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## **White Girls in the Apocalypse: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the End of the World**

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In *Catching Fire* (2010), Katniss Everdeen competes in the Hunger Games for the second time. In the press tour for the games, Katniss wears what “would have been” her wedding dress (Collins 251). She twirls and the white dress burns away, leaving a black feathered dress reminiscent of a mockingjay, a symbol of rebellion (Collins 252). The turning point for Katniss’ cause, however, comes when Peeta takes the stage and announces that he and Katniss married secretly, and he would have no regrets “if it weren’t for the baby” (Collins 256). The book describes an outrage at the news that Katniss is pregnant, while the film orchestrates a collective gasp from the audience, and then a series of close-ups on women covering their mouths or standing and shouting “stop the games” (*The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* 1:16:13). This moment is indicative of Katniss’ status as a reproductively viable white woman. It is this viability, I argue, that marks her as a symbol of revolution and futurity. Katniss embodies change within the text, but outside of the text she, and characters like her, reinforce the gendered and racial dynamic of the status quo as part of a subgenre of fantasy focusing on the post-apocalyptic white girl savior. A growing field since the girl-power era of the 1990s, these series rely on similar characters—young white women—to save the world.

As an extension of emerging Western approaches to foreign policy and charitable-giving-through-purchase that Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill term the “Girl Effect,” characters like Katniss promote the cultural status quo either because they alone keep the end of the world at bay, or because they must tear down the world and rebuild it in the image of contemporary American mores (84). These narratives often look to their past (our present) for social and political inspiration. To maintain the cultural status quo while focusing on a girl-power heroine, the post-apocalyptic white girl savior subgenre has specific markers that center around white women’s sexuality and reproduction as hallmarks for the survival of humanity at large. This

combination of traits, intended to make characters relatable and aspirational for a young adult audience, also acts as a form of capitalist activism by exploiting white feminism and girl-power rhetoric to generate viewers, ad revenue, and licensed products. These texts/media maintain the importance of white women's sexuality and roles as mothers in late stage capitalism while denying the full humanity of queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and other women marked by difference from an idealized heterosexual white identity.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the post-apocalyptic white girl savior codifies and capitalizes on a specific thread of white feminism, supporting white supremacy by depicting white women as devoid of racial prejudice, able not only to speak for all other minority groups, but to mother them in the same way they mother white children, the archetypal stand-in for Western cultural futurity.

Critical discussions of whiteness in film, television, and literature independently draw attention to how each of these forms constructs race and cultural belonging. I draw from all three formats in order to interrogate formations of whiteness specific to young adult women. Valerie Babb comments that "because it is a created identity, whiteness is sustained through hegemony, a complex network of cultural creations, including among other things, literature, museums, popular music, and movies" (4-5). I am particularly interested in texts and media that are widely available through streaming services such as *Netflix*, are part of a series with publication dates that span multiple years, and which have been critically lauded as feminist or empowering for women. Popular media in the post-apocalyptic girl savior subgenre that fit these criteria include novels and media adaptations of *The Hunger Games* (2008; 2012) and *The Red Queen* (2015),<sup>2</sup> and television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), *Once Upon a Time* (2011), *Van Helsing*

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Hughey's *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (2014), for example, mentions the backlash against Black queer actress Amandla Stenberg's casting as Rue in *The Hunger Games* film, but does not include the film in his list of White Savior media.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of publication of this article, *The Red Queen* is in development to become a streaming series.

(2016), *Wynonna Earp* (2016), and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018). I draw specific references from each of the media listed above in order to demonstrate the boundaries of the subgenre. Further scholarship in the field might include examples elided here or expand into texts and media not discussed.

The post-apocalyptic white girl savior is one installment in a long line of young adult tropes for female characters, acknowledging that while young women are depicted as “flexible” and “self-inventing subjects” of late-stage capitalism (Harris 9), they also cannot change the system and must act within the existing boundaries of their society (Day et al. 4). Young adult literature may “blur, reimagine, and, to some degree, reinforce” these tropes, but cannot escape them entirely while trying to redefine young women’s place in society (Day et al. 11-12).

Existing critical discussions include the future girl, the postnerd smart girl, and the historical bad girl, all of whom challenge outdated social expectations for women, but lean into current standards for beauty and capitalist engagement, while ignoring structural barriers. Anita Harris’ (2004) “future girl” is “self-inventing, ambitious, and confident” and reifies capitalism’s illusion of choice, suggesting that young women can escape the limitations of sexism through engaging with the market (17-18). Shauna Pomerantz and Rebecca Raby describe “the postnerd smart girl,” as “clever and sexy, brainy and beautiful” (287). Sean P. Connors and Lissette Lopez Szwydky describe the historical bad girl as “intelligent, strong-willed, fearless and outspoken. [ . . . ] and regardless of the historical time period in which she lives, she is unaffected by her society’s conservative gender norms” (88). Each of these tropes places the ability to succeed, or not, squarely on the young female character/reader, a phenomenon that scholars describe with some degree of frustration. While the critics who name and describe these tropes acknowledge the role that late-stage capitalism plays in shaping these characters, they do not spend much time

investigating either the role that whiteness plays in these constructions, or how these characters might culturally reinforce aspirational whiteness for readers/viewers.

Like her literary predecessors, the post-apocalyptic girl savior defeats older men who hold power over women, but she does not provide the liberation narratives that her plots and marketing claim. Despite Bill Clemente's assertion that *The Hunger Games* series is "progressive and radical fiction . . . that involves collective action on a large social scale" (21), I argue that rather than moving discussions of heroism and activism into the future, these series rely heavily on white feminism to reify existing political and social structures grounded in white supremacy. The villains in these series, whether The Gentleman from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Hush"), or Satan from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, are literally or figuratively inhuman, caricatures of patriarchal social structures. The clear girl-power narratives of each series takes aim at comically grandiose versions of (white) male power, but they merely replace white men with white women as the default leaders of political change.

White girl saviors often win at the expense of people of color, reifying whiteness, and specifically white reproductive femininity as the anchor of moral right and cultural progress. I identify six common traits that the post-apocalyptic girl savior subgenre uses to substantiate its heroines' whiteness as a central and natural aspect of heroism including: belonging to the lower socio-economic class, being the chosen one, being uncomfortable with her symbolic role, being at the center of a love triangle, caring for a child, and being a tragic figure. These traits mark easily identifiable aspects of the sub-genre and reflect larger patterns that scholars such as Richard Dyer link to the cultural naturalization of whiteness and power. I argue that these traits work to normalize white supremacy both inside and outside of the text/media by establishing certain cultural expectations for young adult activists that both ignore the historical patterns of

activism, and create hostility toward, or even foreclose opportunities for, activists who do not meet these requirements (i.e., are not white, able-bodied, heterosexual, etc.).

### **Trait Number 1: Socioeconomic Class**

Western children's literature embraces an idealized view of middle-class childhood. In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Barnardo's Homes for Children, the Wesleyan National Children's Homes, the Anglican Waifs and Strays Society (currently the Church of England Children's Society), and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children were founded, Shurlee Swain comments that poor children are depicted in the literature as "waifs and outcasts, homeless, helpless, friendless and hopeless, destitute, hungry, ragged, degraded, wretched, miserable, and pitiable" (199-201). She continues that while child welfare organizations argue that "all such children needed was 'a good mother and a decent home'" (202), for poor children of color and colonial subjects, separated from their parents by wealthy white rescuers, the child's "best interest" was "preparation for a dutiful and subservient adulthood" (Swain 202). White children, in contrast, are the "future of the . . . Empire" whose racial belonging fits them to "conquer and propagate, in the name of their superior civilization and Protestant religion" (Swain 205). These social beliefs are perhaps why innately good poor (white) children who rise above the station of their birth, from Charles Dickens' orphans to Horatio Alger's bootblacks, are staples of 19th century literature.

This trend of innately good poor white children survives as a staple of the white girl savior subgenre. When American culture imagines whiteness, whether in political discourse or a television sitcom, the image conjured is often of a working-class family (Bettie 128). In *The Hunger Games* series, for example, Katniss Everdeen is introduced to the reader as one of the poorest residents of impoverished District 12 (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 203). Rachel

Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls point out that “authentic” whiteness is centered in the working class (402). *The Hunger Games* uses Katniss’ poverty for three separate goals: to distinguish between the good poor and the evil rich, to give Katniss a reason to rebel, and to build audience sympathy.

Dubrofsky and Ryalls claim that unlike the bodies of Capitol citizens who are marked by plastic surgery and makeup, Katniss and the other residents of poor districts are racially authentic in their lack of adornment. Because the cultural meaning of whiteness is to have an unmarked body, Capitol citizens are not truly white in a cultural sense. Dubrofsky and Ryalls also point out that while the districts seem racially segregated, the Capitol is multiracial, exemplifying a “post-racial ethos where race no longer matters: [because] everyone is literally in costume” (402). Though there are racially white citizens in the Capitol, like the vampires in *Buffy* or the Silvers in *Red Queen*, they possess an unnatural whiteness that symbolizes excess and death rather than the racial purity of the heroine.

Katniss’ poverty drives her to rebel against the Capitol when they threaten the one thing she feels she has left, her sister. After their father’s death and their mother’s psychological breakdown, Katniss raises her younger sister, Prim. The girls must put their names into a drawing each year to determine tributes for the games. Though children can buy more food by putting their name in more times, Katniss refuses to allow Prim to do so (Collins 13). Poverty also drives Katniss to hunt to supplement her family's meager food supply and trade game for the things they need. Hunting makes Katniss a stronger competitor because of her skill with a bow and her ability to sneak up on game, but it also marks her as a member of the deserving poor, someone willing to work hard to provide for her family against the Capitol.

Poverty builds audience empathy with Katniss, both inside and outside the text. Katniss and Rue bond over discussions of poverty, and it is the similarities between their respective situations and their friendship that prompts District 11 to sponsor Katniss after Rue's death. Similar to the Dickens novels that function as their literary predecessors, *The Hunger Games* series also contains scenes of Katniss starving and contrasts them with the Capitol banquets, emphasizing that these disparities are not because food is lacking, but because the wealthy elite choose to keep it for themselves (Collins 31, 97). Katniss, who lacks wealth and the social status that comes with it, is more empathetic to the young adult reader who may also feel disenfranchised because of age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Like Katniss, *The Red Queen's* Mare Barrow must also fight from a place of economic disadvantage, stealing weapons and supplies from her enemies. In the series, Silvers (named for their silver blood) have magical powers that they use to rule over the non-magical Reds. Mare, a Red, learns she has the Silver-like power to control electricity. Mare literally embodies a red-blooded heroine whose whiteness is also a key element in the text. Mare has to hide who she is by wearing makeup "thick white paste" to hide her "natural flush, the bloom of my skin, the red blood" (Aveyard, *Red Queen* 88). In contrast, the ruling Silvers, like the surgically enhanced Capitol citizens, are too white, a marked class whose whiteness is unnatural, signifying both power and death (Kirkland, "Whiteness, Vampires and Humanity" 96). In each case, the girl savior must be working-class so that the audience identifies with her heroic struggle against those in positions of economic and political power.

Aligning racial belonging with class belonging in this way also helps maintain a racial power structure. While *The Hunger Games* include poor Black characters such as Rue, who function as support for the heroine, they are never the stories' focus. These examples also



suggest that if poor women can save the world from a place of such economic disadvantage, then the poor, generally speaking, should work harder to overcome their circumstances and triumph in the face of systemic adversity. This approach to poverty ignores the reality that “the way hard work and ‘laziness’ are treated is *conditioned by race*: whites gain more for the same level of effort, and [B]lack are punished more severely for the same level of ‘laziness’” (DeSante 343). The white girl savior feeds into existing US myths of bootstraps capitalism, ignoring the realities of systemic racism and poverty as well as anti-BIPOC attitudes, and creating stories in which the white woman is able to rise through hard work and determination. As these texts/media are sold to young audiences, their existence as fiction melts away, and they become merely part of the collective Western narrative surrounding economics, work, and race.

### **Trait Number 2: The Chosen One**

Post-apocalyptic girl savior narratives often include queer, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) as background characters; victims or helpers, but with little to no agency of their own. Mary Couzelis argues that these novels’ silence on issues of race works to “perpetuate the hegemonic status quo of pretending race does not matter,” thereby privileging the white-controlled status quo (132). Dubrofsky and Ryalls point to *The Hunger Games*, where Black characters Cinna and Rue are murdered, but their most significant role is the self-sacrifice that enables Katniss to live and fight (401). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’ *The Dark Fantastic* (2019) takes up this thread, suggesting that Rue’s death as a sacrificial mockingjay makes Katniss a revolutionary, and that Rue continues to haunt the series as a symbol of innocence (55). Dubrofsky, Ryalls, and Thomas all note that the film changes this scene to show District 11 rising up against the Capitol, not because of Rue’s death, but because of Katniss’ vigil, relocating the revolutionary potential from Rue’s sacrifice into the body of the white girl savior.

I argue that the post-apocalyptic white girl savior is always haunted by race and queerness. These side characters make the reader feel as if the trope is inclusive and allows the subgenre to access BIPOC and queer identities in the service of white supremacy and heteronormativity, building on the cultural narrative of white women as universally welcoming and mothering. The girl savior must be near these forms of difference, but cannot embody them, since she is chosen for her lineage or special qualities, which are inextricably tied to her heterosexual white femininity. Buffy, for example, is both more effective and more civilized than the first Black Slayer, Sineya (“Restless”). Despite the savior’s straight white unmarked identity, her friends and helpers, such as Buffy’s lesbian best friend Willow, demonstrate her open-mindedness and universal appeal.

Kendra Marston argues that benevolent whiteness in science fiction or fantasy films sees all forms of oppression as an extension of sexism (82). Therefore, she claims, the value of white femininity is often measured in how invested other oppressed subjects are in the heroines’ leadership and superiority (82). Furthermore, white heroines who lead non-white peoples out of oppression act as a vanguard of “new forms of whiteness marked by feminine benevolence, compassion, and social understanding” (85). Marston suggests that this “benevolence” works outside of the films as a plea for Western foreign intervention, grounded in white entitlement and control (85), a sentiment echoed in Koffman and Gill’s “Girl Effect.” I argue that not only does the white girl savior’s status as a “chosen one” support white capitalist leadership and political intervention, it also naturalizes these interventions within white women’s status as mothers, and reaffirms the white child as the universal symbol of futurity, an extension of the “conquer and propagate” rhetoric of the 19th century.

The heroine is helped by characters who embody forms of socially marked difference, but who can never be leaders themselves because they are tragically flawed or monstrous, a manifestation of Thomas' "the dark fantastic" (19). For example, in season 1 of *Wynona Earp*, Wynona's lesbian sister Waverly is possessed by a demon, and in season 3 the Black federal agent Xavier Dolls is the victim of a government experiment that makes him into a part-dragon super soldier.<sup>3</sup> Wynona prevents Dolls from converting fully to a murderous animal, but this is only a temporary cure, and so Dolls must heroically sacrifice himself for her ("When You Call My Name"). The deviance that is coded into these characters also signals a moral weakness that allows them to be compromised by an outside force, requiring the post-apocalyptic girl savior's help, and reinscribing her white heterosexuality as both culturally and morally right. The girl savior also exemplifies Adrienne Rich's compulsory heterosexuality as an extension of whiteness. Rich argues "that heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution* (sic)" (638). The politics of white motherhood that Rich discusses pervade these texts/media, as the white girl heroine must act in the place of missing mothers, as well as eventually becoming a mother herself to signify that the necessary political change has been accomplished and that the future is safe.

### **Trait Number 3: Symbol of a Movement**

Katniss and Mare Barrow are the most obvious examples of savior-as-symbol, as they are both literally used for propaganda films first by the Capitol and then by the resistance. These women work as icons of revolution within their respective narratives, giving the oppressed groups someone to rally around and fight for. Despite the forward-facing iconography of

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<sup>3</sup> Wynona Earp is Wyatt Earp's great-great-grandchild, cursed to hunt the demon incarnations of all of the men that Wyatt killed with his gun, Peacemaker.

revolution, Mare refers to the “histories of the world” as “more freedom than I’ve ever known” and a coup d’état as “a history thing, a before thing” (Aveyard, *War Storm* 227, 314). Mare and Katniss project the empathetic white female warrior, whose leadership is preferable to their corrupt male counterparts, but the future they imagine is closely aligned to our present in terms of both race and gender.

Mare and Katniss both work to destroy centralized governments that treat their member states as colonial projects, but after the war is over the rebuilding efforts are given little narrative space. Utopian rebuilding is not the point of these novels, as the exile (either politically ordered or self-imposed) of the heroines show. Marston expands her discussion of white women leading marginalized people to victory as self-empowerment and coming-of-age narratives, not uncommon in young adult fiction, by connecting the heroine to images of both colonialism and nationalism (59). Marston notes that, despite the governments they crusade against embodying the worst elements of colonialism, these white heroines allow for a kind of imperial nostalgia, naturalizing white superiority and leadership (58-64), and that oppressed populations “approve of the heroine as not only necessary but destiny” (77). She goes on to quote Marina Warner and states that the “bodies of armed maidens” are chaste warriors for righteousness, an “idealized combination of innate virtue and strength” who act as symbols of nationalism, both icons and embodiments of national leadership (Marston 83). Despite this symbolism, neither Mare nor Katniss actually take leadership roles in the newly created nations. In fact, the girl savior rarely carries any political influence after the war. She is a symbol of rebellion, not stability, and so once her job is done, she retreats to her natural domestic sphere.

In addition to the lack of political influence, gendered expectations dictate that the girl savior must also desire a retreat from public life. Dubrofsky and Ryalls note that the narrative

device of the games allows Katniss to project effortless and authentic femininity. Katniss performs without performing since she is beautiful without thinking about it, anathema to the image-obsessed Capitol. This lack of performance, they argue, is in itself a type of gender performance, making femininity look natural and effortless (Dubrofsky and Ryalls 405). Buffy, Van Helsing, Emma, Sabrina, and Wynona all embody similar approaches to gender. They are effortlessly beautiful: thin, with immaculate hair and perfect makeup, in revealing but fashionable clothing. This effortless femininity as an enactment of compulsory heterosexuality requires the heroine to naturally want a quiet life; to marry and raise her family.

The right to bear children and raise them in safety is historically a marker of able-bodied whiteness as *Buck v Bell* (1927), California's "Asexualization Acts" (1909, 1913, 1917), and the Irwin, GA Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility (2020) all demonstrate. At the end of *The Hunger Games* series, Katniss is banished to District 12, where she recovers from her emotional wounds and raises children. Other heroines ride off into a literal sunset or give up their powers. Emma Swan in *Once Upon a Time*, often referred to as "The Savior," saves the fairy tale world several times by breaking the Dark Curse, preventing the loss of magic, and defeating other magical enemies. Instead of taking her place as ruler, Emma ends the series surrounded by her family, married with an infant daughter named Hope ("Leaving Storybrooke"). Emma's narrative arc not only averts the apocalypse, but subscribes to a particular type of reproductive feminine narrative. Emma's path mirrors that of many post-apocalyptic saviors, whose white feminine instincts require them to step back from political life and raise their children once the world is safe to do so.

#### **Trait Number 4: Love Triangle**

I argue that while the love triangle is a common feature of post-apocalyptic narratives, and young adult novels more broadly, it is doing particular cultural work in this subgenre to signal the white girl savior's desirability while maintaining her chastity. Since the ideal white woman is both alluring and sexually pure, love triangles achieve this balance of desirability and chastity until the end of the series when she can settle down and fulfill her duties as a wife and mother.<sup>4</sup> Dubrofsky and Ryalls explain that Katniss contributes to cultural assumptions of whiteness as associated with virtue and innocence, race and goodness read off of the body (401), and Richard Dyer notes that white women in film and television are lit so that they literally glow with goodness (*White* 122). Dyer calls white women "the apotheosis of desirability, all a man can want and nothing he can have, or what a woman can be" (*A Matter of Images* 146). Dyer traces this apotheosis to both the "everything and nothing" qualities of whiteness, as well as the influence of the Virgin Mary on cultural images of white women. Like whiteness, Christianity exists at the impossible crux of being in the body, yet not of it (*White* 14). Therefore, Mary, as the perfect woman is a vessel for the spirit, characterized by passivity, expectancy, receptivity, "a sacred readiness for motherhood as a supreme fulfillment of one's nature," of purity and a state of grace (*White* 17). According to Dyer, Mary as a symbol for white womanhood is not Mary the mother, but Mary the virgin, meaning that idealized white women must be potential mothers, but cannot be sexually active. White women must be desirable but unattainable, maternal, but without biological children until the conclusion of their narrative arc.

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<sup>4</sup> The post-apocalyptic girl savior is desired by a working-class man who understands her but cannot admit his feelings because he does not feel worthy of her, and by an upper-class man who is broken by circumstances and needs to be cared for.

Love triangles maintain the romantic tension for the heroine without allowing her the physical or emotional space to act on her sexual desires. When Katniss kisses Peeta in the arena in order to convince the audience to send her gifts to survive the games, “it’s the first time [she’s] ever kissed a boy” (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 268). After this moment, she compares him to Gale, reminding the audience that he is still a part of the narrative (Collins, *The Hunger Games* 296). This love triangle, combined with the stress of revolution, prevents Katniss from developing any real romantic relationship until the end of the series. A love triangle often maintains the heroine’s sexual purity, but should she slip, there are severe consequences. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, when Buffy has sex with her boyfriend, the vampire Angel, he loses his soul and tries to open a hell dimension, ending the world (“Innocence”). When Buffy begins a sexual relationship with Spike, he assaults her (“Seeing Red”). Buffy’s failures of sexual purity have disastrous effects and she must continually put aside her desires until her role is fulfilled. Though white women must remain virginal throughout the revolutionary period of their narratives, their status as mothers to white children is also inevitable. As long as she is a symbol of revolution, the white girl savior acts as a metaphorical mother to the masses, especially BIPOC and queer characters, and must therefore maintain the sexual purity associated with white womanhood. Once the love triangle is resolved, however, and the revolution has ended, the white girl savior can fulfill her predestined role as a mother by bringing into the narrative a symbol of futurity, white children.

### **Trait Number 5: Motherhood**

The specter of motherhood propels Katniss through the events of *The Hunger Games*. Her motherly love for her sister Prim causes her to volunteer. Maternal care for Rue gets her sponsorship and cements her as a figure of rebellion. A fake pregnancy stirs empathy among

Capitol citizens. Finally, Katniss ends the series as a mother. Maternity becomes the driving force behind Katniss' desire to remake the world and demonstrates that she has succeeded. Dubrofsky and Ryalls argue that good women are always already motherly, and that their strength and heroism stem from natural maternal instincts and heterosexual femininity (407). Marilyn Frye claims that "the demand that white women make white babies to keep the race afloat has not been overt, but . . . it is being made over and over again in disguised form" because white people "confuse the white race with the human species, just as men have confused males with the human species" (27). Certainly, the post-apocalyptic girl savior is driven by a desire to protect humanity, represented by a (white) child. Often this child is a younger sister, as is the case with Katniss, Buffy, Mare, and Wynona. For older heroines such as Emma, Vanessa Van Helsing, and later in the series, Wynona, this child figure might also be a daughter who is absent from the majority of the narrative, but who functions as a plot device; a maternal ideal that the heroine will realize someday when the danger has passed. The cycle of reproduction and futurity in these stories requires both the mother and child to be female.

Even if a younger sister or daughter is not part of the character's backstory, the narrative will work in a girl child for the heroine to protect. In season 1, Sabrina meets ghost children who died as a result of a school hazing ritual called the harrowing, and she helps them get revenge on the current incarnation of the bullies hosting the ritual ("Witch Academy"). Sabrina also hides a girl infant, Leticia, from other witches. Leticia is older than her twin brother, and so Sabrina's family, the Spellmans, fear that Leticia's father will kill her. Once Leticia is hidden in the Spellman home, another witch demands they hand over the infant as payment, and Sabrina uses magic to trick her ("Midwinter's Tale"). Leticia, like the other daughters and sisters in post-



apocalyptic girl narratives, symbolizes the reproductive future of the community, and so must be protected and defended despite being a minor character in the overall plot of the series.

These child characters, though often passive, hold enormous symbolic power as they are sacrificed or endangered in order to motivate the heroine. These children stand-in for the future of the heroine's family line and by extension, a humanity that survives past the current apocalyptic moment. If these heroines give birth at the end of their stories, they are ensuring the future of humanity. White motherhood in these examples is, as Rich points out, political; a necessary component for saving the world as both a driving force and a symbol of futurity and stability.

Motherhood is not only the motivation for heroics; the grief these saviors feel after losing their sisters or children causes them to literally remake the world. When Prim is killed during the bombing of the Capitol, Katniss decides to kill President Coin, turning the socio-political narrative of the series from Coin's ascension into a complete government restructuring (Collins, *Mockingjay* 356, 372). Emma Swan, Henry's biological mother, breaks the curse by giving Henry true love's kiss when he dies from eating a poisoned apple, awakening everyone in Storybrooke to their true identities ("Land Without Magic"). In *Van Helsing*, Vanessa Van Helsing wakes from a coma into a world overrun with vampires. When Vanessa discovers her blood is toxic to vampires and that her bite can turn them human, she sets out to find her daughter Dylan and get them both to safety. When Dylan is turned into a vampire, burns in sunlight, and dies, Vanessa's screams awaken the Dark One (Dracula), who becomes the series' primary antagonist ("Love Bites"). In each case, the death of a child leads to the final showdown between good and evil in which the heroine must prevail or see the future destroyed.

In the same way that comic books will often kill a wife or love interest to motivate a hero—a trope that Gail Simone refers to as “women in refrigerators”—the post-apocalyptic girl is motivated by the death of childhood innocence.<sup>5</sup> For the post-apocalyptic girl savior, the death of a child reveals the true villain and the existential threat that the villain represents to the future. Anna Mae Duane comments that “childhood itself [is] a site of vulnerability, suffering and victimhood,” and that the suffering white child specifically is a potent symbol of “the often violent process of [American] nation making” (3). Children, as representations of innocence, are sacrificed in order to build the nation. These child characters may be revived or replaced once the heroine has guaranteed their safety by establishing a new political order that mimics current American social and political mores.

### **Trait Number 6: Tragic Figure**

Katniss and Emma have happy endings where they are married with children, but within the larger context of trauma and grief, as they both almost kill the man they eventually marry. *The Red Queen* and *Buffy* have hopeful endings, despite having watched a romantic partner die. Sabrina sacrifices her boyfriend, and the ordeal ends their relationship until the show’s final season when he kills himself to join her in the afterlife. Each of these examples interpolates the universal pain of revolution and loss through the post-apocalyptic girl savior, specifically her reproductive role as wife and mother. Marston comments that apocalyptic fantasies often replace cultural critique with “sustained fetishistic emphasis on white pain” (192). Whether it is Rue’s death filtered through Katniss’ imagining the loss of her sister, or Van Helsing’s daughter as a stand-in for all familial separation, the post-apocalyptic girl savior is the focal point for pain and loss. The audience is not allowed to forget or discount the personal cost of saving the world, and

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<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion and list of examples, see Simone’s blog at <https://www.lby3.com/wir/index.html> (2000).

the in-universe bystanders are expected to be grateful that the heroine has taken this pain on herself, having made this sacrifice for them. Connecting to Marston's observations about white leadership and colonialism, this compulsion to feel a debt to the post-apocalyptic girl savior suggests a similar relationship to colonial powers, or other forms of white "benevolence."

Each of these series focuses on the connections between the physical and psychological pain of the heroine as she suffers deprivation for her cause, as well as fear of failure, depression, torture, and loneliness. Buffy is brought back to life by her friends, but they do not prepare her body first, so she must claw her way out of her own grave, a metaphor for her isolation as the Slayer ("After Life"). Later in the season, her friends learn that they pulled her out of Heaven when they brought her back. Buffy is angry and depressed because she was at peace and now she must return to fighting demons ("Once More With Feeling"). Buffy's story ends after seven seasons, with the episode "Chosen." Immediately following a major battle where a Hellmouth opens under the city, Buffy's Slayer powers are dispersed to young women all over the world. Since Buffy is no longer the "chosen one" her friends ask, "what next," implying that now she can rest and heal. This part of the story, however, like the political rebuilding after revolution, is not necessary for the audience. Since these women are depicted as pure, unmarked by race or queerness, but also free of the gendered and racial prejudices of the regimes they are fighting against, they are fetishized as the ideal representatives of universal trauma as well as those with the mental and physical strength to bear it. In this way, the focus on the pain of the white girl savior reifies white supremacy and imperial nostalgia, naturalizing the white superiority and leadership that Marston discusses and compelling the reader/viewer to agree with this logic.

## Activism

White femininity is literally marketed in these texts/media and their accompanying merchandise such as dolls, makeup lines, and clothing, suggesting white women can buy their way into heroism, and that roleplaying as Katniss is a viable alternative to activism. This commodification of girl-power not only redirects activist impulses into profit-generating behaviors, it also naturalizes white feminism's role in upholding white supremacy, depicting white women as benevolent, kind, and gentle. These narratives give white women in positions of power a cultural script from which they might argue that their power (even if visibly used to oppress BIPOC, queer, poor, or disabled communities) is inherently different than white male power, and therefore desirable.

Depicting white women as the natural inheritors of girl power rhetoric and the primary movers of revolution is both ahistorical and counter to the revolutionary potential of fantasy literature. Young adult activism has been a major impetus for cultural change in the United States, from Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1960), to *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), Standing Rock (2016), March For Our Lives (2018), and the School Strike for Climate Action (2019). Yet, the role of young activists, especially youth activists of color, is often overlooked or dismissed by popular culture. Tess Bundy argues that “the lack of scholarship on [B]lack youth political activism has contributed to the contemporary maintenance of these myths [of Black apathy]. ... These images of dangerous and politically apathetic [B]lack youth have implications beyond history books—dehumanizing [B]lack people and particularly youth to such an extent that their bodies have become expendable” (276). While the post-apocalyptic white girl savior subgenre is not responsible for this erasure, her marketability as a trope promotes a larger cultural image of benevolent white feminism as a revolutionary force.

Rather than the historical reality of youth movements in the US, the post-apocalyptic white girl savior imagines a revolutionary who looks more like Tomi Lahren or Kaitlin Marie Bennett, and is more closely aligned with status quo hierarchies of race and gender.<sup>6</sup> This representation of the post-apocalyptic white girl savior may also calcify public expectations for acceptable forms of youth protest, or at least what those young people leading the protest should look like. Despite the creative potential inherent in contemporary cultural movements such as #BlackGirlMagic (2013), films and television continue the post-apocalyptic white girl savior subgenre as a means of limiting or subverting the revolutionary potential of future-facing fantasy narratives, while also claiming to promote change in order to sell benevolent white feminism and its related products, both physical and political.

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<sup>6</sup> Lahren and Bennett are both young (born in the 1990s), white darlings of the political right. Lahren hosted a show on OANN before becoming a Fox Nation personality, and Bennett was the president of Turning Point USA at Kent State University where she staged graduation photos carrying an AR-10.

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