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Making of the Dystopian Space: From District 13 to the Wilds

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Abstract

Dystopian narratives have time and again emerged as both a reaction to contemporary horrors in any society, and a futuristic warning against certain practices left unchecked. One of the primary features of dystopian narratives is the carefully constructed background against which the story unfolds. This background often consists of a disaster or post-disaster area, which houses the dystopian society in question. Just as dystopia is often the direct aftermath of having to sustain utopian façades, the barren land - encumbered by a recent or near past disaster, often bears the brunt of the seemingly perfect society of order and structure, hiding the 'ugly' features of the utopian ideal in many a dystopian narrative. The many characteristics of the barren land, a space that is purported to be unfavourable for people to even live in, give said space a persona of its own, which can be read as a metaphor which runs parallel to the lives of the protagonists of those narratives. This article aims to see how the post-disaster barren land depicted in dystopian literature often acts as a character complete in its own right, through a close reading of the following spaces - District 13 from the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins and the Wilds in the *Delirium* trilogy by Lauren Oliver.

Keywords: Dystopia, Space, YA literature, Landscape, Utopia

Introduction

Literature doesn't take place in a vacuum. The space, the backdrop where the story unfolds lends as much to the story as any other element, such as the plot or the characters. The lives of the protagonists of fictional narratives are shaped by their literary landscapes – physical, social, and cultural (Bleeker and Bleeker 84). Simultaneously, the space or the literary landscape proves to be one of the first tools that helps the audience create a visual image behind the plot. Whether it is the cupboard under the stairs in the first *Harry Potter* (published in 1997) book, or the road in Cormac McCarthy's postapocalyptic novel of the same name, the space where the story is happening, even if the story is not about that space, is of significant importance. This space is both geographical and literary, as its construction draws from the physical landscape and the political territory that is strictly policed by the state.

One of the primary features of dystopian literature that helps set this particular genre apart is the carefully constructed background and context against which the story unfolds. This background often consists of a postapocalyptic or post-disaster area, which houses the dystopian society in question. The spaces depicted in such narratives are often encumbered by a recent or near past disaster, often bearing the brunt of the seemingly perfect society of order and structure. In fact, such spaces are often forced to hide, or suffer the cost of retaining the utopian façade in these dystopian narratives. For example, in Orwell's 1949 novel *1984*, a decrepit London carries the burden of the party's ambition and its continuous war for the sake of peace. This paper focuses on the many characteristics of the barren land in a dystopian narrative, a space that is often purported to be unfavourable for people to live in, let alone thrive. It examines how those features can be read as metaphors running parallel to the lives of the protagonists of those narratives, especially in the

genre fiction of young adult dystopian narratives. Two such spaces in two noted young adult American dystopian series, District 13 from the *Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins and the Wilds in the *Delirium* trilogy by Lauren Oliver, have been explored for the purpose of this study. Essentially, this paper argues that these two spaces do not function as mere settings, but mirror and embody the marginalization and hidden potential of the protagonists, while actively shaping the conditions of their eventual transformation, by delving into the “power of platial experiences” (Moslund 30) in these two series. Moslund explains that literary place is experienced as a primary event by the characters of a narrative, for whom the production of the place is a result of interconnection between the physical place, language and bodily senses (30). He highlights that this place contributes to shaping actions of the plot, rather than being a merely passive backdrop for the narrative to unfold against (30). Both the spaces that have been mentioned, District 13 and the Wilds, are considered forsaken when read as part of the governing narrative presented by the regimes in place. These are spaces that are considered inhabitable, and supposedly only house remnants of society and civilization past.

Dystopia, a natural history¹

Dystopia, the term, derives from the Greek “dys,” meaning “bad,” and the root “topos,” meaning “place”, giving it the literal meaning “bad place” (Stauffer 191). Ellen Kirkpatrick notes that it is a word coined by John Stuart Mill to contrast with Thomas More’s notion of utopia. According to Moylan dystopian fiction usually represents “a society worse than the existing one” (qtd. in Wilson 1). Vivian Greene highlights how “the idea of utopia is frequently intertwined with notions of dystopia,” (2) where an experiment takes a tragic turn and “an optimistic vision can become chillingly dystopic” (6). Looking into Thomas More’s *Utopia*, first published in 1516, she notes that though the author had imagined an isolated island to describe a

better world, in hindsight it seemed like a place that is fascist (Greene 2). Greene further notes that George Orwell’s *1984*, one of the most renowned dystopian narratives of the 20th century that she calls “utopia gone wrong”, is characterized by oppressive conventions and the suffocation of independent thought (2).

Dystopian fiction is characterized by elements that are opposite to those associated with utopia, an ideal place with ideal perfection, especially in terms of laws, governance and social conditions. Greene highlights Charles Fourier’s theorization of utopia as a visionary model of community that would reorganize labour and refashion basic work practice from a dehumanizing or isolating experience into a communal effort that emphasized a shared work ethic and an aesthetically and physically rewarding environment (3). A utopia is a place of good fortune which emulates paradigms of “good spaces of paradise and Heaven” (Claeys 58). By contrast, dystopia is a place where humans are dehumanized and people live fearful and pathetic lives. Baccolini and Moylan highlight how “the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle . . . for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia’s underside” (2). In most dystopian fiction the common elements that trouble a place may vary from environmental catastrophes and social issues to issues of politics, religion or technology, which can present themselves as an immediate or a future threat (Hernandez, line 8). Gregory Claeys situates this disaster-prone quality of dystopia within historical context, and argues that modern dystopian imagination is inseparable from the very real anxieties about catastrophe, environmental degradation and collapse of society as we know it. These anxieties find culmination in both District 13 and the Wilds, spaces which appear as repositories of disaster and collapse.

In addition, such societies are usually governed by regressive totalitarian regimes that do not hesitate to keep the dominant structure of the societal fabric intact, by any means they deem necessary. In fact, one of the most common themes found in almost all the dystopian narratives is society's strict adherence to binary ways of life and in turn, heteronormativity. While most dystopian regimes discourage romance, sexual relationships can only exist within the limits, rules and goals prescribed by the regime. The sole focus of such regime-permitted partnerships is to procreate, and thus future subjects for the system. The systems in power exercise strict repression of psychological, sexual, and bodily autonomy of the subjects residing in it, taking away their existential agency, by means of constant surveillance as well as "fear of spies" (Feuer 84). Simultaneously, dystopian narratives depict that in order to uphold the normative structure, the totalitarian regimes often violate the bodies of its subjects by modifying or altering them, effectively stripping the subjects' personhood. It is through such tampering of the human body the regimes in power manage to dehumanize their subjects. Both Collins' *Hunger Games* and Oliver's *Delirium* series see significant body modifications and alterations done to a number of characters, mostly executed without their consent and at the ruling regimes' behest. Such modifications, sometimes cosmetic, often medical, surgical or psychological, are meted out primarily as punishment, as seen in the case of Effie or Peeta in *Hunger Games*, or as part of governing propaganda, as seen in *Delirium*.

Contrastingly, Lyman Tower Sargent's "critical dystopia" is a concept that undermines previous classifications between ideas of utopia and dystopia (qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 3). Scholars have further built on Sargent's theory to note that critical dystopia helps "critically voice the fears and anxieties" of people in the "new and fragmented . . . post-industrial societies" (Wolmark, qtd. in Baccolini and Moylan 4). Miller points out that they contain hope within a pessimistic narrative structure

and motivate to begin again (cited in Baccolini and Moylan 4). Moreover, Lars Schmeink in his discussion on liquid modernity points out that the "uncertainty, insecurity, fragmentation, and dissolution of social, political, and economic realities that we experience in liquid modernity" are reflected in the ambiguous models of potential change presented by critical utopia/dystopia (67).

The Dystopian Protagonist

The dystopian protagonist is usually someone already living within the existing regime – they are not an outsider. As Parrinder notes, for a society to be dystopian, visitors and travellers cannot come and go freely, as such seemingly perfect societies cannot afford "the disruption caused by a visitor" (6). However, they never come from an affluent background, and are almost always from one of the less advantageous, if not extremely downtrodden, sections of the existing society. Interestingly, despite being marginalized, the protagonist decidedly cannot come from beyond the margins - the unacknowledged or rejected sections of said societies, such as the invalids from Oliver's *Delirium* residing in the Wilds or housed in prisons, or the people from District 13 in the *Hunger Games*. It is imperative that their existence is acknowledged for them to bring about a change to the system they are a part of. The story also delves into their inner psyche often, given their position as the central figures of these narratives, and is often told from their perspective.

However, being a dystopian protagonist goes beyond just being the central character or narrator for the dystopian novel; this literary archetype also involves forbidden curiosity and acts of revolt. They seek beyond what they are shown, and refuse to trust blindly the existing explanations about their society. Lena from *Delirium* who wonders, "They've lied about everything – about the fence, and the existence of the Invalids, about a million other things besides . . . They told us the

raids were carried out for our own protection . . . this, too, might be a lie” (Oliver 280). Similarly, Katniss, the protagonist of Collins’ *Hunger Games* series, questions the veracity of the Capitol’s version of District 13, which they say is “still too toxic to approach” (Collins 166).

The dystopian protagonists often find themselves in situations beyond their control or consent, and as a result, eventually as the central or a major part of a revolt against the existing regime. As Katniss eventually became Mockingjay, the symbol of rebellion in Panem, or Lena found herself working for the rebellion after running away to the wilds, and ultimately became a key figure in bringing the oppressive system down, echoing Sargent’s notion of critical dystopia. Yet, the dystopian protagonists suffer tremendously from overwhelming despondency – they are felled by hopelessness thinking that nothing about their existing condition would change. When Lena witnessed Alex, her love interest as well as an invalid, getting shot by the police, she too gave up on life as she knew it and ran away to the wilds. Similarly Katniss, who was a cynical pragmatist from the very beginning, began struggling with a desperately failing mental health in the aftermath of Peeta getting captured by the Capitol as well as her best friend Gale’s betrayal which led to her sister Prim’s death. They often find no exit from their nightmarish situation, except either in an actual death, like that of the Savage in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), or in a spiritual death like Winston in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), “any glimmers of hope the protagonist may have felt are quickly destroyed” (Parrinder 6).

The Dystopian Space – the Wilds and District 13

Usually, when we think of or hear the word dystopia or dystopian space, even before thoughts of a strict regime come to mind, the thought that takes up space first and foremost is that of a desolate place. It brings to mind the image of a barren land, a place ravaged by natural or political disasters of apocalyptic proportions, remnants of

places bombed or destroyed – which might be full of broken or dilapidated houses, broken roads and debris, with smoke or fumes coming out of different places.

Yet, the abandoned or inhabitable dystopian space is rarely just a setting or a mere physical backdrop. In fact, the space says as much about power structures as the laws of the society do. Grossman argues that spaces of homelessness and wasteland in dystopian fiction are not simply markers of decay, rather sites of dormant resistance and transformation (30). The fringe, the outlands, the area beyond the sanctioned borders are all spaces that the governing authorities have rendered invisible in the official narrative. However, these places quietly harbour what the regime fears most – the possibility of an existence beyond its control. McManus, in her study of the American dystopian tradition, notes how the margins are consistently constructed as devoid of life and dangerous by those in power, and yet it is from those very margins that the possibility of change most often emerges (171). The dystopian space, in this sense, is not merely a reflection of the society’s decay; it is simultaneously its most potent site of resistance.

In Collins’ *Hunger Games* series, the reader is informed from the beginning of a thirteenth and last district in Panem, along with Capitol and the twelve districts where people lived in accordance to hierarchy of importance. It is also constantly portrayed by the Capitol as uninhabitable, with its ruins still smoldering from the toxic bombs dropped on it for daring to lead a rebel uprising. However, in reality it very much exists, albeit underground, with an implicit agreement with the Capitol that they would leave District 13 alone in exchange for the district playing dead and not retaliating against the Capitol (Collins 884). The visible remains of the district that stood above ground were demolished and all access to it was cut off from outside, leaving the district to implode on itself. But it survived through “strict sharing of resources, strenuous

discipline, and constant vigilance against any further attacks from the Capitol” (Collins 885), foreshadowing its eventual emergence as a rival regime under President Coin.

In Lauren Oliver’s *Delirium* series, the wilderness and ruined towns located outside of the verified communities and their legal parameters of the new America are known collectively as the Wilds. Much like in Panem, here too the government claimed that the place was uninhabitable and devoid of people. In reality, there were many camps where people resided, who were termed as invalids and were unacknowledged by the government. The citizens were cautioned to avoid the Wilds and made to believe that even if people lived there, they “must live like animals, filthy, hungry, desperate” and that “They’ll die out soon enough... freeze or starve or just let the disease run its course” (Oliver 116). The people in the Wilds were “not . . . supposed to exist” as they were “supposedly . . . destroyed over fifty years ago, during the blitz” (Oliver 116). The blitz, also known as the Great Sanitation, was a year-long campaign by the government during which all the people who resisted the cure were obliterated (Oliver 212). The perseverance of the invalids make way for the consequent rebellion that removes the tyrannical government from power, in the manner of Sargent’s critical dystopia.

The Dystopian Spaces and Their Protagonists

At the beginning of the narratives, the protagonists Katniss and Lena, along with other members of their communities, were forbidden from visiting other districts or even interacting with people or travelling to other communities without proper paperwork being filed six months in advance. Similarly, District 13 and the Wilds were seen as segregated from the rest of their worlds – from Panem and the new America respectively. While the Wilds were separated by live electric fences, District 13 was mainly kept at a distance through stories and rumours about fabricated toxicity, along with inaccessibility. Yet, as both the

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stories progressed, the readers, along with the protagonists, could see through the propaganda.

The parallel between the derelict spaces and the dystopian protagonists runs deeper than mere circumstance. As Day et al. argue in their study on the female protagonist in YA dystopian fiction, such characters are inherently liminal, they stand on the threshold between compliance and rebellion, between the world as it is and the world they are beginning to imagine (Day et al. 3). A close reading of the texts reveals that District 13 and the Wilds too occupy a similar kind of threshold. These places fail to be either fully within the world of the narratives or wholly outside it. They are spaces caught between old devastation and new possibility, between what the regime insists they are and what they actually harbour. Interestingly, the parallel between the protagonists and the places is not just thematic but structural, with the liminal protagonist and the liminal space being essentially two versions of the same device. Furthermore, as Bleeker and Bleeker note, the relationship between protagonist and place in young adult fiction works in both directions – not only does the space shape the character, but the character’s struggle to accept, reject or escape a place is itself formative (84). Both Katniss and Lena bear the marks of the places they came from as much as the places they found, and it is in District 13 and the Wilds that this second, harder struggle plays out.

The spaces also have a direct and telling effect on the bodies of the protagonists. Day, in her essay on docile and dangerous bodies in YA dystopian fiction, argues that bodily autonomy, who controls the body and how, is one of the central mechanisms that these novels use to stage resistance (Day et al. 84). The two spaces in discussion show discursively different approaches to the question of bodily autonomy with regards to the protagonists. In District 13, bodily control is not dismantled at all, it is simply transferred from the Capitol to a new authority. District 13 residents and their time and

action are stringently monitored. Katniss is assigned a daily schedule, printed on her wrist each morning, regulating when she eats, exercises, and sleeps. While in the Wilds, the opposite is shown to be the case. Lena's body, for the first time, is entirely her own – she can run without needing permission, love without the threat of surgical correction, and feel without the constant surveillance of a government that has classified emotion itself as a disease. Much like the spaces themselves, the bodies and the agency on those bodies of the two protagonists tell the story of their diverging journeys.

However, the two spaces diverge in what they ultimately come to represent. While the Wilds remained a space of hope in *Delirium*, a refuge beyond the clutches of the government, with the citizens finally tearing the fence separating the Wilds down, District 13 emerged as a new and more ruthless power in its own right, far more intent on keeping its subjects in line. Katniss, who sought refuge there after the destruction of District 12, soon comes to realize that “In some ways, District 13 is even more controlling than the Capitol” (Collins 907) and their leader, President Coin, proves a far more ruthless politician than President Snow. This divergence between the two spaces itself mirrors the divergence in the two protagonists' journeys, as Lena moves steadily toward liberation with her association with the rebel movement, while Katniss finds herself caught once more within the machinery of power.

Surveillance is another point of divergence between the two spaces of this paper. Sherwin, drawing on Foucault's concept of the panopticon, argues that the dystopian regime maintains control through the constant possibility of being watched – a surveillance so thoroughly internalised by its subjects that they police themselves (Sherwin 3). In *Hunger Games*, the Capitol's system of control operates on precisely this logic. The Hunger Games, the monitoring of districts, and the mandatory broadcast of state media are all mechanisms designed not merely to punish dissent, but to make

citizens feel perpetually observed. Even District 13 does not escape the gaze of the panopticon, it replicates it. The daily schedule printed on residents' wrists each morning act as its own form of internalised surveillance, a quiet reminder that even in supposed refuge, the body and its movements are still being managed. The Wilds, on the other hand, falls entirely outside this gaze. It is ungoverned and unwatched, which is perhaps why the government works so hard to generate narratives that fabricate its dangers. In this sense, the divergence between the two spaces is not simply a matter of hope versus control, they also represent two fundamentally different relationships to the body under surveillance.

Remarkably, beneath the surface of their divergence, both the spaces in discussion share the structural function that Baccolini and Moylan identify as the “critical dystopia,” a form of dystopian narrative that, unlike its more classical predecessors, retains a utopian impulse, a glimmer of hope that keeps the possibility of transformation alive (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Both District 13 and the Wilds are the physical locations where that utopian impulse is housed within their respective narratives – without them, both stories would be closed systems: pure dystopias with no exit. This resonates closely with Taylor's “hope(less) principle” in dystopian fiction, the idea that the most enduring dystopian spaces and figures appear hopeless from the outside while carrying hope within (Taylor 7). Both District 13, which is rumoured to be nothing but a toxic wasteland, and the Wilds, said to be lawless and unlivable, embody this principle. These places represent hope disguised as hopelessness, waiting to be discovered by the only members of their societies, in both cases the protagonists, capable of seeing through the propaganda.

Conclusion

Both the spaces discussed, Panem's District

13 from *Hunger Games* and the postapocalyptic outlands known as the Wilds from *Delirium*, are not incidental features in their respective narratives. Rather they manifest as structural mirrors of the protagonists and are similarly marginalised, written off, or rendered invisible by the regimes in power. Yet, like the protagonists, these spaces carry within them the same latent capacity for resistance and transformation. Both Katniss and Lena, much like the spaces they come to occupy, are deemed expendable by the systems that govern them. It is precisely this expendability that makes them dangerous to the systems, and which they use to cause the regimes' downfall. As both the series demonstrate, the dystopian regime's biggest faux pas is not military or political, it is spatial. By designating both a place and a person as forsaken, the regimes inadvertently create conditions that lead to their own undoing. It is the abandonment by the state that turns District 13 and the Wilds into threats to the regimes. As these spaces are removed from constant surveillance by the state, the purview of cure, the Capitol's reach, they become the only spaces in their respective worlds where actual resistance can take root without hindrance. This narrative arc reflects the character arc that both the protagonists, Katniss and Lena, display. Removed from the complicity of the sanctioned society, they arise as the only figures capable of imagining something beyond it.

Interestingly, the divergence between the two spaces is as revealing as their parallels. The Wilds are open to citizens by the end of the *Delirium* trilogy as the fences come down, the borders dissolve, and the "disease" the government once sought to contain becomes the thread connecting people together. District 13, by contrast, emerges as another regime replacing the old one, with President Coin assuming the mantle of the same machinery of control that President Snow once wielded. This distinction mirrors the diverging fates of the two protagonists as Lena moves towards a more liberated existence while Katniss finds herself absorbed into the new structure of power.

The spaces do not merely reflect the protagonists' circumstances; they anticipate their fates.

The dystopian landscapes are not mere backdrops for the story of resistance; they appear as the resistance's first chapter. Much before the protagonist raises a symbol, or crosses a fence, the space itself makes the argument that what has been forsaken is not dead, and that the margins are never as empty as those in power would like them to appear.

End Note:

¹ The sub-heading is a nod to Gregory Claeys' book *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017).

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