

Teaching Environmental Justice through *The Hunger Games*

In 2012, social psychologists Twenge, Campbell, and Freeman released a cross-generational study comparing the civic values of the Millennials against those of Generation X and the Baby Boomers. They found that more than previous generations, the Millennials value money and self-recognition above civic involvement. Empathy for others declined between 1979 and 2009 and, according to the study, the Millennials overwhelmingly believe that we live in a “just society,” or that people create and are responsible for the conditions they live in. These results are disturbing, and although it is not immediately obvious, they work in tandem with the finding that “the decline in wanting to take action to help the environment was particularly steep” (Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012, p. 1056).

As an educator and scholar, I found this study startling. Routinely, I teach courses on environmental issues, concerning anything from pollution to food to our beliefs about animals, and since my pedagogy is activist, my teaching revolves around the consumptive habits and lifestyles of my students. I get them to question where the materials they take for granted come from; I link their everyday activity to the impact it has on other living beings. They find this challenging, of course, admitting to feelings of guilt and shame, and sometimes even anger, but by the end of the class, the majority see the world anew and feel empowered to limit their impact on the environment and mitigate the suffering of others through changing their choices. This transformation is empowering and hopeful, but *it isn't enough*. As we enter an age of

escalating ecological turmoil, we must teach environmental values earlier, equipping our students to navigate a world that will pit them against others in the ferocious fight over diminishing natural resources. To prepare them for the future, we need to make the mechanisms by which the world works—as one country exploits another and the wealthy live off the poor—*visible*, so they can make informed choices. In this article, I am going to show how I teach the young adult novel *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) to do just that.

The Hunger Games is perfect for teaching environmental and social justice: it has a gripping plot, it thinly veils the global food system in fiction, making it nonthreatening and visible, and it argues that practicing compassion is the only way to survive a system based on competition. To begin, I will define Environmental Justice and give some examples of how to illustrate this concept. Then, I will give a brief overview of the global food system as well as ways to frame it. Last, I will show how I lead my students to see, through the politics of Panem, how the global food system operates, and discuss how the novel instantiates compassion as an alternative to the politics of greed. Some of these methods and concepts may not be wholly suitable for every grade level, but any teacher can adapt them.

Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice (EJ) is concerned with the unequal distribution of environmental benefits or bur-

dens based on race, class, or gender. Particularly in formerly colonized countries, it is easy to see Environmental Injustice at work as the European Union and

Wealthy countries increasingly import food from countries containing malnourished or starving populations, exactly as the Capitol does in *The Hunger Games*.

the US continue to extract resources under the auspices of trade agreements and through Transnational Corporations (TNCs). But EJ can also be local and, depending on where you live, obvious. For instance, heavy industry is often located in poor neighborhoods or where people of color live; wealthy neighborhoods usually have more and/or nicer parks than poorer ones.

For a long time, food was not an EJ concern, but if EJ is about unequal distribution, then healthy, nutritious, organic food is an environmental “benefit” the poor frequently cannot afford. The highly industrialized, chemically produced food they can afford, then, is an environmental “burden”—the pollution of their bodies through what they are able to consume, if they can afford food at all. An easy way to illustrate this is to ask students how much food five dollars buys at McDonalds versus how much five dollars can buy in fruits or vegetables at the grocery store. They will see there is quite a disparity and that if given the choice, a poor person will of course choose McDonalds over, say, a *package* of carrots, because one gets more

Modern-day Share-cropping

Ensuring that farmers must buy seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides each year replaces local, on-the-ground control of food production with complete corporate dependence. In some places, companies extend credit, and when the farmer gets into debt, the company takes the land as payment, then either leases it back to the original farmer or divides it up among many farmers—a new version of the share-cropping practice familiar in the American South post-slavery.

calories for the money, even if they are comprised of unhealthy fats and chemicals.

The Global Food System—A Crash Course

Because it is complicated, Environmental Injustice in the global food system is hard to see, so I spend time elucidating it for students. Globally, our food system is dominated by a small number of TNCs. (Five family corporations own most of the world grain supply, for example; see Barnett [1980], particularly pp. 154–156, and Morgan [2000].) Worldwide, these companies encourage farmers in the Global South¹ to grow cash crops, offering farmers a reduced rate on seed in exchange for a certain yield. Meanwhile, these same farmers must pay for fertilizers and specialized pesticides designed to work in conjunction with genetically modified seeds that produce only one crop—what EJ activist and philosopher Vandanna Shiva (2007) calls “seeds of suicide.” Finally, based on “market value,” these companies offer a devastatingly low price for the yield, simultaneously ensuring future dependence on the company for cheap seeds *and* the cycle of poverty that guarantees the families have no other options.

In *The Hunger Games*, this phenomenon is most visible in District 11, Rue’s district. The Capitol uses it to grow food and keeps its citizens at the threshold of starvation, mirroring the economic relationships of our world. In 1995, the World Trade Organization (WTO) in conjunction with loans from the World Bank gave the Global North unprecedented power—one might say *economic* policing power—over the Global South. As Raj Patel (2007) explains in *Stuffed or Starved* (a great resource for an overview of the global food system), including agriculture under the purview of the WTO was “the sorest point of contention” in its charter and allowed the European Union and the United States “to keep their strategic reserves of food, while forcing countries in the Global South to cede sovereignty over their agricultural supplies” (p. 97). As a result, wealthy countries increasingly import food from countries containing malnourished or starving populations, exactly as the Capitol does in *The Hunger Games*; further, these countries are denied food democracy and become dependent on a created system, also like the Districts.

Well-known sociologist Friedman (2009) argues

that “food politics are an aspect of class politics” and, I would add, globally entrenched, politically sanctioned racism, which together make unequal access to food an environmental justice issue (p. 1). In other words, hunger is not solely the result of the *inability* to purchase or grow food, it is also caused by preventing the poor from being able to do so through agricultural and economic policy stemming from global imperialism that is driven by outdated ideas of racial superiority. This fact is important; it shows how colonialism—in the form of physical domination—becomes neo-colonialism by way of economic domination, a concept clearly exemplified by the political structure of Panem, which treats its Districts like colonies. Panem, we could say, is a microcosm of our global economic system, reduced to the boundaries of the former United States so as to render it discernable.

Food Disparity and Hunger

When teaching *The Hunger Games* as an EJ novel, I start with food, then the political structure of Panem, and then talk about the two together to illuminate how the novel reflects our world. While *The Hunger Games* is obviously about social justice—the country Panem is, after all, a dictatorship—food justice is subtly woven into the plot. Food arises again and again, but as scattered references in dispersed scenes. Because the references to food are diffuse, and because access to food and eating are an invisible part of our lives (purposely made so), it is easy to miss Collins’s indictment of how the global food system exploits the poor. To get students to see the importance of food in the novel, I ask them to keep a record of the pages where food is mentioned, which inevitably includes almost two-thirds of the novel. We list the citations on the board and slowly go through each; all examples revolve around Katniss Everdeen, because it is through her that Collins illustrates the crushing power of the food system.

Collins establishes the connections between food and oppressive power from the very first page. The book begins as Katniss wakes, puts on hunting gear, and heads to the woods. Readers learn Katniss is forced to hunt due to her family’s economic position. Her father was killed in the coal mines, and although her family received “compensation” from the Capitol, which operates (like any large company) on the belief

that a family can be “compensated” for the life of a loved one, it wasn’t enough to support them for long (Collins, 2008, p. 26). Katniss’s mother is a healer, using plants to treat the injured, but the district is so poor—set in the coal-mining mountains of Appalachia, representing the very real poverty and environmental injustice of the region²—that she often treats patients for free. After her father’s death and the resulting emotional collapse of her mother, Katniss does her best to keep her family alive, “but the money ran out,” she tells us, “and we were slowly starving to death” (p. 27).

Katniss’s entire life is about ensuring her family has enough to eat, and the novel uses her family history to show that her socioeconomic status is controlled and maintained by the Capitol of Panem, which must keep its citizens poor or lose its cheap labor supply and virtually free commercial goods. As she leaves home, Katniss approaches the electrified fence that keeps citizens contained under police surveillance, the food that nature provides just out of reach of the average citizen. Beyond the fence, Katniss tells readers, the woods are “teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, fish iridescent in the sunlight” (p. 9), but the Capitol has made it illegal to “poach” (p. 5) on their lands—after all, it can’t let its citizens use weapons, even if only to feed themselves.

“District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety,” Katniss mumbles as she ducks under the fence that, like much of the Capitol’s propaganda, is more of a panoptical illustration of power than actual barrier (p. 6). Within sight, the food provided by nature is forbidden by law, and after successive generations of containment, citizens no longer know how to hunt or forage; the Capitol has purposefully created a system that prevents citizens from providing for themselves. This is important to point out to students—Panem would prefer that citizens starve rather than break the law. In other words, the political system of Panem controls the entire food supply, and thus *inflicts* hunger.

In addition, Katniss’s hunting skills seem natural, a *fait accompli*, but after looking at the scene with the fence, I ask students to spend a minute reflecting on this question: if I threw you into the deep woods right now, what would you eat? Of course, their first answer is usually animals of some kind, but this is ridiculous: how would they catch these animals? What

do they know about making weapons, setting snares, or animal behavior? How would they know poisonous foods from safe foods? How would they find enough to *survive*?

I return to this scenario later in the book, but these questions help them realize how much Katniss has had to learn by the age of 16 to support herself and her family, and how much they, as students, depend on their parents and the grocery store for survival. As in Panem, our created food system isn't arbitrary, I point out; it is less than 60 years old. But in our modern day, it has become naturalized, and we are entirely dependent on it. Fewer of us grow our own food, which isn't necessarily bad (as it allows us to do other jobs), but it does mean we take our food and those who grow it for granted, and we are increasingly dependent on corporations for our survival. Corporations, I believe, care more about profit than people, and like the Capitol's voracious appetite for capital, this is part of what *The Hunger Games* wants to teach young adults.

In other words, Katniss's life is emblematic of the billions of poor people around the globe who simply cannot afford food. When discussing institutionalized hunger and food insecurity, I break students into groups, giving each a national, global, or local website on hunger. Our students are very Web-savvy, so I use that to encourage them to teach one another about poverty and hunger. Then I tell them, as numerous food-politics writers point out, that globally we produce enough calories per person to feed everyone in

World Mapper

In visualizing data, World Mapper is one of the best websites for almost any discipline and has a powerful effect on students. Using a map of the world, World Mapper expands or shrinks countries based on different indices. For example, on the "human poverty" map, North America shrinks to a sliver and Africa and India balloon to monstrous proportions. World Mapper has maps for wealth, income disparity, imports and exports (including food products), death rates, pollution, and many more. (http://www.worldmapper.org/textindex/text_index.html)

International Websites on Hunger

The websites for the United Nation's World Food Program (<http://www.wfp.org/>), Feeding America (<http://feedingamerica.org/>), The World Hunger Education Service (<http://www.worldhunger.org/index.html>) and Bread.org (<http://www.bread.org>) are good resources when discussing the political implications of Gayle and Katniss's "feast." If your area has local shelters or food kitchens that have websites, these can be particularly powerful.

the world, but hunger is not about insufficient production, it is about disparity. About one million people on this planet are starving, and one million are obese. We have the calories, but their distribution is based more on geography, class, race, and gender than students think. We can see this in the novel when we compare the living conditions and food in District 12, Katniss's home, to that of the Capitol, and then again when we meet Rue, the young fairy-like tribute from District 11, the agricultural region. What becomes startlingly clear in these comparisons is that Capitol residents live in a luxury that is politically *created* and militarily *enforced*.

To illuminate the contrast, it helps to spend time on the first real meal in the novel, which is hard-won and modest. Before hunting, Katniss and Gale share bread traded for caught game, gathered berries, and a goat cheese that Katniss's sister, Prim, has made from her goat's milk. Gale calls this "a real feast," and indeed, where they live, it is (p. 7). Other than this, most of what they eat is comprised of a rough grain, distributed by the Capitol. Both Gale and Katniss take pleasure in this meal because they earned it with their labor; it represents food democracy and sovereignty—their right to control food resources and to exercise food knowledge. This "feast" is the last food Katniss consumes before the Games, where the wasteful opulence of the Capitol becomes a main focus.

In contrast, Katniss's first meal as a tribute consists of multiple courses of rich, delicious food, lavishly laid out in an equally sumptuous setting. The attention to the extravagance that the Capitol showers on the contestants in preparation for the Games

continues throughout the novel, with repetitive and adoring descriptions of meal after meal. Katniss lists for readers: "Mushroom soup, bitter greens with tomatoes the size of peas, rare roast beef sliced as thin as paper, noodles in a green sauce, cheese that melts on our tongue served with sweet blue grapes" (p. 76). I ask students why Collins would describe each meal in detail; after all, most novels avoid mentioning the everyday duties necessary for survival. Collins describes them because for Katniss and hungry children everywhere, these meals are a kind of food pornography and the attention to them refuses complacency.³ At one point in transit to the Games, Katniss wakes and finds the dining car empty of people, but filled with "eggs, sausages, batter cakes covered in thick orange preserves, slices of pale purple melon" (p. 87). Immediately, she compares this with her mother and sister's "breakfast of mush" (p. 87). The food the Capitol can afford to eat and waste seems as if from another world when compared to Katniss's first meal of bread, cheese, and berries.

Collins continually compares the meals the Capitol provides with the living conditions in Katniss's district, which has a high mortality rate. Katniss remarks that "starvation is not an uncommon fate in District 12" (p. 6) and most at risk are the elderly or the injured who can no longer work, or women and children who have lost their primary wage-earner, like the Everdeens, again representing the reality of our world; women and children suffer most from food disparity and chronic hunger⁴, as the students' group research should have uncovered.

At this point, it is essential to talk about the effects of chronic hunger, because we tend to focus on the end result (death) and not on the effects on the living. George (1985) writes in *How the Other Half Dies* that chronic hunger creates citizens "physically less developed and mentally less alert than people who eat enough" (p. 11). She cites studies that show how chronic hunger creates a society of people "permanently damaged mentally" if they have not received proper nutrition in utero and during childhood; this, in turn, creates a cycle where development, political involvement, and even the desire to improve one's living conditions require too much energy (p. 12, emphasis original). George writes, "One wonders, in fact, if those who contribute to keeping these masses hungry do not know exactly what they are doing, since fam-

ished, lethargic, diseased people are notoriously bad at overthrowing anybody" (p. 13). And this is exactly what Collins wants to show: the Capitol seizes all material production while "providing" for its citizens by keeping them at the threshold of starvation, and so prevents them from rebelling against oppression and exploitation. The blunt fact of the matter, both in the book and in real life, is that starvation is a cheap way to control the masses.

After analyzing the meals and before moving fully into the Games, I discuss the political structure of Panem.

Political Force in Panem

Panem is both a consumer-driven and thinly veiled version of the United States, now a dictatorship, and a vision of our future if our

current national ideologies and policies persist.

When the novel begins, the country is comprised of 13 districts, contained and policed by military surveillance. Each provides material goods, food, clothing, and entertainment for the inhabitants of the Capitol, which controls the total-

ity of material production. District 1 produces luxury items, District 7 provides lumber, District 11 grows food, District 12 mines coal, and all of the districts are required to provide *children* for the gruesome and bloody entertainment of the Games. The districts closer to the Capitol have what we might call "favorable trade agreements": they supply luxury goods and services, so that the wealth disparity between the Capitol and the districts is mirrored between the wealthier districts and the poorer ones.

Just as America hires workers in China to make iPads or laborers in Guatemala to grow bananas, Panem controls the price and distribution of goods—and thus the quality of life—in its districts, and in turn creates a "market value" for the lives of its citizens. In this case, the "market value" is incredibly low, and Panem has become cannibalistic, consuming its own citizens as the cost of maintaining control. Consumption is simply consumption in this novel, regardless of

The blunt fact of the matter, both in the book and in real life, is that starvation is a cheap way to control the masses.

what is consumed; in fact, the children dying in the Games are literally *consuming* entertainment.

Collins shows how, in a system where everything has a price, *nothing* is immune—not the basic necessities for survival, and certainly not the poor. The conflation of consumable commodities and consumable populations is one of the strongest ways *The Hunger*

The conflation of consumable commodities and consumable populations is one of the strongest ways *The Hunger Games* invokes Environmental Justice struggles.

Games invokes Environmental Justice struggles. Thus, the Games, the novel clearly articulates, are one piece of an oppressive state apparatus designed to show the districts just how much control the Capitol has—so much so that it can take their children with impunity and not only *subject* them to horrific acts of violence, but force them to *carry them out*. Titling the book *The Hunger Games* emphasizes

the role of the games as a mechanism of oppression to ensure compliance—a televised demonstration of power, starvation, and brute force.

This novel points out particularly that poor children are disproportionately at risk in a society that continually assesses “value.” A poor family can trade their child’s safety for food, known in the book as “tesserae,” and I spend quite a bit of time on this when teaching the novel. For example, Katniss should only have four entries in the pool for the Hunger Games since she is 16—one for each year since her eligibility began at 12 years old—but she took four tessera to feed her family at the age of 12, and since the entries are cumulative, when the novel starts, Katniss’s name has been entered 20 times. In other words, Katniss wagered her life to prevent her family from starving, and it is the system that creates the need for tesserae in the first place. Katniss also notes that wealthier people, like Madge, the mayor’s daughter, do not have to sign up for tessera, which creates anger between the classes that distracts the poor from targeting the real perpetrator of this system. Katniss thinks, “[T]he tesserae are just another tool to cause misery in our districts. A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can

generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another” (Collins, 2008, p. 14).

Because of tesserae, the chance that poor children will die is exponentially higher than in the wealthier districts, as it is globally due to starvation, pollution, war, or disease. In a cross-national study released in 2007, sociologists Jenkins, Scanlon, and Peterson (2007) show that 815 million people worldwide suffer from chronic hunger, with “nearly 20 percent” of these children under the age of five (p. 823). In the United States, we are more privileged, but hardly immune to food insecurity, especially as our class structure continues to stratify into what looks devastatingly similar to *The Hunger Games*, with a small minority holding a disproportionate amount of national wealth. In the United States, 16 million children “lived in food insecure households in 2010,” according to *Feeding America* (2012), which is about 22% of all children in our country (Food Insecurity section, para. 2). Through Katniss, Collins illuminates what students have already discovered via their group work—that within our food system, poor children suffer most.

As I have said, the Games are Collins’s literal translation of this fact, but she also connects *people* to *food* in numerous ways necessary for her young audience. First, Katniss is named after an edible tuber (Collins, 2008, p. 7), but I also point out that calling the day the children are selected for participation in the Games the “reaping” is purposeful—they are nothing more than a crop—and Collins reinforces this again by calling the “reaped” children “tributes,” a Latin term for the grain paid to the Roman empire by peasants or other countries as acknowledgement of submission. Of course, the very nature of the Games mirrors the gladiatorial spectacles of this era as well, with “Panem” deriving from “*panem et circenses*,” or *bread and circuses*—the idea that the masses need only food and entertainment to keep them quiescent.

Collins conflates people with food again as Katniss is prepared for the Games and turned into a commodity, a character for the audience to identify with, love, and ultimately, *consume*. To illustrate how Katniss becomes a “commodity,” I discuss the scenes leading up to the Games before Katniss enters the arena. Her survival depends on her appeal, so first she must be properly prepared by her “stylist” and “prep team” to conform to the desires of the Capitol audience.

While readers expect a before-and-after beauty makeover, the kind we see on TV with miraculous results, Collins gives quite a different picture. Katniss spends three hours in the “remake center” while they remove layers of her skin until she has been buffed smooth, wax hair from her legs, arms, torso, and face, file her nails, and cut and style her hair (p. 61). This isn’t at all luxurious or pampering, but painful and humiliating. During the process, one of the beauticians exclaims in surprise, “Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!” (p. 62). Concretizing the connection between the tributes and food, Collins writes that afterward Katniss feels like a “plucked bird, ready for roasting” (p. 61) and “a piece of meat to be prepared for the platter” (p. 64). Later, when Katniss does her pre-Game interview with Ceasar Flickerman, she comments that:

They do surgery in the Capitol, to make people appear younger and thinner. In District 12, looking old is something of an achievement since so many people die early. You see an elderly person, you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of survival. A plump person is envied because they aren’t scraping by like the majority of us. But here it is different. Wrinkles aren’t desirable. A round belly isn’t a sign of success. (pp. 124–125)

This passage could be the thoughts of anyone from a poor country visiting the United States, where obesity is epidemic, yet we starve ourselves to be fashionably thin; where grocery stores hold an obscene amount of food, yet homeless people beg in the streets.

And so Katniss enters the arena not as a human being, but as a piece of meat prepared for consumption by those too self-involved to see her as anything other than entertainment. As she looks around the room prior to being thrown into the arena, she thinks, “In the Capitol, they call it the Launch Room. In the districts, it’s referred to as the Stockyard. The place animals go before slaughter” (p. 144). The fact that Collins appends the last sentence of this passage shows her awareness that some readers may not know what a Stockyard *is*, which speaks directly to our disassociation from our food system, particularly the vast oppression of animals and the corporate manufacturing of animal corpse flesh for consumption. Like cattle, pigs, or chickens, Katniss is “fattened up” before being “processed” into a consumable commodity, and like them, she is expendable.⁵

If the links between food, economic status, and

survival are not clear to readers, they should become obvious when Katniss enters the arena. Sitting in the middle of the arena is the “Cornucopia” stuffed with the food, water, and weapons the tributes need to survive if they have no hunting and survival skills.

By placing these supplies in a “Cornucopia,” Collins again reaches back to Roman myth and implies that we live within a system where food magically appears without source or labor, and indeed, an American grocery store is testament to this—a modern cornucopia of products from all over the world.

Replicating the conditions of Katniss’s life, each tribute must choose in the opening moments of the Games between potentially dying in battle for the food and other resources, or starvation—no choice at all. Waiting poised on a pedestal for the Games to begin, each tribute “plays” the national game of social and class warfare. The fight over the resources in the Cornucopia kills almost half of the children on the first day, literalizing the horror of a future with diminishing resources if we do not implement social and environmental justice globally.

Precisely because her choices are restricted, Katniss is forced to use the politics of Panem against her fellow tributes—to use hunger as a weapon—in order to win the Games. Even as she tells Rue, “You can feed yourself. Can they?” (p. 206), she realizes that the other tributes “don’t know how to be hungry” (p. 208), and that she must enact the very ideology of the system she despises in order to survive. And indeed, the tributes who live to the end of the Games are those who have food knowledge: Rue and Thresh from the agricultural district, Katniss who can hunt, and Peeta. The only tribute left who does not know how to hunt or forage is Cato, the strongest and most brutal participant, surviving only because he hoards the supplies from the Cornucopia.

Yet, while Katniss enacts the tactics of the system to survive, it is her knowledge of nature and food that

The fight over the resources in the Cornucopia kills almost half of the children on the first day, literalizing the horror of a future with diminishing resources if we do not implement social and environmental justice globally.

saves both her and Peeta, and I examine this passage closely with students. Although the Gamemakers announce that, for the first time, if two tributes from one district survive, they will be declared winners together, they revoke this rule at the end of the Games. Facing Peeta, Katniss realizes she cannot kill him, and suddenly she sees that not having a victor would spoil the entire TV extravaganza and prevent the Capitol from “winning” the game it has been playing. She suggests she and Peeta threaten to eat poisonous Nightlock berries, literally utilizing her food knowledge to undermine the political system. Collins shows in this moment that knowledge leads to self-determination and empowerment. This is a powerful message for young readers who, in maturing, may be starting to grasp that they live in an exploitative system they

may not fully endorse, even as they benefit from it.

Not all of the citizens of the Capitol agree with the price of their privilege, either. I ask students to consider Effie, Cinna, and Katniss’s prep team—how are they portrayed? As evil agents of the system? Do we feel sympathetic toward them, and if so, why would Collins do that? Collins recognizes that when it comes to dominating the global food supply or state control, the methods of manipulation are much more sneaky, much more nuanced than most young readers will recognize. She shows throughout that the feelings of privilege and entitlement—to foodstuffs as well as to material wealth—is inculcated into the population in order to reinforce and maintain the power of the people at the very top.

This is an opportunity to raise complicity, because we are all complicit in the global marketplace, and this is why students often express feelings of guilt and shame. I stress to students that we are all born into a system, and how that system conducts business is often invisible to us. We may not agree with its methods or how it exploits less fortunate people (precisely why it is hidden), but *we do benefit from it*, especially here in the United States. In this way, the system co-opts our consent; it makes us complicit in suffering and oppression. But if we can see this system at work, the way Katniss does, and understand where our commodities come from, how they were obtained, and the real cost of their production, we can think of ways to work around—or even outside of—the system.

I think Collins is to be commended for not dismissing the messiness of political manipulation. After all, how can we, or the citizens of the Capitol, know the price of our privilege if that information is withheld from us? Katniss comes to see this as well. After she is forced to kill in the arena, she thinks, “to hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It’s the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us” (p. 236). Returning to the earlier moment with Madge, the Mayor’s daughter, Katniss finally realizes that the system maintains itself through class warfare, and in order to truly undermine the political system—which keeps “us divided among ourselves”—we must have more sympathy for others, even if that means we give up some of our own privilege and comfort (p. 14). Making this system visible—a system whereby wealthy nations exploit the poor for food, animals become mere products in

You Decide

“**F**ood Democracy” is the right of citizens to have a say in how our food system works. It means being able to hold companies accountable for how the chemicals and antibiotics used might affect our health, for unsustainable or destructive practices, or for the use of particular ingredients. Food democracy is an area we have severely neglected in the US. In a recent interview, Mittal, Founder and Executive Director of the Oakland Institute, stated that the US was currently “the biggest example” of the loss of “food democracy, food sovereignty” (Danaher, Biggs, & Mark, 2012, para. 9). She discussed the recent push to label GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and how food conglomerates fought it, pointing out that “there was no democratic process whereby people of this country could determine for themselves what kind of food they would eat, how it is grown, and who grows it” (para. 4).

To delve deeper into these issues, the recent 2012 fight in California over Proposition 37, which would have made it mandatory to label foods that contain GMOs, is a good example. The proposition was defeated by the obscene amounts of money spent in opposition to the bill; the list of donors includes virtually all of the modern food conglomerates and can be easily found online.

the marketplace, and poor people often become the same—makes *The Hunger Games* Environmental Justice fiction with a very clear moral message.

Compassion and Social Justice

Recently, in an online interview posted on YouTube, Collins answered fan questions, and one asked what she hoped her readers would take away from the novel. Her reply—that they should ask themselves “was there anything in the book that disturbed you . . . and if there was, *what can you do about it?*”—shows she hoped the book would provoke readers to consider personal accountability and activism. If our desire within the environmental movement or within the critical environmental humanities is to spread recognition of harmful ideologies, novels like *The Hunger Games* provide a unique opportunity to meet precisely the group we want to reach at the age we want to reach them with literature that meets them on their own ground and speaks to them in their own terms. Because of this, I think Collins deserves praise for working important issues of environmental and social justice into novels for a group of readers who, we often think, are too jaded or self-involved to care. In truth, her nightmare fictional world is a condensation of the environmental justice issues that this very generation will face.

Too often, as I’m sure many teachers also encounter, I find students feel powerless to change the system. It is too encompassing, too large. But I point out to students that Gale and Katniss feel this way in *The Hunger Games*, too. Katniss thinks that anger about the system “doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair. It doesn’t fill our stomachs” (Collins, 2008, p.14). In this, she is right. But anger can spur us to act, and Collins gives Katniss and readers hope by arguing that one revolutionary act of courage and sympathy can create social change. She proposes a simple but radical solution: to practice compassion when faced with need, each time we see it, in whatever way we are able, even if that action seems too small.

To show how she weaves this message into the book, I have students list acts of kindness found within the story; they occur so consistently that we forget until the entire board is covered with page numbers. These acts of compassion are like ripples in a pond

and begin from the very start of the book when Prim is “reaped” and Katniss volunteers to take her place. Rather than clap as instructed, her fellow citizens are moved by her self-sacrifice and “take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says, we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong” (p. 24). They follow this silence with a three-fingered salute that symbolizes respect and admiration—in short, an act of *civil disobedience*. The media manipulators in the Capitol ensure this protest is not televised, but that doesn’t stop Katniss, and her act of compassion after Rue’s death is broadcast to the entire country.

As Rue dies, Katniss sings her to “sleep” in one of the most touching scenes of the book. In a rush of fury and defiance, she realizes she can replicate her district’s protest “to shame” the Capitol, “to make them accountable, to show . . . that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own” (p. 236-237). She declares that the tributes are people, individuals, worthy of living their own lives, not commodities; she demonstrates that the most radical anti-capitalist force is compassion, the ability to forsake oneself and show genuine concern for others. She knows they will broadcast the retrieval of Rue’s body from the arena, so she decorates it with flowers, a visual assertion “that Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I” (p. 237).

Rue’s district is so moved by Katniss’s display of kindness and grief that they reciprocate and send her a sponsor gift, a loaf of bread, the first “district gift to a tribute who’s not your own” (p. 239). Katniss recognizes the full value of this gift, and so should readers after hearing about the lives of the starving cash-crop farmers in District 11. What District 11 engages in here is nothing less than the “dangerous unselfishness” that Martin Luther King Jr. urged his listeners to practice in his famous 1968 speech “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Collins argues through these two moments—when District 12 practices civil disobedience and when District 11 sends Katniss bread—not only that the strong have a duty to protect the vulnerable,

Collins gives Katniss and readers hope by arguing that one revolutionary act of courage and sympathy can create social change.

but also that *compassion is contagious*. We cannot witness it without feeling compelled to replicate it ourselves, and with this one act, the seeds of the revolution that follow in book two, *Catching Fire*, and book three, *Mockingjay*, have been planted via live television.

The message that compassion is contagious and the key to undermining an exploitative system is the most radical statement of the novel. This might not seem true to students, so I teach an excerpt of the Dalai Lama's tribute to Ghandi, to show how radical and

The message that compassion is contagious and the key to undermining an exploitative system is the most radical statement of the novel.

sacred the idea of universal compassion really is. In his tribute, the Dalai Lama declares that "some people seem to think that compassion is just a passive emotional response instead of rational stimulus to action. To experience genuine compassion is to develop a feeling of closeness to others *combined with a sense of responsibility for their welfare*" (para. 5, emphasis added).

Katniss—and others, including Katniss's mother and sister, Peeta, Haymitch, Cinna, Rue, and Gale—embody these ideas in *The Hunger Games*. Their acts of kindness push others to act, leading to truly revolutionary social change where the citizens of Panem begin to feel "a dangerous unselfishness," a "sense of responsibility" for their fellow human beings. That Collins presents these ideas to a group of "undiscerning" readers, bombarded with materialism, increasing narcissism, and a rapidly degrading environment is profound.

While it may be true that Collins provides a solution to the projected dystopian future of the United States through Katniss, she does not give readers the satisfaction of seeing the system topple so that they are relieved of the duty to act. This is typical of young adult dystopias, which "tend to replace the unequivocal unhappy ending of the adult antecedents with more ambiguous, open structures, in which the story appears to be incomplete as it stands," writes Sambell (Sambell, 2003, p. 172). This is because Collins wants readers to recognize that the political realities of her text are not just fiction, but present now; we can't

simply dismiss them. Returning to these politics after the Games, Katniss thinks, "The most dangerous part of the Hunger Games is about to begin" (Collins, 2008, p. 359). If young adult readers don't understand that the Games are merely a heightened version of what these characters face in daily life—hunger, thirst, competition for survival—she tells them directly. Katniss and Peeta may have won the Hunger Games, but the political "games" of their world *and ours*—globally entrenched, state-sanctioned class warfare, racism, and environmental exploitation—continue.

Combined with Collins's elucidation of the global food system, her argument for compassion results in a message that is anything but typical. Taken together, these themes in *The Hunger Games* espouse a vision very similar to Vandanna Shiva's *Earth Democracy*, "a future based on inclusion, not exclusion; on nonviolence, not violence; on reclaiming the commons, not their closure; on freely sharing the earth's resources, not monopolizing and privatizing them" (Shiva, 2005, p. 4). Given where we are headed as a society, both nationally and globally, and what Twenge et al. discovered about the lack of civic altruism in younger generations, Collins's novel offers solutions both simple and radical that the Millennial generation desperately needs to hear. That these messages are wrapped in a juicy love triangle, a gripping plot, and laden with teenage angst merely makes them more delicious to the target audience.

At the end of the novel, I return to a frequent exercise where I ask students to reflect, in writing, on their views of humanity. Are we essentially good, or bad? Are we an inherently greedy, violent species, or can and have we evolved to a more peaceful and moral existence? Overwhelmingly, most of the class responds that humanity is bad—look at the world around us, the war and conflict, the ecological devastation, they say. Yes, I respond, maybe you are right, but in my experience, *that is not true*. When we give people all of the information they need and empower them to act, it is my experience that the vast majority *want* to do the right thing. Just look at yourselves, I point out—isn't that true? They agree, and I find that an enduring moment of hope.

Notes

1. I agree with Raj Patel's reasons for using this term in his book *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World*

Food System (2007). The term “Third World” is derogatory, “underdeveloped nation” eclipses the political forces that prevent a nation from developing while assuming “development” is good, and the term “developing nations” is often an outright lie. The term “Global South” is geographical and more accurate.

2. For the particularly ambitious teacher, this novel also refers to Mountain Top Removal, the injustice in Appalachia of literally blowing the top off of a mountain to get to the coal most easily. The “waste” is pushed into the valleys or into water ponds above communities who live in constant fear of flood and disaster. (More information can be found at <http://ilovemountains.org/>.) Before I teach *The Hunger Games*, I usually teach a couple of chapters from Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been*—a beautiful multigenerational novel about Mountain Top Removal—and the eco-documentary *The Last Mountain*.
3. In the second book of the series, *Catching Fire* (Collins, 2009), the Capitol’s disregard for and waste of food is reprised at the annual Games gala. Platters of food cover every surface and surround the party goers, and as they dance and gorge themselves, taking only one bite of each item, Katniss and Peeta discover that small glasses of emetic circulate so that the revelers can eat their fill, purge, and return to consume more (pp. 77–79).
4. The World Food Program estimates that “women make up a little over half of the world’s population, but they account for over 60 percent of the world’s hungry” (<http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>). Children account for roughly 20% of the world’s hungry, according to Jenkins, Scanlon, & Peterson (2007), leaving 20% for men, comparatively.
5. The abuses of the meat-processing industry of both animals and its labor force have been well documented. See *Fast Food Nation* (2012) by Eric Schlosser or *Eating Animals* (2010) by Jonathan Safran Foer.

Brianna R. Burke is an assistant professor of Environmental Humanities in the English department at Iowa State University. She is currently writing a book titled *Inheriting a New Earth as well as working on an edited volume on eco-pedagogy and environmental activism in the classroom*. She teaches classes on environmental justice, food and the environment, environmental literature, post-apocalyptic and posthuman narratives, and race in the twentieth century. Teachers who would like to implement environmental activist pedagogy in their classrooms are welcome to contact her at Iowa State University; she is eager to learn how eco-pedagogy translates into high school classrooms and welcomes opportunities for collaboration.

References

- Barnet, R. (1980). *The lean years: Politics in the age of scarcity*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Collins, S. (2009). *Catching fire*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Collins, S. (2008). *The hunger games*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Dalai Lama. (2012, April 25). Mahatma Gandhi. *Asiaweek.com*. Retrieved from <http://www-cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/98/0612/sr3.html>
- Danaher, K., Biggs, S., & Mark, J. (2012, April 17). The United States’ failing food system: An interview with Anuradha Mittal. Retrieved from <http://www.alternet.org/environment/64095/FeedingAmerica>. (2012, April 29). *Child hunger facts*. Retrieved from <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/child-hunger-facts.aspx>.
- Friedman, H. (2009). The origins of third world food dependence. Retrieved from www.twinside.org.sg/title2/resurgence/212/cover03.doc.
- George, S. (1985). *How the other half dies: The real reasons for world hunger*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.
- Haney, B. (Producer and Director). (2011). *The last mountain* [Motion Picture]. United States: Massachusetts Documentary Productions.
- Jenkins, J. C., Scanlon, S., & Peterson, L. (2007). Military famine, human rights, and child hunger: A cross-national analysis, 1990–2000. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51, 823–847.
- Morgan, D. (2000). *Merchants of grain: The power and profits of the five giant companies at the center of the world’s food supply*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.
- Pancake, A. (2007). *Strange As this weather has been*. Washington DC: Shoemaker & Hoard.
- Patel, R. (2007). *Stuffed and starved: The hidden battle for the world food supply*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House.
- Sambell, K. (2003). Presenting the case for social change: The creative dilemma of dystopian writing for children. In C. Hintz & E. Ostry (Eds.), *Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults* (pp. 163–178). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Safran Foer, J. (2010). *Eating animals*. Boston, MA: Back Bay Books.
- Schlosser, E. (2012). *Fast food nation: The dark side of the all-American meal*. New York, NY: First Mariner Books.
- Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability, and peace*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Shiva, V. (2007). *Seeds of suicide: The ecological and human costs of the globalization of agriculture*. New Delhi, India; Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology. Retrieved from <http://sanhati.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/08/seeds-of-suicide.pdf>.
- Twenge, J., Campbell, W. K., & Freeman, E. C. (2012). Generational differences in young adults’ life goals, concern for others, and civic orientation, 1966–2009. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102, 1045–1062. doi: 10.1037/a0027408