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## ***The Hunger Games: An Ecocritical Reading***

**Janice Bland and Anne Strotmann**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines how a popular series like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy can motivate students to improve their language and literacy proficiency by extensive reading. Moving on from there, we argue a thoughtful and collaborative deep reading of *The Hunger Games* can broaden as well as change perspectives; for without being openly didactic, the series is sufficiently multilayered to provide meaningful booktalk in the classroom and to trigger engaged debate. Recognising that the degradation of non-human nature through human action has become a major theme in education, we argue that the intentionally interdisciplinary approach of ecocriticism towards a literary text can be a contribution to global issues education in the English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. We offer an ecocritical examination of *The Hunger Games*, not as an ideal or model reading, but rather aiming to promote ecopedagogy and further critical discussion and creative language activities in the secondary ESL/EFL classroom and student teacher seminar. To illustrate an ecocritical reading, we trace the classical literary tropes of apocalypse, pastoral and wilderness and reflect on the trilogy's multilayered approach towards the relationship between the human and the non-human. Finally, we suggest how critical issues such as consumer manipulation, media and celebrity culture can well be discussed with reference to *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

**Keywords:** *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *Catching Fire*, *Mockingjay*, ecocriticism, ecopedagogy, anthropocentrism, image-based media culture, dystopia, young adult fiction

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### Introduction

Suzanne Collins' trilogy, *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010), has gained immense popularity among young adults; and this has been further intensified as the screen adaptations are released. This popularity is testified by 2,500,000 highly positive ratings and 132,000 book reviews (at the time of writing) of *The Hunger Games* on *Goodreads*, 'a free website for book lovers' (see [www.goodreads.com/about/how\\_it\\_works](http://www.goodreads.com/about/how_it_works)). The reviews also demonstrate that Katniss Everdeen is a convincing protagonist for boys as well as girls, a significant aspect for the classroom, for boys are less ready to accept a protagonist of the opposite sex than girls (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 11; Hesse, 2009, p. 14). Katniss manifests none of the febleness of recent heroines in some highly popular fiction, particularly her formidable wilderness survival skills set her apart. When selecting a literary text for young adults in the advanced ESL/EFL classroom, we maintain that the reputation of the text should be taken into consideration as an important first criterion. The renown of the text – and the stories attached to it – can animate students to actually begin reading, rather than seek avoidance strategies, helping to fulfil the dictum that schoolwork should play a role in students' social networking. Although probably true for both girls and boys, Newkirk (2002, p. x) refers specifically to boys and their social energy when he writes: 'boys are likely to read material that can be transported into conversations with their friends. Literate activities are centered around shared interests.' There are a number of amusing animated summaries of the books and themes in the trilogy available on the student-friendly Shmoop website (see [www.shmoop.com/hunger-games/summary.html](http://www.shmoop.com/hunger-games/summary.html)).

A further criterion that should be considered especially in the EFL classroom is whether a text is cohesively and for the target audience accessibly well written and with empathetic, well-drawn characters. This is to encourage reading of the entire series and thus support language acquisition through extensive reading – in addition to the close analysis that is an aspect of advanced EFL education in secondary schools. Sixteen-year-old Katniss is a first-person adolescent narrator and single focalising character. She narrates in language that is moving and accessible for a teenage audience, she employs an age-based language variety that speaks eloquently to the discourse community of young adults. Both accessibility and stylistic expressivity are essential considerations when choosing a text for the EFL classroom; without accessibility, the function of the literature classroom to widen horizons cannot be fulfilled. In *The Hunger Games*, the narration moves along a continuum between graceful and detailed descriptions evoking observant young eyes and short, staccato sentences suggesting spontaneity and uncertainty:

A young buck, probably a yearling by his size. His antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet. Poised to run but unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans. Beautiful.

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Gale and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run but stumbled, and Gale's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened. Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat. (Collins, 2008, p. 326)

With the above passage, Katniss narrates a significant moment for herself and her hunting partner Gale, as they hunt to keep their families from starvation. The language is characterised by a marked (deliberate) use of repetition: 'beautiful', 'fresh and innocent', and frequent ellipses: subjects and finite verbs are omitted. The effect throughout the trilogy is of direct access to the thought processes of the protagonist. Abrupt sentences produce an impression of Katniss as hesitant, contemplative, at times chirpy but also frequently – due to her circumstances – melancholic and even morose. The ellipses suggest incompleteness, allowing the reader to contribute thoughtfully to the story.

Apart from flashbacks such as the scene quoted above, the novels are narrated in the present tense, which would be rather unusual in adult fiction. According to John Stephens (2005, pp. 79-80): 'The function of present tense narration is to convey an illusion of immediacy and instantaneity, suppressing any suggestion that the outcome is knowable in advance'. Thus the young adult reader vicariously experiences the fear, the heartbreak, the humour, the human warmth and love as well as the cruelty together with Katniss. This immediacy strongly draws the reader in, who, in the EFL classroom, is likely to be of a similar age to Katniss, Peeta and Gale, who are between 16 and 18 years old at the beginning of the series. Storytelling in the present tense is extremely difficult to achieve well. Though relatively easy to read when well executed – due to the immediacy and suspense – present tense narration is *not easy to write*, it requires an exceptional command of tense and grammatical aspect. Although difficult to accomplish, Suzanne Collins succeeds masterfully. However EFL students who like to write their own stories are recommended to polish their creative writing in the past, the tense of choice for most narrative.<sup>i</sup>

In addition to the criterion of popularity and the criterion of accessibility, we argue for a third criterion in the selection of literature for the young adult classroom – an aesthetic or ethical criterion important for the careful analysis typical of intensive reading. Just as for adult literature so for young adult fiction it is highly relevant in language education whether a text is multilayered, open rather than didactic, can provide input for meaningful booktalk in the classroom and can broaden perspectives (see Bland, 2013, pp. 209-253). This criterion is also vital for teacher education classes at university, in order to fascinate ongoing language teachers, promote their own pleasure in reading, and inspire them to introduce insightful literature in their future classrooms. The emphasis of this paper is on this third criterion. Katniss' agonising inner conflicts, her selfish survival tactics brought on by bitterly unfair odds, and her poignant selflessness, ring true for young adult readers. Her adolescence is characterised in ways that teenage readers recognise: her thoughts are dominated by her protective relationship to her family and later to Rue (her vulnerable young fellow victim of the Hunger Games), her confusing relationships to Gale and Peeta, her relationship to her own body, which is severely compromised by the manipulative Capitol, and her attempt to maintain some control over her various subject

positions – how she sees herself and how others see her – even when thoroughly abused by the Gamemakers and later in the series also by District 13. As a contribution to global issues education in the EFL classroom, we outline how ecocriticism might be included in relation to *The Hunger Games*.

### **From an Anthropocentric to an Ecocentric Perspective**

Ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary study is a relatively new field, even though preceded by a long tradition of nature writing. The study of texts from an ecocritical perspective might reveal, for example, anthropocentrism or alienation from the natural world. Bartosch and Garrard write (2014, p. 221): ‘the contribution of ecocriticism is inherently and valuably gradual: making us think anew about the world, nature, and the place of the human animal’. With this gradual progression in mind, ecocriticism – in teaching contexts also known as ecopedagogy – ‘seeks social change as well as deeper understanding of literature’ (Garrard, 2014, p. 8). Particularly the culture versus nature binary is criticised by ecocritics as a dangerous dualist hierarchy, and deep ecology identifies ‘the dualist separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monist, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere’ (Garrard, 2012, p. 24). Ecocriticism has been defined as ‘an ethical discourse that focuses on the interconnections between nature and culture as these are expressed in language, literature and the plastic arts’ and aims ‘to find ways of understanding both human and the natural environment [...] which promote intersubjective relationships with **others**: human others, other creatures, natural environments’ (Stephens, 2010, p. 168-169, emphasis in the original). The term ‘culture’ is traditionally restricted to human-created or human-influenced phenomena. However, this has been contested: ‘culture as learned forms of adaptation and forms of life, is also found in other species, animals particularly, and is not exclusive to the human.’ (Plumwood, 2006, p. 122). Thus we will attempt to show that the ‘change of perspective’ that is central to intercultural learning and to the language classroom, might include a moving way from an anthropocentric, towards an ecocentric perspective. The agenda of ecocriticism is education towards global citizenship – in a world that is linked socially, culturally,

politically, economically – and last but not least environmentally – by sharing the same planet, since ‘current use of the world’s resources is inequitable and unsustainable,’ (Oxfam, 2006, p.1). Education for global citizenship includes critical thinking in order to understand ‘how we relate to the environment and each other as human beings’ (Oxfam, 2006, p. 3).

In order to read *The Hunger Games* ecocritically, we begin by examining some dominant tropes that have their origin in the Euro-American Judeo-Christian narrative of a fallen, exiled humanity seeking redemption (Garrard, 2012, p. 15). The first trope is the **Apocalypse**, since the setting of *The Hunger Games* is the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem. Katniss voices anger at what happened before Panem came into being: ‘Frankly, our ancestors don’t seem much to brag about. I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn’t care about what would happen to the people who came after them’ (Collins, 2010, p. 99). As we shall see, the **Pastoral** trope is also clearly traceable in *The Hunger Games*, represented by the Meadow in District 12. The trope of **Wilderness** (which is closely connected to the North American frontier myth) suggests freedom but also the unknown, the potentially dangerous. In *The Hunger Games*, wilderness can be found beyond and between the districts. The reader becomes especially familiar with the woods outside of District 12, where the protagonist Katniss hunts illegally in order to feed her starving mother and Prim, the little sister for whom she volunteers as a Hunger Games tribute, with the expectation of almost certain death.

### **Apocalypse, Pastoral and Wilderness Tropes**

#### **Apocalypse**

The apocalyptic narrative, which includes nature striking back with floods, droughts, epidemics and other catastrophes, is, according to Lawrence Buell (1995, p. 285): ‘the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal’. The role of the imagination is pivotal to this metaphor, for it implies that the very fate of our world ‘hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis’ (Buell, 1995, p. 285). The setting of *The Hunger Games* is Panem, a country ‘that rose up

out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America', destroyed by 'the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war...' (Collins, 2008, p. 21). The wars between the districts and the Capitol resulted in the defeat and despotic colonisation of the districts to provide services and resources for the Capitol's decadently luxurious life style.

In *Mockingjay*, District 13, which was all but destroyed in the war between the Capitol and the Districts, functions as a warning for a post-apocalyptic society: 'Their early years must have been terrible, huddled in the chambers beneath the ground after their city was bombed to dust. Population decimated...' (Collins, 2010, p. 34). Smouldering ruins, poisoned by toxic bombs, are one of the most common apocalyptic images. In every apocalyptic narrative 'destruction collocates with the replacement of "life and beauty" by "smouldering ruins" and desertification' (Bradford, Mallan, Stephens & McCallum, 2007, pp. 94-95). At the end of *Catching Fire*, it is the protagonist's home, impoverished District 12, that she has longed to return to, that has been obliterated to 'piles of ash' (Collins, 2010, p. 6), and a 'sea of grey' (p. 3). Peeta's speech to the Panem-wide television audience in *Mockingjay* includes classic warnings: 'Is this really what we want to do? Kill ourselves off completely? In the hope that – what? Some decent species will inherit the smoking remains of the earth?' (Collins, 2010, p. 31).

However, a cease-fire between the Capitol and the rebels would mean maintaining the status quo, the absolute power of the corrupt Capitol. A question for classroom discussion – for example for a staged talk show where students can stay in character to try out arguments in the safety of role play – could be: Under what circumstances could violence be justified even if it destroys life? Or is it never an option? The characters in *The Hunger Games* have a lot of quandaries to face and are tragically ensnared by circumstances. With Peter Thacker we could ask: 'Have we overemphasized hopelessness in young adult literature?' (2007, p. 17). Paradoxically, there *is* a sense of hope and continuation in the representation of apocalypse, which at least in young adult literature usually carries the message that environmental intervention is difficult, but not impossible: 'Only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it' (Garrard, 2012, 116, emphasis in the original).

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## Pastoral

The pastoral tradition creates two key contrasts: the spatial distinction of town and country as well as a temporal distinction of a fallen present and an idyllic past (Garrard, 2012, p. 39). The Meadow as a space between the poverty-stricken coal miners' homes in the Seam and the wilderness of the forest around District 12 is introduced on the very first pages of *The Hunger Games*. The final book *Mockingjay* ends the trilogy with the image of the Meadow, which as a kind of utopian vision represents another feature of pastoral – as a redeemed future (Garrard, 2012, p. 42). The meadow is also a figurative place where children are safe, as in the song that is first introduced when Katniss sings it to her dying fellow tribute, 12-year-old Rue:

*Deep in the meadow, hidden far away  
A cloak of leaves, a moonbeam ray,  
Forget your woes and let your troubles lay  
And when again it's morning, they'll wash away.* (Collins, 2010, p. 284)

At the end of the trilogy, the vision of the utopian meadow and the actual Meadow of District 12 fuse together when Katniss finally sees her children playing in safety:

They play in the Meadow. (...) It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly (...). How can I tell them about that world without frightening them to death? My children, who take the words of the song for granted:

*Deep in the meadow, under the willow  
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow  
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes  
And when you awake, the sun will rise.*

*Here it's safe, here it's warm  
Here the daisies guard you from every harm  
Here your dreams are sweet and tomorrow brings them true  
Here is the place where I love you.* (Collins, 2010, p. 455)



The pastoral utopia is disturbed however by Katniss' subsequent anaphoric echo: 'My children, who don't know they play on a graveyard' (Collins, 2010, p. 455). The mass graveyard underlying the Meadow mirrors the deep psychological damage and protracted recovery of Katniss and Peeta on an environmental level. But the reborn Meadow is also home to the dandelion that symbolises Katniss' seed of hope for the future: 'The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again' (Collins, 2010, p. 453). Writing a pastoral poem could be a Creative Writing task in the ESL/EFL classroom. As the above model illustrates, pastoral is characterised by a simplicity that symbolises the dominant theme of an innocent and unpretentious life, removed from war, consumerism, competition and city stress. The students could be invited to emphasise in their creative writing the temporal distinction common in pastoral – usually present versus past – echoed in *The Hunger Games* as the distinction between a fallen present and a hopeful future, mankind living in harmony with nature.

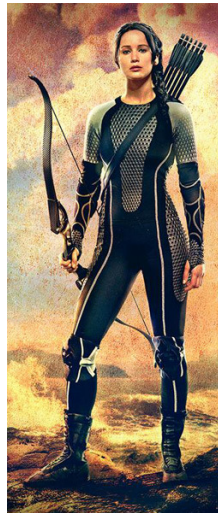
### **Wilderness**

The wilderness tradition belongs to the most influential of American traditions. It derives from New World Romanticism fascinated with the wild as acultural, offering, according to Timothy Clark (2011, p. 25), 'a space outside given cultural identities and modes of thinking or practice'. The dynamic of many texts in this (originally androcentric) tradition is the shift from human society towards a state of solitude where man finds himself. The subversive force that is often inherent in the trope of wilderness – in the case of *The Hunger Games* valuing simple living against consumerism and media culture – can dissolve, however, when 'what may be written as a literature of protest is often consumed as a literature of escape' (Clark, 2011, p. 30). Clearly this is also a danger with *The Hunger Games*, just as it is with much subversive literature. Therefore booktalk (and filmtalk) in the classroom play an important role in encouraging multilayered, insightful readings. The very culture critiqued by *The Hunger Games* is of course adapting the narrative to its own ends, for example with the many video games now available and a growing collection of Barbie Dolls based on the movies. This development offers numerous opportunities for practising critical literacy in the classroom. Katniss as she enters the arena in the film of

*Catching Fire* (see Figure 1) has already been remodelled by the Capitol (and real-life movie stylists). Fortunately, she still appears strong, athletic and recognisably human. The Barbie Doll industry however, predictably, has created a vulnerable looking, glossy-haired Katniss with a dangerously unhealthy body shape (Figure 2).<sup>ii</sup>

**Figure 1: Katniss in the film *Catching Fire***

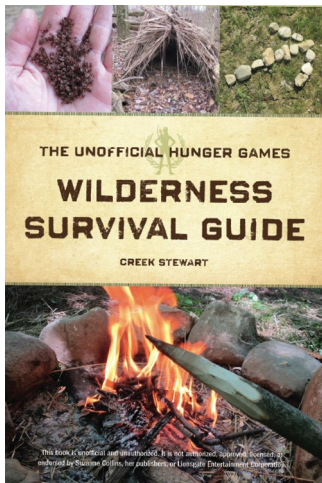
**Figure 2: *Catching Fire* Katniss Barbie Doll**



We can distinguish two wilderness settings in *The Hunger Games* that students may confuse. The first is the woodland wilderness surrounding both Districts 12 and 13, where Katniss and Gale hunt. These woods serve as a wild space for temporarily fleeing the force of the corrupt Capitol, which relies on the virtual enslavement of the districts. The landscapes of the arena are a second wilderness setting, but these are constructed by the Capitol and made hazardous and deceitful on purpose. Both kinds of wilderness are potentially dangerous – however the natural wilderness of the woods has cornucopian qualities, it is manageable for those with the skills to understand it. The peril of the arena's wilderness on the other hand lies additionally in its artificial nature, described by Alice Curry (2013: 105) as 'a hostile space of ecological extremes: a grotesque instantiation of our anthropogenically changing climate'. Nonetheless, the battleground of the arena is less deadly for those who have learned to read the environment. Katniss and a few of her fellow tributes survive because they have 'wilderness literacy': Katniss recognises and respects the dangers of the wilderness, having learned hunting from her father and herbalism from

her mother. She can melt into the wilderness, where she finds shelter, food and medicine. This aligns with the ecofeminist perspective, which has moved away from the androcentric tradition of the conqueror in the wilderness, to ‘immersion rather than confrontation, “recognition” rather than “challenge” ’ (Garrard, 2012, p. 84).

Interestingly, an *Unofficial Hunger Games Survival Guide* (Steward, 2013) has appeared that teaches wilderness literacy, and potentially life-saving skills like finding water and edible plants, setting up snares like Gale, stalking, hunting and building shelters like Katniss and even camouflage techniques like Peeta’s. Undoubtedly some students will be highly interested in the transfer of storyworld negotiation of the wilderness to real life survival skills in a nonfiction handbook. The guide is comprehensively illustrated and



clearly written: ‘The human spirit is strongest when it’s fighting for something or someone else. Katniss fights for Prim. Peeta fights for Katniss. Gale fights for freedom. None of them fight for themselves’ (Steward, 2013, p. 14). The book could serve students who prefer inquiry projects and active tasks – as many male readers do (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) – as a source of information and illustration to help them prepare presentations on survival strategies, which they can then helpfully introduce in the classroom to their peers.

### **Exploring Relationships with the Environment in *The Hunger Games***

Not only humans but also other species alter the environment, though of course humans do so in a dangerous and deliberately speciesist way. The charge of anthropocentric behaviour as speciesism, or prejudice towards human concerns (Garrard, 2012, p. 146), is likely to provoke interesting discussion and controversy in the classroom. This can be initiated by *The Hunger Games*, for the storyworld interrogates a human culture (the Capitol) that is hyperseparated from nonhuman nature. Val Plumwood (2006, p. 123) writes we should distrust any model that ‘seems to reinforce the western tradition of treating humans as superior and apart, outside of and hyperseparated from nature, rather than integrating the human narrative with other narratives of the land’. *The Hunger Games* invests nature with

weight and even with agency. The empathetic characters model an active participatory role in the ecology of Panem. In her narration Katniss personifies nature as a nurturing parent: 'The woods became our saviour, and each day I went a bit further into its arms' (Collins, 2008, p. 62). Particularly Katniss shows '...more rounded and embodied ways of knowing the land, for example, by walking over it, or by smelling and tasting its life, from the perspective of predator or prey' (Plumwood, 2006, p. 123).

Students might be invited to make a note of descriptions of food found in the wilderness, and compare this to the wild greens collected for food or herbal teas in their own culture. The storyworld carries the message that food gathered in nature can be delicious or life saving: 'He plucks a few blackberries from the bushes around us. (...) I catch it in my mouth and break the delicate skin with my teeth. The sweet tartness explodes across my tongue' (Collins, 2008, p. 9). The discovery of an early dandelion signals to Katniss that her family can overcome starvation:

I grabbed a bucket and Prim's hand and headed to the Meadow and yes, it was dotted with the golden-headed weeds. After we'd harvested those, we scrounged along inside the fence for probably a mile until we'd filled the bucket with the dandelion greens, stems and flowers. That night, we gorged ourselves on dandelion salad and the rest of the bakery bread. (Collins, 2008, p. 60)

The opulent Capitol food and elaborate exotic delicacies are described in luxurious detail too, but in *Catching Fire*, Katniss and Peeta, as partying victors, are confronted with yet another shocking reality:

...here in the Capitol they're vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It's what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun. (Collins, 2009, p. 98)

Later in the series, Katniss, now called the Mockingjay, becomes the figurehead of the rebels. The choice of the mockingjay bird as symbol for the revolution adds to the idea of agentic creativity in nature. Nature overcame the Capitol-engineered, genetically altered

jabberjays by creating a new species – the all male jabberjays mating with female mockingbirds to produce the aurally creative mockingjays. ‘They’re funny birds and something of a slap in the face to the Capitol. During the rebellion, the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons. The common term for them was *muttations*, or sometimes *mutts* for short’ (Collins, 2008, p. 51-52). The voice of the mockingjay is heard at pivotal moments throughout the series: ‘These hybrid birds, able to mimic a range of human vocal sounds, are themselves symbols of counter-hegemonic resistance, joining human and nonhuman voices together in a demonstration of mutual agency’ (Curry 2013: 174). Thus it can be said that the agency of nature is central to the series, for the mockingjays represent a ‘form of agency or creativity, the work of the earth, of the natural world, of nature, in forming the land, also the agency of the earth itself, the biosphere, the other species present in and formative of the land’ (Plumwood, 2006, p. 125). The final book is named *Mockingjay*, and the series ends with a core of hope emerging from despair. Students could research different wildlife management projects and promising large-scale *rewilding* projects, presenting a report to the class. Students might research symbols of hope in different cultures using Google Images, considering why certain symbols, such as birds, are popular; alternatively they could design their own symbol of hope and present and explain it to the class.

The corrupt Capitol tries to manipulate humans as well as the nonhuman world to lose agency. They frighten the district citizens away from interacting with the wilderness. Unable to resist, most remain with broken spirits inside the fence:

In the autumn, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples. But always in sight of the Meadow. Always close to run back to the safety of District 12 if trouble arises. ‘District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety’. (Collins, 2008, p. 6-7)

This is in contrast to Gale and Katniss’ successful animal-like behaviour in the wilderness: ‘Silent, needing no words to communicate, because here in the woods we move as two parts of one being’ (Collins, 2010, p. 63). They are constantly attentive to nature:

(...) I noticed the plants growing around me. Tall with leaves like arrowheads. Blossoms with three white petals. I knelt down in the water, my fingers digging into the soft mud, and I pulled up handfuls of the roots. Small, bluish tubers that don't look like much but boiled or baked are as good as any potato. 'Katniss,' I said aloud. It's the plant I was named for. (Collins, 2008, p. 63)

The empathetic characters Rue and Prim are also named after plants. When Katniss meets the tragic, bird-like Rue and hears her name for the first time: 'I bite my lip. Rue is a small yellow flower that grows in the Meadow. Rue. Primrose' (Collins, 2008, p. 121). The affective bond between the natural setting and the empathetic characters forms a strong counterpart to the corruption, cruelty and perverted nature of the Capitol. Katniss remarks: 'Gale says I never smile except in the woods' (Collins, 2008, p. 7), 'I think of Gale who is only really alive in the woods, with its fresh air and sunlight and clean, flowing water' (Collins, 2009, p. 5) and 'An immersion into greenery and sunlight will surely help me to sort out my thoughts' (Collins, 2010, p. 62).

Hunting for food has been described as a 'disalienating activity' (Goodbody, 2007, p. 139). In opposition to modern industrial food production, which makes the animals invisible and avoids any kind of relationship, the hunter gains knowledge of animals – prey or fellow predators – and develops respect for them. Hunting for food relies on understanding of and rapport with the animals. Katniss also accepts that she might 'be viewed as a source of food' herself (Collins, 2008, p. 188). Thus, hunting for food can be understood 'as a participation in normal ecological processes that celebrates and respects the value of the natural world, including the quarry' (Goodbody, 2007, p. 157). As previously mentioned, ecopedagogy need not be restricted to specifically environmental literature. On the contrary, an ecocritical discussion of a series like *The Hunger Games*, which is not specifically environmental, can also highlight speciesist strategies which have been used to rationalize the exploitation and killing of animal others (as well as animalised human others) in the name of an anthropocentric culture which is a few thousand years old. So, for example, Katniss maintains her enjoyment in hunting throughout, even when, in District 13, they are not short of food. Yet there are passages when Katniss experiences herself as a deficient animal with a lack of instincts, for example when she admires the

birds' ability to sense the hovercrafts before she does and when she has to flee a man-made fire in the arena:

All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer, and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. But they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there's no way I can keep apace with them. (Collins, 2008, p. 208)

The storyworld of *The Hunger Games* connects with our reluctance to accept our ecological identity. Plumwood (2006, p. 142) considers 'the great task of sustainability is desegregation, to accept our ecological identity and situate human life and settlement in ways that maintain the long-term functioning of the ecosystems we participate in'. A thoughtful task in the classroom, which can highlight different characters' connection to or distance from the environment, is to invite students to write acrostics on different characters' names, as the following examples show:

*Snakelike, creepy*  
*Not human, inhumane*  
*Odiously unnatural*  
*Worshipping power*

*Peaceful*  
*Respectful towards nature*  
*Innocent*  
*Motherly*  
*Rescues all creatures, responsible*  
*Open-minded*  
*Sympathetic*  
*Expert with animals and plants*

*Game hunter*  
*Active, angry, archer, armed*  
*Lethal skills, loves the woods, loathes the Capitol*  
*Energetic, efficient, environment-conscious, experienced hunter*

*Ready to take flight across the treetops*  
*Understands birdsong and herbs that heal*  
*Everything beautiful brings her to mind.*

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### **The Capitol's Onslaught on Human and Nonhuman Nature**

To what extent can the dystopic mirroring of contemporary western consumerism, media culture and reality television be drawn into an ecocritical discussion of *The Hunger Games*? The violation of both human nature and the environment is the next focus, as the haunting storyworld of *The Hunger Games* will entice our students into considering this very familiar part of their own world from the perspective of a dystopia. Young adults today must also make distressing decisions as to how far they allow the image-based media culture determine how they live their lives. The *Hunger Games* is a compelling critique of the reality contestant elimination show. The Capitol Gamemakers have turned this into a fight to the death that every citizen becomes involved in, for the media coverage is intense, every day and night of the Hunger Games, until only one contestant survives. The natural, protective adult/child relationship is perverted, as the tributes are selected at random from 12 – 18-year-old children of the districts, one boy and one girl from each. They are then trained and groomed to perform before the cameras in the arena. Their performance is crucial if they are to have any hope of survival, for the pampered Capitol citizens sponsor their favourite tributes by sending in gifts, most commonly food, medicine and weapons. Thus the series critiques the use of media coverage to manipulate – and of course this manipulation is familiar to the students in our classrooms. Referring to *The Hunger Games*, Vivienne Muller (2012: 54) writes:

In our current times, violent video games and reality television shows serve much the same purpose; they are our modern bread and circuses and they are potentially dangerous detractors from what might really matter in terms of humanity's greater goals or the truths that their virtual mode so entertainingly conceals.

Both Peeta and Katniss heroically try to maintain their sense of self, even though once imprisoned in the arena they – as well as nonhuman nature – are in danger of losing all agency in the life and death drama, when not only their actions but also their subject positions are 'constructed by the entertainment industry and the state' (Layfield, 2013). However, both Peeta and Katniss use camouflage to resist the voyeurism of the Capitol. Katniss accepts the dazzling makeover and costumes designed by Cinna, who is later



revealed as a rebel, and becomes adept in manipulating the manipulators. By the time she reaches District 13 in *Mockingjay*, however, she is almost too damaged and emotionally drained to maintain this performative role. For she is acutely aware that Peeta is suffering torture at the hands of the Capitol due to her performance for the rebels, with their ‘team of people to make me over, dress me, write my speeches, orchestrate my appearances – as if *that* doesn’t sound horribly familiar’ (Collins, 2010, p. 12, emphasis in the original).

Peeta, as a boy who has long had to endure little respect from his family, maintains his self-respect by refusing to become ‘just a piece in their Games’ (Collins, 2008, p.172). His choice in *The Hunger Games* is obliteration of his body into the landscape in the form of extreme camouflage, and even death, rather than compromising his ethical stance by killing fellow tributes. Therefore it is particularly tragic that towards the climax of the trilogy, Peeta believes the torture he has undergone at the hands of President Snow has transformed him into a monster: ‘I’m the mutt. I’m the one Snow has turned into a weapon!’ (Collins, 2010, p. 338).

The residents of the Capitol appear happy to embrace effacing their natural body: ‘the surgical enhancements of the people of the central Capitol are predicated on a class-conscious effort to emancipate the elite from natural constraints’ (Curry, 2013, p. 47). By the third book of the series, however, even an embodiment of Capitol shallowness can mourn the role she has taken on, as Tigris, ‘an extreme example of surgical enhancement gone wrong’ (Collins, 2010, p. 372), demonstrates when she aids Katniss, Gale, Peeta, Cressida and Pollux who have infiltrated the Capitol. Plumwood writes (2006, p. 129) ‘We should be suspicious of hyperseparated senses of “human” and “nature,” since to be other (or separate, distinct) is not the same as to be purely other (or hyperseparated)’. The Capitol-engineered mutts, however, rupture any understanding of ‘human’ or ‘nature’. In *Mockingjay*, the horror of the mutts increases when Katniss and her companions are hunted by ferocious and eerie mutts that are a ‘mix of human and lizard and who knows what else’. They use human sounds: ‘Hissing, shrieking my name now, as their bodies contort with rage’ (Collins, 2010, p. 363). At the core of the terror is the fear that ‘scientific and technical developments challenge inherited concepts of what the “human” is or means’ (Clark, 2011, p. 63). Horror is a popular genre amongst adolescents – therefore a creepy

but inviting task is for the students to draw a mutt from the series, with annotations as to its physical features, characteristics and the role it plays in the story. Alternatively students could design a new mutt – which might be monstrous or benign like the mockingjay – and create a role for it in the storyworld.

Starting with their act of resistance in *The Hunger Games*, when Katniss and Peeta threaten to eat the poisonous berries, and continuing in defiance until the end of both Snow and Coin, Katniss and Peeta manage against all odds to survive the dystopian Capitol onslaught on both human and nonhuman nature.

### **Changing perspective**

Are there any advantages to exercising ecocriticism with a fictional young adult trilogy? Specifically environmental literature is traditionally nonfictional, yet nonfiction is not necessarily more veracious than fiction: ‘Facts do *not* speak for themselves; it is always up to an author to endow them with meaning through the process of selection, arrangement, and presentation’ (Thompson 1993: 71, emphasis in the original). The benefits of fiction lie in the opportunity for students to slip into characters and try out different fictional scenarios and perspectives, thus improving argumentation skills, critical thinking and intercultural competence, which are necessary for global citizenship. This can be practised in the classroom with group hot seating, as the ‘really salient feature of environmental literary work may be its impact on the reader’s point of view, which can be accomplished through fictional stories as well as non-fictional ones’ (Murphy, 2000, p. 52). To encourage the students to read each book of the trilogy thoughtfully, one third of the class can take on the role of the characters in that particular book, sitting at the front of the class, while the other two thirds ask them questions. The students playing characters must answer in role, and also talk to each other in role. This is extremely effective, for as Katniss narrates the story, we often need to fill in gaps and interpret the actions and feelings of the other characters, whose thoughts we can only guess. Certain characters naturally express very little (for example Thresh in the first book). In this case the student who plays Thresh should voice his thoughts.

Visualising tasks are very suitable for the language classroom, such as encouraging students in groups to design a story map of Panem, to show where the districts might lie in relation to present-day North America. Many fans of the series have created and published such maps on the internet, easily discovered on Google Images. Researching these, comparing the rationale for each one and their accuracy in relation to the book, is a follow-up task that supports extensive reading and the acquisition of geographical knowledge of the USA. Moreover, inviting students to compare maps of Panem may reveal to them that this dystopia is set both in a real landscape and in an almost recognisably real world.

*The Hunger Games* book covers from around the world can be seen on this website: [bookriot.com/2013/09/13/hunger-games-covers-from-around-the-world/](http://bookriot.com/2013/09/13/hunger-games-covers-from-around-the-world/). It is eye-opening to discuss how the covers from different cultures highlight the themes of the series differently. Some enthusiasts have created their own book covers, as can be seen for example here: [kate-kyrillion.deviantart.com/gallery/36538072#](http://kate-kyrillion.deviantart.com/gallery/36538072#). Designing a book cover to emphasise a particular theme could be a highly motivating creative task for students.

### Conclusion

Claire Kramsch (1996: 3) claims that culture ‘constitutes itself along three axes: the diachronic axis of time, the synchronic axis of space, and the metaphoric axis of the imagination’:

Teaching culture means therefore teaching not only how things are and have been, but how they could have been or how else they could be. Neither history nor ethnography provide this imaginative leap that will enable learners to imagine cultures different from their own.

With *The Hunger Games* the synchronic axis of space is involved in that Panem represents the US, and the diachronic axis of time is involved in that although a dystopia set in the future, Panem looks back on a recognisable environmentally disastrous past. However, with literary texts it is foremostly the metaphoric axis of the imagination that is called upon in order for the reader to enter a storyworld, live in it for a time, and exercise the ability to change perspective. Particularly in the foreign language classroom, literary

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texts should be read from two perspectives, questioning what they disclose about what they explicitly and implicitly refer to, as well as what they reveal about the culture of the reader: 'Such readings prevent us from defining ourselves in contrast to the foreign culture but rather encourage us to discover *our own* problems in *their* culture and *their* problems in *ours*' (Bredella, 2004, p. 384, emphasis in the original).

Contemporary media culture and consumer culture in western capitalist society has of course global repercussions, so it is no longer possible to easily distinguish *our* cultural problems and *their* problems. Ecopedagogy is more than (didactically) raising awareness about environmental issues – it is not the environment itself but rather the anthropocentric perspective that is the cause of the environmental crisis. Ecocriticism is about broadening perspectives, highlighting anthropocentrism and developing empathy for human and nonhuman nature. For, in a globalised world, the environment is very clearly our collective problem.

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<sup>i</sup> Past tense narration includes all aspects of the past – past perfect and progressive – but excludes all aspects of the present, such as present perfect and present progressive, except in dialogue. Past tense narration is consequently far easier to manage persuasively and accurately for non-expert native speakers as well as ESL/EFL students (Bland, 2013, pp. 170-171).

<sup>ii</sup> source: [fashionistabarbiewk.com/2013/10/the-hunger-games-catching-fire-barbie-dolls/](http://fashionistabarbiewk.com/2013/10/the-hunger-games-catching-fire-barbie-dolls/)

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