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## “Reaping” Environmental Justice through Compassion in *The Hunger Games*

“Be concerned about your brother. . . . either we go up together, or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”—Martin Luther King, Jr.,  
“I’ve been to the Mountaintop”

When we look back at literary culture in the future, the early twenty-first century will be recognized as a golden age of Young Adult literature. Read increasingly by adults as well as teens, young adult fiction has a growing audience and thus a growing influence, particularly when—as has been the case with *Harry Potter* and the *Twilight Saga*—the novels become multi-million dollar entertainment empires. The newest testament to the growing popularity of young adult fiction is *The Hunger Games*, a speculative fiction novel that tackles two of the most pressing environmental issues of our time: the global food system and hunger. Addressing these problems through a grotesque gladiatorial spectacle, the novel repeatedly emphasizes that food is a social and environmental justice concern, showing that how we view the natural world—as “raw materials” to be consumed, manipulated, or contaminated according to our desires—extends to both our domestic labor practices and our use of marginalized human beings globally. Through a fast-paced, action-packed plot, Suzanne Collins indicts the global food system where agribusiness and control over the methods of growth, agricultural knowledge, land rights, and cash cropping

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have prevented the poor from having any power over or access to the food they produce. Then, through the main character, Katniss Everdeen, the novel illuminates how many of us have lost the basic knowledge of how to catch, forage, or even grow our own food and argues that if we regain this knowledge, we can challenge the systems of power currently working to patent and regulate one of our most basic necessities. For the “Millenials,” the generation that *The Hunger Games* is written for, this is an intricate argument in itself; however, the novel goes even further to suggest that we can undermine global exploitation by showing compassion and embracing a “dangerous unselfishness”—a simple, and in our age of cynicism and irony, increasingly radical solution. The kind of compassion *The Hunger Games* endorses is so rare in the social fabric of Collins's created society that when practiced it becomes revolutionary, starting a tidal wave of social change. Due to its critique on live TV because of their own political machinations, unfortunately for those in power this time the revolution is televised. With its critique of the global food system and its message of revolution through compassion, *The Hunger Games* is worthy of scholarly attention, for it is nothing less than a progressive environmental justice novel for the twenty-first century.

Set in a future becoming increasingly visible where natural disasters force humans into fierce and bloody competition for remaining resources, the novel takes place in a country called Panem, which is both a consumer-driven thinly veiled version of the United States, now a dictatorship, and a nightmare vision of our future. When the novel begins, the country is comprised of thirteen districts, each of which, surrounded by electric fences and policed by military surveillance, provides material goods, food, clothing, and entertainment for the inhabitants of the Capitol. Long ago the districts rebelled, Collins explains, and after a bloody period of revolution called the Dark Days, only District Thirteen maintained its resistance before the Capitol retaliated by killing all of its inhabitants. To atone for Thirteen's rebellion, the remaining districts must send two children each year as “tributes” to The Hunger Games, a gladiatorial reality-TV extravaganza where the children are forced to hunt down and kill one another until only the “winner” remains. Broadcast nationally with viewing mandatory, Collins is clear that The Hunger Games are just the most visible mechanism of an oppressive state apparatus designed to specifically communicate to the citizens the extent of the control the Capitol has over their lives—so much that it can take their children with impunity and not only subject them to, but force them to commit, terrible acts of violence. In turn, this violence, enacted by the children but in the “service” of the nation, makes everyone in the novel complicit in

the domination of their fellow citizens. Justifiably, the violence troubled parents and reviewers alike,<sup>1</sup> but that is precisely what the novel hopes to do—to disturb readers through rendering the violence of corporate and state control visible and by demonstrating that our silence and inaction allows this violence to continue.

Despite all of this, Collins's novel is a deceptively easy read, sweeping readers along with its suspenseful narrative, implanting its social and environmental message alongside a (albeit clichéd) love triangle and the protagonist's struggle to find herself. The social justice issues of the novel may be obvious—Panem is, after all, a dictatorship—but the way Collins weaves food justice into the story is subtle. References to food arise repeatedly but are scattered throughout the narrative, sometimes appearing only in a single sentence on subsequent pages for long stretches. Together, however, these references create a complex web and declare that every living being has equal rights to healthy, nutritious food; that we are interdependent and rely not only on one another, but also on the animals and plants that contribute to our survival; that the subjugation of the poor through the consumptive desires of the wealthy is unjust; and that we must turn away from a system based solely on economic gain and exploitative greed. Because the references to food are sporadic and diffuse, and because food and access to food are an invisible part of our lives (purposely made so), it is easy to miss Collins's indictment of the global food system. In *The Hunger Games*, consumption is simply consumption, regardless of what is consumed—the children dying in the Games are literally *consuming* entertainment—which is precisely what generates the horror palpable throughout the lives of the characters, since the Capitol's control of material goods and food is the same control exerted over its population, and just as often the material goods and food grown by the citizens become the means by which they are oppressed. In other words, through subtle cues, the novel connects our exploitation of the environment for food to our exploitation of oppressed populations who grow that food, and our far too-easy manipulation and disposal of both. These social and environmental justice issues are systematic and thus enormous, but in the story, they all connect to food issues and access *to* food, which starts on the very first page when Katniss is “reaped” for the Games.

Setting the Games as central to the entire plot, the novel begins on “the day of the reaping” and Katniss wakes, puts on hunting gear, and heads to the woods (Collins 3). Along the way, she passes coal miners trudging off to work with black-lined faces and crystallizing lungs and approaches the electrified fence that keeps the citizens of the district contained under police surveillance and control, the food that nature provides beyond the fence just out of reach of the average citizen.

“District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety” Katniss mumbles as she illegally ducks under the fence that, like much of the Capitol’s propaganda, is more of a panoptical illustration of power than an actual barrier (6). Getting up to go hunting is routine for Katniss, the reader learns, because hunger is one of the main tactics the Capitol uses to exert control over its citizens, keeping them too weak to start a revolution, or literally killing them through starvation. Beyond the fence, Katniss tells readers, is food “if you know how to find it,” but the Capitol has made it illegal to leave the Districts or “poach” off of their lands—after all, it can’t let its citizens use weapons, even if it is only to feed themselves (5). As she hunts, Katniss looks around her and notes that the woods are “teeming with summer life, greens to gather, roots to dig, fish iridescent in the sunlight” (9). Within sight, the food provided by nature is forbidden to the citizens of the Districts, and after successive generations of containment, they no longer know how to hunt or forage; the Capitol has purposefully created a system that prevents its people from being able to provide for themselves. Using the fence as metaphor, this is one of many moments in the text where the speculative nature of the novel becomes clear and the uncanny similarity between fiction and reality occurs: Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) have also created a system of assured profit because most of us are utterly dependent on the corporate and government controlled food system for survival. While we know this system does not grant equal access to everyone, this is hardly something teenagers can be expected to understand and is part of what this book wants them to see. Within the world of Panem, Katniss’s situation is not unique; she is one of many of the working poor. She is forced to hunt to support her family because her father was killed in the coalmines, and although her family received “compensation” for his death, it wasn’t enough (26). Katniss’s mother is a healer, using ecological knowledge and plants to treat the injured, but the district is so poor—set in the coal-mining mountains of Appalachia, representing the very real poverty that exists there—that she often treats patients for free. After Katniss’s father’s death and her mother’s emotional collapse, Katniss tries to keep her family alive, “but the money ran out,” she tells the reader, “and we were slowly starving to death” (27).

Katniss’s life is not unlike the billions of poor people around the globe who simply cannot afford food. As numerous food-politics writers point out, globally we produce enough calories per person to feed everyone in the world, but hunger is not about insufficient production, it is *structurally created*. Well-known sociologist Harriet Friedman 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 (1). Often, we do not think of food as an environmental justice issue, but if environmental justice is defined as the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens based on race, class, or gender, healthy nutritious organic food is an environmental “benefit” that the poor too frequently cannot afford. The highly industrialized, chemically produced food that they can afford, then, is an environmental “burden”—the pollution of their bodies through what they are able to consume, if they can afford to purchase it at all. In plain words, within our global economic system, survival is a “benefit” and starvation a “burden.” Globally, the distribution of food is structural and systematic, and Collins makes this clear in the political structure of Panem, which extracts resources from the Districts the same way powerful nations do from those less fortunate. In Panem, the Capitol controls the totality of all material production. District 1 provides luxury items, District 7 provides lumber, District 11 grows food, District 12 mines coal. The Districts closer to the Capitol have what we might call “favorable trade agreements”: they supply luxury goods and services to Capitol residents, so that the created wealth disparity between the Capitol and the Districts is also mirrored between the wealthier Districts and the poor ones. Like America does with workers in China making iPads or laborers in Guatemala growing bananas, Panem controls the prices and distribution of goods—and thus the quality of life—in its Districts and through this process creates a “market value” for the lives of its citizens.

If the connection between Katniss's life and the global poor is evident, why is it necessary to point out that hunger is a structural problem? Because, as Raj Patel argues in *Stuffed and Starved*, that very fact “breaks the link between simple availability” and why people starve to death (130). Reworded, this means that hunger is not solely the result of the inability to purchase food; it is caused by preventing the poor, *through policy*, from being able to do so. In *The Hunger Games*, the Capitol seizes control of all material production while “providing” for its citizens by keeping them at the threshold of starvation, Collins's way of illustrating the structural nature of hunger to her young readers. Because Katniss lives in a country where hunger is a politically sanctioned method of social control, the first third of the novel is preoccupied with food, and this attention is heightened when Katniss becomes a tribute in the Games, contrasting the daily reality of the people of her District with the lives of citizens from other Districts and the wealth and abundance of the Capitol.

The first meal in the novel is a modest example of food sovereignty gained through the exercise of local food knowledge and functions as a contradistinction to all others that follow. Before setting off to hunt in

the first few pages, Katniss and her friend Gale share bread traded for caught game, gathered berries, and a goat cheese that Katniss's sister, Prim, makes from her goat's milk. Gale calls this "a real feast," and in District 12, it is (Collins 7). At least it is fresh food, and apart from this, their only other food substance is 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 their right to control food resources and their ability to work within a local sustainable economy. After Katniss is reaped for the Games, however, the focus on food shifts dramatically and the wasteful opulence of the Capitol becomes the main focus.

As a tribute in the Games, Katniss observes with longing that their first dinner consists of multiple courses of rich delicious food, lavishly laid out in an equally sumptuous setting. The attention to the extravagance the Capitol showers on the contestants in preparation for the Games continues throughout the novel, resulting in adoring descriptions of feast after feast, so much so that at first it feels excessive. Katniss lists food items at each repast: "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" (76). Eventually, these lists read like food pornography, rejecting complacency about where our food comes from and how it is produced.<sup>2</sup> At one point in transit to the Games, Katniss wakes for breakfast and finds the dining car uninhabited, but regardless filled with "eggs, sausages, batter cakes covered in thick orange preserves, slices of pale purple melon" waiting to be consumed or thrown away (87). Immediately, she compares this with her mother and sister's "breakfast of mush" (87). The comparisons between what rich Capitol citizens can afford and the chronic hunger the rest of Panem's citizenry suffers from repeats for the first hundred pages as Collins sets up the political structure of the country. During one of the many epic meals Katniss eats on the her way to the Games, she realizes that it would take her, an accomplished hunter and gatherer, *days* to assemble the same meal at home, and even then, she could not match its luxury. The food the Capitol can afford to eat and waste seems as if from another world when compared with Katniss's first meal of bread, cheese, and berries.

The provisions the Capitol provides are contrasted with the living conditions in her District, where citizens frequently starve and the mortality rate is incredibly high. Katniss remarks that "starvation is not an uncommon fate in District 12" 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 many the world over—it is always women and

children who suffer most from food disparity and chronic hunger.<sup>3</sup> Collins goes on to write that these deaths are never classified as death by starvation, but rather attributed to "the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia," the same way the United States' media attributes death by starvation to drought or war, but never to politics or greed (28). Susan George writes in *How the Other Half Dies* that chronic hunger creates citizens "physically less developed and mentally less alert than people who eat enough" (9). She goes on to cite studies that have shown how chronic hunger leads to a society comprised of people who are "permanently damaged mentally" if they do not receive proper nutrition in utero and during childhood, creating a cycle where development, political involvement, and even the desire to improve one's living conditions require too much energy (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 famished, lethargic, diseased people are notoriously bad at overthrowing anybody" (13). 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.

Contradicting logic, hunger is most prevalent in areas where food is actually grown, and this is true in the book as well. In *The Hunger Games*, District 11 is the primary agricultural area in the "reformed" United States. Katniss first learns about District 11 when she meets Rue, the fairy-like child tribute from that region who befriends her during the Games. Katniss remarks that since Rue is from the agricultural district, she thought Rue and her community would have plenty to eat, but Rue tells her they can't consume what they grow or they are whipped and killed. This is not an unusual occurrence, the novel makes clear, and in the second book *Catching Fire*, Collins portrays District 11 as the primary focus of the Capitol's military power. District 11 is a colony of the Capitol; the power that the Capitol exerts over the agricultural production of District 11 is the same as the force once exercised by imperial powers over colonized nations, except that in our modern age, these relationships are now carried out by corporations, not governments (but often with their complicity), especially in the case of the Global Food System.

Globally, our food system is dominated by a small number of TNCs which, worldwide, encourage countries in the Global South<sup>4</sup> 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 that work in conjunction with genetically modified seeds—the same seeds that will only produce one crop, what Vandanna Shiva calls "terminator seeds." Finally, based on "market value," these companies offer a devastatingly low price for the farmers'



yield, simultaneously ensuring future dependence on the company for cheap seeds *and* the cycle of poverty that guarantees the families will have no other options. Although District 11 is positioned a bit differently in the novel—it falls under a dictatorial regime and so is strictly policed by the state—the way the Capitol uses it and keeps its citizens at the threshold of starvation is reflected in the economic relationships of the world today. 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 explains in *Stuffed and Starved*, 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” (97).<sup>5</sup> More and more, wealthy countries import food from countries containing malnourished or starving populations, the same way that the Capitol does in *The Hunger Games*; these countries no longer have food democracy<sup>6</sup> and are now dependent on a created system, also visible in Collins’s positioning of Panem. It is no mistake that Collins places the novel in what was once the United States, using Panem to show the end results of our practices as a nation. Panem is a microcosm of the system whereby developed nations exercise their economic power over poor populations in exchange for food or material goods.

This exploitation is perpetuated in the novel the same way it is socially sanctioned in our society: through silence and mis-information. When Katniss finds out that the very District that grows their food exists on the brink of starvation, she is surprised. Collins writes: “It’s interesting, hearing about her [Rue’s] life. We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Gamemakers are blocking out our conversation, because even though the information seems harmless, they don’t want people in different districts to know about one another” (203). Panem prevents its citizens from knowing the true social cost of their food or the things they consume. And, like in Panem, with the increasing passage of “Veggie Libel” bills and “Ag-Gag” laws in the United States, we don’t know where our food really comes from either, or what it *contains*. This is because, also like in Panem, this information is politically regulated.<sup>7</sup> After all, if we knew the true social cost of the food on our dinner plates, we might make different choices.

Again invoking the United States, consumption is rampant in the novel, and people are consumable commodities, as I mentioned in the beginning of this article. The conflation between consumable commodities and consumable populations is one of the strongest ways



*The Hunger Games* invokes environmental justice struggles. Renowned Environmental Justice activist Robert Bullard writes that "the root cause" of all environmental justice issues "can be traced to the imperial ethics and values surrounding the 'conquest' of the land and its people" (9); the way in which our economic system conflates people with land as equally consumable commodities is paramount in any environmental justice struggle. The Games are Collins's symbolization of this scenario, of course, but she connects people to food in numerous ways that might be too obvious for adult readers, but which is necessary for her young audience. Not only is Katniss named after an edible tuber, calling the day the tributes are selected for participation in the Games the "reaping" is purposeful—the Capitol exerts unilateral control over the districts' children just as it does their food supply, and Collins reinforces this again by calling the "reaped" children "tributes," a Latin term for what peasants or other nations owed the Roman empire as acknowledgement of submission and usually paid in grain (Collins 7). Of course, the very nature of the Games mirrors the gladiatorial spectacles of this era as well, with "Panem" deriving from "*panem et circenses*," the idea that the masses need only food and entertainment to keep them quiescent. The Games, then, are a metaphor for late-stage capitalism where everything and everyone is assigned a market price and some people are viewed as "less valuable" than others; through the Games, Collins argues that not only have we specularized suffering for entertainment, but that in doing so, we have rendered suffering palatable, made it so easy to ingest that the injustice has become virtually invisible. The Games make our economic system visible to young readers and show how the Capitol has become cannibalistic: consuming its own citizens is a cost of maintaining control.<sup>8</sup> In addition, poor children, the novel makes clear, are disproportionately at risk of being turned into commodity spectacle for the Capitol because poor families can trade the safety of their children for more food, known in the book as "tesserae."

Like others in her District, Katniss has had to use tesserae to feed her family. When the story begins, Katniss's name should only be entered into the pool for the Hunger Games four times, since she is sixteen—but she took four tesserae to feed her family at the age of twelve, and since the entries are cumulative, Katniss's name has been entered twenty times on the day of the reaping. In other words, Katniss wagered her life to prevent her family from starving. Katniss also notes that those who are of a higher economic class like Madge, the mayor's daughter, do not have to sign up for tesserae; she thinks, "the 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" (14). The chance that poor children will die in the novel is exponentially higher than those of the wealthier districts, as it is globally because of starvation, unsanitary living conditions, war, or disease. In a cross-national study released in 2007, sociologists J. Craig Jenkins, Stephen Scanlon, and Lindsey Peterson show that 815 million people worldwide suffer from chronic hunger, with "nearly 20 percent" of these children under the age of five (823). In the United States, we are indeed more privileged, but hardly immune to food insecurity, especially now as the class structure in our country 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*, which is about 22% of all children in our country (n.p.).

Collins conflates people and food again for an immature audience as Katniss is prepared for the Games and the need to turn her into a commodity, a character for the audience to identify with, love, and ultimately, consume, becomes a primary focus of the novel. Katniss's very survival depends on her appeal, so first she must be properly prepared by her "stylist" and "prep team" to conform more closely with the desires of the Capitol audience. While readers look forward to a before-and-after beauty makeover, the kind we see on TV with miraculous results, Collins gives a different picture. Katniss spends three hours in the "remake center" where her stylists remove layers of her skin until she is buffed smooth, wax hair from her legs, arms, torso, and face, file her nails perfectly, and cut and style her hair (Collins 61). This isn't at all luxurious or pampering, but painful and humiliating as Katniss is made to feel inferior through the process; during it, one of the beauticians exclaims in surprise, "Excellent! You almost look like a human being now!" (62). Concretizing the connection between the tributes and food, Collins writes that afterward Katniss feels like a "plucked bird, ready for roasting" (61). Later, Katniss thinks that she is "a piece of meat to be prepared for the platter," and through this scene, Collins links the lengths we will go to for beauty—the rise in plastic surgery, the fear of aging, the billions spent each year in face creams and cosmetics—to the commercialization that makes it possible to consume food produced by people who are starving by portraying them as inferior, savage, less-than-human: responsible, in short, for their own hunger (63).

In contrast, cultural "progress" in the Capitol results in extreme artificiality, the citizens "so dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered they're

grotesque” (63). Later, when Katniss does her pre-Game interview with Caesar 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. (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 so much food it is obscene, and yet homeless people beg in the streets. Katniss points in this passage to what happens to the wealthy when basic necessities are taken for granted: we become victim to ever-increasing narcissism, the growing reinforcement through media of self-interest so that we are too distracted—or too apathetic—to think of others, even as we are made to feel inferior by the very images of perfection we ingest. The obsession with self-image makes it easier to ignore the suffering of those less fortunate, who are so far removed by the insulation wealth buys that they no longer seem *human* and thus become mere “raw materials.” In this way, the class system in *The Hunger Games* is so stratified that it promotes “something approaching species difference,” as Benjamin Kunkel aptly puts it in his musings on “Dystopia and the End of Politics” (92). Dehumanizing the poor children of the Districts is one of the ways the Capitol justifies devouring the commodified tributes. Kunkel continues: “technological advance continues apace, and all things and many persons are for sale—a condition no one any longer recognizes as political—and the state exists only to keep the peace in wealthier districts and ensure the continued functioning of markets in labor and other commodities” (92). This is why 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 launched 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” (Collins 144). The fact that Collins has to append the last sentence of this passage shows that she is aware that some of her readers may not know what a Stockyard is, which speaks directly to our disassociation from our food system and what it takes to feed this country, particularly the vast oppression of animals

and the corporate manufacturing of animal corpse flesh for consumption. Like cattle, pigs, or chickens—living beings which we continually disregard as having natural rights—Katniss is “fatted up” before being “processed” into a consumable commodity, and like both the animals and the many workers who labor in meat processing plants, she is expendable.<sup>9</sup>

If the links between food, socioeconomic status, and survival are not clear to readers, they should become obvious when Katniss enters the arena. In the middle of the arena sits the “Cornucopia,” stuffed with the goods, food, water, and weapons, the tributes will need to survive if they have no hunting and survival skills of their own. In order to reach these commodities, however, the tributes must risk fighting each other and the Careers, the children of the wealthy Districts trained in battle techniques from birth. Replicating the conditions of Katniss’s life, each tribute must choose in the opening moments of the Games between dying in battle for access to the food in the cornucopia and thus survival, or starvation—no choice at all. Waiting poised on a pedestal for the Games to begin, each tribute “plays” the national game—social and class warfare—and the fight for the resources in the cornucopia kills almost half of the children on the first day, literalizing the horror of the future we face if we do not begin to systematically implement social and environmental justice globally.

In the end, Katniss must use the politics of Panem against her fellow tributes, use hunger as a weapon, in order to win the Games. As she tells Rue, “You can feed yourself. Can they?” (206).

She realizes that the other tributes “don’t know how to be hungry” and knows she must enact the very ideology of the system in order to survive (208). And indeed, the tributes who make it to the end of the Games are those who have food knowledge: Rue and Thresh from the agricultural district, Katniss who can hunt for herself, and Peeta.<sup>10</sup> The only other tribute who does not know how to find or hunt for food is Cato, the strongest and most brutal Career, 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 save both her and Peeta. 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 off with Peeta, Katniss realizes she cannot kill him and then understands that not being able to claim a victor of the Games would spoil the entire TV event 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 defy the Capitol and undermine the entire political

system. Collins shows in this moment that knowledge leads to self-determination and power; it gives us the ability to think around an oppressive system that co-opts our consent to conduct business-as-usual. This is powerful message for young readers, who, in maturing, may be just beginning to see that they exist in an exploitative global capitalist system they may not fully endorse even as they benefit from it.

Before I move on to discuss the other ideology of food this novel endorses—the need to revive food knowledge and food democracy—it is important to note that Collins's indictment of the Capitol's control over its citizens is not strictly a dichotomy where one side is victim and the other victimizer. Instead, she 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 at first recognize. Collins shows throughout the novel 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 created system. Because of this, one could easily argue that Collins excuses the ignorance of the citizens of the Capitol, in turn simultaneously alleviating readers' complicity in global hunger, and while this is a risk, I think Collins deserves praise for not dismissing the messiness of political manipulation. Her decision not to elide complexity is brave and rare, especially in fiction for young adults. After all, how can we, or the citizens of the Capitol, truly know the price of our privilege if that information is withheld from us?

There are a couple of moments in the text where Katniss encounters a Capitol citizen's ignorance and feels complete disgust, but there are also others where she begins to see how the citizens of the Capitol and the Career tributes who have been taught to see their participation in the Games as an honor are equally manipulated by a system of ideologies that reinforce political dominance. For instance, during Katniss's first meal as tribute, Effie Trinket (the press secretary) observes that previous tributes from District 12 have eaten “like a couple of savages” (44). Katniss immediately notes that the previous tributes from District 12 have “never, not one day of their lives, had enough to eat” (44). This is just one of many moments when Capitol citizens show blatant disregard for the living conditions of the citizens of the Districts—and the novel argues that it is not entirely their fault. They are trained to think of the people of other Districts as expendable, to feast upon the Games as entertainment. Later, Katniss will also have sympathy for her fellow tributes, even the most brutal ones, again a moment where Collins points to the fact that we are all pieces in a global game played to accumulate capital. Forced to kill in the arena, Katniss 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" (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 works, as Gale remarks, to keep “us divided among ourselves”—we must have more sympathy for one another, even if that means we have to give up some of our own privilege and comfort (14).

The human sympathy the novel espouses extends to the natural world as well, to the plants and animals with whom we coexist, and this is the second environmental ethic the novel proposes: we are dependent on the world around us for survival, and if we regain basic food knowledge and respect for the way the environment supports our lives, we can challenge the systems of power regulating our survival. In the novel, Katniss does this by hunting and foraging outside of her District, regardless of the fence and police surveillance, taking control of her own food resources and practicing food democracy. And while it is true that Katniss hunts—an issue on which the environmental movement is split<sup>11</sup>—she does so because she must, and never without respect. At one point in the novel she kills a deer, thinks that it is “beautiful,” feels “a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent,” but then her stomach reminds her that she is starving to death (269). There is no room for sentimentality in Katniss's approach to the natural world around her, only respect. One could argue that Collins is unapologetically anthropocentric, and that may be true, but it is in large part because the novel revolves around food and consumption. Hunting in this novel is not about sport or blatant disregard for an animal's right to life. If anything, Collins uses Katniss to say that that if one is going to eat meat, one should have to take the life of the animal oneself. However anthropocentric, Collins advocates, over and over, for closing the gap between us and our food.

Contrasted with the scenes when Katniss hunts are domestic scenes where humans and animals live side-by-side. This is best illustrated by Lady, the goat Katniss gives her little sister, Prim. Collins's description of why Katniss trades for the goat reads almost exactly like the webpage for goats from Heifer International: “Owning a nanny goat can change your life in District 12. The animals can live off almost anything. . . and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell” (271). However, Lady is more than just a food animal to the family; Prim, Katniss's little sister, genuinely loves the goat. When they first find Lady, she is wounded and close to death, but they value her so much that they use the few plant medicines they have to heal her. The Everdeens' relationship with Lady proves that we live in relation to



other living beings—they are not just commodity goods that we can give a price value but have their own intrinsic rights. Often, as in this case, they are not as dependent on us as we are on them. It is only when we begin to forget this essential truth and dismiss the rights of other living beings while feigning mastery over our environment that we can warp the food system the way we have. In doing so, we behave like the dictatorship of Panem. Wendell Berry eloquently points this out in *Bringing it to the Table* when he discusses how we manipulate our environment: “This, clearly, is a dictatorial or totalitarian form of behavior, and it is as totalitarian in its use of people as it is in its use of nature. Its connections to the world and to humans and the other creatures become more and more abstract, as its economy, its authority, and its power become more and more centralized” (7). Ultimately, this is also Collins’s point. The entire plot declares that in a world where access to food becomes a weapon, subverting the system requires that we know how to sustain ourselves—which implies respect for the direct way the environment supports our lives—and help others do the same. Making this system visible whereby wealthy nations exploit the poor for food domination, where animals become mere products in the marketplace and poor people often become the same, transforms *The Hunger Games* into speculative fiction with a very clear moral message.

I don’t wish to enter into genre wars or fight about the perimeters of one genre over another, but I do believe that reframing *The Hunger Games* as speculative fiction makes the social and environmental message of the novel more clear. Many have called the novel post-apocalyptic, and it is: it begins years after environmental catastrophe has reshaped the world as we know it. Others have labeled the novel dystopian, and it is that, too: Panem is a totalitarian government that brutally oppresses all opposition. Yet, neither of these genre labels fully encompasses the political project of *The Hunger Games*, which is not only to speak to the human degradation of our planet or dictatorial regimes—rather, the novel addresses the current political apparatus that controls the global food supply and speculates what will happen when we have exhausted global markets and that same destructive apparatus turns inward on the very people who created it. Expressed differently, it projects our global domination of the food supply to its logical and nightmarish conclusion.

Margaret Atwood used the term “speculative fiction” when discussing her first novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and defines it as a work of fiction in which

nothing happens that the human race has not already  
done at some point in the past, or that it is not doing now,



perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We've done it, or we're doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already set in motion. (92)

Atwood emphasizes that the conditions for her imagined societies are actually *preconditions*, that she draws from current politics and culture such that the distance between her imagined worlds and the actual world is very small, sometimes uncannily similar. Like Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*, *The Hunger Games* eerily resembles the United States and our relationship to the rest of the world in such a way that it is both recognizable and divergent, slipping between the two so seamlessly, so artfully, that it is hard to locate exactly *where* the gap between fiction and reality resides. Panem is the speculative version of our global dominance nationalized and turned inward on its own citizens, and yet not fully recognizable as such—yet. Atwood goes on in her discussion of speculative fiction to muse that novels within the genre are concerned with exploring the “what if” of our current political, social, and I would add environmental, concerns. She asks, “what if you wanted to take over the United States and set up a totalitarian government, the lust for power being what it is? How would you go about it?” (98). In *The Hunger Games*, the obvious answer is control the food supply, make everything and everyone a tradable commodity in a horribly corrupt market.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than a mere dystopia or an investigation of what the United States might look like after the apocalypse, *The Hunger Games* investigates the potential end result of our current politics, the reality of the dystopia we live in now as we teeter on “the unstable brink that separates real from imagined . . . between what is already present in our world and what may be yet to come” (Snyder 473). It projects the tactics used by the United States and TNCs into a future where the people manipulated with hunger and starvation do not live in some distant country, but right here at home, illustrating for young readers not only what our country does to others but also how poor people within our own national borders suffer. The country of Panem is a portrayal of the inevitable consequences of turning over control of our global food supply to companies whose only concern is profit, but this time, the “company” is the country, a conflation of the Capitol and the voracity for Capital.

As we move into an age of escalating ecological turmoil already passed in *The Hunger Games*, it is crucial to examine the views of the environment that younger generations routinely encounter. As recent

evidence shows, ecological awareness and sensitivity is on the decline among young people. In a cross-generational study investigating the civic values of the Millennial generation against those of Generation X and the Baby Boomers, Jean Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, and Elise Freeman found—among other shocking results that every educator should read—that “the decline in wanting to take action to help the environment was particularly steep” (1056). If our desire within the environmental movement as a whole or within the critical environmental humanities in particular is to spread a growing recognition of harmful ideological constructs regarding our biosphere, novels like *The Hunger Games* trilogy 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 grounds and speaks to them in their own terms. Because of this, I think Suzanne Collins deserves recognition for including important issues into novels for a group of readers who, we often think, are too jaded or self-involved to care. As speculative fiction, the lives of the characters in *The Hunger Games* change from horrifying fantasies into a projection of the environmental justice struggles that this very generation must face.

Recently, in an online interview, Collins answered fan questions, one of which 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 because it reflected aspects of your own life and if there was, *what can you do about it?*” shows that she hoped the book would provoke readers to think about personal accountability and activism (n.p., emphasis added). So often, as I’m sure many others also encounter, I find that students feel powerless to change the system. It is so encompassing, so large, and often they don’t realize that their choices perpetuate it. 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 14). But Collins gives Katniss and readers hope by showing that one revolutionary act encourages others to act as well, creating social change. First, however, we all have to realize how we participate in and perpetuate the system, as Katniss does when she realizes that for years she watched people around her die while doing nothing, as if she, too, was watching *The Hunger Games* every day of her life (85). Only after recognizing our complicity and the ways we are *made* to feel powerless can we take personal action to redress the injustices around us.

Collins proposes a simple but radical solution for large-scale social change: 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.

These acts of compassion echo throughout the novel like ripples in a pond and begin from the very start of the book when Prim is “reaped” for the Games and Katniss volunteers to take her place. Rather than clap as instructed, her fellow citizens of District 12 “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” (24). They follow this silence with a three-fingered salute that symbolizes respect and admiration—in short, an act of civil disobedience. Katniss’s act of self-sacrifice moves them to a form of protest not seen for years in Panem. The media manipulators in the Capitol ensure this protest is not televised to the other Districts, but that doesn’t stop Katniss, and since it is part of the Games, her compassion after Rue’s death is broadcast to the entire country.

As Rue dies, Katniss holds her and sings her to “sleep” in one of the most touching scenes of the book. In a rush of fury and defiance, she realizes that she can replicate her District’s protest, even in a small way, “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” (236–7). Then she comes up with the solution that has been present in the text from the very beginning—she wants to demonstrate that the tributes are people, individuals, worthy of living their own lives, not commodities, and through her the book argues that the most radical anti-capitalist force is compassion, the ability to forsake oneself and have concern for others, the ability to think beyond the self to understand how others feel. She knows the Capitol will broadcast the retrieval of Rue’s body from the arena, so she decorates it with flowers, a visual declaration “that Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I” (237). Moved by Katniss’s display of kindness and grief, Rue’s District reciprocates by sending Katniss a sponsor gift, a loaf of bread, the first “district gift to a tribute who’s not your own” (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 must it have cost the people of District 11 who can’t even feed themselves? How many would’ve had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf?” Katniss reflects (239). Collins argues through these two scenes—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, 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*, are planted via live television.

The message that compassion is contagious and the key to undermining an exploitative system is arguably the most radical statement of the novel and transforms the spiritual teachings of the Dalai Lama into narrative. In his tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama declared 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" (n.p.). Katniss—and others in the text as well, 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 large 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, who are bombarded with materialism, increasing narcissism, and a rapidly degrading environment is no small feat.

It may be true that Collins provides a solution to the projected dystopian future of the United States through Katniss's actions, but she does not give readers the satisfaction of seeing the system topple so that they are relieved of the responsibility to act. This is typical of young adult dystopias; "Children's writers 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 Kay Sambell (142). *The Hunger Games* wants readers to recognize its political realities are not solely fiction, but present now; we can't simply dismiss them. Returning to these politics at the end, after the Games Katniss thinks, "The most dangerous part of the Hunger Games is about to begin" (359). This is Collins's way of bringing the novel full-circle. If the young adult readers don't understand throughout that the Games are just a microcosm of the lives of the citizens where the result is that the conditions they deal with—hunger, thirst, competition for survival—are merely a heightened version of what they face in real life, she tells them directly. The novel ends by making clear that what happens throughout the book is over but that the controls exerted on the lives of the characters and, indeed, on the lives of the poor globally, have not gone away. Katniss and Peeta may have won the Games, but the political "games" of globally entrenched, state-sanctioned class warfare, racism, and environmental exploitation continue.

Combined with Collins's argument about the global food system, her statement that compassion is the ultimate anti-capitalist force results in an overall message that is anything but typical for young adult literature. 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" (4). Given where we are headed as a society, both nationally and globally, and what Twenge et al. discovered about the lack of civic attitudes 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, and so what? Good for Collins, and good for the environment and social justice as well. The fact that her work is incredibly popular and for a young audience doesn't mean that we shouldn't take it seriously in the academy. In fact, teaching this novel shows the opposite is true. In class, after finishing our discussion of the book, I always ask my students if they think it is possible to learn compassion. This question stymies them for a while, but after a couple of minutes, they always agree that yes, it is. They also agree that if we practice compassion when faced with true need and if we act against oppression wherever we see it in any way we can, however small, it *is* enough to start a revolution. That is hopeful and profound, indeed.

#### NOTES

1. See "Fresh Hell" by Laura Miller in *The New Yorker*, Stephen King's review in *Entertainment Weekly*, or "Suzanne Collins's War Stories for Kids" by Susan Dominus in *The New York Times*.

2. In the second book of the series, *Catching Fire* (2009), the Capitol's disregard for and waste of food is reprised at the annual Games gala. Platters of food cover nearly every surface and surround the party goers, and as they dance and gorge themselves, only having a 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. (Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire*, New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2009. 77–9.)

3. The World Food Programme 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 *et al.*, leaving 20% for men, comparatively.

4. 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*—the term "Third World" is derogatory and no longer widely-used, "under-developed nation" eclipses the

political forces that prevent a nation from developing while assuming “development” is naturally a good thing, and the term “developing nations” is often an outright lie. The term “Global South” is geographical and more accurate than any of these ideologically laden terms.

5. Forcing these countries to cede sovereignty allowed TNCs to move in, perpetually keeping farmers—both abroad and in the United States—always on the edge of poverty. Cash cropping in particular has increased exponentially throughout the world, and “because export crops are much more profitable, they crowd out the non-commercial crops on which millions of poor people subsist,” aggravating the world hunger problem (Barnet 170–1). Some countries have dedicated so much land to cash crops that they simply don’t have enough arable land left to produce foods for themselves. Susan George writes that “55 per cent of the cropland in the Philippines; over 80 per cent in Mauritius” and “50 per cent of all cultivated land in Senegal” are set aside for export crops (19); meanwhile, these countries rank 112, 77, and 155, respectively, on the UN Human Development Index (126). (To contrast, the United States ranks 4<sup>th</sup>.)

6. By “food democracy,” I mean the right of citizens to control how our food is grown, nationally and locally. Food democracy means being able to hold companies accountable for practices that are unsustainable at best, or at worst completely destructive; it means holding companies accountable for what is in our food, and forcing them to tell us how the chemicals and antibiotics used will affect our health. Essentially, it means that every citizen has a say in our food system and how it works, and this is an area that we have severely neglected in the United States, allowing corporations to take unprecedented control over a resource absolutely vital to our survival. In a recent interview Anurandha Mittal, Founder and Executive Director of the Oakland Institute, stated that the United States was currently “the biggest example” of the loss of “food democracy, food sovereignty” (Danaher, n. p.). She discussed the recent movement to label GMOs and how food conglomerates have fought against 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” (n. p.).

7. This issue of where our food comes from, how it is produced, and what it contains (for example, genetically modified ingredients) is becoming even more contentious as more states pass “Veggie Libel” laws and “Ag-gag” Bills. According to Ronald Collins and Paul McMasters, “13 states have food disparagement laws” requiring any critic to marshal scientific evidence in a critique of a food substance or “legal liability can follow.” For more information, see their article on *The Coalition for Free Speech, Food Speak* website, <http://www.cspinet.org/foodspeak/oped/candm.htm>. For more information on how these bills are passed and their legal ramifications, see Bederman et al., “Of Banana Bills and Veggie Hate Crimes.”

8. Direct cannibalism is forbidden in *The Hunger Games*, as we learn later in the novel when Katniss recalls an earlier Games in which a tribute went “completely savage” and began eating the other children he had killed. Still, the novel notes that cannibalism isn’t illegal, exactly, only that viewing it made



the citizens of the Capitol uneasy, ruining their enjoyment. In other words, that the ratings of the Games as a TV show could fall mattered more than the fact that one tribute ate another (Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 143).

9. The abuses of the meat-processing industry—cruelty toward animals and its labor force—have been well documented. See *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer, or *The Omnivore's Dilemma* by Michael Pollan.

10. Peeta's use of "food knowledge" to save himself is a bit of a stretch—as the baker's son, Peeta decorates the cakes and he uses his skills to camouflage himself. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 252.

11. Hunting is a controversial issue within the environmental movement and I don't want to reprise that debate here. Aldo Leopold famously wrote about the environmental benefits of hunting and game management in *The Sand County Almanac*, and much of the ecocritical debate about hunting has revolved around his work. For deeper ethical considerations, see "Modernization and the Claims of the Natural World" in *Writing for an Endangered World* by Lawrence Buell, or Harold Fromm's essay in *ISLE*, "Aldo Leopold: Aesthetic Anthropocentrism", among others.

12. The consolidation of power within "Big Ag" is well known. For information on seed supply control, see *The World According to Monsanto* by Marie-Monique Robin and *Seeds of Destruction* by William F. Engdahl. For how these monopolies affect farmers in other countries, see the many texts by Vandana Shiva (particularly *Stolen Harvest*) or Wangari Maathai, pioneers in the field. For information on the five grain conglomerates, see *Merchants of Grain* by Dan Morgan or *Invisible Giant* by Brewster Kneen.

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