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In search of values. Reading *The Hunger Games* in an African context

ABSTRACT

*"We have lost our moral compass" is a frequently uttered lament among the ranks of the veteran members of the African National Congress. The refusal to shame a comrade-in-arms is the real discordant note in South African politics. In attempting to give shape to the present situation, this article takes up two quite different studies of shame and honour. Brown's (2016) study of honour in the USA provides the lens for a shame and honour reading of Suzanne Collins' (2008-2010) **The hunger games** trilogy. Brown and Collins, in different ways, point out the dark side of an honour-based society: the neglect of women and children, and the problem of male violence. The hero of the trilogy, Katniss Everdeen, experiences the pull of the Empire's values of honour and empire, and yet finds space to push back against its more brutal aspects. In the space-between, like the Jesus of the Gospels, she creates an empathetic and altruistic zone that fosters the dignity of voiceless servants and people such as Rue, a vulnerable teenager.*

Perhaps the most important practical principle which the contemporary Left can glean from the theory of hegemony is that an old order cannot be made to vanish simply by pointing out its evils, any more than a new order can be brought into existence by pointing out its virtues (Bates 1975:).



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1. INTRODUCTION

“We have lost our moral compass” is a frequently uttered lament of African National Party veterans such as the late Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada, as they survey the fractured landscape of South African politics with its corruption, manipulation, and blatant acts of self-interest. Kathrada was a symbol of traditional values and the theme of the loss of moral compass was used at his funeral (Kathrada 2017). A more recent cry comes from a previous minister of finance, Trevor Manuel, as he reflected on the obvious financial corruption of government officials during the Covid-19 pandemic: “We have lost our moorings” (see Nkanjeni 2020).¹ In different ways, the same sentiment continues to be expressed, without the ruling authorities taking clear action.

This is the enigma of modern South Africa, the quest for values – not because there are no values, but because the value systems are in competition. Some values are used in the defence of corrupt politicians, whereas other values call for these leaders to be held accountable for their actions. Is the honour of such leaders of more value than simple issues of justice and fairness (righteousness)? More broadly, there is the question of the origins of the systemic violence against women and children. Why is the honour and dignity of women and children so easily sacrificed? Why do “honour killings” (*News 24* 2016) still exist? Why is the honour of some people with power in competition with the human dignity of those who have hardly any or no power? While such questions demand answers in normal situations, the presence of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the situation.

In seeking a model for evaluating the present competition of value systems, this article begins with an exploration of values in a contemporary global study (Brown 2016). It then proceeds to a study of *the Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins 2008-2010), one of the most challenging young-adult works of fiction of the past two decades, and the redefining of the values found therein. Finally, it evaluates the present South African situation based on these two works. The methodology that informs the study is based in part on Punt’s (2016) use of Empire studies, which he successfully applied to *the Hunger Games*, and the ideas of the imperial pull of the state hegemony and the pushback of the individuals’ reaction, in their choice of justice over exploitation. This article focuses on the competition between value

1 The full quotation reads: “We’re a country that has lost its moorings and it’s a deep, deep tragedy because we’ve come from a very special place as a country. The transition from apartheid to democracy has been a very special process but I think we’ve lost our moorings and now there have to be actions” (Manuel, as quoted by Nkanjeni [2020]).

systems based on cultural values such as honour and those based on human dignity, using Katniss, the central character of *the Hunger Games* as a touchstone.

2. A CONTEMPORARY STUDY OF VALUES

Brown's (2016) monumental study *Honour bound*, the result of decades of research, shows how the cultural ideal of honour has impacted on American society. The consequences are several, with both a light side (politeness and emphasis on family) and a dark side (a penchant for violence; Brown 2016:19-41). Brown (2016:11-15) traces modern American values of shame/honour back several centuries to the turbulent United Kingdom-context of the Ulster Scots. Speaking generally, Punt (2016:12) would add that

Every encounter between cultures involves an in-between space which refers to the site of conflict, interaction and mutual assimilation in such encounters from which hybridity results.

Trapped between the forces of the English and their self-seeking rule, and the predatory incursions of the Highland Scots, the Lowlanders were forced to find their own way, within a state of moral confusion. Subsequently, groups of these same Scots were forcibly moved to Northern Ireland, where they experienced intense cultural alienation, lawlessness, and oppression. Honour systems seem to be hardwired into the human psyche, requiring specific social conditions to bring it to the fore (Brown 2016:180). Brown (2016:173) concludes that "a sense of lawlessness helps to create the social building blocks for honor cultures" and, in this case, the Ulster Scots or Scotch-Irish deferred to a system of shame and honour. Later, these same people emigrated to the fertile lands of the American Southern and Western states, with not only their families,

but also the beliefs, values, and social scripts of an honor culture that had incubated for nearly a millennium in the strife-stricken Lowlands of Scotland (Brown 2016:13).

Over the past three decades, comparative statistical studies by Brown and his colleagues (see Brown 2016:199-202) have shown how honour among White male Americans in the Southern and, to a lesser extent, the Western states manifests in various ways. Among the descendants of the Ulster Scots, family takes precedence over nationhood; family custom replaces national custom (Brown 2016:15); White male reputation overshadows the honour and dignity of others, especially women, who

are expected to keep themselves pure from any perceived form of shame (Brown 2016:51). Brown's (2016:43-60) studies indicate that, in some areas in the USA, where honour is highly valued, there are higher degrees of domestic violence and an increasing likelihood of school shootings (Brown 2016:34). On the other hand, there may also be higher levels of bravery exhibited in war (Brown 2016:90-94), albeit accompanied by higher levels of recklessness (Brown 2016:79-94). Similarly, at the state level, honour states tend to invest heavily in the military and lightly in mental health institutions (Brown 2016:74). Interestingly, the wider community tended to adopt these primary values, showing the pervasive influence of the Scots ancestors. Thus, location has become a primary ingredient in the dispersal of social values within the states of the USA (Brown 2016:26).

Contrary to popular views, religion, even fundamentalist thinking is not a contributing factor to adherence to the honour code. In the USA, considering that the Bible Belt falls within the boundaries of several honour states, one might assume that there is some continuity. In fact, Brown (2016:155) describes this connection as "a statistical ghost" and his research (Brown 2016:154-156) has shown extensive discontinuity instead. Similar findings emerge from Jordan (Eisner & Ghuneim 2013). Muslims, who support honour killings, are not more or less likely to be religious. As with Christianity (Brown 2016:1540), religious adherence is not statistically vital to studies of honour cultures. In fact, one may discern a tension between forms of religion, especially in Western countries, and adherence to the honour code. Bowman (2006) showed that religion, including Christianity, has undermined the honour code in Western countries. Brown (2016:154-156), following Bowman (2006), reasons that, since both religion and the honour code espouse social values, there is competition between these two value systems leading, in some instances, to the displacement of the honour code.

Brown (2016:184), albeit fleetingly, draws attention to the dignity code as an alternative to the honour code. For Brown (2016:184), the dignity code offers a powerful counter to the honour code, especially to its dark side. Where the honour code demands constant defence and maintenance on the part of the individual, a dignity code assumes a certain intrinsic value for everyone. Brown (2016:184) does not develop the origins of the dignity code, other than to spell out the differences from the honour code, which are considerable, as is also apparent from a reading of one of the great young-adult novels of the early 21st century.

3. THE HUNGER GAMES

Suzanne Collins is the author of the well-known trilogy *The Hunger Games*, now made into four blockbuster movies and achieving almost cult status. What sets this young-adult fiction apart is its appeal to a wider audience and its resonance with activists across the globe and, less positively, in feeding conspiracy theories. In addition, the novel has come under scholarly purview, including its imbedded value systems (Punt 2016; Henthorne 2012; Pharr & Clark 2012; Dunn & Michaud 2012). Essentially the three novels, *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), form a dystopian trilogy set in a post-apocalyptic world. Dunn and Michaud (2012:15) define dystopian writings as

functional works that take a negative cultural trend and imagine a future or an alternative world in which that trend dominates in every aspect of life.

The cautionary element in *The Hunger Games* warns that human society is fragile and might easily turn into a dystopian reality,

where children are slaughtered for entertainment, power is in the hands of nearly untouchable tyrants and workers starve as the affluent look on and laugh (Dunn & Michaud 2012:15).

The Hunger Games redraws the map of North America, reducing that world to a subtler scale and recolouring society as sharply divided into those who have and those who have not, whether it is access to luxury, information, or power. The imaginary world, called Panem (Latin for bread), is ruled over by “the Capitol”. The inhabitants of the Capitol enjoy wealth and prosperity, while various forms of entertainment and decadent meals keep them ignorant and satiated. By contrast, the people of the widely separated outer districts are forced to supply the needs of the Capitol. The twelve districts wallow in poverty and squalor, while armed and often ruthless peacekeepers keep them under strict subjection and in ignorance and fear.

The reader discovers the world through the eyes of a 16-year-old young woman named Katniss Everdeen, who lives in the remote District Twelve, a coal-mining village. Katniss lost her father in a mining accident and is to be found in the care of her mother, together with her younger sister Prim. The use of the first-person narrative and the present tense enables the reader to view and experience the world through her eyes. Katniss is a reluctant hero (Pharr & Clark 2012:12), who nevertheless sets in motion a remarkable transformation of her society. Her character, which initially appears simple, is quite complex and at times contradictory (Olthouse

2012:40). Only by degrees do the thoughts of Katniss reveal the strength of character that makes her remarkable.

The story begins with the words of Katniss:²

When I awake, the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim's warmth but find only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the reaping (Collins 2008:3).

Following a failed revolution against the state, *The Hunger Games* had been inaugurated as a brutal punishment some 74 years previously. Each year at the reaping, two teenagers (a boy and a girl) from each of the twelve districts (the thirteenth is believed to have been destroyed) are chosen to fight in the Games – a fight where only one victor will survive. The allusions to the Roman gladiatorial games are unmistakable, as was intended by the author (Henthorne 2012:14).

In the use of the term “arena” and in the name of the country, Panem, there is reference to the common Roman expression *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses) attributed to Juvenal, a well-known Roman writer of the post-Republic era. By supplying free bread and lavish entertainment, the citizens of Rome were kept passive, thus allowing the state to have its own way (Collins 2010:223-224). Katniss herself comments:

The writer was saying that for full bellies and entertainment, his people had given up their political responsibilities and therefore their power (Collins 2010:223).

These words, spoken in the final volume of the trilogy, are a remarkable insight into the earlier thinking of Katniss.

Like the Roman gladiators, the fight to the death in *The Hunger Games* takes place in an arena, but with a futuristic difference. In this artificial world created by the game-makers, there are thousands of hidden cameras to observe the participants, making for a television spectacular. Early in the first volume, Katniss explains:

The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins (Collins 2008:18).

2 While I will identify the words as those of the character Katniss, they come ultimately from Collins, the author of *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

Pavlik (2012:31) describes the games as

the ultimate in terror tactics because they are played with the lives of innocents ... there can only be one victor.

Passionately, even compulsively, the audience of the Capitol will watch the games on their televisions, while the districts are the forced observers of the public screenings. The game-makers will manipulate the environment, introducing mutated animals and plants and generally ensuring that the audience, especially those in the Capitol, are kept on the edge of their seat. Each time a tribute dies, their death is announced by the sound of a canon firing, and their faces reflected in the sky at nightfall. Eventually, when only one tribute is left alive, that person is proclaimed the victor and made financially secure for the rest of his/her life.

The character of Katniss embodies beauty, courage, and strength, which the reader only discovers by degrees. Because she was given a Mockingjay brooch to wear in the games, in time that will become the symbol of her struggle against the state. The Mockingjay was a hybrid creation, a mixture of mockingbirds and blue jays, designed by the state to spy on the peoples of the districts, until it was subverted and used against them. There is an obvious sense of irony in that the state's own creation becomes a tool of its destruction and of the empowerment and emancipation of the people (Olthouse 2012:37).

The Hunger Games trilogy is informed by Collins' own life as the daughter of a professional soldier, who served the US Airforce at home and abroad (Henthorne 2012:80-94). In a key interview (Blasingame & Collins 2009), Collins refers to her father's criticism of the later American foreign policy (regarding Iraq and Afghanistan), and remembers him crying out at night – the nightmares being the aftermath of his time in Vietnam (Henthorne 2012:12-14). The books intentionally paint a dark picture of war (Henthorne 2012:12-18).

4. THE ELUSIVE VALUES OF KATNISS

The Hunger Games has been the object of several academic treatises (Henthorne 2012; Pharr & Clark 2012; Dunn & Michaud 2012). Henthorne (2012) draws from literary studies, gender studies, history, psychology, cultural studies, and the social sciences. In his introduction, Henthorne (2012:2) makes an important claim: "*The Hunger Games* trilogy is a product of its era, just like every other cultural artefact". Moreover, the books address contemporary issues such as gender roles, oppression,

and injustice (Henthorne 2012). While adult dystopian writings warn of what this world might become, *The Hunger Games* addresses what is happening now (Clemente 2012:20),³ in concert with contemporary political power games (Pavlik 2012:30).

Henthorne's (2012:80-94) fourth chapter, in which he appeals to the pragmatist philosophy of James (2000), deals with Katniss' values. Katniss follows a path of "reasonably expected outcomes", which may be analysed and tested, and "insists on discerning right and wrong for herself and acting accordingly" (Henthorne 2012:9). Punt (2016:290) states that

[t]he movie offers no clear or distinctive lines for its villains and heroes, or uncomplicated notions of justice, love and other central themes, and its intricate characterizations defy their easy appropriation in common conventions.

However, Punt (2016) goes further when he demonstrates the value of using Empire studies to depict Katniss' experience of the pull of empire and her resilient pushback (see Winn 2016).

Dunn and Michaud (2012), in an edited collection of articles on *The Hunger Games* gathered under the theme of philosophical reflections on the trilogy, also address the question of values. The complexity and variety found in this instance is in line with Katniss' own journey into maturity. "Along with Katniss, we grow into a deeper understanding of the complexity of morality and moral reasoning" (Averill 2012:118). The complexity is evident in the range of views on the moral core of Katniss' own journey. In this case, Averill (2012:111-119) comments on the feminist care ethic; from a Darwinian perspective, Mann (2012:75-84) studies the altruism of Katniss, and Dunn (2012) of "moral decency". In a second collection of scholarly essays edited by Pharr and Clark (2012), Risko (2012:80-88) discusses Katniss' "liminal choices" and her "revolutionary ethics"; Pavlik (2012:30-38) speaks about power and power games, and Gant (2012) in terms of "righteousness" and "spirituality". Out of this plethora of ideas comes the consensus that Katniss is a remarkable character, best summed up by Barkman (2012:180) who concludes:

All of us, not just the citizens of the Capitol, can learn to love virtue more, but there are some who love it like a girl on fire⁴. They are the hope of Panem and the hope of our world as well.

3 In the sense that the books raise contemporary issues concerning power, identity, gender, and freedom.

4 A reference to Katniss' costume in the opening parade of the 74th Hunger Games.

This article offers its own contribution in suggesting a novel way of reading the trilogy through the lens of the values of honour and shame.

5. HONOUR AND SHAME

The Hunger Games creates a tapestry of colours and textures drawn from ancient Roman society – as is evident in the names of the characters (Plutarch, Octavia, Brutus), place names (the country called Panem, the Capitol, the Arena, and the Cornucopia), weapons (swords, bow and arrow, trident, and net), and chariot displays. The fact that Roman society, not least its gladiatorial games, was deeply embedded in a culture of shame and honour has not been raised previously. Such a value system was engendered in the sense that honour was a masculine construct, including bravery in battle and ritual challenges (riposte). Such honour is not achieved by force or wealth; it is rather a bequest of the public court of reputation (PCR; see Crook 2009). Used in a positive sense, shame was associated with the private world of women, the home, family, purity, and the avoidance of anything that might bring shame on her husband, father or family (see Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:121-124; Schneider 1971:2).⁵ Shame, in a negative sense, particularly from a male perspective, is to be avoided at all costs (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998:123-124). Where the path to the restoration of honour is closed, it is better to take one's own life than to be permanently shamed.

As a lover of classics (Henthorne 2012:14), Collins was aware of this value system. Her own experience as the daughter of a military man (Henthorne 2012:13) would have revealed something of the dark side of this code (see Brown 2016:19-42). However, there is a twist, since *The Hunger Games* both reveals the code of honour upheld in Panem, and brings about its downfall through the deeds and thoughts of Katniss. Initially, as Punt (2016) demonstrates, Katniss is sucked into the values of the games, but in the course of time begins to push back. Using the backdrop of Roman society, *The Hunger Games* makes plain the shortcomings of the myth of winning glory through war and battle, as Collins intended (Henthorne 2012:12-18). At the same time, Katniss demonstrates her ability to compete for honour in a way that surprises the other competitors and ultimately undermines the whole system.

5 “Shame, the reciprocal of honor, is especially important when one of the contested resources is women, and women’s comportment defines the honor of social groups. Like all ideologies, honor and shame complement institutional arrangements for the distribution of power and the creation of order in society” (Schneider 1971:2).

Katniss is an unusual female protagonist in the sense that her behaviour, attitudes, temperament, and character seem to fit the norms of masculinity more than of femininity (Miller 2012:102).

In the thoughts of Katniss and in her dialogue with other characters, from the opening pages of the first volume, there are elements of the typical honour code (Collins 2008:21-22). At the start of the first novel, an overdressed and somewhat distracted Effie, who is the representative from the Capitol, describes her own role as an “honour” (Collins 2008:28). When Katniss offers herself in place of her younger sister Prim, Effie remarks: “Don’t want her [Prim] to steal all the glory, do we?” (Collins 2008:23). The notion of honour permeates the actual games and infects all the competitors. Katniss remarks: “[W]inning the reaping is such a great honour, people are eager to risk their lives” (Collins 2008:22). The competitors from the wealthier districts are nicknamed “the careers” and for them, according to Katniss, “winning [the Games] is a huge honour, who’ve been trained for their whole life for this” (Collins 2008:36). “Career tributes are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, but only because they are the Capitol’s lapdogs” (Collins 2008:161). They are also quick to feel shame, as when Katniss wins a victory over them (Collins 2008:133).

Other elements of honour include the sense of moral obligation and the burden of reciprocity (see Culver 2012:67-73). Culver (2012:69) explains that Katniss judges the world “through a lens of debt and reciprocity”. Prior to the games, Katniss’ singular encounter with Peeta was when she and her family were starving, and he gave her bread (Collins 2008:32). The event haunts her, because she feels indebted to him, which she hates (Culver 2012:68; Collins 2008:32). Later, towards the end of the games, Katniss is faced by Thresh, one of the strongest competitors, who breaks the rules and spares her life (Collins 2012:288). He explains that he is doing this because of Katniss’ protection of Rue, who is from his District. His words are:

Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we’re even then. No more owed. You understand (Collins 2008:288).

Katniss responds, “I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it” (Collins 2008:288).

As an emotion felt by Katniss, shame plays out in an incident that occurs early in volume one. When a stranger was killed and another taken into custody by the peacekeepers, Katniss and her friend Gale wisely remained hidden in the woods. Later, when Katniss encountered the girl

as “an avox”,⁶ she was consumed by feelings of guilt: “She’d locked eyes with me and called out for help. But neither Gale nor I had responded” (Collins 2008:83). This memory triggers a sense of shame:

I am ashamed I never tried to help her in the woods. That I let the Capitol kill the boy and mutilate her without lifting a finger. Just like I was watching the Games (Collins 2008:83).

As the games play out, the reader discovers not only the depths to which the game-makers will stoop in the interests of creating a visual spectacle (Wright 2012; McDonald 2012), but also the previously hidden dimensions of Katniss. Towards the end of the games, when it becomes clear that Katniss and Peeta have formed a romantic bond, there is public pressure to spare both. Henthorne (2012:10) describes how

Katniss effectively subverts the Games, forcing the Game-makers to change the rules so that two victors will be allowed. In a sense, she becomes the Game-maker taking control of the Games and altering them forever.

Then everything changes again as the game-makers revert to the original rules, where only one victor is allowed. The climax of *The Hunger Games* comes when Katniss and Peeta, her ally from District Twelve and eventual partner, are faced with each other as the sole survivors. Honour now demands that Katniss and Peeta fight to the death. But Katniss, inspired perhaps by Peeta’s refusal to allow the games to turn him into “some kind of a monster” (Collins 2008:149), seeks a better solution. The issues of shame and honour loom large through the entire interaction. Katniss is ashamed when she wrongly interprets Peeta reaching for his knife as an act of aggression: “I drop my weapons and take a step back, my face burning in what can only be shame” (Collins 2008:343). Instead of fighting to the death, Katniss and Peeta stand looking at each other. They refuse to fight and so bring the entertainment intention of the games into jeopardy. Katniss describes the process of her thinking as follows:

Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Game-maker’s faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully, which the cameras will broadcast to every screen in the country (Collins 2008:354).

Her courage and that of Peeta come to the fore, as Katniss offers a solution to their dilemma. They will choose an alternative honourable path,

6 An avox is a person who has been punished by having his/her tongue cut out and forced to be a servant.

by eating the poisonous berries which Katniss has kept, and committing suicide, while at the same time preserving the dignity of their chosen loyalty. In this way, the two teenagers will forestall the intentions of the game-makers to proclaim one of them the victor. The games watched so avidly by the populations of Panem will end in disappointment. There will be no victor.

As Dunn (2012:55) points out, Katniss' motives are mixed and include variously anger against the Capitol, possible adverse reactions from her District if she killed Peeta, or merely a simple sense of decency (see Collins 2008:358-359). Later, when Katniss reflects on her use of the poison berries, she comments:

In the arena, when I poured out those berries, I was only thinking of outsmarting the Gamemakers, not how my actions would reflect on the Capitol. But *the Hunger Games* are their weapon and you are not supposed to be able to defeat it (Collins 2008:358).

As the plot develops, her mentor Haymitch informs her:

Listen up. You're in trouble. Word is the Capitol's furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can't stand is being laughed at and they're the joke of Panem (Collins 2008:356).

Ultimately, Katniss has shamed both the game-makers and the Capitol, and she will carry the consequences of this for the rest of her life. She has played the masculine game of honour; she has fought as honourably as a man, and she has won. This is both her triumph and her tragedy.⁷

6. IN SEARCH OF HUMAN DIGNITY

A key moment in the first volume for Katniss is the death of her ally Rue, a younger teenager from District Eleven (Agriculture). Despite Katniss' attempt to protect her from the other tributes, Rue is brutally murdered. Aware that her actions run contrary to the intention of the games, Katniss decorates Rue's body with flowers and honours her (Collins 2008:237). She is aware that, by necessity, this ceremony will be broadcast live to the nation. From this point onwards, the glory, which is intended to be reflective of the honour of the Panem, is subtly changed, as Katniss herself is changed. Reflecting on the death of her friend and ally, she says:

⁷ Much of the third volume of the trilogy spells out the extent of the post-traumatic shock suffered by Katniss (Collins 2010).

Rue's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice, they inflict upon us. ... I feel my impotence. There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there? I want to do something right here, right now to shame them, to make them accountable (Collins 2008:236).

Her salute for a fallen comrade, made memorable especially in the movie, becomes a symbol of the revolution, and is, incidentally, taken up across the world by protesting workers nowadays.⁸ From the moment of the tragic death of Rue, there is a sense of Katniss' growing conviction to fight back against the game-makers – to seize the initiative, and to use the games, designed to bring shame on the subservient districts, to bring shame instead on the heads of the game-makers (Collins 2008:237). Punt (2016:290) continues:

In fact, *The Hunger Games* is probably the best recent popular presentation of the relationship between political hegemony and people along the lines identified in Empire theory—the experience of concurrent attraction to and revulsion against empire by all those affected by it, in short, the push and pull of empire.

In concurring with Punt's observation, this article would add that, as Katniss pushes back against the system of the Capitol, this includes the values held dear by Panem and its ruling elite. Dunn and Michaud (2012:13) write:

Katniss peels away the layers of lies that swaddle her world and discovers the truth buried beneath its many deceptive layers.

In describing the process of Katniss' engagement with her world, several scholars have given context to the actual process. To the question as to how Katniss changes her world, Averill (2012) refers to her feminist care-gift, as defined by Held (1995). Mann (2012:81) refers to her altruism in the light of the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which argues that empathic concern produces altruistic motivation (Batson 2010). This article suggests that, ultimately, Katniss' caring and her empathy with various other characters in the trilogy lead to what may be described as the simple affirmation of human dignity. Such qualities shown by Katniss are in line with what Brown (2016:184) describes as a dignity culture, in which

8 Protesting students in Bangkok, Thailand (20 November 2014), used this salute after watching one of *The Hunger Games* movies, leading to their arrest and imprisonment (*The Guardian* 2017).

social worth is assumed by default. People in a dignity culture are more likely to grant respect to others simply by virtue of their being human. ... Dignity is *assumed*, whereas honor is *earned*.

Katniss' pushback occurs at the macro- and micro-levels, even before she takes on the role of the Mockingjay. While the subversion of the honour system plays out quite obviously in the trilogy, specifically in the climax to the games in volume one (Collins 2008:343-345), Katniss' actions in according a sense of human dignity are at a more subtle level. For example, one of the forms used by the powers-that-be in Panem is the removal of the vocal cords of dissenters, turning them into "avoxes". Katniss mentions two such avoxes and her dignified treatment of them, the one being a young woman (Collins 2008:77-78, 82, 119), and the other being a sympathetic peacekeeper, Darius (Collins 2008:155, 218-219). In both cases, Katniss accords the voice-less servants their full human dignity, which causes her to be censored by President Snow, supreme ruler of Panem (Collins 2010:365-368). To each relationship, Katniss – and this is the power of the use of the first person-singular narrative – creates a sense of the dignity of the other person. For Katniss, simple human dignity is worth fighting for, even if it means taking on the game of shame and honour.

7. A GOSPEL PERSPECTIVE

Punt (2016:290) describes *The Hunger Games* as an "intertext", which provides a platform for making sense of the New Testament documents and their imperial setting and for interpreting these texts as part of the pushback against the Empire. Returning to the Gospels, we find that Jesus offered a path, to which Christians may appeal. In his time, he challenged the system of shame and honour of Roman imperialism (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998) and pushed back against the pull of empire (Horsley 2016). Jesus questioned the desire for honour found among his disciples, using a child to epitomise entrance into God's Kingdom (Matt. 18:1-5). In addition, when he witnessed the competition for honour displayed at a banquet, he offered a striking alternative to the order of the time (Luke 14:7-11). He rebuked his disciples for seeking positions of honour among themselves (Mark 9:33-37). "Jesus epitomised a way of living which pushed back against the Empire's glorification of honour" (Domeris 2017:267) in his quest for "kingdom values" (Horsley 2016:65-67).

Instead of the pursuit of self-interest and personal glory, as championed by the code of honour,

Jesus' code personified humility and the dignity of others, especially those who were rendered vulnerable or were shamed by their society, including women, children and gentiles (Domeris 2019:19).

Jesus consistently interacted with people who would have been considered dishonourable in his time. In each of these interactions, regardless of the gospel writer, Jesus comes across as granting dignity to that person. He recognised their needs and responded to them as people deserving of the bequest of human dignity. For example, as a host or principal guest, Jesus was seen to eat with people of all ranks (Luke 5:29; 7:34), including tax-collectors, women of dubious reputation, and foreigners (Blomberg & Carson 2005). He openly welcomed the idea that he "was the friend of tax-collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19).

Jesus reached out to vulnerable people such as widows, regardless of race, commended their faith (Mark 7:25-30), and healed their children (Luke 7:12-15). He affirmed the faith and dignity of women, including some of dubious reputation (Luke 7:36-50). He welcomed people who were ritually unclean (the woman with the bleeding disorder, Mark 5:25-34) and touched the lepers (Matt. 8:3). In all these instances, by word and deed, Jesus established the value of human dignity. Katniss, in turn, reveals the power of the competitive edge of kindness (Mann 2012:77-78). She is a primary example of empathy-altruism (Mann 2012:81), a poignant reminder of Jesus.

8. BROWN, KATNISS, AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN SITUATION

As one gazes into the vision of the much-hoped-for post-Covid-19 South Africa, there is a space for a renewed quest for justice and human values – what one writer has termed "a new social contract" (*Financial Times* 2020). In pursuit of such, I return to the writings of Brown (2016) and Collins (2008, 2009, 2010). What would Brown, from the vantage point of his extensive studies of honour in the USA, have to say to South Africa? Hypothetically speaking, he would probably raise the issue of the virtual absence of studies of the honour system operating in the country, except for a brief mention of honour-killings (*News 24* 2016). Theologians and sociologists could play a role in this arena.

Regarding Katniss, I might ask what a girl from a poor mining community, familiar with hunger and violence, would have to say to the country?

Perhaps, in her hypothetical answer, she might mention asbestos roofs⁹ or raise the spectre of gender-based violence. She might even compare the pursuit of wealth and glamour among the ruling elite with the lifestyles of those in the Capitol in Panem. Certainly, she would have something to say about the relentless defence of the honour of comrades to the detriment of justice and the care of the poor. Concerning the responsibility of theologians, Katniss would doubtless express concern about the absence of a prophetic voice in the new South Africa and the need for critical voices in public theology to join in the existing debates.

The debate on cultural values and human dignity has already begun, as is clear from Albertyn's (2009) recent writings addressed to the Constitutional Court.¹⁰ This work has taken her beyond simple legal issues into the realm of values and especially the issue of human dignity, which she defines as follows:

Dignity in this sense goes to questions of status and recognition. It imputes tolerance and respect, a non-hierarchical approach to groups and individuals that should condemn unequal power relations, and their manifestations in unequal status and recognition. It rejects violence, prevents stereotype and stigma and requires us to see the value of people's identities and personal choices (Albertyn 2009:188).

Albertyn (2009:208) also raises the issue of culture, which in a country such as South Africa, is often in conflict with dignity:

Cultural practices are always traversed by power and interests, and it will always be necessary to enforce values and principles that protect the vulnerable. This is true across and within all cultures as the tension between patriarchy and gender equality is 'universal'.

Here is the nub of the issue and a fertile area for theological studies and writings by those who, like Katniss, are committed to upholding human dignity.

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9 On the corruption of the asbestos project in the Free State, see Myburgh (2019).

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