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Amy Wong

Dominican University of California, amy.wong@dominican.edu

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Teaching Dystopia

Essay for *Avidly (LA Review of Books)*

Amy R. Wong

This year, those of us who work in college classrooms kicked off our semesters with the spectacle of Trump's inauguration: its bluffed militarism, its dark vision, its citation, in effect, of Bane, from the Batman dystopia *The Dark Knight Rises*. Everything about the inauguration presaged the bitter, disputatious, spectacle-driven manias that have come to mark the 45th Presidency. It was clear, on that grey January day, that dystopia was newly in vogue as he intoned: *Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation. We all bleed the same red blood of patriots.*

By pointing out the dystopian stylistics of the inauguration, I don't mean to suggest some reality of a utopian "before." The U.S. has always been a brutal, unpleasant place for many; a nation built as much on the mythos of the founding fathers as on violence, brutality, and the systematic and continued valuation of some lives over others. What I mean to suggest, to the contrary, is that especially for those of us who regularly teach and study *literary* dystopias, the patterned qualities of this genre have suddenly leapt off the page in an almost cartoonish fashion. As a literature professor, this has proven both a challenge and an opportunity in the classroom. Teaching my course on children's literature last winter, I wondered what kinds of thinking about literary dystopias we might be able to accomplish while living through a form of dystopia ourselves.

By May, when we were discussing *The Hunger Games*, media, and spectacle, we had all lived through a few months of a White House that uses spectacle in ways eerily similar to those used by the authoritarians in power in Suzanne Collins' best-selling young adult dystopian series. Panem, as readers will probably know, is Collins's vision of post-apocalyptic America, ruled by the totalitarian Capitol, which largely maintains its hold over the people by orchestrating a yearly media spectacle of the eponymous Hunger Games. In these games, each of the twelve districts — largely segregated by class — offers up two of its children as "tributes" who must fight to the death, their struggles captured for audiences everywhere through a version of reality TV. Yet, despite the easy parallels between *The Hunger Games'* Panem and the United States in 2017, what was most essential in our discussions of dystopia, it turned out, were the *differences* between our world and Panem. And, in my students' careful articulation of these differences, there emerged — without fanfare — the stirrings of intellectual growth and process, the very tools we might use to inoculate ourselves against dystopia's numbing spectacularity.

I teach college students in the Bay Area at a small, regional university that may as well be the alt-right's version of liberal dystopia: the student body is diverse by all metrics, heavily left-leaning in their politics, our flagship programs stress service learning, community engagement, and ensuring safe spaces for the marginalized. It is admittedly not an easy environment for conservative students. And, as a woman of color whose liberal politics are often assumed by my students, I often find myself worrying more about whether I've created enough space in the classroom for the occasional conservative student to learn and to grow,

too. But more often than not, without a conservative student in our midst, our openness is un-received labor. In the run-up to the election, each and every one of my freshman expository writing students prefaced their opinions with an awareness of their own fallibility. And when we read excerpts from both Ta-Nehisi Coates' and J.D. Vance's memoirs, a room full of students of color agreed that it was unkind to police anyone's suffering. There is not a smug liberalism.

Still, for my students, such things as white privilege, gender discrimination, systemic inequality, and the need for intersectional politics tend to be agreed-upon realities before they have stepped foot into my classroom. When we finished reading *The Hunger Games*, then, I only needed to reiterate its thinly veiled geographies — District 12 is in post-apocalyptic Appalachia, and the Capitol is the Rockies (now the wealthy West because California is under water) — for students to easily identify Collins' interest in allegory. The Capitol, as we discussed, is effectively a monstrous alliance of Hollywood (reality TV), Silicon Valley (wealthy sponsorship), and fascistic uses of media. If they had already “gotten there,” by the end of our first discussion, what else could we unpack in our remaining discussions? What could we do, I wondered, that could materialize as something productive and meaningful for my students, and for the world outside the so-called liberal bubble?

The much-maligned liberal bubble, of course, is in a large part maintained and produced by our media discourses, which have become an easy target for Trump and his base. When invoked in the mainstream, the dystopias of Orwell and Atwood have served a similar rhetorical purpose Collins's did, at first, in my classroom—that is, we found *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* to represent worlds that are scarily similar or proximate to our own. Six days after the inauguration, the *New York Times* published a piece by Michiko Kakutani on how Orwell's novel “suddenly feels all too familiar.” More recently, the popular site *Funny or Die* created a mash-up of *The Handmaid's Tale* television series and Trump's America.

To be sure, finding this kind of “sameness” — between literary dystopias and our own, lived-in reality — can provide the emotional jouissance for a call to action. In the case of *The Handmaid's Tale* as television, there is the added affective power of audiences experiencing literature within a shared and relatively short interval of time (something scholars of Victorian serial reading often discuss). Collective emotional responses and what they can do to motivate calls to action are important: I found the sharing of public tears of rage, resolve, and relief at marches following the election in Oakland to be among one of the most powerful collective experiences of my life. At the same time, such emotion — especially of the kind that dwells in dystopia's prophetic doom — can be paralyzing.

But difference, I realized, can create intellectual movement. I witnessed this movement, on a small scale, when my students began to point out the differences between Panem and America in 2017. Los Angeles enjoys critiquing Silicon Valley. Katniss Everdeen is not telling a *Hillbilly Elegy*. Trump's press team is bungling next to the Capitol's. These observations may seem beside the point, especially given our habits of reading dystopias in order to prophesize about our own world. But the differences my students chose to focus on ultimately opened up space for unexpected recombinations. A white student self-identified as liberal, and then proceeded to argue that Katniss's mother participated in a culture of learned helplessness. A single, black mother of two returning to school and tirelessly working to move out of a low-income housing, believed that change in Panem would come

from personal responsibility and bootstrapping. And probably the only white student from Appalachia at the university made a passionate appeal against the structural inequalities of the coal-mining District 12.

In articulating the differences between our world and Panem, my students opened up a space to loosen the knot of partisan political discourse. In recognizing that literary dystopia not only enables us to talk about our own world but also to talk about a world that is distinctly *not* ours, we made some breathing room to assemble together ideas that we would, in our world, inevitably box up separately and label liberal or conservative, and never the twain shall meet. In witnessing this discussion unfold, I also learned about my own impulses to sort ideas, to point out inconsistencies, to police political identities to check if they “made sense” — and I was glad that I stayed silent.

For what matters in the battle against the shock and awe of spectacle in all of its reductive immediacy is creating more opportunities for slow learning. It was a hopeful experience, for me, to observe slow learning unfold during the course of a classroom hour, because it suggested the even greater potential of what this type of engagement could achieve in a semester, a year, a college education, a life, and maybe our world. The unexpected assemblies that I witnessed in my classroom are significant in themselves as starting points for the glacial movements that unmoor us from the deadlock of dystopia.