Finnick might keep Peeta alive, in what turns out to be a conspiracy by a number of victors with Plutarch, the chief Gamemaker. These rebels intended on keeping Katniss alive as a symbol of rebellion in the districts, and Peeta's life is important as a means to keeping Katniss on side. Over the course of the second and third books, others die for the rebel cause, including Katniss' sister Prim whom she worked so hard to protect in the first book.

There is therefore undoubtedly an economy of sacrifice at work in Mags' death, calculated in terms of sacrificing herself to aid the rebellion. Yet there is something irreducible about suicide that resists circulation. As Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death*, glossing Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

I can give my whole life for another. I can offer my death to the other, but in doing this I will only be replacing or saving something partial in a particular situation (there will be a non-exhaustive exchange or sacrifice, an economy of sacrifice. I know on absolute terms and in an absolutely certain manner that I will never deliver the other from his death, from the death that affects his whole being (1996, 43).

Death is, as Derrida argues, the one commodity that is unable to be exchanged, circulated. Death is what is "absolutely mine" (44). As such, the mode of death that

is self sacrifice is (or at least can be) the source of ethical responsibility to the other. As Derrida puts it, “the sense of responsibility is in all cases defined as a mode of ‘giving oneself death’” (43). This work of Derrida’s intersects with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that the relation to the other is at once a provocation towards violence *and* a commandment against it—a paradoxical relationship that seems particularly apt for the Hunger Games. Our responsibility to the other precedes ontology, even. In any case, what is clear in Derrida’s analysis is that self-sacrifice has a dimension which eludes capture, which cannot be reducible to economies in which death comes.

For Derrida, the intrusion of otherness in the manifesting of the impossible always implies a third, an other, which may or may not be the space for God. Derrida’s slogan in *The Gift of Death*—“every (other) is every (bit) other” (82)—problematizes any easy distinction between human and God, insisting instead upon the alterity of every other. As Derrida puts it, “God, as the wholly Other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly Other” [. . .] each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent” (78). As a result, what we can say about the self-sacrifice in *The Hunger Games* novels is that it points towards the fact that ethical relationships, even in neoliberalism, are not bound to calculation, that there remains an element that exceeds compelled competitive and violent relations into something other, a space whose alterity may or may not be God. Derrida’s argument points to a structural relation between the self and the Other in which the subject is responsible to the wholly Other.⁹

Conclusion

Sacrifice in the *Hunger Games* novels is a multifarious thing. The sacrifices of 23 young people in a fight to the death of all against all is a gruesome plot device of Suzanne Collins’, but it stages powerfully the forced forms of sacrifice in the neoliberal present. It is testimony to Collins’ storytelling power that the series allows us to think outside of the neoliberal hegemony and imagine religious and ethical alternatives to the stark neoliberal division between winners and losers. The primal obligation to the Other, as demonstrated by Thresh, shows the ways in which responsibility can trump self-interest, while the suicidal self-sacrifice of Katniss, Peeta and Mags shows that the grim spectacle of violence can be over-turned. At the very least, Collins shows the ways in which ethical responsibility to the Other eludes capture—on the edge of economy, but with a dimension that remains outside the relentless commodification of life under neoliberal capitalism. Sacrifice in *The Hunger Games*, therefore, shows us a wide range of permutations of the sacred—from “good” mimetic violence to luxurious expenditure of violence to the impossible withdrawal of violence. While the first two fit perfectly well with the brutal neoliberal logic of the Capitol, it is in the experience of the impossible that we find something truly important in the text—an unearned, unwarranted grace that points the way out of the ethical dead-end of neoliberal self-interest. While many forms of definitions of the sacred point towards a supernatural origin (for instance, Rudolph Otto’s idea of the numinous, Mircea Eliade’s hierophany), in *The Hunger Games* we find a form of the sacred without supernatural dimension, that occurs strictly

⁹ I take this point from Caputo (1997, 206).

between people: an impossible sacrifice that, nevertheless, happens. The impossible necessitates an intrusion of otherness, something else than sheer economy, unexpected, unwarranted, undeserved—and yet for all that, just and necessary.

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