Enchanted Empowerment: Witches, Gender, and Identity in Young Adult Literature

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ENCHANTED EMPOWERMENT:
WITCHES, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

Myers Addison Enlow

A Dissertation

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Abstract

The female witch has historically been used in popular American culture as a metaphor for female resistance to and disruption of the patriarchy. This metaphor has long since transformed from portraying these witches as evil and deserving of punishment to beautiful, trendy teens and young adults who use their magic for good to fight against demons and examples of this transformation can be found across popular television shows, movies, and books. Many popular genres, including much of young adult literature, are often overlooked or ignored by the academy and therefore the complex signification of the witch as a focus for interpreting and understanding contemporary girlhood and feminism is missed. This project argues that young adult literature purposefully uses the figure of the witch to model a feminist agency for its adolescent readers. This dissertation studies contemporary iterations of the teenage girl witch and argues that they offer adolescent readers significant portrayals of feminisms and (de)constructions of gender roles with which they can identify and through which they can develop their own feminist positions and critiques of patriarchal injustices.

Beyond the witch’s magic showing adolescent readers ways for them to use their own power of voice and collective activism, the witch’s monstrosity represents a position of “Other” that allows readers to identify with them. Adolescence is often depicted as a liminal space between childhood and adulthood which mirrors the liminal space the teen witches occupy between monster and human. Thus, adolescent readers can identify with the emotions and challenges the witches face despite their magical differences. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the representation of the witch in contemporary young adult literature reflects and influences constructs of gender and empowers adolescent female readers through the possibilities for expanded cultural understanding and critique offered by character identification. Each chapter
studies two to three young adult novels to explore how the representation of the witches demonstrates empowerment and resistance: chapter one looks at how the representation of malevolent mothers challenges idealized, white motherhood; chapter two depicts witches using collective activism with their coven mates to dismantle systemic villains; chapter three analyzes how land ownership is gendered and nature is controlled in similar ways to women and witches; chapter four takes a pedagogical approach to show how witches can be used in the classroom to navigate lessons and discussions of grief.
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Introduction

Teen witches’ identity is often depicted as two-fold: on the one hand their magical powers make them special, but at the same time their magic is an abnormality, making them outsiders. This double-edged identity mimics the way teenagers feel trapped between identifying as a child and identifying as an adult. Witches often have to hide their identity out of fear that they will be harmed or killed due to their Otherness, mirroring the identity crisis young adults often experience with expressing their gender, sexual orientation, or even future desires. Despite symbolizing these marginalized spaces of identity, the witch is able to use her immense power to save herself and others, enact change, and find true happiness. Therefore, the witch becomes emblematic of hope for young adult readers who may not feel very hopeful in their own lives. The critical examinations in this dissertation identify and articulate the power structures embedded in society to assist adolescent readers, students, teachers, and administrators with confronting these power dynamics in their curricula and lives.

At the crossroads of magical potions and adolescent angst lies an intersection: young adult literature and the enchanting figure of the witch. This dissertation approaches these crossroads of real-world issues and the fantastical element of the witch to show how she is a catalyst for personal and societal exploration. More than a predictable trope, witches in young adult (YA) fiction serve as a lens through which adolescents can navigate the complexities of their own identity, power, and belonging (all defining features of YA literature). Throughout history, witches have held a liminal space in culture, both feared and revered. In YA literature, this duality allows witches to become a vessel through which adolescents can explore similar feelings of liminality— that time period between childhood and adulthood. Through the witches, adolescents are able to explore rebellion and agency: to see how their own powers, though not
literally magic spells, can create alternative possibilities to social constructs and allow them to refigure their own potential marginalization into something powerful.

*Enchanted Empowerment: Witches, Gender, and Identity in Young Adult Literature* looks to the figure of the teenage witch in young adult (YA) fiction to explore YA’s evolution within the twenty-first century’s larger understandings of gender identification. I engage in reading contemporary texts such as Jessica Lewis’s *Bad Witch Burning* (2021), *The Babysitters Coven* (2019) trilogy by Kate Williams, *B*-*Witch* (2020) duology by Paige McKenzie and Nancy Ohlin, *The Witchery* (2022) by S. Isabelle, *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* (2016) by Kelly Barnhill, *Edie in Between* (2021) by Laura Sibson, and *Undead Girl Gang* (2018) by Lily Anderson through the lens of gender and sexuality studies to highlight new ways of understanding adolescent readers’ character identification and the current state of young adult literature. In reading a wide range of YA novels, I bring together young adult literature scholarship alongside scholars of YA fantasy and witchcraft to analyze how, as Alison Waller writes in *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism*, “models of adolescence do not arise solely from professional discourses” but are also produced through “fictional representations” (1). Joining Waller and other children’s and young adult literature (CYAL) scholars, I endeavor to showcase the academic and pedagogical importance of the genre and its teen characters. In what follows in this introduction I will outline scholarship surrounding the three main focal points in which my dissertation intercedes: young adult scholarship, young adult fantasy scholarship, and witch scholarship. Through detailing relevant historical and current conversations in these three branches, I show the larger conversations in which my dissertation seeks to intervene.
Conformity and Resistance in Young Adult Literature Scholarship

Young adult literature is the largest field in which my dissertation intervenes, and therefore it is necessary to contextualize the field as a whole. I begin with what is seemingly a unresolvable discussion of who exactly adolescents, teenagers, and young adults are, both in terms of the literature written for and about them as well as who, or what, this age group of people is in a real-world context. Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* is crucial to young adult scholarship as it offers an historical account of young adult literature beginning with the creation of “teenagers” as an age group. According to Cart, the emergence of teenagers as a distinct group began in the 1930s, when the influx of students attending high school “putting young people into each other’s company every day led to the emergence of a youth culture centered on high-school social life, especially in the newly popular sororities and fraternities, which provided the context for a newish wrinkle in courtship rituals: dances and dating” (Cart 5-6). Only a decade later was the first young adult literature novel (according to Cart) published, *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly in 1942. Shortly after, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Outsiders* (1967) were published, and they are still often cited as the founders of the young adult literature genre. Regardless of which novel truly was the first young adult novel, literature soon caught up to encompass teenagers and their experiences independent of childhood and adulthood.

Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen’s 1989 third edition of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* defines young adult literature as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and twenty choose to read (as opposed to what they may be coerced to read for class assignments)” (Donelson and Nilson 13). In their 2009 eighth edition, they updated their definition to “anything that readers between the approximate ages of twelve and
eighteen choose to read either for leisure reading or to fill school assignments” (Donelson and Nilson 3). The difference between the two is the age cutoff moving back two years to eighteen years old and there no longer being a distinction between reading for leisure or for school assignments. The changing of the age is likely because of the addition of the “new adult” genre which often encompasses characters who just graduated high school and are entering college. Cart also includes the “new adult” category in his redefinition of young adult as “literature for twelve- to eighteen-year-olds (or thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds) [that] could officially be described as Teen…and books for eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds could be categorized as young adult or new adult” (Cart 140). As these definitions show, children’s, young adult, and adult literature is often defined based on just one or two years’ difference between the target reader audience and the characters’ age in the novels.

Because of this overlap, discussions about specific distinctions between children’s, young adult, and adult literature ensue. Peter Hunt argues in Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism that children’s literature “is generally defined in terms of its audience, and the concept of that audience shifts with time and place; and it is written for a subservient audience, which has led to a good deal of definition by use…and, of course, that use is generally to serve the dominant culture” (Hunt 6). Though Hunt is only speaking of children’s literature, the same could apply for young adult literature, as they’re both often viewed as works to prepare adolescents for adulthood through teaching them the proper ways to be and not be an adult. Amy Pattee’s builds on this notion in Reading the Adolescent Romance: Sweet Valley High and the Popular Young Adult Romance Novel, arguing that “children’s and young adult literary artifacts depend on the reification of a cohesive definition (or definitions) of youth, the form of which is suitably recognizable so that products addressed to this audience are distinguished as such, and
the content of which remains within parameters of appropriateness and accessibility as defined on behalf of this audience” (Pattee 7). For Pattee, children’s and young adult literature is distinct from adult literature in that it works to reinforce what exactly is a child and an adolescent through the characters and plots. This is achieved through placing limits on what should be addressed in the novels. Roberta Seelinger Trites also highlights the subtle difference between children’s and young adult literature through plot constructions in Disturbing the Universe. Trites says the difference between children’s and YA novels, “lies not so much in how the protagonist grows…but with the very determined way that YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual rather than focusing on Self and self-discovery as children’s literature does” (Trites 20). No longer is the adolescent solely searching for who they are in YA novels, but also who they are in relation to society and who they are about to be as adults. Outside of pedagogical scholarship on young adult literature, scholars tend to focus on the ways in which the youth represented in the pages of a novel reflect, reinforce, or challenge and contradict the society they’re currently living in and about to enter into as full-fledged adults. The tendency to challenge and contradict is most often noted by scholars who take up young adult literature from the lens of race and gender and within the subsect of girlhood studies.

Many feminist girlhood scholars work to analyze the gendered figure of the girl within the realm of childhood and young adult literature, including Dawn Sardella-Ayres and Ashley N. Reese who seek to define girls’ literature through the subgenre of bildungsroman. Sardella-Ayres and Reese find that “although not all girls’ fiction is a bildungsroman…the socialization of the heroine into the roles of wife and mother remains central to girls’ literature” (Sardella-Ayres and Reese 34). This is in direct contradiction to boys’ literature that features journey plots for the boy
characters where they are able to leave the home to go on a quest and return to a future that allows them to leave the home and enter a life not restricted to the roles of husband and father. In a similar work on how girls in YA literature often reinforce gendered cultural expectations, Sara K. Day’s *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature* looks at how “the prevalence of narrative intimacy in contemporary American literature for adolescent women reflects a concern with the threats posed by these interpersonal connections while suggesting a more general understanding of the reading experience as a type of interpersonal relationship” to ultimately argue that “narrative intimacy in novels written for and about adolescent women highlights and reinforces often contradictory cultural expectations regarding young women’s involvement in interpersonal relationships” (Day, *Reading Like a Girl* 4). Day even offers her own definition of what adolescence is through a lens of gender: “as young women navigate their relationships, they internalize not only the value of disclosure in establishing intimacy but also the pressure to learn and use discretion in their dealings with others. Indeed, adolescent womanhood is marked by a growing understanding of what should *not* be expressed or shared” (Day, *Reading Like a Girl* 10). Using feminist lenses, these scholars show how representations of girls and girlhood in young adult novels reflect contemporary cultural understandings about what it is to be a teenage girl. These works are but a few examples of the ways in which a large part of young adult literature’s value is found in its ability to mirror cultural expectations and ideologies within the characters. Furthermore, they forecast a shift in these ideologies through characters, genres, and plot. Female characters are often cast as resisting cultural expectations, especially in fantasy and dystopian genres, and plots allow readers to question their current beliefs and trajectory towards the future by mirroring real-world issues through the fantasy setting or identifying with the main character.
Recent scholarship has focused on the intersections of the racial and gendered makeup of whom young adult literature represents and targets. Antero Garcia writes in *Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres* that “more specific than simply teenagers, a large portion of YA is focused on the interest of white, affluent teenagers. It depicts the culture and life choices of America’s affluent even in controversial texts that are seen as challenging, provocative, difficult. What’s more, in depicting a specific set of cultural practices, YA—in general—defines and reinforces these practices over time” (Garcia 5). Since the inception of YA literature, the demographics associated with most characters and the targeted marketing demographics of the audience have been largely those associated with white, heterosexual teenagers. However, the push for more inclusive YA literature is on the rise. Traci P. Baxley and Genyne Henry Boston’s *In)visible Presence: Feminist Counter-Narratives of Young Adult Literature by Women of Color* makes the case for the impact YA novels have on all adolescents, but specifically girls of color. Baxley and Boston “unpack the controlling images that are pervasive and harmful to women of color and offer a counter perspective that validates the power of voice and presence” (10). Ultimately, their analysis shows that “engaging in narrative texts helps students discover who they are, who they are not, and who they have the potential to be based on their emotional, critical, and psychological responses to what they read” (Baxley and Boston 6). Similarly, *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection* by Aria S. Halliday takes up the necessity to document black girlhood in scholarship and contends “that there are three main reasons—historical knowledge, cultural attitudes, and cultural rhetoric—for why scholars have had difficulty separating the experiences of Black girlhood from womanhood” (Halliday 6). Though not a new concern within the larger field of American literature, young adult and children’s literature has only more recently been concerned with diversity and representation.
The narrowed field of Black girlhood studies within young adult literature represents the nuances on the topic of adolescent novels and adds to the credibility of the genre beyond high school curriculums.

Regardless of the many lenses through which to analyze young adult literature, the larger genre convention of adolescents navigating their teen years and discovering their identity remains. Foundational young adult literature scholar Roberta Trites claims that the primary purpose of the young adult novel is to depict growth: “growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power. Without experiencing gradations between power and powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow. Thus, power is even more fundamental to adolescent literature than growth” (Trites x). Trites shows how adolescents learn about their own simultaneous power and powerlessness in relation to adults and larger societal categories (gender, race, class, etc.) that define them. Young adult literature also allows readers to experience, through the characters, their potential to thwart and resist the adults and institutions positioned against them. Maria Nikolajeva and Mary Hilton’s *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture: The Emergent Adult* explores these different forms of institutions: “Through sympathetically portraying the alienated pains and pleasures of adolescence, through enacting adolescence with all its turmoil, writers bring young readers face to face with different forms of cultural alienation itself: the legacy of colonialism, political injustice, environmental desecration, sexual stereotyping, consumerism, madness, and death” (Nikolajeva and Hilton 1). Without young adult literature allowing adolescents to confront these realities, they would enter adulthood unaware of the barriers they will likely face. In contrast to the YA novel working as an ideal way to embolden teens to tackle adulthood, Ebony Daley-Carey’s “Testing the Limits: Postmodern Adolescent Identities in Contemporary Coming-of-Age
“Stories” uses two unconventional YA novels to show that the bildungsroman narrative of “overcoming” the trials of adolescence to mature and become an adult are not always empowering, realistic, or attainable. Traditionally, young adult fiction has “insisted that the instability and uncertainty attached to liminality must be outgrown as the adolescent progresses towards adulthood. Liminality is then replaced by an agentic and other-regarding subject who conforms to existing social expectations” but if an adolescent “will not or cannot conform to normative definitions [they] are invariably marginalised and positioned as other” (Daley-Carey 473). At the end of the day, while a large portion of young adult literature does feature protagonists challenging the status quo, their stories end with some level of conformity so they are able to enter the adult world with little to no disruption as intended. However, the fantasy genre is an example of one of the genres (like dystopian fiction) that often allows the protagonist to challenge the systems of oppression to a higher degree and does not force them to conform by the end of the novel. Due to the nature of fantasy novels incorporating elements of the supernatural and otherworldly, authors can get away with showing teenagers refusing to conform without punishment because, technically, it’s a fictional world or fantasy land that does not conform to realistic rules.

As scholars such as Day, Daley-Carey, Nikolajeva, and Hilton exemplify, there is conflict between conformity and resistance in young adult scholarship. As Day details, representations of female characters in YA often still show them conforming to traditional gender stereotypes by the end of the novel, despite their resistance in the beginning. On the other hand, Nikolajeva and Hilton claim that a major component of YA literature is to show adolescent characters facing and resisting different forms of oppression in order to triumph in the end. Central to this conflict is often the genre of the YA novel and gender of the main character. For example, Day explores
nineteenth century girls literature, which generally reflects the modes of conformity and resistance in that time period. In contrast, contemporary dystopian or fantasy novels provide a completely different take on conformity or resistance. In particular, it’s become a genre convention of YA fantasy novels to feature a female main character that refuses to conform to her society’s gender expectations. This most often manifests through her supernatural abilities that are uncommon for girls to possess (e.g. Violet in *Fourth Wing* bonding with two dragons when no one in history has bonded with more than one before) or her strength shown through fighting to save her town/school from the impending doom despite all the male characters urging her to save herself (e.g. Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Bella in *Twilight*, etc.).

Beyond the genre conventions, disagreements about representations of conformity and resistance in young adult fiction also lie with cultural expectations of adolescents. Since YA’s creation, one of the main components of the genre has been to prepare adolescents for adulthood. However, the conflict arises because opinions on how to prepare adolescents for adulthood differ. Arguments for both managing adulthood through conforming to cultural expectations as well as becoming an adult who aims to reform those expectations are made in YA fiction. While acknowledging that these arguments about young adult literature are ongoing, my study of witches in young adult fantasy offers an important interpretation that extends and intervenes in existing debates about conformity and cultural expectations in young adult literature. I contend that the witches allow for a unique perspective of what navigating the complexities of adolescence can and should look like for today’s teens, specifically through their promotion of collaboration with their covens to work through grief and take down villains and their prioritization of trusting their own voice and knowledge. Also, because the novels play at the edges of fantasy and reality, the format of the novels reflects discussions in the field of YA
literature between conformity and resistance. Though arguments can be made in a multitude of ways that what’s happening in the texts can only happen because of the fantastical element, I maintain that adolescents can glean ways to resist from the witches in the pages even though they’re fantastical creatures. Put simply, though the witches rely on magic in the novels, their forms of resistance—collaboration, voice, and knowledge—can be replicated by readers. In exploring these novels of “in-between,” I intervene in these YA literature debates on liminality and the tension between conformity and resistance. Moving from the larger field of young adult literature scholarship to young adult fantasy scholarship, I lay out the more focused discussions of scholars and map out the ways in which I am entering this subfield’s discussions.

Monstrosity and Witches in Young Adult Fantasy Scholarship

As outlined in the section above, young adult literature focuses on larger questions about identity, belonging, challenging the status quo, and navigating into adulthood. To complicate these issues, young adult fantasy takes the young woman negotiating these different problems and places her in the position of monster. This dissertation specifically looks at novels that fit in the fantasy young adult literature genre and the monsters I analyze are teenage witches. Thus, the witch allows me to localize the larger questions of adolescent girlhood. By narrowing my focus to fantasy young adult literature that features adolescent girl witches as the main characters, I am able to narrow the huge YA issues (gender, identity) into smaller issues. Centering my analysis on female adolescent witches allows for me to explore what it means for adolescent girls to be woman, adolescent, and other (oftentimes simultaneously), and to be able to test their powers in a world that readers recognize as their own. Because these teen witches do not inhabit a fantasy realm, such as the dystopian future of *Hunger Games* or the Hogwarts Castle in the *Harry Potter* series, but contemporary American towns, Haelsford, Florida; Spring River, Kansas; and Sorrow
Point, Washington, and navigate day-to-day high school drama, I turn to Alison Waller’s definition of fantastic realism. Waller describes fantastic realism as blending elements of impossible events with real-life teenage experiences. It combines familiar teenage struggles with elements of magic or the unexplained, and the moments that the fantasy disrupts the realistic, everyday situations often causes either the characters or readers to question what’s real and what’s not (Waller 17-18). Waller’s definition is important in that she describes what fantastic realism is. In my dissertation, I build on Waller’s definition and move to show what these novels do. In the novels I analyze in the following chapters, the fantastic (in the form of witches and witchcraft) is impossible only to the reader, as the characters are neither hesitant of their magical abilities nor do they believe their life is anything but their reality. Some of the novels do feature the teen girls obtaining their power for the first time, but beyond a brief wondrous disbelief at their new abilities, they immediately accept their identity and powers as their new reality. Despite the settings in contemporary America (Kansas and California for example) and the witches' appearance as “normal” teenage girls, their ability to wield magic still classifies them as monstrous to non-magical beings. As I show in more detail within each chapter, the realistic settings of the novels are just as important to the analysis of the novels as the main characters being teen girl witches.

_Schools of Magic: Learning in Children’s and Young Adult Fantasy Fiction_ by Megan H. Suttie argues that “though it is a literature of the impossible, the otherworldly, the unreal, fantasy is inherently and intricately bound up with reality, offering clarity, commentary, and critique upon what is possible and real within our own world” largely through “its allegorical re-presentation of issues and its juxtaposition of the real and the unreal” (Suttie 14-15). YA fantasy novels featuring teen witches allow for the allegorical representation of issues of gender, race,
and sexuality, and through its juxtaposition of the real world with the world of fantasy, the witches are able to show oppressions readers may find hard to read about. For example, depictions of racial and gender oppression can be coded as witch versus human rather than man versus woman or Black versus white. Yet the treatment of witches at the hands of humans mirrors the ways in which men and white Americans treat women and people of color. Without having to talk explicitly about racism or sexism, adolescents are able to still have the conversations about power, exclusion, and access. For example, Natalie Jipson delves into the “blood-based transfer of magical abilities” in young adult fantasy novels centered around witches and witchcraft to argue that “the ways in which magic is transferred in fictional spaces, from one witch to another, tends to follow a set of rules and customs that are deeply imbricated with categories of racism, settler colonialism, ableism, and sexism” (1). Jipson’s work encapsulates how young adult fantasy literature can unthinkingly reflect dominant structures, but I show that through these reflections adolescents can understand and discuss those structures. Alison Waller writes that fantastic realism allows writers and readers a way to explore adolescent themes between reality and fantasy and provides the potential for a radical retelling of adolescence, one that questions the normal adolescence experience (Waller 195). Her point is that the normal adolescent experience is often characterized as a temporary progression towards adulthood, a period that will soon be categorized as the “past” from which the teen can learn and move on. Focusing on this time period as something more than a constant forward momentum, and instead reading it as a position from which to critically question cultural assumptions of the past, present and future, young adult fantasy allows scholars to read adolescence as more than an ordinary time in everyone’s lives. Specifically, as the next section will elaborate, through the use of the
teen girl as a witch who challenges and questions gendered cultural assumptions, we are able to see exactly how deep the roots of our culture go.

Through the monstrous abilities of teen witches, the fantasy novels I explore contend with the figure of the monster in similar ways to fantasy novels with zombies, werewolves, and vampires. In Monstrous Youth: Transgressing the Boundaries of Childhood in the United States, Sara Austin highlights the similarities between monsters and children: “the meaning of monstrosity shifts as cultural anxieties change, and the meaning of childhood shifts with historical changes in education, medicine, art, literature, psychology, and human rights discourses. Since childhood and adolescence are states of becoming, children, like monsters, float, frustrating identity categories” (3). As I will detail below in the next section and throughout the dissertation chapters, the figure of the witch is imbued with cultural anxieties. It is this concept of the changing monster and teenager that I employ in my analysis of contemporary witch novels to show the current relation between witches and teenage girls. The witch reflects society’s anxieties about female power and resisting norms. By closely examining the portrayal of young witches in young adult fantasy fiction, I show how society often views adolescent girlhood as a potential threat to the gendered status quo.

In a seminal text in monster studies, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen outlines seven theses to understand cultures through the monsters they’ve created: The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body, The Monster Always Escapes, The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis, The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference, The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible, Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire, and The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming. The last thesis is particularly useful within this dissertation as Cohen states, “Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and
discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return” and when they return they come back with greater knowledge and “ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 20). This echoes scholars cited above (Antero Garcia and Sara K. Day), who have used young adult literature to highlight how cultural assumptions about race and gender are often reinforced through the representations of girlhood. Cohen, amongst other scholars, identifies these texts as unconsciously reproducing a monster to confront assumptions about race and gender, whereas I read the witch in fantasy YA novels as a deliberate creation of a “monster” by the authors to comment on the identity positions of adolescent girls that so often reproduce the hegemonic norms. Cohen, Austin, and Jipson offer a nuanced approach to evaluating the representations of teen girls and monsters in relation to cultural assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. I go beyond these approaches to argue that representations in the novels I analyze are conscious strategies to cast the teen girl witch as a rich, multilayered analysis of contemporary America’s values on race, gender, and sexuality stands and possibilities for the future.

Baylee Kerkvliet applies Cohen’s theses in “Monsters in Young Adult Literature: The Unassuming Boundary Keepers of the Possible” to show how YAL “monsters offer young readers the ability to find power, confidence, and curiosity within themselves to break free of a world governed by questionable institutions and find their own way in it” (Kerkvliet 11). However, Kerkvliet contends that “even though monsters help young readers understand that they can question institutions and the boundaries established by them” the main goal of young
adult literature is to “teach young readers how to self-police: to show them that they can push back against unfair and unjust institutions if they need to, but also to show them how to live in productive ways in their society in order to avoid becoming the monsters they so fear” (Kerkvliet 12). In the texts I have selected, the protagonists are already the monsters (i.e. witches) and are not portrayed as something, or someone, readers would not want to become. Instead, often in the witch novels the true monsters are the humans or human institutions the witches fight against: witch hunters, political organizations, corrupt leaders. Thus, the fantasy novels in this dissertation cast a different outlook on monstrosity and often end with the teen witches succeeding in their efforts to combat the unfair and unjust institutions through their magic and collaboration with other witches.

**Witches Then and Now: How History of Witches Impacts YA Literature**

My choice to focus on witches is grounded in the fact that they are often depicted as strong, female characters who challenge traditional gender roles which threatens patriarchal control. At least since the 16th century, women have been persecuted as witches in Europe and North America. Most of these trials are not remembered with the same degree of infamy as the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 or the European Witch Trials that lasted for over a century between 1500 and 1660. For example, “In the Bishopric of Trier, in 1585, two villages were left with only one female inhabitant each” after their witch hunt (Ehrenreich and English 34). The exact number of people killed in witch trials is not known; however, “women made up some 85 percent of those executed—old women, young women, and children” (Ehrenreich and English 35). Historical reasons for the persecution of witches ranges from the “battle between conservative and liberal America” (Gibson 87) in Salem, Massachusetts to “repositioning witchcraft as the affliction of non-Europeans” beginning with Native Americans (Davies 3).
Matilda Joslyn Gage, writing in 1893, is arguably the first to publicly argue that witches were the victims of masculine oppression and blame the church for starting witch-hunts (132). Gage’s assertion that the church accused women of witchcraft to suppress them may have been the first of its kind, but she certainly wasn’t the last. In the time since Gage published *Woman, Church and State* many scholars have connected the killing of witches to patriarchal ideals.

According to Ehrenreich and English in *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* there are three main accusations against witches: “First, witches are accused of every conceivable sexual crime against men. Quite simply, they are ‘accused’ of female sexuality. Second, they are accused of being organized. Third, they are accused of having magical powers effecting health—of harming, but also of healing…specifically with possessing medical and obstetrical skills” (Ehrenreich and English 39). These three accusations form a general idea of gender roles for women in the age of the witch craze (1500-1600s) and how they’ve carried over to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: women are still subtly questioned about their right to enjoy sex on their own terms, manifesting in “slut-shaming” women with multiple partners while men receive praise for similar behavior. The persistence of the wage gap implies that women’s work outside of the home is still inherently worth less than a men’s. Finally, while many women excel in medical and scientific fields, there often is still a lingering discomfort surrounding women in these roles.

Sylvia Federici echoes the ways in which witch hunts created a new model of femininity in *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*: “women had to conform to be socially accepted in the developing capitalist society: sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world, accepting as natural the confinement to a sphere of activities that in capitalism has been completely devalued” (Federici 32). Even though this is not our current model of femininity today, we can still see vestiges of the ways the facts and arguments surrounding historical witch
trials and hunts relate to the definitions of the witch that are still prevalent in twenty-first century America. From the European witch who practices midwifery and uses herbs to treat ailments to the Voodoo Queen (most famously Marie Laveau of New Orleans) practicing a form of African spiritualism with voodoo, rootwork, and conjure, witches are almost always represented as women. 

Within the media’s representation of witches as women there has been a move from writing witches in conservative gender roles to more recent literature featuring the witch as a liberatory icon. In Alison Waller’s article, she analyzes Margaret Mahy’s supernatural novels *The Haunting*, *The Changeover*, and *The Tricksters* to show how she uses witchcraft to mimic the pains teenage girls go through while navigating puberty and growing towards adulthood. In these novels, they’re learning to be young women, but their magic is often “sharply undercut by a return to domesticity” (Waller 11). Ultimately, even though these girls are witches, their magical powers do not give them the freedom to eschew societal expectations and remain firmly rooted in their spaces as schoolgirls, daughters, and sisters at the end of the day. This article tangentially touches on family structures in witch literature, but remains focused on the development of the girls through a witch representation. Therefore, this article is important in grounding the surrounding conversations about children’s/young adult witch literature because many scholars (June Pulliam 2014; Meredith S. Sutphin 2009; and Roberta Seelinger Trites 2018) focus on the witch’s magic as occupying a space of restricted, or limited, power for girls.

According to Miranda Corcoran, the teenage witch and her magic powers gives her, and other teenage girls, a place to explore their future selves and understand what it means to grow up as an adolescent female in America. *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture: Teen Witches* by Corcoran “explores the teenage witch not as a mere reflection of US
anxieties about adolescent femininity, but as a distinct ‘discursive formation’ that enabled Americans to conceptualise teenage girls as a unique identificatory category and a new form of female subjectivity, while concomitantly offering adolescent girls themselves a malleable, imaginative space in which to experiment with their own nascent identities” (Corcoran 7). For Corcoran, the contemporary twenty-first century teenage witch is not just another rendition of what America fears in femininity, but this new teen witch was constructed in order for America to understand what an adolescent girl has the possibility to become. Ultimately, I am taking the conversation further by arguing that some young adult literature foregrounds the witch as an alternative to traditional daughter, sister, mother, and wife categories. In other words, I see the magical abilities of the young witches as fully empowering them to freedom, not just producing a temporary space of power until they become women.

Byrdie Kosmina writes in *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch Popular Culture, Memory, Activism* that the witch is difficult to define “because of her status as a historical, literary, mythological, and mnemonic figure: she exists at the intersection of multiple modes of knowledge and culture” (Kosmina 1). This dissertation seeks to move beyond simply defining the witch in the new 21st century era to show the new potential the 21st century teen witch provides to adolescent readers and shed light on how assumptions about teenage girls have shifted within the literary genre. My dissertation uses figures of the teen witch in young adult contemporary realistic fantasy novels to mediate an outlook on the present feminine adolescent experience and imagine a more progressive future where the idealized readers of these novels apply the attitudes and beliefs of the characters in their own lives. Scarlett K. Harrington argues in “Something Wicked: Witches and Rhetorics of Resistance” that when wielded by the hegemonic, meanings of magic create the witch as the heretical
other who utilizes spells as rhetoric to challenge the material conditions that make her/them monstrous. Discourses of magic and witchcraft act as a civilizing process whereby othered bodies are assimilated into white heteropatriarchal standards of acceptability and civility. The witch is threatening because her/their otherness is monstrous, abject, and refuses assimilation – an enactment of agency; the language of spells is her/their tool to enact change. When marginalized bodies, particularly women/femmes, reclaim the symbol of the witch they draw on haunted memories of oppression to subvert and challenge the status quo. (Harrington 5)

Harrington’s outlook on witches and their use of rhetoric as resistance resonates with the young adult witch literature I analyze in the following chapters because the characters wield magic as a way to subvert and challenge societal expectations. These narratives depict the witch as an empowered teenage girl who is reclaiming the oppressed memory of witches as Other and using her subversive powers to address issues relevant to the female adolescent experience. Ultimately, these stories highlight a transformative potential of reclaiming narratives, both for the witch and the teen girl, and offer a way to challenge power structures in literature that often led the female protagonists to a traditional, feminine future instead of offering a transgressive, inclusive future.

My dissertation seeks to address a number of central questions related to contemporary young adult witch literature in America: How does the genre challenge existing social hierarchies and power structures? In what ways does YA witch literature offer nuanced portrayals of adolescent identities that move beyond stereotypical representations? How do witches in these narratives use magic as a metaphor for navigating societal challenges? How does the genre empower adolescent girls by highlighting the potential for agency? How does YA witch literature engage with social issues relevant to adolescent girls, such as gender inequality
and environmental concerns? The critical examinations in this dissertation identify and articulate power structures embedded in society and detail how the teen witch main characters confront and resist these power dynamics. The witch in novels, movies, and tv shows collectively embodies the idea that girls and women having political and social power is so far-fetched that they literally have to possess supernatural powers in order to achieve any political and social power. Regardless of having money, class status, and racial privilege, there is still such a large gender gap that women have to become witches with the ability to cast spells, hexes, and enact fear into men to see themselves gain any semblance of power.

**A Look Inside Each Chapter**

This dissertation argues that young adult witch narratives grapple with questions of personal identity, the responsibility of power, and the importance of challenging societal norms in a way that YA fiction featuring non magical human teenagers lacks. Through the use of the witch, the novels are able to empower female adolescents through magic as a metaphor for agency and power. Additionally, the witch is inherently tied to a sense of otherness, which allows for a nuanced exploration of identity with which adolescent readers may more easily identify. Finally, magic represents a way to question authority and disrupt oppressive systems of power in a safe and engaging space. Ultimately, the use of the witch provides a way to confront real-world concerns in an experimental way that can be less overwhelming than tackling large issues, such as environmentalism or death, head on. My chapters draw upon diverse fields of scholarship from pedagogical and educational theory, literary criticism, critical race theory, and feminist gender theory to deconstruct YA witch novels and shed light on their potential to empower young readers. Additionally, each chapter focuses on a cluster of novels that use the
young adult witch to parallel, and ultimately respond to, longstanding concerns in women’s and gender studies.

Chapter One, “Bad Moms: Teenage Witches and Alternative Family Structures in Young Adult Novels” draws on Rita Felski’s four modes of identification to explore how YA witches subvert and complicate motherhood. I argue that Bad Witch Burning, Our Crooked Hearts, and The Ravens deconstruct models of white nuclear family motherhood by exhibiting mothers who purposefully and repeatedly place themselves above their daughters, seemingly with no remorse. I show how readers of these novels could identify with the teenage witch and shatter and replace the idea of a perfect mother with a realistic form of motherhood that reflects women’s flaws and identities outside of mothering. Assuming, like Felski, that readers identify with characters and then draw on those identifications in the real world, the witches’ views of their malevolent mothers work to model alternate perspectives for the targeted teen audience, leading the reader to consider their own mothers as complicated, flawed individuals.

Chapter Two, “Casting Change: Witches as Agents of Collective Activism” examines how the young adult genre has moved beyond the tropes of the bildungsroman to call readers to empathy and activism. Using three novel series, These Witches Don’t Burn (2019) duology by Isabel Sterling, The Babysitters Coven (2019) trilogy by Kate Williams, and the B*Witch (2020) duology by Paige McKenzie and Nancy Ohlin, I explore how the figure of the witch allows readers to understand social justice awareness and action that hinges on using individual powers collectively. Expanding on June Pulliam’s claim that “the teen witch’s example shows how changing one’s perspective can be empowering,” I argue that the teen witch’s example in these novels shows how individuals come together to use their voices and knowledges to fight hate speech and anti-democratic organizations that occupy a very real space in the reader’s world
today. The novels not only explore how adolescents navigate and negotiate these power
dynamics, but also how they actively work to disrupt and dismantle oppressive systems of
power. More importantly, these novels work to show readers that the characters cannot challenge
power dynamics on their own, but they need to positively collaborate with their friends and
covens. So, even though readers do not have witchcraft at their disposal, they do have their voice
and words to fight against their own villains and forms of oppression by mobilizing the support
of friends and allies.

Chapter Three, “Earth As Goddess: An Ecofeminist Approach to Patriarchal Spaces and
Empowering Places in YA Literature” explores the contrasting environments of institutions and
nature, with particular attention to how they reflect and reinforce racialized and gendered power
Drank The Moon* (2016) by Kelly Barnhill, I examine how adolescent femininity is oppressed in
patriarchal spaces such as the town, but flourishes in natural areas surrounding the town, such as
the forest. Through this analysis, I offer a framework for understanding the interplay between
patriarchy, environmentalism, and the empowerment of teens. The natural areas illustrate and
underline the ecofeminist perspective that women and nature are interconnected, while also
offering a source of magic and wisdom for characters to develop their witch identities. The teen
witches and readers learn to respect Earth and understand that when humans venture too far from
their democratic interconnection with nature it can lead to gendered and hierarchical oppression
that manifests even in the places and spaces you occupy.

Chapter Four, “Pedagogical Power of Magic: Teaching Grief Through Witches in Young
Adult Literature,” adopts a pedagogical perspective to put the arguments of previous chapters
into practice. In this chapter, I engage the evolving discussions of the potential uses of YA and
children’s literature in the classroom. I look at a micro-genre of YA in which the witch’s magic is crucial to her accepting the death of a loved one and provide a case study for teaching these works in the classroom: *Edie in Between* (2021) by Laura Sibson, *Undead Girl Gang* (2018) by Lily Anderson, and *The Nature of Witches* (2021) by Rachel Griffin. My approach focuses on the use of creative writing assignments to help students understand how each novel's use of magic provides a way for the witch to cope with her grief. One advantage of teaching these novels is their potential to stimulate a heightened degree of agency in their readers. Because the authors do not focus solely on the witch’s struggle with grief, but foreground their opportunities for coping and empowerment in their magic, the teen witches are presented as the authors of their own stories, claiming their grief as meaningful but not defining their potential futures and identities. Employing assignments and in-class activities that guide students to pinpoint this agency, I show how these novels allow young readers the opportunity to learn from, experience, and practice their own mechanisms to deal with grief while simultaneously gaining fundamental critical thinking and analytical skills.

The figure of the witch in novels, movies, and tv shows often embodies the idea that girls and women literally have to possess supernatural powers in order to achieve any political and social power. Regardless of wealth, class status, and racial privilege, the popular figure of the witch suggests that women need the ability to cast spells and strike fear into men to see themselves gain any semblance of power. In contrast, *Enchanted Empowerment: Witches, Gender, and Identity in Young Adult Literature* shows how the figure of the witch has evolved in twenty-first century young adult literature to embody a more robust icon for adolescent readers. Beyond symbolizing power to young girls, the witch now offers new perspectives on coping with
grief, radicalizing motherhood and familial roles, inspiring collective activism, and questioning how the patriarchy has institutionalized almost every space they occupy.
Chapter One: “Bad Moms: Teenage Witches and Alternative Family Structures in Young Adult Novels”

Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto write in their 1992 “The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother” that “belief in the all-powerful mother spawns a recurrent tendency to blame the mother on the one hand, and a fantasy of maternal perfectibility on the other” (192). Almost thirty years later, the fantasy of a perfect mother still largely pervades American ideals, though contemporary popular culture is doing more to explore the “messy mom” character, particularly with sitcoms such as Black-ish (2014-2022) and Modern Family (2009-2020). Exploring “messy” motherhood in its own way, contemporary young adult witch literature presents an ambivalent depiction of maternal care and parental guidance. This subversion and complication of fantasies of motherhood occurs in part through readers’ character identification with teenage girl witches in popular young adult genre novels. Our Crooked Hearts (2022) by Melissa Albert, The Ravens (2020) by Danielle Paige and Kass Morgan and Bad Witch Burning (2021) by Jessica Lewis deconstruct institutional motherhood by describing anti-fantasy mothers who purposefully and repeatedly place themselves above their daughters, seemingly with no remorse. Rather than maintaining the fantasy of perfect motherhood, Lewis, Albert, Paige and Morgan create mothers who prioritize their own needs over their daughters’.

One method for exploring the functions and significances of representations of anti-fantasy mothers in young adult witch literature is through a literary approach that Rita Felski terms “identification,” and this study applies Felski’s method to readings of anti-fantasy mothers and their representation. Through Rita Felski’s four modes of identification outlined in Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies (2019), I show how readers identify with the teenage witch and shatter and replace the idea of a fantastical mother with a realistic form of motherhood that reflects women’s flaws and identity outside of mothering. I am using Felski’s
model for reader identification particularly because “characters do share qualities with real people, while our interactions with others often draw on insights we have gleaned from novels or films. We translate between fiction and life without blinking” (Felski 83). In all three novels, the main character is the teenage girl witch. Assuming, like Felski, that readers identify with characters and then draw on those identifications in the real world, the witches’ views of their malevolent mothers work to model for the targeted teen audience other ways motherhood looks, with the hope that identification with non-nuclear family models will lead readers to consider their own mothers as complicated, flawed individuals. The author of Our Crooked Hearts, Melissa Albert, says in an interview: “families free of dysfunction don’t exist, and nobody I know is more than one generation removed from some kind of familial chaos. The sooner young readers can abolish any shame they might carry for having a nontraditional or imperfect family, the better, and I hope seeing diversity in family structure on the page helps” (Trombetta). The young adult genre’s target readership are teenagers who might have an aversion to their own mothers (or parental figures), but because the narrative is told through another adolescent’s point of view, they can occupy the consciousness of considering their own mothers and themselves in comparison to the main character. The main characters’ views of their mothers challenge readers to accept aberrant forms of motherhood and provide examples of how different mother-daughter relationships are navigated. By showing anti-fantasy forms of mothering, young readers are able to consider forms of mothering (and “daughtering”) that challenge the ongoing dominant narrative of the fantasy mother.

Of Felski’s four modes of identification I will be focusing on three: alignment, allegiance, and recognition. Character alignment refers to how “directive force of narrative, description, and point of view” positions a character and shapes a reader’s view of a character (Felski 94). Readers usually identify with main characters more than background characters
because the story is typically told through their point of view: readers can read their thoughts, and authors attach more detail to the main characters. Building on alignment, Felski’s allegiance shows “how ethical or political values draw audiences closer to some figures rather than others” (95). The third aspect of Felski’s character identification I use is recognition, which can cause readers to potentially realize they’ve made assumptions without noticing they had done so. Specifically, “recognition names an experience of coming to know: of being struck by some kind of insight or realization” (Felski 101) or can occur when “one recognizes oneself in certain characters rather than in others” (Felski 100). Felski offers a nuanced version of character identification, one where the reader can feel allegiance to or recognition with more than one character. This version of identification provides terminology to discuss how the teen reader can relate to both the witch daughter and the mother figure. Recognizing actions taken by the reader’s own mothers or themselves in these characters allows for a way for readers to identify with both the mothers and the daughters, someone whom they both do and do not have commonalities with. Thus, character identification with both the mothers and daughters can move beyond the novel and open a gateway for readers to realize the “right” way for someone to mother does not exist and is largely built upon a foundation of gendered assumptions.

In addition to drawing on Felski’s useful discussion of recognition and identification, this study of “malevolent” mothers and mothering has also benefitted from Murray Smith’s Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema (1995). Smith explores the concepts of “alignment” and defines this as “the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of characters” (6). Smith’s study also productively uses the term “allegiance” described as “the way a film attempts to marshal our sympathies for or against the various characters in the world of the fiction” (6). Smith, like Felski, employs the concept of “recognition” defining the term as “the more basic level at which spectators grasp and construct characters” (9-10) to
analyze the ways viewers identify with characters in film. Smith and Felski use the same terms to discuss character identification within two different genres—film and novels. Young adult novels are particularly amenable to Felski’s approach because the genre has an explicit focus on the social attunement, or development education, of its assumed teen readers. Similar to YA’s focus on the social, Smith’s iteration of character identification pushes to connect identification with cultural ideology. Specifically, Smith’s study “seeks to relate ‘character’ to the question of spectatorship” and suggests that “identification’ may function in a variety of ways with respect to ideology, having the potential both to reinforce and to question norms” (10). As I show, Felski and Smith’s “identification” modes offer ways for scholars to consider how teenage and adolescent readers of these texts might identify with the teen witch main characters. As Smith says, it is this identification that questions the norms of motherhood, causing readers to recognize their own assumptions about mothers. When readers respond to the main characters, they may also identify with the main characters and leave the reading with new understandings of mother love, as the daughter characters in the texts do.

Joining and extending Felski and Smith’s persuasive studies of character, Blakey Vermeule (2010) works with character identification theory and seeks to answer why readers even care about literary characters enough to identify with them and her general answer is because "literary characters are tools to think with" (245). Vermeule goes even further and claims that “they are the greatest practical-reasoning schemes ever invented. We use them to sort out basic moral problems or to practice new emotional situations. We use them to cut through masses of ambient cultural information” (xii). Vermeule’s scholarship is salient because the main characters of the novels I analyze are teen witches, meaning many young adult authors feature likable characters that young adult readers want to know more about and relate to. Though there seems to be little connection between a fictional supernatural teen witch and a non-magical
teenage reader, the identification comes through readers seeing how the characters handle emotional relationships and situations with their mothers and learning how they handle adolescence with the additional challenge of navigating their new powers. Like Vermuele says, the teen witches are tools for readers to test out ways they can navigate their own challenges with changing bodies, feelings, relationships, and family. Using Felski, Smith, and Vermeule’s character identification theory to focus on representations of mothering, I aim to show that representations of mothers in *Our Crooked Hearts*, *The Ravens*, and *Bad Witch Burning* challenge the ethical, political, and racial values of motherhood through character identification.

The authors use witches as conduits for complicated mothers because it comments on the history of women’s oppression as mothers and works to transform what that identity means today for both Black and white women. Culturally, the witch figures as a feminist icon due to her history as an anti-patriarchy, anti-establishment woman who lives on the fringe of societal norms. Danielle Paige, co-author of *The Ravens*, says, “I’ve always been fascinated by witches….It’s their power, the potential for darkness, the idea that they are even more powerful together. But most importantly, it’s the sisterhood” (Canfield). Paige highlights the gendered, collective possibility of the witch in *The Ravens*. I use this feminist positioning of the witch, alongside feminist theory that has established the constraints and limits traditional nuclear family roles place on women, to reconceive the understanding of mothers and mothering. The novels I examine feature mothers who do not fulfill the role of the perfect mother because they abandon their daughters, magically erase their memories, and financially abuse them. The mother’s transgressive behavior is not condoned or celebrated in these novels, yet I foreground their behavior because their very presence in novels signifies to the characters and readers the absurdity of desiring a “perfect motherhood” that doesn’t exist. Highlighting non-normative, malevolent mothering lifts the burden on mothers to perform an ideal motherhood and helps
teenagers to reconceive how they expect their mothers to behave through alignment and recognition with the characters.

Depending on their ethical and political values (allegiances), readers of *Our Crooked Hearts*, *The Ravens*, and *Bad Witch Burning* may regard the mothers as “good” or “bad,” relying on their values associated with what motherhood, women, and femininity should look like. The supernatural characters allow for parallels between good magic making a good mother and bad magic causing bad mothering. Witches and magic in all three novels are constantly classified as “bad” and “good,” mirroring the simplistic standards mothers are judged by, though in the end it’s shown that the lines between good and bad are blurred and complicated depending on perspective, circumstances, and situations. The mothers in these novels have past mistakes and current flaws in their relationships with their daughters, but as their daughters learn to harness their own witchcraft, they learn there is more to their mothers than motherhood—they learn about their past and begin to understand and align with them in a meaningful way. Readers follow along with the main character’s journey to discover their magic and navigate their maternal relationship, allowing readers to slip into the teen witch’s consciousness and apply the same thoughts about their own mothers. In the end of all the novels though, it is the teen witch learning about their magic for the first time, or learning to harness their magic, that allows them to identify with their mothers through learning about their adolescence and path to becoming a witch. Magic and witchcraft bond the mothers and daughters together, allowing the teen witch to understand their mothers to be flawed people who are more than “just” mothers because they now understand they share similar past and present experiences. Alongside the teen witch, readers learn about the mom’s past mistakes, relationships, and choices that culminated to create the current woman they call “mother.” This recognition lets the characters and readers see their
mom’s lives before motherhood and understand their mothers to be whole persons who participate in activities outside of carpooling, grocery shopping, and preparing meals.

**Suppressing Magic in Our Crooked Hearts**

*Our Crooked Hearts* (2022) by Melissa Albert is told from multiple points of view in two different time periods. The plot follows sixteen-year-old Ivy in the present day and sixteen-year-old Dana in the past. In the present day, Dana has disappeared and Ivy attempts to find her by unearthing her mom’s secrets, and she learns that her mom is a witch and used her powers to erase Ivy’s memory when she was only eleven years old. In the past narrative, readers follow Dana as she and her best friend, Fee, meet Marion. The three teen girls become fast friends and once Marion introduces them to an old grimoire she found, they become witches. The past and present first converge when Ivy is eleven and learns that as a teenager her mom trapped Marion in an alternate universe, forcing Dana to wipe Ivy’s memory of magic. This sequence is repeated a second time in the present-day when sixteen-year-old Ivy meets Marion (again) and learns about her mother wiping her memory five years earlier. Dana wipes eleven-year-old Ivy’s memory to keep her from releasing Marion from the alternate universe, as she believes Marion is a danger to her and her family. However, Dana goes even further and wipes Ivy’s memories of not just Marion, but any memory of her own magic, identity as a witch, and the budding romance with her best friend next door. Dana’s decision to take away Ivy’s identity in order to keep her nemesis trapped robs Ivy’s understanding of who she is and creates a barrier of secrets between mother and daughter.

*Our Crooked Hearts* solely features a white mother, Dana, and her white sixteen-year-old daughter, Ivy. According to Guillem and Barnes, “current postfeminist sensibility that allows for the celebration of ‘bad’ mothering parallels the 50s and 60s feminist celebration of ‘good’ mothering in its universalizing of white women’s experiences, thus obscuring how what looks
like all-inclusive gains from ‘feminist’ struggles are structured around racial (dis)advantages” (Guillem and Barnes 287-288). White femininity allows white women to defy the boundaries of hegemonic “norms” related to mothering practices in a way that is liberating and feminist, not negligent; whereas women of color are not allowed to defy these boundaries and signify feminist celebration due to racial politics deeming their mothering deviant from the jump. I am not including Our Crooked Hearts in this analysis to celebrate Dana’s “bad” mothering as a white woman’s feminist stance, but rather I include this novel because the daughter does not forgive her mother by the end. Ivy expects traditional, “good,” white motherhood from Dana and doesn’t allow her mother to transgress the idealized motherhood role. Despite Ivy’s ideals of mothering and motherhood being squarely situated in the mythical nuclear white family, by the end of the novel magic and witchcraft challenge Ivy’s understanding of the world, allowing her to let go of the image of an ideal mother and forgive her own mother.

Our Crooked Hearts is set up so that while readers are following Ivy’s attempts at understanding and connecting with her mother, the next chapter jumps back in time to follow Dana as she descends into dark magic with Fee and Marion. By juxtaposing these two storylines, Ivy’s desperation increases alongside Dana’s use of magic. For example, while Dana’s sixteen-year-old self casts a spell to raise Astrid (the dead witch who’s grimoire she, Fee, and Marion have been using to learn and practice magic) in one chapter, the next chapter switches to show present-day Ivy rummaging around her mother’s belongings and calling stores of twenty-year old receipts just to see if someone remembers her mother; Ivy is grasping at straws to find her mom and simultaneously really know who she is. Even though both Dana and Ivy’s points of view are fairly equally represented, readers are associating magic, death, revenge, and murder with Dana and innocence, curiosity and morality with Ivy. This contrast pushes the reader's alliance even closer to Ivy’s side, as she’s the morally “good” character, but this divide between Ivy’s good
magic/Dana’s bad magic is also mirrored in the depictions of good mothering (Ivy’s desire for her mother’s attention) and bad mothering (Dana’s detachment).

The dedication in *Our Crooked Hearts* states, “To my wonderful, fiercely loving mother, who is not the mother in these pages. If I ever wrote you into a book, you’d be a heroine” (Albert). Even before beginning the book, this sets up the reader to assume that the mother in this story is not wonderful, fiercely loving, nor a heroine but that she is the opposite: an awful, neglectful, villain. This infringes upon the reader’s character identification from the start, so when the mother is first encountered in the plot the reader’s perception of her is tinged with the dedication. For instance, the first time readers are introduced to Dana, Ivy’s mom, is when Ivy comes home late with a split lip. Dana is sitting on the stairs when Ivy walks in and “she snapped to her feet, because she’d seen [Ivy’s] mouth” and immediately asks Ivy “What happened? Were you in an accident?” (Albert 10). This is a standard reaction a mother would have to seeing her teenage daughter come home in the middle of the night with an injury, but readers are encountering this interaction through Ivy’s point of view, and Ivy thinks, “The beam of her focus felt physical” (Albert 10). When her mom asks if her boyfriend was drinking Ivy thinks, “She’d seemed less dangerous a moment ago” (Albert 10). Therefore, the first encounter with Ivy’s mom readers understand that Ivy characterizes her mom as “dangerous” and “physical” even when her daughter is hurt. Both terms Ivy uses correlate with a villainous character rather than a mom lovingly concerned about her daughter’s physical well-being. Without Ivy’s interpretation, Dana’s actions could be classified as fiercely loving, but readers viewing it through Ivy’s eyes coupled with the dedication, means their judgment of Dana is aligned with Ivy’s.

After coming home with a split lip, Ivy begins craving more attention and mothering from Dana. The text describes Ivy’s desire for attention as “getting greedy…Having her wait up for me, punish me, give more than half a shit about my choice of boyfriend. It made me want
more from her” (Albert 19). Ivy feels that caring is an essential part of what mothers are “supposed” to do for their children, so by Dana shifting her concern away from Ivy, she’s transgressing her role as mother. This lack of consideration and attentiveness causes Ivy’s mother to cross over into malevolent motherhood. Ivy’s desire to pinpoint her mom’s whereabouts and dig into her past secrets is a selfish desire to understand her and why she lacks the care Ivy so desperately yearns for. As shown later in the novel, this is done out of shame and regret rather than neglect or malevolence in Dana’s mind, but by the time this is revealed to readers, they’ve spent so much time aligning with Ivy they’re wary of Dana too.

Dana’s magic is represented as a large part of her malevolence. Ivy bleaches her hair blonde, and in response her mom’s “hands went up. Not in surprise. Not to shield herself. She held her palms straight out, crooking her fingers in a gesture that plucked at my guts like a guitar pick. It was an attitude so unreadable yet so obviously malevolent it sent a bolt of cold thudding down my spine” (Albert 29-30). Ivy is unknowingly witnessing her mom about to perform a spell, but Ivy does not know her mom is a witch yet and she still instinctively believes Dana’s intentions are “obviously malevolent.” At this moment readers are also unaware of Dana’s witch identity, so when her magical abilities are revealed, there is already a subliminal connection between Dana’s witchcraft and malevolence which creates speculation around Dana’s intentions towards her daughter, further aligning readers with Ivy.

Witchcraft as evil is further shown to readers when Ivy mimics her mom’s hand gesture and asks what it means. Dana lunges, “Her knee came down on the bed and she was above [Ivy], squeezing my fingers in hers, forcing [her] arms to [her] sides” (Albert 33). Dana does not want Ivy to practice magic because she knows how dangerous and harmful it can be, yet Ivy is a witch and has no memory of the safe practical magic she used as a child. This interaction leads Ivy, and readers through Ivy, to see the move as something bad and unsafe, so when Ivy learns later that
she is a witch, the instinct that her magic is dangerous still lingers. Despite her mom’s violent reaction to Ivy’s hair and mimicking her hand gestures, Ivy becomes more determined to figure out what her mom is hiding.

Shortly after uncovering one of her mom’s spell jars buried in the backyard and calling a store called “Twixt and ‘Tween” from her mom’s past, Ivy begins to realize that Dana is actually a witch: “Maybe I was an idiot if I didn’t believe it. If I didn’t accept what was right in front of me, what could very well be the reason behind the scars and the silences and the secretive bullshit I’d learned to live with: my mother was capable of unnatural things” (Albert 84). Ivy believes that her mom is detached, uncaring, and callous because she is a witch, but it is also witchcraft that causes Ivy to recognize her mother’s full-personhood outside of being a mother. Consequently, this intertwines even further the figure of the witch and the mother as a malevolent figure for readers and Ivy. Ivy assumes that her mother’s use of witchcraft causes her to act unlike the traditional caring, overly protective and “normal” mother she wishes Dana was. For Ivy, there is no reason for her mother’s behavior towards her other than her witchcraft, which Ivy sees as unnatural, causing Dana to act unnaturally towards her own daughter.

By the end of the novel, when readers understand exactly why Dana erased Ivy’s memory as a child, effectively removing her knowledge of magic and ruining a friendship, Dana’s malevolence is already solidified and she’s not able to truly redeem her image with Ivy. The day she erases Ivy’s memory, Dana walks in on Ivy communicating with Marion in the mirror. Ivy asserts that she will release Marion from the mirror world Dana trapped her in almost two decades earlier. To protect Ivy from Marion, but mainly to ensure that Marion does not escape, Dana decides to remove Ivy’s memories and knowledge of magic and lock them in a memory box. Readers are able to read Dana’s point of view the night she takes Ivy’s memory in the chapter, finally allowing for a first-hand account of her reasoning. This shift in point of view lets
adolescent readers gain a perspective of why their parents enact unfair punishments, potentially swaying their alliance towards Dana. This also brings in an older readership who are closer to Dana’s age and lets them test their own mothering choices against hers as a way to assure themselves their mothering isn’t incorrect. As Ivy touches her blood-tipped finger to the box Dana says, “I love you...And I cannot let you destroy yourself over this” (Albert 277). Dana knew that “What Ivy brought back wouldn’t be Marion. It would be shaped like her, but all the parts you couldn’t see would be twisted, broken, sucked dry across the unfathomable years. She would be a monster” (Albert 276). In Dana’s perspective she is taking Ivy’s memories out of love and protection. Dana does not want Ivy harmed by Marion, who is shown in the flashbacks as capable of manipulation and very dark magic, nor does Dana want Ivy to harm herself attempting to do such powerful magic at a young age.

For Dana, the act of erasing Ivy’s memory is one of a loving mother who’s willing to sacrifice for her daughter, yet Dana does not entertain the idea of self-sacrifice as traditional white motherhood mandates. Instead, Dana chooses to do nothing about Marion, leaving her in the mirrorworld as before, and takes away crucial parts of her daughter’s essence—her magic and memory—to save herself from facing Marion again. This, therefore, is an act of transgression on Dana’s part because she is psychologically harming her daughter rather than fighting her own past physical and metaphorical demons. For Ivy, Dana has chosen herself over her own daughter by not performing magic to save Ivy’s magic and memory, categorizing her as a “bad” mother in Ivy’s eyes and, depending on the reader’s allegiance, their eyes too. If the reader’s mother has similar attributes to Dana, though, they have a chance to experience what Felski describes as “recognition,” perhaps causing them to rethink what is “bad” and what is “good.”

The novel ends in the present day with Ivy saving her mother and Aunt Fee from Marion by stealing Marion’s memories of Dana, Fee, and Ivy and sealing them up in the same golden
box that housed her own memories of magic. Three weeks later, for Ivy and Dana, “the thing that worked best was for us to not speak. To work together, side by side. Little spells, mainly, magic for children. Things she’d taken from me, that Marion helped me get back. Sometimes Aunt Fee was with us and sometimes we were alone. On the other side of everything, we were not okay. But maybe someday we would be” (Albert 336). Ivy reserves space and hope for forgiving her mother and reconciling their relationship on the foundation of magic—the thing that tore them apart years ago. This ending is realistic in the sense that Ivy does not immediately forgive her mother, but she hopes to someday be able to. Ivy still yearns for a specific relationship with her mother, but she has achieved the aspiration for honesty within the family and magic is now integral to their daily lives. Dana’s mothering has shifted by the end: no longer is she viewed as malevolent through Ivy, just “complicated.” Witching too has shifted back to something that can be good and positive depending on the witch, largely in part because Ivy and Dana are able to use their powers together.

Ivy believes that when her bleached hair grows out to its natural red again, she will have forgiven her mother and they can be “two red-haired witches side by side. I could look at her and see the mother who did love me, forgive the complicated woman who’d messed it up” (Albert 336-337). Ivy shows the reader here that even though she hasn’t fully forgiven her mother, she has come to realize Dana is more than her mom—she’s a woman and a witch who has flaws and is capable of making mistakes. Ivy also presents a path forward to healing her relationship with her mother by working together on their witchcraft and accepting her past mistakes. The end of the novel does not force Ivy to embrace her mom immediately, but rather it allows her to take the space she needs to process the harm Dana has caused her while maintaining an opening for communication and forgiveness to take place. Ivy also shows readers that Dana is a complicated woman, but that her malevolent actions do not detract from her potential to become close with
Ivy in the future. Thus, by the end of the novel readers have come to learn, through Ivy’s point of view, that witchcraft and motherhood are not only good or bad, they’re complicated, but the possibilities for finding happiness within the multidimensional permutations of both witchcraft and motherhood are endless.

**Beyond Blood: Sisterhood and Magic in *The Ravens***

*The Ravens* (2020) by Danielle Paige and Kass Morgan is the first in a duology that follows Scarlett Winter and Vivi Devereaux as they navigate Kappa Rho Nu (aka the “Ravens”) sorority at Westerly College in Savannah, Georgia. The Kappas are more than an exclusive sorority; they’re all extremely talented witches. Vivi is an incoming freshman and has no idea she’s a witch—she’s just eager to escape her mother and make some friends at college. Scarlett, on the other hand, is a junior Kappa sister who knows about her own witch lineage and is working towards becoming sorority president just like her mother and sister were before her. Vivi gets a bid to pledge the Ravens and finds out she’s a witch, but when a fellow Kappa sister is kidnapped, the sorority works together to find her.

Readers learn about Vivi’s nomadic childhood with Daphne within the first few pages of the novel. Daphne earns money reading tarot cards and fortunes, but when Vivi is growing up, the narrative explains, “whenever Daphne Deveraux got one of her ‘premonitions,’ they tended to leave the next morning, unpaid rent and unpacked belongings be damned” (Paige and Morgan 3). Vivi has been around magic her entire life, but she does not believe magic is real until she pledges to Kappa and finds out she’s a witch herself. Westerly is Vivi’s “way out” and “a new beginning, far from her mother’s impulsive behaviors’” (Paige and Morgan 5-6). However, Daphne is “adamantly against” Vivi attending Westerly and “that was what sealed the deal for Vivi. If her mom hated it that much, it was clearly the perfect place for Vivi to start a brand-new
life” (Paige and Morgan 4). Vivi attends Westerly to run away from her mother and magic, but it turns out she’s running towards discovery of her own magic instead.

Vivi grows up coming in second place to her mother’s job and magical premonitions, which helps readers to understand Daphne’s identity is not “just mom” to Vivi. Even though she already understands her mother as “tarot card reader” and “follower of premonitions” more than “caretaker,” Vivi says to her mother while packing for Westerly, “‘This is a big change for both of us. It’s okay to be upset. Just tell me you’re going to miss me, like a normal parent would, instead of turning this into some sign from the spirit world’” (Paige and Morgan 7-8). This echoes Ivy’s pleas in Our Crooked Hearts to both her mother and father that her mom be “normal.” In both novels, the daughter’s desire for their mothers to not practice witchcraft is linked to their desire for a normal mother who adheres to normal mothering practices. As white mothers though, “the potential to be a good mother exists always and already, and this affords [them] the opportunity to transgress these expectations with [their] consistent ‘bad’ behavior” (Guillem and Barnes 294). For Ivy and Vivi, they’re moms would be normal “good” moms if they would stop practicing witchcraft as it is the only thing Othering them. Daphne’s fear for Vivi’s safety at Westerly also echoes Ivy’s mom’s rhetoric about magic being dangerous—both Daphne and Dana believe they are protecting their daughters from making the same mistakes with magic as they did when they were teenagers, but the secrecy and lies ends up pushing Vivi and Ivy away from their mothers. It’s not until their witch selves are revealed and embraced that the daughters can have a relationship with their mothers and understanding their mother’s malevolence as misguided protection and love.

Like Ivy, as Vivi learns more about her own magic, she forges a stronger connection with and understanding of her mother, eventually dropping her desire for her mother to be normal and accepting her. For example, Daphne doesn’t actually tell Vivi she will miss her, instead she
continues attempting to change Vivi’s mind about attending Westerly. When that fails, Daphne pleads, “Promise me you’ll be careful. Remember, things aren’t always as they appear. Even something that seems good can be dangerous” (Paige and Morgan 8). Vivi and readers soon learn that this line foreshadows the Kappa Rho Nu “Ravens” sorority Vivi will join; the magic she will realize she’s capable of; and Daphne’s own secrets about her time as a Kappa at Westerly.

On the other hand, Scarlett grows up knowing she, her mother Marjorie, and older sister Eugenie are witches, and she attends Westerly specifically to join the infamous Kappa “Ravens.” According to her mother, for Scarlett “To be accepted into [Kappa’s] ranks was a necessity; to become president in her own right was the most basic expectation” (Paige and Morgan 11). While Vivi and Daphne have substantial dialogue together in the novel, Scarlett and Marjorie are not often seen talking to one another, and when they are it’s a particularly short conversation. Instead, readers are left with Scarlett’s inner dialogue to build an understanding about her mother which aligns readers with Scarlett’s own view of her mother. When Marjorie drops Scarlett off for her junior year at Westerly, the novel offers Scarlett’s idea of Marjorie’s mothering philosophy:

Scarlett caught a whiff of her perfume, a light jasmine scent that reminded her of the way her mother used to sneak into her room after a long night at the firm and plant a kiss on her forehead. Scarlett always pretended to be sleeping, because her mother tried so hard not to wake her. But she didn’t mind being woken. It reminded her how much her mother cared, something that Scarlett didn’t always feel during her waking hours. And what her mother cared most about was each of her two daughters following in her footsteps and becoming president of Kappa. (Paige and Morgan 11)
This quote encapsulates Scarlett and Marjorie’s mother-daughter dynamic and their different desires. Scarlett yearns for her mother to show her care and love through physical touch and verbal assurance, whereas Marjorie makes clear to Scarlett that the thing she cares about most is that she becomes Kappa president, just like Marjorie herself was. Marjorie’s desire to see Scarlett mimic her own life at Westerly is of higher importance than listening to and understanding Scarlett’s own personal desires and wishes for her life. However, as a Black woman, Marjorie placing importance on her daughter earning a leadership position in the sorority can be seen as her own form of resisting white oppression. Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined” (4). Therefore, acting as Kappa president not only allows for Scarlett to network with alumni and legacies, helping her to secure a lucrative career upon graduation, it also is a form of resistance to generations of oppression that has held Black women back from such positions of power and places of intellect.

It’s important to note though, that the daughter’s desire for a present and attentive mother transcends racial lines in these novels and at the end of the day, both Vivi and Scarlett just want their mothers’ attention. How readers respond to each mother’s lack of attention is potentially different because of their allegiance, or political values, that determines their understanding of racial difference. The reader’s own race could also potentially impact their empathy for one mother over the other, but reading scenes that show mothers and daughters wanting the same things might potentially cause readers to experience moments of recognition and awareness that

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1 For more information on Black motherhood resisting white oppression see Kerry Bernice Wilson’s *Black Moms Matter*. 

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they may have been making racialized assumptions based on their own allegiances or positionalities.

The novel does not place Marjorie’s mothering in direct contradiction to flighty Daphne, a white woman; rather, she’s compared to Minnie, Scarlett’s Black nanny, who “was the one who had always believed in her—who’d reassured her when she felt her mother’s disappointment or Eugenie’s disdain. Minnie was the one who told Scarlett she could be the most powerful witch in the world if she believed in herself and trusted the magic” (Paige and Morgan 11). Minnie and Marjorie ultimately have the same belief that Scarlett can be a powerful witch, but Minnie lovingly encourages Scarlett towards her potential while Marjorie expects and demands it as a condition of her love. Minnie functions as Scarlett’s othermother, the one who “‘filled in the gaps. And not just the magical ones’” (Paige and Morgan 185) in Scarlett’s life. Hilary S. Crew writes that “othermothers” are “constructed as the strong mothers in . . . young adult novels, without however, being constructed through stereotypical images of the good mother. Othermothers would thus seem to engage in the practice of different kinds of mothering in specific contexts—a mothering separated from the maternal bodies of mothers” (Crew 17). Without the context of othermothers and how they function within the Black family dynamic, readers could view Scarlett’s mother, Marjorie, as neglectful for not caring for Scarlett as Minnie does, particularly because of the first-person point of view aligning readers with Scarlett and her own loyalty to Minnie over her mother is shown. However, knowing that in the Black community it’s common for women to mother other children, Marjorie’s lack of sentiment and encouragement is just representative of her personality. Minnie fills in those gaps for Scarlett, allowing her to get what she needs from both her mother and othermother.

The mothers in *The Ravens*—Vivi’s mom, Daphne, and Scarlett’s mom, Marjorie—participate in a subtle malevolence akin to an apathetic motherhood. The encounters and
interactions between Scarlett and her mom, Marjorie, largely surround her potential future as Kappa president, while Vivi works hard to avoid her mom, Daphne. By the end of the novel, it’s clearly shown through Vivi and Scarlett’s conversations with one another, their own inner dialogue, and memories that while Daphne and Marjorie tell their daughters they love them, their priorities are rooted within protection and betterment of the Kappa witch legacy above their daughters’ protection and independent desires.

Once Vivi begins initiation into Kappa Rho Nu, it’s shown that sisterhood (i.e. magic and witch identity) is placed above all other relationships, not just Vivi and Scarlett’s mother-daughter relationships. The pledge night speech to Vivi and the new witches contains rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of sisterhood above anyone and everyone else. After pulling tarot cards and seeing “a flame [shoot] up from the candle’s wick, nearly reaching the ceiling” (Paige and Morgan 97), Vivi and the other pledges are confirmed as witches with a speech:

You were born witches…but tonight you’ve taken your first step toward becoming something even more important—a sister. Kappa Rho Nu is much more than a sorority; it’s the oldest, most powerful coven of witches in the country. It was founded in the seventeenth century to help women escape persecution, and over the years, it’s become one of the most influential organizations in the world….To become a full Kappa, you’ll need to survive Hell Week. Then you must continue to impress your sisters over the weeks that follow. It’s not enough to have magic; you have to become one of us. (Paige and Morgan 97)

From this speech Vivi and the others are told that they’re witches but, more importantly, they’re Kappa Rho Nu sisters, which reinforces the idea of feminism as sisterhood. While magic and witchcraft are something the pledges are born with, they aren’t inherently Ravens: to earn that title they need to impress the others and become one of them. This language of transforming into
a Kappa Raven implies that the sisterhood is more important than their magic; being accepted into the sorority takes precedence over their innate abilities and talents. The exclusivity of the Ravens allows them to achieve a sense of superiority as the best sorority on campus, but it also reinforces the fact that the sisters within Kappa are the best, so pledges are required to place their sisters and the sorority above all else. Ultimately, this speech proclaims the Ravens as an elite institution. Access is a higher honor than being born a witch—it’s essentially who you know, not what you know. The Ravens use language of sisterhood to describe the bonds between the sorority members, complicating mother-daughter relationships because it reimagines those relationships as also siblinghood between the Kappa mothers and daughters. However, though Marjorie, Scarlett, Daphne, and Vivi are both mother-daughter and Kappa sisters, the politics of becoming (and remaining) a sister ultimately override any biological familial bonds, as both Marjorie and Daphne’s allegiance shows.

Vivi and Scarlett aren’t the only Kappa sisters who receive and internalize the motto of sorority sisters first; their mothers are also Raven Alumnae and join the sorority with the “sisterhood first” condition. However, Marjorie and Daphne do not leave behind the motto when they graduate from Westerly; instead, they take it with them and it impacts their mothering. Marjorie passes the motto down to Scarlett by raising her to believe her biggest goal and mission in life is to become Kappa president. Marjorie is willing to force Scarlett to mimic her steps in college at the expense of actually getting to know her own daughter, placing her own feelings of accomplishment through Scarlett above all else. Daphne uproots her and her daughter’s life dozens of times, creating an unstable childhood for Vivi and planting the seeds for the resentment she’s feeling now, in order to protect a talisman from her time as a Raven. At the root of both Daphne and Marjorie’s actions is that of sisterhood—they want to see the Ravens flourish through Scarlett’s presidency and remain out of harm's way by hiding the talisman—and they will
do so at the cost of their own daughter’s happiness and lives. Placing their Raven sisters above their role as mothers speaks to the tension between feminism and motherhood. Both Marjorie and Daphne are willing to sacrifice their motherhood position for sisterhood, allowing readers to see the potential for a Black and white woman to join together for a common cause and display transgressive mothering to protect a pledge they took to join a sisterhood over a decade ago. Marjorie and Daphne do not keep in touch after Westerly, but their pledge to Kappa and magic ties them together for life.

When Tiffany, a fellow Kappa sister, is kidnapped, and her ransom is the talisman Daphne spent her life protecting, Vivi goes to her mother to retrieve the necklace. Daphne knows why Vivi wants the talisman and that it is dangerous: she protects it now because her best friend, Evelyn, and Kappa sister years ago attempted to kill her and Marjorie over it. When Vivi comes to take it, Daphne not only lets her, but she also does not chase after her and nor offer her help with the deadly situation. Like Vivi, Scarlett does not seek out her mother’s help to rescue Tiffany or even tell her about the situation. However, both mothers show up to Kappa house right after the magical battle with Tiffany and there is very little show of affection—no tears, no hugs, no smiles of relief—from either mother. Marjorie and Daphne only offer their presence and story of how when they were Ravens they went through a similar situation. At this point in the novel, the reader's alignment and allegiance is likely split between the daughters and the mothers. Depending on how strongly readers feel about upholding sorority sisterhood above all else, as Kappa does, and how much they value a hands-off, independent approach to parenting, they might side with Marjorie and Daphne. On the other hand, if the reader does not have their own allegiance to a sorority or believes mothers should help their children regardless of circumstance, they could side with Vivi and Scarlett and be utterly distraught that their mothers did not help them in this magical battle that they had previous experience with. No matter the
reader’s own stance at the end of the novel, there is a potential for recognition to take place in which they see how their own assumptions about motherhood have impacted their reading positions.

When Scarlett sees her mom she asks what she’s doing here and before Marjorie can answer Vivi and Scarlett begin telling their moms what happened. Daphne is the first to respond saying, “I’m so sorry you girls had to go through that…This is exactly what I was trying to help you avoid, but I don’t think I went about it in the smartest way” (Paige and Morgan 356). Marjorie says “crisply in an assured tone” to Daphne, “You did your best….After what happened with Evelyn, what other choice did you have?” (Paige and Morgan 357). At this point, Marjorie and Daphne recount their own history with the talisman and how they too had a Kappa sister fall prey to its dark magic. When Vivi hears her mom’s story and understands how she came to possess the talisman she says, “I’m sorry, Mom….I shouldn’t have taken the talisman” (Paige and Morgan 358). Daphne responds, “No, it’s my fault. I should have told you all this a long time ago. I thought that by keeping you ignorant and far away from Westerly, I was keeping you safe” (Paige and Morgan 358-359). Marjorie then tells Scarlett, “Whereas I wanted to raise you and Eugenie to be stronger and smarter than I was….I figured if you were the most powerful witches in your years, then you’d never fall into the trap of idolizing the wrong person the way I did” (Paige and Morgan 359). Scarlett and Vivi aren’t upset with their mothers’ lack of help with the talisman in the end, rather Vivi was “supremely comfort[ed]” (355) when Daphne showed up at the Kappa house to see if she was okay and “flush[ed] with shame and regret” when she apologized to her mom for stealing the talisman (358). This is in direct contradiction to Vivi’s feelings towards her mother at the beginning of the novel when she thinks her premonitions are falsehoods and is excited to attend Westerly to escape seeing her mother. Similarly, Scarlett’s mom reaches out and “gently strokes Scarlett’s hair” upon seeing that she’s
safe, which is the nurturing Scarlett has craved from the beginning (356). Magic led Marjorie and Daphne to mother Scarlett and Vivi in the ways they do, but magic also allows the mothers and daughters to grow closer in the end once their past secrets and own relationship with magic at Kappa is revealed.

**Maternal Abandonment in Bad Witch Burning**

Through representations of mothering that are diverse in multiple ways, including racially, the good/bad motherhood dichotomy can be weakened and challenged, and might eventually become less powerful and less oppressive. Reading young adult counter-narratives that highlight Black and white mothers transgressing racial and gender stereotypes allows for conversations to take place and assumptions to be challenged surrounding racialized ideas about mothering. Traci P. Baxley and Genyne Henry Boston write in “Always Carrying the Load: The Presence of African American Motherhood in Young Adult Literature”

In instances when Black mothers appear to have ‘abandoned’ their children to othermothers, the various reasons are often viewed from a traditional mainstream lens. This act of ‘abandonment’ that mainstream would consider as unacceptable maternal behavior, is perceived differently when interpreted through Black women’s counter-narrative lens. Mothers define this type of abandonment as an act of sacrifice when there are overwhelming circumstances—difficult economic times, teen pregnancy, marital issues—in order to ensure the well-being of their children. Because of the reliable othermother networks, these mothers know their children will be well nurtured and protected. (55)

*Bad Witch Burning* (2021) features another example of othermothering, like Minnie and Scarlett in *The Ravens*, as well as a mother (permanently) abandoning her daughter, similar to Dana’s temporary abandonment in *Our Crooked Hearts*. By addressing the counter-narrative of Black
women’s sacrifice, rather than abandonment, I raise the possibility of how a white teen reader may arrive at “allegiance” or some other mode of identification through *Bad Witch Burning*.

In *Bad Witch Burning*, sixteen-year-old Katrell has the ability to talk to the dead by writing them a letter and setting it on fire. She charges people to communicate with their loved ones, but the money isn’t enough to support her, her mom, and her mom’s boyfriend-of-the-week, Gerald. Katrell’s mom has lost her job at Walmart six months ago, and she has not looked for one since. Gerald works at Wendy’s, but doesn’t contribute his money to food, rent, or utilities. When Katrell tries to summon her dog, Conrad, but accidentally brings him back to life, she decides she can charge a lot more for bringing back the dead. Katrell’s new power comes at a price: bringing each body back requires a piece of her to animate them and with each resurrection she becomes more ill. By the end of the novel the dead she has raised are turning against her, and she has to figure out how to send the bodies back before they kill her.

*Bad Witch Burning* is told through Katrell’s point of view, automatically setting the reader up to align themselves with her. For example, Katrell’s inner thoughts tell readers that her priority is to earn enough money to buy a car because “a car is freedom…If I had a car, I could drive away from here” (Lewis 13). Katrell doesn’t verbally express her desire to get out of the town of Mire even to her best friend, Will, so readers understand and learn about Katrell on an intimate level that no other character experiences. Readers are also aligned with Katrell against her mother because Katrell’s mother is the only character not given a name; she’s just referred to as “Mom” throughout (even Conrad, Katrell’s dog, is given a name). The lack of a name for Katrell’s Mom not only makes her one of the hardest characters for readers to identify and align themselves with, it also positions her as a character with no other identity outside of “Mom.” Adolescents and teenagers often only see their mothers as “Mom” with no hobbies, personality, or things to do besides fulfilling their children and spouses’ wants, needs, and desires. Not
attributing a name to her mom, then, makes Katrell even more relatable to the reader as they also are likely to only think of their mother as “Mom” instead of their given name. However, Lewis does not use Katrell’s mom to reinforce the “mom only” identity of mothers; instead she’s satirizing the idea of a mother only being “Mom” by making Katrell’s mom the opposite. In other words, Katrell’s mom is only referred to as “Mom,” but her identity is intrinsically tied up in her relationship with her boyfriends instead of her daughter. Katrell comes home to smell her mom baking cookies and finds her standing in the kitchen washing dishes but when Katrell goes to take a cookie, “Mom smacks my hand” and says “‘Those aren’t for you’ . . . . ‘If you bring me some ingredients, I’ll make you some’” (Lewis 15). The scene ends with Gerald, Katrell’s mom’s boyfriend, coming home leaving readers to assume the cookies are for Gerald. Katrell’s Mom isn’t a witch, but it takes Katrell’s powers for her to see her mom’s multifaceted identity and truly accept her for who she is rather than continuously trying to make her fit the “Mom only” identity she craves. This satiric use of “Mom” then causes readers to recognize how they might think of their mothers as only fulfilling that one caretaking role, when in fact they are something other than just mothers.

Conrad’s death gives the reader their first glimpse of Katrell’s Mom’ loyalties. When Gerald pulls a gun on Katrell for talking back, Katrell’s mother stands “half in front of [Katrell], shielding part of [her] with her body” but when Gerald takes another step towards Katrell, her “Mom shifts slightly, so she’s standing next to [Katrell], not in front of [her], and lets go of [her] arm” (Lewis 21). Gerald escalates, shooting and killing Conrad, and then hitting Katrell in the temple with the butt of the gun. Katrell looks to her mom for help, but she “doesn’t say a word” (Lewis 23). When her mom doesn’t intervene, or say anything about the abuse, there is no outrage on Katrell’s part. Instead, Katrell barely registers her Mom’s actions, or lack thereof, as she “looks back and forth between me and Gerald, her hands clasped nervously in front of her,”
and when Gerald charges Katrell she “starts screaming” (22). These are the only lines we get of Katrell’s Mom during this interaction with Gerald; Katrell is more focused on Gerald’s “foul breath” that “smells like alcohol and stale Wendy’s” (Lewis 23) and then the “sharp grief” when she sees that Conrad has been shot dead (Lewis 24). Because this scene is recounted through Katrell’s point of view, the reader is forced to take Katrell’s place and imagine they have a gun pointed at them and their own mother is only half-shielding them from the bullet. Furthermore, this establishes a recurring dynamic in the novel in which Katrell does not blame her mom and instead places all the blame on Gerald.

At this point in the novel, readers are likely to care more about Conrad’s death than Katrell’s Mom’s lack of protection. As the novel progresses, readers alongside Katrell recognize that her Mom is just a person unable to fulfill the maternal role. In their article on aberrant mothers, Suzanna Dunuta Walters and Laura Harrison write, “Deviant or non-normative mothers have long been a staple of Hollywood storylines…but those mothers have precisely been deviant in order to be punished, to serve as reminders of the power of normative familialism and rigid gender ideologies” (48). The journey Katrell takes readers on forces readers to confront embedded racist ideas about blaming or subjecting Black mothers to punishment for abandoning their children or endangering them through proximity to their romantic partners. While readers could label Katrell a “bad” mother, structural racism creates the conditions for her poverty and abusive relationship. Katrell helps readers to see that while Katrell’s Mom continuously places her boyfriends above her daughter, the cycle of poverty and abusive relationships causes problems by creating barriers for Katrell’s Mom. Readers can recognize that they too can accept

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2 For ways in which Black motherhood has been stereotyped see Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Dana-Ain Davis (2016), and Kerry Bernice Wilson (2022).
their mothers even if they fall short of their expectations, particularly because expectations are built on the foundation of racial oppression and not an achievable reality.

Katrell does not blame her mother for their lack of money, again placing the blame on Gerald instead. When Katrell’s mom says that they’re short on rent and lights because “something came up,” Katrell immediately begins to strategize about coming up with more money thinking, “I’ll have to dip into my car savings. Again” (Lewis 38), but then she pivots to “If it’s Gerald, I swear to God I’ll kill him” (Lewis 38). Katrell’s inner dialogue shows her instinct to solving a problem is first creating a solution and then blaming Gerald—in neither of these scenarios does Katrell assume her Mom will help nor does she condemn her Mom for not contributing. When her best friend, Will, finds out about the latest money issues she says, “Has your mom found a job yet?” Katrell “glare[s] at her until she looks away” (Lewis 46). Will pushes the conversation further saying, “It’s just that it’s been six months and she hasn't even looked—” (Lewis 47) which prompts Katrell to immediately leave Will’s and go home. As Katrell is walking back to her house she thinks, “I need more hours. I need a better car. I need more money” (Lewis 47). Not only does Katrell herself refuse to blame her mother, or even hold her accountable, but when Will brings it up Katrell shuts down and removes herself from the conversation, not allowing Will to fully cast blame on her mother either. Even right after having an argument about her Mom’s lack of monetary contribution to the household, Katrell’s thoughts are only on how she can remedy the situation.

Early in the novel the Mom’s character starts to fall into the background for readers: she has been established as irresponsible, potentially even neglectful, but otherwise the focus largely rests on Katrell’s magic to earn more money. Casting Katrell’s Mom as a background character in Katrell’s life and foregrounding socioeconomic issues works to break down the readers’
mindset that an individual can, or even should, fix a systemic issue. Katrell still believes she alone can solve her issues with more money, because as Collins says, “Black daughters learn to expect to work…and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible” (183). Katrell’s assumption that she can remedy her situation is coded as a racialized expectation of the Black family; the subtle shift of blame away from Katrell’s Mom to money helps readers to confront their habits of blaming circumstances on individual people’s choices rather than the oppressions that are forcing those choices onto them.

Mom’s character doesn’t remain in the background for the entire novel; she becomes more central for Katrell and the readers when she begins stealing Katrell’s money which causes Katrell to realize she cannot solve this issue alone by earning more, further cementing the same idea into readers that it’s beyond an individual’s ability to change systemic poverty and effects of domestic violence. Gerald beats Katrell when she refuses to give him a portion of her money, so resurrected Conrad attacks Gerald, ripping his throat out and killing him. A few days later, Katrell finds out her Mom stole fifteen hundred dollars from her to bury Gerald and lashes out, screaming, “You never pick me, you know that?...You know Will’s mom cares about her? Do you know how shitty I feel when I come home to you, who can’t be bothered to protect me from your asshole of the week?” (Lewis 229). Her mom slaps her and says, “I hate you”... ‘I wish I’d never had you!...I should have left you at a fire station when you first started seeing stuff that wasn’t there”’ (Lewis 229). This is the only scene in the entire novel where Katrell yells at her Mom and tells her exactly how she feels. The dialogue quoted above is only a small snippet of

For more information on socioeconomic issues and the impact of systemic racial oppressions on Black mothers and other African Americans lives in America see Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2013), Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017), and Nazera Sadiq Wright (2019).
what Katrell screams, but up until this point only the readers knew of Katrell’s growing anger at her mother’s lack of care. In this scene readers are the ones yelling at Katrell’s Mom; readers are able to expel all of their own anger at the Mom’s malevolent neglect witnessed on behalf of Katrell.

After lashing out and expelling her emotions towards her Mom, Katrell no longer feels the need to blame her. Instead, she feels sad that her Mom isn’t more like her best friend Will’s adoptive mom, Cheryl. Katrell has finally come to realize that maybe her Mom doesn’t really care about her, at least not in the way Cheryl cares for Will or in the way that Katrell needs her mother to care for her, but blaming or punishing her mother doesn’t change anything. At this moment Katrell begins to understand what the reader has already known: her mother has been knowingly taking advantage of her by stealing her money, refusing to get a job, and choosing her boyfriends over her daughter.

Katrell has no faith that any authority figure in her life will be able to help her. When her mom steals her money for Gerald’s funeral, Katrell realizes her magic powers can only provide her so much protection. Katrell doesn’t decide to go to the police, not trusting an institution of power that has never before protected or assisted her, a Black girl in a poor neighborhood. Instead, she seeks out her guidance counselor, Mike, who’s been meeting with her several times a week to voice his concern about her attendance and well-being at home while also attempting to get her to apply to community colleges. Even though she goes to Mike for advice, it isn’t until the final scene in the novel when Katrell actually lets him (and Will) help her. Will finds Katrell at home so weak from raising the dead she can barely stand and immediately calls Mike who calls an ambulance. In the end, Katrell’s Mom doesn’t come back, but Mike works to place Katrell with her best friend Will’s adoptive parents.
Though we are still in Katrell’s point of view at the end, she’s hospitalized and on pain killers so she’s in and out of consciousness and readers don’t get any inner dialogue about her mom leaving her. The reader is now left to consider their stance on the mother. Abandoning your child after stealing tens of thousands of dollars from them isn’t traditionally “good” mother behavior, and so readers could characterize Katrell’s mother as malicious. Yet, her own daughter doesn’t condemn her mother, and there are inherent racial implications surrounding labeling Katrell’s Mom immediately as “bad.”

Looking at Katrell’s Mom’s behavior through a Black woman’s counter-narrative lens allows for the perspective that her mom might not have abandoned Katrell out of neglect, but out of love. Katrell spends the majority of her time at Will’s house, where Cheryl makes sure she has food to eat, takes her to the doctor, and encourages her to attend school. Therefore, Cheryl is Katrell’s othermother and her biological mom could decide to leave Katrell to Cheryl as a way to protect her from her overwhelming circumstances—abusive boyfriends and unemployment. With this lens, readers can see Katrell’s mom as a victim in her own way. The alignment places readers on Katrell’s side up until the very end when they’re left to their own allegiance based on political stance or personal background. However, Katrell’s point of view and aversion to punishment has likely swayed readers by the end—if Katrell doesn’t blame her Mom or want to see her punished, why should readers? What’s more, why should anyone blame or punish mothers we encounter daily without knowing their full story and understanding the racist implications surrounding “good” mothers?

*Bad Witch Burning* shows readers a different side of mothering witches than *Our Crooked Hearts* and *The Ravens*. Instead of the mothers also being witches, only the daughter is a witch in *Bad Witch Burning*. Yet through Katrell’s point of view, readers are able, as in the other two novels, to recognize their own mother’s identity beyond the role of “Mom.” Katrell’s
magic is what helps her to understand her own mother’s faults, but it’s really her magic that teaches Katrell that she cannot and should not be expected to fill in the gaps her Mom leaves but also that her Mom is allowed to be a “bad” mother in comparison to her best friend’s adoptive mom. Katrell’s witchcraft provides her with the ability to prove her own strength and capabilities to herself, but in the end her magic is not enough to perform her mother’s duties and maintain her own school and social life, which causes readers to recognize that they too should not be expected to fulfill a parental role in their own lives. The first two novels depict daughters learning of their own witchcraft while also discovering their mother’s witch identity, whereas Katrell and her Mom know about one another’s magic and non-magic identities all along.

Women, particularly those in nuclear family structures, are working within a white patriarchal system, which means their unspoken job is to raise their children to also work within the white patriarchal system when they grow up. However, Our Crooked Hearts, The Ravens, and Bad Witch Burning defies the white patriarchal system through the mothers’ refusal to uphold these ideals. The mother’s refusal is not always intentional, but the fact that these authors are writing about a neglectful mother without placing blame or punishing her is doing work to break down the stereotype that all mothers are required to be good mothers. All three novels use the witch to navigate different, potentially malevolent, mothering in a way that translates to readers recognizing their own mothers as more than “Mom.” Though the reader’s own mothers aren’t witches, the journey the teen witches take to discover themselves through their own magical revelation mirrors the reader’s coming of age realizations. Because this journey also reveals something about their mother’s pasts and identities at the same time, it forces readers to consider their mother’s teenage years and life outside of the home.

In The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood (1996) Sharon Hays argues that the “contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering takes the form of an ideology of
intensive mothering” which “advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (x). In *The Mommy Myth* (2004) Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels build on Hays’s ideology of intensive mothering to coin the term “new momism” which is a critique of “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (4). Ultimately encouraging women to define themselves through the sole identity of motherhood, intensive mothering and new momism are new terms that critique the “two meanings of motherhood” first explored by Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born*: “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that the potential–and all women–shall remain under male control” (13).

Moving beyond critique and into theorizing new ways of conceptualizing motherhood, Andrea O’Reilly argues for “maternal empowerment”: “a state or place in which mothers are or may be empowered” (19) and “an oppositional stance that seeks to counter and correct the many ways in which patriarchal motherhood causes mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women” (20). Patriarchal motherhood, as O’Reilly calls it, is the intensive mothering and new momism that Hays, Douglas, and Michaels critique in their own scholarship. However, O’Reilly pushes further and says that to claim maternal empowerment we must eliminate “the ideological underpinning of patriarchal motherhood, gender essentialism” (17). Ultimately gender essentialism is the belief that women are biologically nurturing caretakers and these traits make them the best fit for raising children in the home whereas men are more naturally inclined to work outside of the home and not have as much innate knowledge of childcare. Tatjana Takševa also works towards dismantling gender essentialism by pushing for acceptance of maternal
ambivalence through honoring and “acknowledging the intertwined but separate interests of [the mother] and her child” (164). I join these scholars to reconceptualize motherhood outside of gendered assumptions while also thinking about how to break down the racial assumptions that are intrinsically tied up with mothering. Within the three novels I analyze, *Our Crooked Hearts*, *The Ravens*, and *Bad Witch Burning*, the main characters provide readers with a personal account of grappling with their mother’s identity outside of motherhood and ultimately land on a version of maternal ambivalence where both the mothers and daughters redefine mother love and negotiate a more successful relationship between them, even if that means terminating their relationship altogether.
Chapter Two: “Casting Change: Witches as Agents of Collective Activism”

According to Emma Winters: “Our culture needs young adult novels because they are sincere when the world is quippy. These books say what they mean and in doing so invite us to empathy. Young adult books also call us to activism: not to phone it in or Tweet it out but to be out in the streets practicing solidarity in the flesh” (n.p.). Young adult novels are sincere because they speak directly to the lived experiences of adolescents and refuse to shy away from grittier issues like mental health issues and societal prejudice. By providing a space to explore the complex emotions, relationships, and journey of self-identification, YA fiction becomes a genre that creates a connection with readers. Beyond encouraging adolescent readers to reflect on their own feelings of liminality or otherness in the world, the genre’s sincerity in pursuing complex topics can empower young adults to become activists and change the world around them.

The young adult genre has moved beyond simply regurgitating teenage romances and *bildungsroman* to tackle societal expectations, mental health issues, sexual assault, climate change, sexuality, and systemic oppression. Particularly in the young adult fantasy genre, characters are bringing awareness to social injustices and fighting back in a multitude of ways. Turning towards activism became highly popularized with Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* series, but in the decade since the genre has pushed the boundaries of tackling serious public issues even farther. This chapter explores how contemporary fantasy young adult novels call readers to empathy and activism. I use three series to explore how the figure of the witch in contemporary fantasy young adult novels allows for readers to understand social justice and inspires action that hinges on using individual powers, specifically knowledge, collectively. These series are atypical from most YA dystopian fantasy novels for three reasons: they offer more agency to the character’s decision making process in defeating the villain; do not heavily
focus (or even feature) a romantic plot arc; and defeating the villain is not solely placed on the
teen witch’s shoulders, she may come up with the ideas to take down the villains but she needs
collective power to complete the spell. Also, unlike other young adult fantasy and dystopian
novels where the main characters use weapons and strength to fight their villains (like Katniss in
*The Hunger Games*), the witches in these novels just have their knowledge and voices. Yes, they
have magical powers, but their magic is performed after learning spells, through the use of their
voice and words, and is magnified with the support of their coven. So, even though readers do
not have witchcraft at their disposal, they do have their voice and words to fight back against
their own villains and forms of oppression and the support of friends to help them along the
way.

Looking at how adolescent development hinges on understanding power, Roberta S.
Trites asserts, “Although the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a
depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the
adolescent has learned about power. Without experiencing gradations between power and
powerlessness, the adolescent cannot grow. Thus, power is even more fundamental to adolescent
literature than growth” (Trites x). Trites expands the characterization of the young adult novel
from a coming of age story in which the main character navigates their own individual growth
and maturation to a story in which characters learn to navigate systemic power dynamics of
family, church, government, and school. While Trites mainly analyzes this phenomenon in
canonical nineteenth- and twentieth-century books (*Little Women, The Chocolate War*, and *The
Catcher and the Rye* for example), I show how this dynamic has continued in contemporary
young adult literature. The novels I discuss not only explore how adolescents navigate and
negotiate power dynamics, but also how they actively work to disrupt, and hopefully dismantle,
oppressive systems of power. More importantly, these novels assiduously work to show readers that the characters cannot challenge power dynamics on their own, but they need to positively collaborate with their friends and covens. The teen witches of B*Witch, The Babysitter’s Coven, and These Witches Don’t Burn experience what Trites calls feelings of both power and powerlessness throughout the novels: they experience power when learning how to wield their magic and then powerlessness when the villainous organizations threaten to destroy them and their magic. It is not the individual teen witch’s own power (magic, voice, knowledge, and determination) that allows her to overcome and triumph over the organizations making her feel powerlessness in the first place, it is the teen witch and her coven mates’ collective power that allows them to defeat the villain in the end.

Activism and the Other in Young Adult Literature Scholarship

Much scholarship has been published on young adult dystopian novels as sites for teenage activism against large organizations, and what it means for the hero to be a teenage girl in these novels. Sara K. Day, Miranda A. Green-Barteet, and Amy L. Montz’s Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction is a collection of essays that focuses on the ways in which the dystopian mode provides girls—who continue to be constructed as passive and weak within much of contemporary Western culture—with the means to challenge the status quo, even as many of these works remain invested in elements of romance that may be seen as limiting girls’ agency. While these girls and their forms of rebellion may not always succeed and may even inadvertently reaffirm the very heteronormative ideals they set out to subvert, these characters occupy the role of active agent rather than passive bystander. (Day et al 4)
Ultimately, dystopian novels, according to the editors of this collection, are “participating in the redefinition of adolescent womanhood even as they call attention to the liminal spaces that their protagonists frequently inhabit” (Day 7). Young adult fantasy novels achieve a similar goal by providing the female characters with a supernatural means to challenge the status quo. However, unlike the dystopian novels Day discusses and most fantasy novels with creatures like vampires and werewolves, the witch novels I discuss go further in challenging the status quo through storylines that almost never limit the girls’ agency. For example, a number of the essays in Day’s collection focus on *The Hunger Games* trilogy for their analysis, which features a love triangle between the main characters and ends with Katniss a married mother. Therefore, while this series highlights Katniss’s strength to bring down a political structure that has forced children from each of the districts for the past seventy-four years to fight to the death, her agency is limited in that she cannot break free from the heteronormative structure that demands she settle down by marrying and having children in the end. The novels I analyze do not limit the teen witch’s agency through the same heteronormativity in two distinct ways: the few relationships that are highlighted in the novels are lesbian relationships and they are all subordinated to the plot and the character’s lives. None of the characters dedicates more time thinking about her girlfriend than her own personal issues with magic or taking down the villain. De-emphasizing the romance in these novels allows the characters to have more agency over their lives and works to dismantle the heteronormative assumption that girls’ and women’s storylines always end with a marriage.

In contrast to the dystopian novels’ settings in a tragedy-torn future, warning readers to make a change today so their future does not become what they’re reading on the page, the young adult witch fantasy novels I examine in this chapter are set within identifiable locations in
late 2010s: Salem, Massachusetts; Spring River, Kansas; and Sorrow Point, Washington. Meredith Sutphin suggests that, “What librarians and educators who advocate the power of fantasy novels…believe is that setting novels in a whole new world with its own rules can help readers to think outside the boxes of our own culture” (6). These novels do not rely solely on new worlds or new rules, but on readers’ identification with the witches to encourage readers to think outside of the box. The supernatural witch characters allow for the readers to explore complex concepts about their society without biases getting in the way, much like different worlds in other fantasy novels. For example, the way society treats the witches reveals their values, priorities, rules, and injustices and because the society in the novels is based on realistic settings, those values and priorities are reflected in the readers’ society. In addition to the realistic settings, readers do not see witchcraft as an unrealistic wish fulfillment in a society they can’t change because witchcraft is something innate to these witches: a witch is who you are rather than something you become. While readers are not actually able to become vampires or werewolves, since there are now large groups of people who identify as witches, anyone can join a coven, learn spells, and practice the craft they read about. Because there was a real, historical group of people that were killed for being witches, they are not only a make-believe creature in fairy tales, it is an identity and lifestyle that people experienced in the past and that is still claimed today. Like dystopian novels, the witch novels I discuss present fictional scenarios that align with contemporary cultural concerns and create a fear-based “us versus them” binary (witches vs. hunters/humans/demons).

In contrast to most YA fantasy novels, the “monsters” in these YA witch novels present as humans and are humanized to the reader. The actual monsters in these novels are not the supernatural creatures (i.e. the witches), but rather the villainous organizations that set out to
destroy the witches and witchcraft as a whole. In *The Truths of Monsters: Coming of Age with Fantastic Media*, Ildiko Limpar argues:

the monster warns us against what is un categorizable and thus labeled as Other. Yet otherness is a theme that calls to teenagers in intricate manners. Adolescents feel other than children and other than adults; they often feel that they are simply Others in an environment that they do not fit into. Their coming of age is a process of leaving this kind of disturbing otherness, and by doing so, joining human society with a full membership. In order to do so, they must confront their monsters, and through understanding differences they must fight whatever constitutes their otherness. The monster indicates an “other” form of existence and shows the anxieties that belong to the nevertheless desired form of existence. (3)

Limpar suggests that for teenagers to enter adulthood they must confront their monsters, or leave their own monstrous “other” form behind. Typically, when novels feature monsters it is the monster, as Limpar says, that is signifying the other that which we must stay away from.

However, the novels I examine below are different in their use of the monster and the Other because of the reversal of who is Other and who is the Norm. The witch main characters who hide their true identity from the humans are *supposed* to be Other because of their supernatural nature, yet the fully human villainous organizations are Othered not only by the witches, but by the readers as well. As Chapter One’s character identification shows us, readers are aligned with the teen witch as narrators and main characters, though readers are likely not self-identifying as witches. At the same time, because the Others are evil humans, the reader does not categorize them as the desired Norm. Instead of the witches coming of age and leaving their otherness (witchcraft) behind, as Limpar says, the witches defeat the organizations and establish
themselves as a desirable norm. Therefore, the reader understands the witches to be the Norm and humans acting on behalf of villainous organizations to be the Other, meaning the accepted thoughts and actions of the witches are adopted by readers and the thoughts and actions of the Othered villains are rejected. Angela E. Hubler argues that positive images and strong role models are not enough in novels, “a structural ‘map’ of social reality, one which reveals the historical development, and interrelationship, of the institutions of gender, race, and class…is crucial if girls are to begin to understand and to transform oppressive social institutions” (85). The organizations in the three series below reveal the map of social reality because they embody structural and institutional oppressors in the real world of the readers. The teen witches have villains to take down, but these villains mirror the larger social reality of villains that perpetuate similar oppressions in the readers’ world.

Teen witches address issues of corrupt organizational power, the importance of political awareness and activism, and social justice (including but not limited to race, LGBTQ+, and gender) across all three series I examine. Robert Paxton defines fascism in The Anatomy of Fascism as:

a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion. (218)

Each of the organizations and villains in the series I analyze are either loosely or explicitly described with Paxton’s definition. Given that the publication dates of these novels (2019 and
2020) fall towards the end of Donald Trump’s presidency, the fascist allegory does not seem to be coincidental, and neither is the use of teen witches to defeat fascist forces. Using a feminist lens and an anti-fascist outlook, these novels demonstrate alternative ways of representing contemporary young adulthood for girls and women. By representing teen witches using their voice and power to take down the fascist-coded villains these witches are resisting patriarchal assumptions while symbolically reclaiming power through their use of witchcraft that past generations of women were unable to perform.

As I have outlined, prior scholarship on young adult dystopian and fantasy literature has generally claimed that characters and readers are given limited agency and resistance within a generic structure that ultimately reinforces norms. I show how contemporary young adult witch novels move away from these conventions to allow for the organization of characters' and readers' agency in imagining more structural change. In what follows I show how young adult witch fantasy novels do something different than traditional dystopian and fantasy novels for three distinct reasons: they’re set in current, real places/times; they attempt to get readers to see that the villain is oppressing us here and now, not in a potential future; and because the witches primarily use their voices and knowledge to collaborate with their covens to defeat the villains, readers are able to believe they can do the same thing.

According to June Pulliam, “It is fairly easy to understand the monstrous Other as double in Young Adult horror fiction since this character is nearly always sympathetic, and is frequently the protagonist. Thus, while the monstrous Other is represented as horrifying in the eyes of others, readers or viewers can identify with the monster and see how this creature is similar to themselves” (16). Pulliam points out that the monstrous Other can be seen as horrifying to characters in the story, but because the narratives often allow readers to see beyond their surface,
accessing the monster’s thoughts, feelings, and motivations, it fosters empathy and understanding between the monster and reader. Through this emotional connection, the reader and monster can share common experiences and emotions allowing the reader to identify with the monster because they see themselves reflected in the monster. In general, Pulliam’s *Monstrous Bodies: Feminine Power in Young Adult Horror Fiction* argues that teen girls are the Other in patriarchal culture because they're girls not boys and she uses the idea of the Other/Norm to show that these boundaries are culturally constructed and not inherently (i.e. biologically) natural. Pulliam shows how the young adult horror genre exposes these boundaries as culturally constructed and offers a way to challenge them. Dedicating an entire chapter to the teen witch, Pulliam argues that witches are Other because they're represented as female and their power is grounded in nature, both things that are in negative contrast to the patriarchal standard. Drawing on Mary Field Belenky's definitions of different stages of knowledge (received, subjective, procedural, and constructed), Pulliam links the teen witch's maturation into an adult to their emerging constructivist perspective, the idea that knowledge, the process of acquiring knowledge, and the knower (the person gaining the knowledge) are interconnected and constantly influence one another. Ultimately, Pulliam argues that the teen's powers are linked with her growing constructivist perspective: she uses her powers for liberation rather than oppression, because as her knowledge grows her powers grow. These witches cultivate a worldview through knowledge that informs their use of magic, but their magic and worldview still mark them as Other for Pulliam.

In contrast to Pulliam’s teen witch as a sole character whose powers and knowledge are individual and independent, the teen witch in the series I highlight is supported and sustained by her coven and friends. Instead of being an isolated Other responsible for defeating the villain or
saving her community, because these teen witches rely on their covens for support, they are surrounded by others who are like them, normalizing their identity within a group. This reversal destabilizes what is classified as “normal” and what is classified as “other” not only within the plot of the novel, but also what readers understand these categories to mean. The *These Witches Don’t Burn* (2019) duology by Isabel Sterling, *The Babysitters Coven* (2019) trilogy by Kate Williams, and the *B*Witch (2020) duology by Paige McKenzie and Nancy Ohlin exhibit teen witches and their covens overthrowing villainous and corrupt organizations which directly mirror contemporary real-life villainous and corrupt organizations. In *These Witches Don’t Burn* and *B*Witch, the organizations violently attack and oftentimes kill witches for who they are, whereas in *The Babysitters Coven* the leader of the Sitter organization is utilizing her leadership position and forbidden “red” magical powers for her own personal and monetary gain. By the end of all of these novels, it is clear, as June Pulliam writes, “while readers might not be able to communicate with spirits, change into werewolves, or cast spells, they can change how they look at the world. In this way, the teen witch’s example shows how changing one’s perspective can be empowering” (Pulliam 171). I argue that the teen witch’s example in these novels does even more than what Pulliam claims: the teen witch is a direct example of how individuals come together to use their voice and knowledge to fight back against hate speech and anti-democratic organizations that occupy a very real space in the reader’s world today. These YA novels show how it is knowledge that defeats the villains at the end of the day, not brute strength or weapons, and knowledge is a very achievable thing for the readers to obtain—it’s something they can gather and use to empower themselves. Showcasing teen witches using their agency in the form of magical spells to navigate their villains allows readers to understand that knowledge is a power they can obtain and they can use their own voice to fight back just like the teen witches.
Mind and Body in *These Witches Don’t Burn* Series

In *These Witches Don’t Burn* (2019) by Isabel Sterling, the main character, Hannah, is an elemental witch who lives in Salem, Massachusetts. Hannah and her ex-girlfriend, Veronica, are part of a coven. Everyone in the coven keeps their magic hidden from the Regs (non-witches); if they’re caught using magic in front of a Reg, the Council could strip them of their powers forever. Hannah and Veronica work together to uncover who is attacking Salem’s witches. Book two, *This Coven Won’t Break* (2020), follows Hannah’s Salem coven mobilizing with other covens across the nation to stop the Witch Hunters from deploying a “cure” that would remove all witches’ magic. At the second novel’s conclusion all the covens come together to combine their magic and wipe the memory of all the witch hunters so they not only don’t remember making the serum but they forget witches even exist. By the end of the second novel, Hannah and her coven show that knowledge and words are what’s needed to beat villains founded in hate, specifically hate groups who perpetuate anti-LGBTQIA laced speech and wish to “cure” people of who they really are.

The first book in the series sets up a connection between the mind and body, particularly through Hannah, at the end of the novel when she’s trying to escape from Benton, her classmate and witch hunter. Beginning with this mind/body connection in the first novel is important, because it lays the groundwork for why Hannah pushes for all the covens to work together towards a non-violent solution to take care of the witch hunters. Additionally, as I will outline below, highlighting the ways in which Hannah uses her mind and body together to try to break free from Benton works towards dismantling expectations that teen female protagonists can, and should, save themselves with no help from others. Towards the end of *These Witches Don’t Burn*, Hannah wakes up in the backseat of Benton’s car to find she and Veronica are tied up, thus
realizing he’s the witch hunter who has been attacking them for weeks. When Hannah tries to “reach for [her] magic” she finds “nothing. The swirl of power in my chest is there, I can feel it, but I can’t access it” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 295). Prior to this scene Hannah has been using her magic to try and locate the witch hunter. However, now that Benton has dosed Hannah and Veronica with a cure his family has been creating, they’re rendered magic-less for the time being. Benton tells Hannah, “‘soon we’ll be able to save you. Instead of killing you, we can make you human’” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 296). Hannah not only verbally responds, “‘We are human. We’ve always been human’” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 296), but she physically starts to search around for something to free her and Veronica from their bindings and a way to escape Benton’s car. Without her magic, this leaves Hannah in a position that readers can more closely understand, as they too would be searching for something sharp to free their wrists rather than summoning a spell in this situation.

The important point in this scene is that Hannah does not give up, even though she’s lost her magic; she just switches tactics and relies on her body in a different capacity. Roberta S. Trites writes in Twenty-First Century Feminisms in Children’s and Adolescent Literature, that “many of the strong female protagonists of YA dystopias are psychologically at war with their bodies. These protagonists are indeed grateful when their bodies empower them, but they despair or are enraged when their bodies betray them—and even worse, in those moments, they regard their own bodies as objects, not as inextricably one with their minds” (86). Because witches’ powers inextricably link their mind and body—they have to learn spells to think or say whereas the magic naturally runs through their veins—they do not regard their bodies as objects. Instead, their magic and power is so tied up in their identity and being that when they have their magic stolen from them it feels like a loss of self, rather than a betrayal. The mind and body work
together to empower the teen witches which works to dismantle the mind/body dichotomy and reinforces to the readers that both their minds and bodies can empower them.

Even more remarkable is the fact that Hannah and Veronica do not manage to overpower Benton either physically or with magic. Benton originally only set out to cure Hannah, but he says as he’s lighting the pyre, “If I don’t kill you, the Order will. And then they’ll kill me for being too weak to do my job” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 301). At this point Hannah and Veronica are completely convinced they’re about to die so Hannah begs, “You can’t kill us like this. You can’t. You have the gun. Just end it” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 303). Benton “shakes his head, ‘We will no longer hide our work behind accidents….Your deaths will be a message’” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 303). Fortunately, Benton does not burn Hannah and Veronica to death. Instead the coven’s High Priestess and their parents arrive, rescuing Hannah and Veronica and subduing Benton until the police arrest him for attempted murder. This scene occurs in the final few pages of the novel, leaving readers under the impression until the very last minute that Hannah and Veronica will be killed by Benton. Readers are with Hannah through an entire gamut of situations where she’s characterized as the heroine who is supposed to defeat the villain (Benton). Instead of instant triumph at the behest of her magic, weapons, or brute strength, Hannah fails and has to be rescued by a group of adults. Despite her failure, according to the YA dystopian trope, Hannah continues to fight to the best of her ability to find the witch hunter, stop Benton, and save Veronica and her family. The first novel ends with Hannah thinking, “There’s a war brewing. And I intend to win” (Sterling, These Witches Don’t Burn 320). This behavior works to dismantle traditional YA dystopian tropes that place all of the weight of defeating the villain on the shoulders of a teenager and instead works to embody healthy practices of navigating villains, placing emphasizing the importance of mind
and body working together and help from others to take down the oppressor. Hannah’s failure to defeat Benton at the end of book one also is the driving force behind her solution to defeating the witch hunters in the second novel.

In addition to showing Hannah’s relentless pursuit of the villain, the first novel also establishes Benton (and the Hunter’s Order at large) understanding of witches as sub-humans with an illness that needs to be cured. The sequel, *This Coven Won’t Break*, covers more ground on the Hunter Order and details how the hunters have quickly moved forward in their mission to cure witches alongside Hannah and her coven’s plans to permanently eradicate the Hunters. The sequel shows Hannah’s move from assisting her coven in demolishing the Hunter Order by any means necessary to pushing her plan to humanely neutralize the villain by collaborating with all of the coven’s witches and making sure the coven does not stoop to the same level of murderous behavior as the hunters. Hannah learns that Benton Hall and his family aren’t the only Witch Hunters in Salem, or the United States, “‘there are roughly a hundred Hunters across the US’” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 186). Though there aren’t that many active Hunters, “it doesn’t take that many fascists to make fascism” (Bray 140). Bray reminds us that “in 1919 Mussolini’s *fasci* had a hundred members” and “when Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933, only about 1.3 percent of the population belonged to the NSDAP” (Bray 140). Despite their small numbers, the Hall family owns Hall Pharmaceuticals, it “‘is their base of operations’” and the other “‘families [are] stationed across the country. They’re obscenely well-funded, so they have easy access to travel and can relocate entire families within a week’” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 187). The small number of Hunters not only accurately reflects the way historical fascist regimes began, it also parallels the potential for small hate groups to grow and cause large-scale damage.
The Hunters have updated their cure, figuring out how to make the effects permanent and “shifted from the syringes they used on [Hannah] and Veronica to a modified tranquilizer gun with their drug loaded inside the dart” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 37). The Hunters have drugged the water supply in Washington, causing the entire coven there to permanently lose their magic. The Hunters’ goal is to make the cure airborne and as Riley, another teen hunter, says, “Soon, there will be no escaping salvation” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 110). Though the Hunters’ physical numbers are low, their monetary resources allow them to have a dangerous reach: they are able to hire enough people with the skills to create an airborne cure, making their limitation of having few boots on the ground only a small hurdle to surpass. The Hunters are also very successful and can inflict so much damage, “Because they train for it. Because they’re fed on hate. They’ve spent generations on this quest, keeping their network small and contained, raising everyone with perfect devotion to the cause” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 187). Unlike the witches, who utilize their mind and body to practice witchcraft and efforts to defeat the villain, the Hunter Order rely on using their knowledge in a forceful way to physically fight the witches with strength and tactile artillery (guns loaded with the cure). While both the witches and the Hunters are using knowledge to defeat one another, the Hunters use their knowledge only as a means to physically harm and destroy the witches, whereas the witches use their knowledge to learn about the Hunters and aim to neutralize them in a non-violent manner.

Originally, the coven’s plan entails first destroying all of the Hunter’s “cure” and then neutralizing the Hunters through “imprisonment. Draining financial resources. A couple key assassinations” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 19). When Hannah learns about Phase Two of the plan she sighs, “I wish there was a reset button we could push and make them disappear. Or that we could go back in time and stop them from ever finding out about magic in the first
place’” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 19). Hannah isn’t completely against key assassinations, and even when the coven’s plan turns into developing their own “‘targeted potion that will poison Hunters but leave everyone else unharmed’” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 124) Hannah only wonders, “Does murdering the people who want us dead make us villains, too?” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 124). Unlike the hunters, who are so convinced the witches are too far from human to consider their acts depraved, Hannah questions early on if the motive for murder makes the act any less wrong. Hannah questioning the coven’s plan to murder some, or all, of the hunters is an act of embodying her knowledge. Rather than employing the hunter’s own tactics of violence against them, Hannah believes the coven can use their knowledge and magical skills to defeat them in a different, less malevolent, manner. After infiltrating Hall Pharmaceuticals with other members of the coven goes awry, Hannah begins to voice her desire for the coven and Council to change their tactics towards a less violent plan.

Hannah and Benton were high school friends in the first novel, but when Hannah and Archer, another coven member, are caught by Benton’s parents in Hall Pharmaceuticals, Hannah gets a glimpse of Benton’s home life. Archer is injected with the cure, rendering him magic-less and “human” according to the Hunters. Despite this, Benton’s parents physically assault Archer for destroying all the cure doses on hand and the lab’s data. Benton tries to stop his dad saying, “‘Dad, that’s enough…You heard him. He was cured. He’s human now’” but in response “Mr. Hall catches Benton across the side of the face with a vicious right hook” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 228-229). Hannah watches and wonders, “*If the Hunters will do this to their own children, what will they do to us?*” (Sterling, *This Coven Won’t Break* 228-229). This isn’t the first time Hannah has tried to understand the hate the Hunters feel towards witches, but it is one of the first times she’s seen first-hand how that hate impacts children, like Benton, who grow up
with the Hunters. Hannah’s empathy for Benton continues to grow after Riley, another Hunter, gets angry, hits Benton with the crowbar, and repeatedly kicks him while saying, “‘Fucking witch sympathizer,’” finally throwing Benton in the locked cell with Hannah and Archer (Sterling, This Coven Won’t Break 239). A little bit later, as Hannah and Archer sit in their cell, she thinks, “Kill or be killed. What kind of family raises their kid like that?” (Sterling, This Coven Won’t Break 245). This is a turning point for Hannah, as she’s seen a different side to Benton in the cell, particularly when he helps Hannah and Archer escape. Hannah allows her new knowledge of Benton’s parents to inform her perspective of him and his viewpoint of witches, and she decides that “If someone like Benton wants to save us, as twisted as his version of saved is, can’t we do something similar to the Hunters? Can’t we cure them of their hatred instead of killing them off?” (Sterling, This Coven Won’t Break 242). Rather than killing all of the Hunters, as her coven’s Council wants at this point, Hannah envisions a way to give them a taste of their own medicine and cure them of their hatred.

Hannah convinces the coven to create their own cure to erase the Hunters’ memories of witches and their Hunter identity. In order to deploy their own memory erasing potion to all of the Hunters at Hall Pharmaceuticals at once, the entire coven has to unite and use Blood Magic to connect and spread their magic. As they’re about to perform the spell, Hannah thinks: this is “the first time since the very creation of witches, the three Clans are working together. Our magics blending into something greater than their individual parts” (Sterling, This Coven Won’t Break 298). The three Clans interweave mind and body through all of the witches physically sharing their bodily blood to bind themselves to one another and use their voice to recite the spell (mind and knowledge) as one. Hannah is unable to defeat the witch hunters on her own or with other smaller factions of the coven. It’s not until they all embody magic together and chant the
final spell to deploy the memory wiping serum in the air that they’re able to defeat the villain. Concurrently, the villains are defeated due to their lack of truly understanding and knowing who the witches are outside of their magical capabilities. Hannah pushes for the coven to prioritize their vast knowledge about the witch hunters to their advantage and wants to gather all the coven members to work together to use their minds and bodies for a collective spell. Thus, the second novel culminates in Hannah’s knowledge of collective activism and using the mind and body together as the driving force behind the witches defeating the witch hunters.

Moving chronologically through the plot points in These Witches Don’t Burn to mirror Hannah’s own realization, I outline how it is the witch hunter’s lack of knowledge about witches beyond what’s needed to kill them and remove their magic coupled with their military-style operation that is their downfall. By the end, the witches are victors over the witch hunters because of their deep knowledge of the witch hunters and their prioritization of collectively working together with the larger coven to conduct a spell, which links the witches’ minds and bodies as one as they gather in a circle and intentionally chant together. Though the hunters are relatively small in number, their efforts to eradicate witches completely are built on a foundation of money and hate—they are able to purchase pharmaceutical companies and raise their children to also be witch hunters who know nothing other than their mission to destroy witchcraft at all costs. The covens are also small in number: only a few families make up each coven and they seem to lack the funding the Hunters have. However, despite their deficiencies, the witches are still able to defeat the Hunters through their voices, particularly through Hannah voicing her opinion that their coven should not descend to their level of violence and then through the collective voice of all the witches casting the memory erase spell over the Hunters. Therefore, though both the villains and the heroes of this duology have different strengths and weaknesses,
the hero does not prevail because of brute strength, money, sheer luck, or even magic. The heroes, the witches, prevail because Hannah embodies the use of her knowledge about who the Hunters are and what makes them hate, to overcome their attempts to cure all witches. While the coven deploys a memory erase serum via a spell, the serum would not exist without Hannah voicing her concern over mimicking the Hunters’ violence, nor would they be able to make the serum airborne without the collective voice of all the coven members participating.

**Collective Knowledge in *B*Witch Series**

Highlighting the fact that knowledge and collaboration are what allows the witches to succeed in the end, I argue that these novels work as ways to promote the use of knowledge, voice, and collaboration over the spread of disinformation within adolescent readers. It’s important to look chronologically at how the witches learn that their knowledge and collaboration is what’s needed to defeat Antima’s spread of disinformation, as it’s the same way readers will also come to the same conclusion. Thus, I’m mirroring the reader’s identification in my breakdown of the character’s journey to show that process of accepting knowledge and collaboration as the true weapons against Antima, not necessarily their magic. *B*WITCH and *Witch Rising* by Nancy Ohlin and Paige McKenzie is a duology in which each chapter is told from the point of view of a different teen witch in either Div or Greta’s coven. For decades there has been a federal anti-witchcraft law in place: the anti-witchcraft law of 1877, Title 6 of the US Comprehensive Code, Section 129, called 6-129 for short. The new US President, David Ingraham, is trying to pass a bill to beef up enforcement and punishment of 6-129. Antima is an aggressive backer of the president and his goal to increase the enforcement and punishment of this law. New girl Iris joins Greta’s coven, and though the two covens are not friendly, when a fellow witch is found dead in Sorrow Point they work together to stop Antima. *B*WITCH and
*Witch Rising* promote collective activism in this duology through the two rival covens joining ranks and collaborating to stop Antima’s rising threat in Sorrow Point. Similar to *These Witches Don’t Burn*, collective activism of the covens and their greater knowledge of Antima allows them to triumph in the end. *B*WITCH and *Witch Rising* are battling Antima, which represents larger systems of oppression that are at work within America, and because the humans within this duology know about witches, the knowledge the covens wield and their activist tactics look differently from Hannah’s in *These Witches Don’t Burn*. For example, Div and Greta’s covens have to navigate politics and gather details on funding and laws to identify the major players in Antima, whereas Hannah and her coven have been passively at war with the Hunters for decades.

The novel opens up with an anonymous online post detailing the anti-witchcraft law of 1877: “*Whoever engages in or promotes the practice of Witchcraft may be punished by Death or term of imprisonment or any other penalty the Court may deem appropriate*” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *B*WITCH 2). This law echoes the sentiments of the Witchcraft act of 1604, but is also vague enough that “witchcraft” could be swapped out for a number of terms—homosexuality, sodomy, miscegenation, etc—and the law would read the same. This parallels the ways in which the Witch Hunters in Sterling’s duology characterize their “cure” for the witches. The anonymous online poster goes on to say that since the Great Witch Purge, “Some (some) non-witches have become more tolerant and accepting, at least in private…No witches have been executed since the Great Purge. Sentences have decreased over the decades, from ‘life in prison’ in the early 1900s to ‘six to twelve months’ more recently” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *B*WITCH 2). However, the new president, David Ingraham, says “bad, untrue things about witches and witchcraft all the time, either in the regular media or on his social media” and “announced
recently that he was working with Congress on a bill to seriously beef up enforcement and punishment for 6-129 violators” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *B*WITCH 15). Along with the renewed enforcement of 6-129 and President Ingraham’s anti-witch rhetoric, a new group of anti-magic supporters, Antima, is surfacing in Sorrow Point and across the United States.

When Iris first hears about Antima she thinks, “And what was up with that name? Had they deliberately riffed on “Antifa,” the antifascist movement, when they were the polar opposite of that? Evil jerks!” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *B*WITCH 16). Antima is attempting to riff off of Antifa, yet their tactics are not anti-fascist and instead embody the fascist notions Antifa works to disassemble. Invoking Antifa with their name attempts to position the witches and witchcraft as the oppressor and non-magical individuals as the victims, whereas in actuality the witches are aligned with historically minoritized groups (LGBTQIA+, people of color, religious denominations, and even other witches). Antima is afraid that because witches possess a supernatural ability to perform magic, they are going to revolt by way of an insurrection against the government and all other non-magical people.

Antima members identify themselves by wearing a shoulder patch depicting a “stark, almost geometric design of what looked like a bird-cage suspended over a bonfire” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *B*WITCH 18). The image is symbolic because Callixta Crowe, rumored to be the most powerful witch of all time, had a familiar that was a black crow, and she was one of the witches burned inside a cage during the Great Purge. Antima is quite literally wearing on their sleeves a violent, murderous history they are hoping to repeat. With the ultimate goal of getting rid of all witches/witchcraft, Antima takes it upon themselves to begin policing where they live. Classmates and teachers are showing up at school with Antima patches on their clothes and backpacks and local police are also joining their ranks. With the police force and President
behind Antima, the number of witches being detained skyrockets: “‘Two weeks ago, there were two hundred ninety-five arrests. Last week, there were seven hundred thirteen more arrests. That’s over a thousand arrests in fourteen days, which is more than we’ve had in the past hundred forty years since the Great Witch Purge’” (McKenzie and Ohlin, Witch Rising 38).

Through arrests, Antima is able to show witches they have political backing for their organization. Wearing patches on their jackets and backpacks allows Antima to physically embody the threat against witches in public spaces; they may not be able to enact arrests or violence, but the patches work as a physical reminder of their power and capability to do so at a moment’s notice.

Not only is Antima ramping up their efforts to apprehend witches publicly, they are also recruiting new members at school by handing out flyers that read, “IF WE DON’T PUT AN END TO THEIR WAY, THEY’LL PUT AN END TO OUR WAY. JOIN US THIS SATURDAY AT 1 P.M. COMMUNITY CENTER, MAIN STREET” (McKenzie and Ohlin, Witch Rising 24). On top of their physicality, Antima is using their rhetoric and voice against witches to recruit new members and spread fear amongst witches. This fear causes non-witches to fearmonger as they’re on high alert for any instances that could be deemed witchcraft. By verbally recruiting members in the high school hallway the villains succeed in further alienating witches to Antima sympathizers and others that fear Antima themselves. Antima uses a version of their mind and body to recruit new members, as they’re physically placing their bodies in spaces like high school hallways to be visible to both new recruits and witches, but they’re also using their knowledge of people’s fear of witches to recruit new members. However, the difference between Antima’s use of mind and body and the witches’ use is the distinction between knowledge and misinformation. Antima is spreading misinformation about the witches,
claiming that witches are going to end humans, whereas Div and Greta’s coven gather factual information about Antima and its members to defeat them.

Greta’s and Div’s covens decide they’re going to infiltrate the Antima organization to gain knowledge of the group’s leaders and plans with the hopes of finding a way to take them down from the inside. Mira, Binx, and Aysha go to the community center and are astonished at seeing two hundred attendees, when there were just a few dozen mere weeks ago (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 75). To echo Bray, “before they achieved such popular support, Fascists and Nazis [Antima] were but tiny groups of ideologues” (Bray 141). Help from political leaders such as Mira’s father, Mr. Jahani, who is running for mayor, and the president allows Antima’s numbers to multiply so quickly. Mr. Jahani delivers a speech at this Antima rally saying, “I think I speak for everyone here when I say, witches don’t belong here…Not in Sorrow Point, not in Washington, not in our country. There are a million reasons for this, but I’ll give you just one. Their use of magic gives them an unfair, not to mention unnatural, advantage over the rest of us humans.” He continues to lament the different ways witches can use their magic to cheat on tests and steal jobs and money (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 77). Mr. Jahani’s speech reminds readers that “historically fascism has gained entry to the halls of power not by smashing down the gates, but by convincing the gatekeepers to politely swing them open” (Bray 131). Mr. Jahani’s speech is not stating facts or recounting events caused by witches; instead he’s pontificating with the hope of moving the audience to fear and anger against witches. Mr. Jahani is unaware that his own daughter, Mira, is a witch and is listening to his speech in the audience. His knowledge of who witches are is only informed by what Antima has encouraged him to say for the rally with the promise of monetary and political gain.
After a few weeks of Div fake dating Hunter Jessup, the two covens figure out that the Jessup family occupies a high-ranking position in Antima. Hunter tells Div she seems to really get “‘the threat. The thing that could destroy our society as we know it’” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 62). Since Hunter believes Div is on Antima’s side, he decides to tell her about the New Order and their plans to intensify Antima’s mission. Hunter says Antima isn’t “‘very well organized. Up until now, it’s been a bunch of randoms here and there who hear about the Antima movement online or wherever and decide to join, maybe form a local group and give themselves a cool-sounding name’” but New Order is trying to “‘make things more centralized, have just one leader’” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 62). So far the New Order has created a database of all the witches in Washington and Antima groups across the country. Hunter brags that they have reached out to all of the Antima groups nationwide and “‘They’re eager to come into our tent, so to speak. Our very well-funded tent’” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 90). The New Order has also organized Antima rallies nationwide where “protestors [are] wearing shirts with the new symbol, marching down Main Streets and in front of state capitals and city halls. They carried signs that said THE NEW ORDER IS HERE TO STAY! and 6-129A NOW! and HUMANS FIRST! While chanting ‘Witches don’t belong here!’ through bullhorns” (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 215). The Jessup family’s socioeconomic status gives them the ability to fund Mr. Jahani’s political campaign, and because they’re also funding Antima’s New Order, they can inextricably link Antima with politicians to empower them. Money also allows the Jessups to increase Antima’s numbers rapidly, thus underscoring the fact that they’re relying on physicality and materials to back their organization. They’re using knowledge to create databases and target individuals to join Antima, but they’re not using their knowledge to learn specifics about the witches and witchcraft.
In the second novel, *Witch Rising*, the covens learn that the Jessup mom is the New Order leader, even though she is also a witch. Dr. Jessup tells Div she only became the leader of New Order to protect her daughters:

I wasn’t lucky like you and your friends. I didn’t know about my true identity until I was a wife and a mom. By then, it was too late. I was worried that if I told Jared that I was a witch, he’d try to take the children away from me... You may find this hard to believe, but my husband wasn’t always against witches. That happened over time. He made a lot of money at his business and fell in with a different crowd... a very rich crowd that was mainly interested in protecting their wealth and their power. They saw, and continue to see, witches as a threat to that. (McKenzie and Ohlin, *Witch Rising* 220)

The Jessups, and by extension Antima and the New Order, are solely motivated by money and power. Their primary concern is eradicating threats to their power status, not about who the witches truly are. Antima lacks true knowledge about witches and witchcraft, whereas in order to defeat Antima, Div and Greta’s covens purposefully seek out knowledge specific to Antima’s inner operations, mission, and plans of attack. Thus, it is the motive behind Antima’s actions and their use of disinformation, rather than true knowledge of witches, that truly becomes their downfall. They do not lack resources, yet their intentions to destroy out of pure evil and hate do not allow them to desire to learn about the witches.

Similar to how Hannah defeats the witch hunters in *These Witches Don’t Burn*, the two covens successfully erase the memory of the Antima members and President Ingraham before he can sign the new 6-129 order. Like Hannah, Binx took a plan to deploy a virus that kills anyone wearing the Antima logo or holding a sign with the logo and replaced the deadly virus with a potion to reverse the hate they feel towards witches combined with a spell to wipe their memory
of witches and humans hating each other. Greta’s and Div’s covens successfully collaborate to stop the new 6-129 bill from being signed and magically change the President’s stance on witches. However, they know that “The work was just beginning, of course…There were many, many others whose minds had yet to be changed” (McKenzie and Ohlin, Witch Rising 263). Yet they’re hopeful because “having the president on the right side of the issue was huge progress. And already, footage from the rally had gone viral via the news and on social media. It would just be a matter of time before the New Order, and the rest of the Antima, fractured and folded for good” (McKenzie and Ohlin, Witch Rising 263).

The ending of the B*Witch duology is reminiscent of Mark Bray’s Antifa conclusion where he states:

Hearts and minds are never changed in a vacuum; they are products of the worlds around them and the structures of discourse that give them meaning. Any time someone takes action against transphobic, racist bigots—from calling them out, to boycotting their business, to shaming them for their oppressive beliefs, to ending a friendship unless someone shapes up—they are putting an anti-fascist outlook into practice that contributes to a broader everyday anti-fascism that pushes back the tide against the alt-right, Trump, and his loyal supporters. (Bray 206)

The witches took action against Antima, ultimately putting their own anti-fascist outlook into practice from their relentless efforts to dig into the organization’s network to casting a multi-coven spell in the end. Yet, they understand their efforts do not eradicate all members of Antima globally, or even outside of their town. Even still their efforts towards toppling a fascist organization is not futile, because the President’s discourse is now changed and as shown in the beginning his words greatly impacted the rise of Antima so now, hopefully, his words can work
to dwindle Antima’s numbers. Ridley says early on, “Being a witch necessarily meant that you had to keep a distance from others because you never knew who might figure out your identity and turn you in to the principal or the police” (McKenzie and Ohlin, B*WITCH 41). Ridley’s words echo Hannah having to hide who she was out of fear of witch hunters in These Witches Don’t Burn and also ring true to readers who are forced to hide who they are or fight for their right to exist, because “...most anti-fascist organizing is literal self-defense” (Bray 172). The teen witches in the series so far have to hide their identities out of fear of prison, physical harm, and death. This is not much different from how many LGBTQIA+ teenagers and adolescents of color live their lives. For that reason, readers are able to connect to the fear and helplessness the teen witches in these novels experience and replicate their use of voice and knowledge to combat the villain.

**Oppressive Power in The Babysitter’s Coven Trilogy**

The Babysitter’s Coven trilogy by Kate Williams offers a more subtle form of an anti-fascist outlook as there are no witch hunters in this series. The villain is Wanda, the leader of the Synod, the Sitters’ governing organization. In book one, The Babysitter’s Coven, the main character, Esme, learns that she is a witch and that her job and passion for babysitting is because she is a part of the larger Sitter organization. Sitters are witches who use babysitting as a cover to fight the monsters and evil entities that escape from the “Negative,” a world or dimension beyond our own. In book two, The Babysitter’s Coven: For Better or Cursed, the Synod holds a Summit, a once-a-generation gathering where sitters are trained, educated, and able to form relationships with one another. It’s during the Summit that Esme finds out the leader of the Synod, Wanda, cursed her mother and put Cassandra’s father, Erebus, in the Negative so neither of them could out her for using Red Magic (magic used for personal gain) to buy Beanie Babies.
Book Two ends with Esme sending Wanda to the Negative. Book three, *The Babysitter’s Coven: Spells Like Teen Spirit*, takes place mostly over the course of a Galentine’s staycation with Esme, Cassandra, and their sitter friends they made at the Summit. There is a new major dilemma this time: a new band in Spring River is using Red Magic to try to become famous. Esme, Cassandra, and their sitter friends work together to stop them.

As with the previous series, I’m again focusing on the use of knowledge and collective activism in the first two books of *The Babysitter’s Coven* series. However, this series differs because the villain is not another witch hunter or an anti-witch organization; instead, the villain of this series is a fellow Sitter and leader of the Synod. Thus, this series complicates the traditional witch vs. villain dichotomy that is established in the previous series to show how knowledge and collective activism can still be employed against a villain within. I am specifically using Bray’s thoughts on a long-term solution to fascism to show the similarities between Wanda, the Synod, and systemic powers turning fascist. Bray argues,

> The only long-term solution to the fascist menace is to undermine its pillars of strength in society grounded not only in white supremacy but also in ableism, heteronormativity, patriarchy, nationalism, transphobia, class rule, and many others. This long-term goal points to the tensions that exist in defining anti-fascism, because at a certain point destroying fascism is really about promoting a revolutionary socialist alternative…to a world of crisis, poverty, famine, and war that breeds fascist reaction. (Bray 209)

There is an innate connection between Bray’s long-term solution to fascism and feminist thinkers, as they both aspire to undermine and dismantle the white patriarchy which upholds heteronormativity, transphobia, and class rule. Within the society of *The Babysitter’s Coven* the Synod is utilizing class rule to maintain the status quo. The Synod has the ultimate, final say in
any issues relating to the misuse of magic, specifically Red Magic, and controls all of the portals to and from the Negative, which houses all of the demons the babysitters are trained to capture. The babysitters are expected to protect their region’s children from the monsters that escape the Negative through the use of magic spells and their individual supernatural abilities (such as pyrokinesis and telekinesis), but cannot inquire about forbidden topics, such as Red Magic. Therefore, the Synod organization and their ways of governing are held up with similar pillars as the witch hunters in *These Witches Don’t Burn* and *B* Witch, particularly class rule with a determination to inculcate the society (i.e. the babysitters and Antima) with their own ideologies and norms. Moreover, both the Synod and the witch hunters operate on strength grounded in the same pillars Bray says uphold fascism, so undermining those pillars will cause the organizations to tumble. As with the previous two series, Esme and Cassandra’s knowledge, along with the collective help of other Sitters, helps them to defeat the Synod and Wanda in the end of book two.

Book one explains how main characters, Esme and Cassandra gather knowledge about their jobs and the organization: discovering their kinesis powers, learning how to cast spells, and revealing that they’re Sitters. Sitters gain their power on their seventeenth birthday, called the Changeover. Ultimately, “‘A Sitter’s job is to protect, not to kill. A Sitter only kills as a very, very last resort, and even then there are consequences’” (Williams, *The Babysitters Coven* 223). Instead of killing demons, Esme and Cassandra are supposed to return them back to the Negative by flushing them through the portal. Since Sitter powers are generationally passed down through the mother, “‘the skills needed for a Return are innate…they don’t need to be taught….If you can learn to block out the noise that surrounds you in daily life, you will inherently know what to do, and you will do what is right’” (Williams, *The Babysitters Coven* 236). Esme and Cassandra are
babysitters in the way that they “‘enforce the rules and make sure no one gets hurt….but instead of a couple of kids, [Sitters are] in charge of….humanity’” (Williams, *The Babysitters Coven* 217). Their skills to perform a Return are innate, but they still need to learn the spells and the mission of Sitterhood. The sitters are a true co-mingling of the mind and body because after they perform a spell once their bodies inherently remember the spell. Each Sitter is gifted with a version of kinesis that is unique to her, thereby underscoring that while each Sitter physically trains for Negative Returns, they also need their minds and knowledge to successfully complete a Return.

While explaining their new roles and the rules of being a Sitter to Esme and Cassandra, Brian (their Counsel, like Giles is Buffy’s Watcher in *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer*) says, “‘The Portal is where beings can pass back and forth between this dimension and the Negative. Fortunately, we won’t have to worry about that for a while. The Spring River Portal was sealed by the Synod many years ago, which means that, for our purposes, it does not exist for the time being’” (Williams, *The Babysitters Coven* 224). This gives rise to the Synod’s downfall in *The Babysitter’s Coven: For Better or Cursed* because even though Esme and Cassandra just found out about their Sitter duties, they have already encountered multiple demons while babysitting, which means the Portal is not sealed as the Synod claims. Therefore, Esme and Cassandra enter the Sitterhood with seeds of doubt about whether to truly trust the Synod or not. Esme and Cassandra use their knowledge of embodied experiences with the demons coupled with the knowledge about the Synod’s goals and missions to draw their own conclusions about the Synod. Esme and Cassandra don’t automatically take Brian’s word for the Synod upholding their own standard of conduct because they’ve physically encountered the opposite through fighting demons that aren’t supposed to be able to access the portal. *The Babysitter’s Coven* is an
accumulation of knowledge for Esme and Cassandra: what Sitters are, who the Synod is, what the Negative is, how to perform a Return, and learning spells. Everything learned in the first novel informs Esme’s experience at the Summit in the second novel, helping Esme to reveal the truth about Wanda and the Synod. Finally, this knowledge is also what empowers Esme and Cassandra to overcome Wanda’s attempts to permanently silence them in book two.

*For Better or Cursed* centers around the Summit of all Synod members and all Sitters, which takes place in Esme’s hometown, Spring River, Kansas. This year’s Summit is a last minute affair, and when Esme learns that the only hotel in town will host the event in less than a week she asks Brian, “‘How does that work?...That hotel is probably booked’” (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 57). Brian tells Esme that, “‘they don’t have a single room available’” but the Synod will make it so that “‘No one who had a reservation will remember. Same with the hotel staff who are working there for the duration of the Summit. Their memories will be modified so that all they are experiencing is another day of work’” (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 57). This doesn’t sit well with Esme: “Mind erasure seemed like a pretty big thing, a potent combo of hypnosis and amnesia, but the Synod was handing it out like candy canes” (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 57-58). To Esme, the Synod wiping the memories of hotel staff for the entire weekend they’re working and guests to take their rooms is different than wiping someone’s memory out of kindness (as they did for MacKenzie at the end of Book One so she would avoid nightmares and trauma from spending time in the Negative). The Synod could choose any other weekend or place to hold the Summit to avoid having to use their powers against people in order to get their way. Instead, the Synod wields their power over others just because they can and don’t seem to have any regard for the fact that these are people who have their own weekend plans. Again,
Esme doesn’t just blindly follow the Synod and trusts her instincts about their behavior as problematic, further reinforcing and embodying her own knowledge as a form of power.

In greeting the Sitters at the beginning of the Summit, Wanda warns them against the rising threat of Red Magic calling it a “‘perversion of Sitter magic….It is selfish rather than altruistic. Instead of protecting, it causes harm. It is greedy, not generous, and rather than being genetically innate, it can be acquired by anyone willing to sacrifice their moral soul’” (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 122-123). If Wanda is alerting the Sitterhood to the dangers of Red Magic then it helps to paint her as anti-Red Magic and therefore staunchly against using it herself. Despite her anti-Red Magic speech, it’s revealed that Wanda herself is using Red Magic, and has been for the last fifteen years, to procure Beanie Babies on eBay. According to Adrian, her assistant, “‘She’s spending thousands of dollars, and she’s selling her own stuff to pay for it. Last night, she had me take her mother’s wedding ring to a pawnshop so that she could get money to bid on a tie-dyed crab’” (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 240). As Cassandra says, it’s all about “‘Wealth and power’” which “‘looks different for everyone’” and for Wanda wealth and power is Beanie Babies (Williams, *For Better or Cursed* 310). Ultimately, Wanda is grossly abusing her power as head of the Synod through using Red Magic to obsessively purchase Beanie Babies, breaking not only the Sitter rule of using Red Magic but also the rule against using any magic for personal gain. After accusing Esme of stealing the Red Magic spellbook, in an attempt to rid Esme of her Sitter magic and keep her mom under the curse forever, Wanda takes Esme and Cassandra to the roof of the hotel where she plans to perform an immortality spell on herself and then push them both off of the roof to their deaths. Wanda’s decision to isolate Esme and Cassandra on the roof is not only practical for her plan to kill them, but it also speaks to the fact that Wanda realizes Esme and Cassandra are weaker when they are without other Sitters. Thus,
Wanda’s choice to separate them helps to establish the power in numbers and collaboration between Sitters, which, ironically is the purpose of the Summit she organizes as well. Fortunately, after bonding with the other Sitters during the Summit, they didn’t believe that Esme and Cassandra would actually steal the Red Magic spellbook so they come to their rescue, further exemplifying that collective activism is an important component needed to defeat Wanda and the Synod. During the fight between the Sitters, Wanda, and demons, Esme manages to stop Wanda by flushing her to the Negative. Once Brian and the rest of the Sitterhood leaders are made aware of Wanda’s actions, they decide to leave her in the Negative as punishment and the rest of the Synod leaders’ memories are wiped and they’re relocated to new, different lives with no recollection of their magic, the Sitters, or their position in the Synod.

Like the witch hunters and Antima in the previous novels, it all comes down to wielding power and the way to that power is through oppressing others. However, unlike the hunters and Antima, Wanda uses her knowledge to procure a wealth of Beanie Babies and wield Red Magic. Wanda’s takedown is similar to Antima’s and the hunters because their motives are established on greed and hate, which blinds them to who the witches really are. By the witches dismantling their villain’s organizations (the Hunters, Antima, and Synod), they are also toppling the pillars that uphold them at the same time. Though the witches do not voice their takedown of the witch hunters, Antima, or the Synod as a political revolution, they are staging metaphorical revolutions against organizations with missions and foundational bases that are so similar to the same principles that white supremacy, transphobia, class rule, etc. are founded on.

In all three series examined in this chapter—These Witches Don’t Burn, B*Witch, and The Babysitters Coven—the teen witches utilize their knowledge and collective coven power to take down the villain. From the two witch hunting groups of the first two series to a tyrannical
leader of the third series, none of the main teen witch characters stood by while hateful, incorrect information was being spread about them, their witchcraft, and their families. Instead, they all rose to take action against the villains in their lives utilizing their magical powers, voice, and knowledge to guide them in deciding what is right and what is wrong. Esme thinks to herself in *For Better or Cursed*, “For us, a feeling *was* proof” and I think that perfectly encapsulates each of the teen witches in these novels. They all trusted their feelings to tell them when a situation didn’t feel right, when they should or should not trust someone, and what the correct way to handle the villains was. Emphasizing feeling as proof is particularly important in young adult novels, because the readers will be able to see the villains on these pages as real life people they know, but believe they don’t have the power to fight back because they’re not witches; yet, they do have the ability to trust their feelings and knowledge about situations and make changes in their life the same way the witches do. Therefore, unlike the main characters in young adult dystopian novels defeating the villain through brute force and the use of weapons, readers of these witch novels come to understand their strength is through their voice, knowledge, and collective activism.
Chapter Three: “Earth As Goddess: An Ecofeminist Approach to Patriarchal Spaces and Empowering Places in YA Literature”

Witches speak to our fear of nature, of the non-human. A woman, alone in the forbidden dark forest, is the basis of fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* that teach children not only to fear the woods, but also the women who inhabit these woods. In this chapter I analyze how this archetype of the witch in *The Witchery* and *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* complicates the gendered dichotomy between non-human environmental spaces and inhabited living spaces of humans. In both novels there is indeed a witch in the woods, and the witch is the basis of the stories told to create the townspeople’s current fear surrounding the woods. However, in analyzing *The Witchery* and *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* I move beyond simply recounting examples of the witch archetype to focus on how these novels complicate ideas of land ownership and the gendering of nature.

This chapter uses an ecocriticism framework to explore ways in which the landscape boundary between nature and human, natural and civilized, is constructed through the gendered trope of witches. It’s generally agreed upon that modern environmentalism began with Rachel Carson’s “A Fable for Tomorrow” in her book *Silent Spring* (1962), which “works as a moment of self-reflection for many Americans about their relationship with nature,” but as Gretchen Elizabeth Barksdale notes, this fable “also points to another concern, why are the witch and blighted nature so often woven together within American texts?” (Barksdale 2). I take up Barksdale’s question of why the witch and nature are woven together and argue that portrayals of women as witches are linked with the environment to create gendered land boundaries and facilitate oppression. I investigate the ways in which these two narratives use the witch to generate complicated conversations about power and gender through nature and the land. I am
not claiming that these two novels create a new ecocritical model for the YA genre; rather, I am using them to explore how we can apply an ecocritical focus to novels that do not explicitly engage with the ecocritical. Put simply, these novels are not YA ecocritical novels, yet I am viewing them through an ecocritical lens to show how traditional notions of gender can further be challenged through the witches’ connection to nature and their interactions with humans.

William Rueckert’s definition in his 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” is thought to be the first time the term “ecocriticism” was coined. Rueckert’s definition, “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (107), is more restrictive than other definitions. For example, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” which means that it “takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (122). I employ Lawrence Buell’s definition of the ecocritical which focuses on how stories and images can “shape humans’ real-life interactions with the natural world in ways that are historically and culturally distinctive” (Buell, et al. 419). The stories I use in this chapter construct meaning through landscapes: the human and witch characters signify opposing forces through their environmental and landscape boundaries. Using Buell’s form of ecocriticism, I show how these novels provide a way for readers and scholars to shape their own interactions with the world based on the complications depicted. In a subtle manner these novels interrogate preconceived notions of gender and land, such as who has the right to own land and the concept that women are inherently linked to nature. Therefore, focusing on these complicated moments can spark conversations surrounding the link between gender and nature.

In complement to Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical definition, I employ Simon Estok’s ecophobia, “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our
daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism” to discuss the hatred for witches and nature in the novels (208). Estok’s ecophobia demonstrates the ways colonization through conquering and controlling land is represented as a fear of nature: “representations of nature as an opponent that hurts, hinders, threatens, or kills us—regardless of the philosophical value or disvalue of the ecosystemic functions of the dynamics being represented—are ecophobic” (Estok 209). Estok cites examples of ecophobia, such as the cosmetics industry demonizing blemishes, homeowners’ associations issuing fines against long grass, and dog owners routinely trimming their poodles, claiming it’s all “about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of animal and nonanimal resources possible” (208). Ecophobia is displayed consistently in both *The Witchery* and *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* through the representation of the forest surrounding the towns as a space that threatens the town and townspeople. Focusing on these ecophobic representations, I also explore how nature is represented in tandem with the witches who inhabit the space. In order to maintain power and control over the land, the townspeople in the two novels also create and maintain the fear of witches who inhabit(ed) the forest as a way to control them and the land. In the analysis below of *The Witchery* and *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* I will consistently show how Estok’s ecophobia is working to enact power and control over both the witches and land which reinforces the explicit link between ecophobia and misogyny.

A subcategory of ecocriticism is ecofeminism, which bridges the ecocritical with feminism to shed light on the ways in which Earth has been feminized. According to ecofeminism, because Earth and nature are gendered as “female,” the ruination of nature can be seen as an attack on women at the hands of men. In 1974 Francois d’Eaubonne coined the term “ecofeminism” in *Le feminisme ou la mort*, translated in English as *Feminism or Death* for the
first time in 2022. d’Eaubonne encourages women towards environmental activism: citing the connection between women and nature, she blames the patriarchy for pollution and the destruction of Earth. Carolyn Merchant traces the idea of ecofeminism back to the 1600s when, “the female earth and virgin earth spirit were subdued by the machine” because “Western culture became increasingly mechanized” (10-11). Merchant takes an ecofeminist perspective on history by speculating on how, and when, possessing women became intertwined with possessing the earth. According to Merchant, once the “nurturing earth image” became a “cultural constraint restricting the types of socially and morally sanctioned human actions allowable with respect to the earth” such as commercialism and industrialization, the image of the earth became no longer a nurturing mother but something hindering forward progress (11). Once the patriarchal machines took over the matriarchal earth, respectful collaboration and cohabitation between the earth and humans ceased to exist. Current ecofeminist thought continues to maintain the likeness between women and nature. For instance, Peter Hay maintains that “if there is one central contention within ecofeminism it is that the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women are intimately linked” (75). Similarly, Ariel Salleh succinctly defines the basic premise of ecofeminism as “acknowledgement of the parallel in men’s thinking between their ‘right’ to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women, on the other” (Island Magazine, 26). As Merchant, Hay, and Salleh outline, ecofeminism is preoccupied with exploring this link between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment. To be clear, I am not advocating for a continuation of the idea that there is an “innate” connection between women and nature⁴, as I do not wish to promote the idea of gender essentialism.

⁴ For more information on the debate in ecofeminism surrounding gender essentialism and the biological connection between women and nature see the following: Andrea Blair (2002), Jessica Gray Barton (2013), Douglas A. Vakoch (2012), and Ariel Salleh (Arena, 1991).
However, the novels I analyze establish, whether intentionally or unintentionally, a connection between the oppression of female witches and nature. Thus, there is an unspoken connection between the treatment of women and nature in these novels, opposing men and women, town and forest, and/or the urban and rural. The ecocritical lens through which I read the young adult novels below is specifically ecofeminist, as I am highlighting the ways in which the novels explore the link between the oppression of the witches and the exploitation of the forest surrounding the town.

Beyond simply using ecofeminist concepts to apply to these novels, I am also looking at the ways in which the novels employ an ecofeminist criticism of domination. Eric C. Otto writes, “because both feminism and environmentalism are fundamentally critical of domination, each one can find in the other one resources for expanding its attentions and energizing its methods, ultimately to join hands in a coproductive ecofeminism that denounces oppressions of women and nonhuman nature” (13). Ecofeminism provides a nuanced way to understand the image of the witch in The Witchery and The Girl Who Drank The Moon as a representation of women’s link to the earth. However, as the novels work to complicate these notions, the outcome is, as Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen state, “less violent, more just practices” (1) than the outcomes historically wielded on witches and women in similar positions as the characters. Specifically, The Witchery and The Girl Who Drank The Moon utilize the witch as a way to critique oppression of women and highlight the link between the town’s domination of the forest and the witches. However, the novels also end in the witches joining hands with some of the townspeople to cooperate together to denounce the historical oppression. By foregrounding the connection between women and nature through the witches, these novels are able to
metaphorically show ways in which ecofeminism can be employed to create a more equitable future.

Like the multiplicity of perspectives within ecofeminism, and the wider scholarship of ecocriticism, the two novels in this essay model different solutions to the spatial separation of men and women, witches and humans, nature and society in the management of hierarchical societies. *The Witchery* and *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* directly engage the archetype of the witch to show how the controlling of land is synonymous with the attempt to control nature and women out of fear. The common theme in these novels is that the world can only hope to sustain itself by moving beyond gendered hierarchical domination through a transgression of boundaries. The witches in these novels fight back in distinct ways, all with the end result of reclaiming their environment and nature as something to be revered rather than othered. Ultimately, by the end of the novels the witches have shown that their environment, and nature, is not something to be conquered and plundered. Instead, the witches call for a transcendence of the model of conquest and embrace a future where humans and nature thrive together.

**Lessons of Power and Privilege in The Witchery**

*The Witchery* by S. Isabelle is set in Haelsford, Florida, an historical “witch town” that houses Mesmortes Coven Academy, the all-girl school for witches, and Hammersmitt School for Exceptional Young Men, the all-boy mundane (non-magical person) school. Each year there is a Haunting Season, when the hex placed on the town centuries before calls the Wolves from the Swamp to kill anyone, but particularly mundanes, in their path. This year, it is up to the students and teachers at Mesmortes Coven Academy to cast protection spells around both their school and Hammersmitt. In exchange, the town and Hammersmitt provide a gift, called a “sacrifice,” to the school to show their appreciation.
While the focus of *The Witchery* is on breaking the centuries old curse that keeps the Wolves alive and sets off their yearly attacks, I am using an ecocritical lens to depict how the novel complicates land ownership, particularly through gender. There are two different uses of the land shown in *The Witchery*: witches who work with the land for their spells and magic, showing an appreciation for nature’s renewable resources such as plants, and mundanes who only understand the land as something to take, conquer, and own. Though portraying this dichotomy, the novel does complicate the simplistic “woman equals nature” and “man equals destruction” through the relationship between the teen boys and girls.

In order to understand the current unspoken gendered divide of Haelsford’s land, it’s necessary to outline the founding of Haelsford. Generations before mundanes lived in Haelsford, “it was a small village that belonged to witches. There was peace, harmony, magic, all that good stuff” (Isabelle 27). Thalia, a Mesmortes student, continues the story, telling Logan, the new student at Mesmortes, then, “it was taken from them…A traveling caravan of mundanes tortured and hanged witches every winter, calling it Hunting Season. They put blackthorne in our wells and fed it to the animals we ate. They wanted to show that no devil-given power could save us from their God-fearing hands. They took the land and called it Haelsford” (Isabelle 27-28).

Haelsford is founded on the belief that witches do not have the right to own or occupy land, nor do witches have the right to use nature, such as blackthorne, for their own magic. Conversely, mundanes maintain the right to take land and use nature to gain control and power over the witches. As Hay reminds us, ecofeminism highlights how women and nature are “deemed inferior categories of beings, existing as raw material for man’s physical needs” (Hay 76). Mundanes, deeming the witches as inferior, align the witches’ use of the land and plants as
power from the devil, in contrast to their use as godly\textsuperscript{5}. This shows that mundanes believe their intent for using nature and the environment is superior to the witches, placing a hierarchy of mundanes’ needs and intent above witches’.

Haelsford’s history is built by mundanes who want to own and weaponize the land for themselves, and witches who were nearly eradicated for living and nurturing a land desired by mundanes. Haelsford’s history of land ownership is further complicated, because the witches are represented through girls and women and mundanes through men in the novel. Therefore, the conquering of Haelsford not only depicts a confrontation between mundanes and witches, but also between men and women. Though there is no specific gender of each mundane and witch present in the Hunting Season detailed above, the novel only depicts female witches and male mundanes when discussing the past and present narratives. For example, the curse on Haelsford is created by three sister witches, and in present-day the main characters are either students of the all-boys mundane school or the all-girls witch school. Thus, for the remainder of the discussion of The Witchery, mundanes and their association with nature will be linked to a male perspective and witches and their association with nature to a female perspective.

Present-day Haelsford is not witch-free. Despite the mundane attempts when founding the town, they did not kill all the witches. Three sisters escaped: Adelaide, Mathilde, and Sloane, also known as the Strigwach Sisters. These three women “‘spent days digging through the earth with their hands and what little magic they could conjure up to create an escape route under Haelsford. They made a vow that no mundane would harm a witch here ever again’” (Isabelle 28). This vow became the curse currently plaguing Haelsford. Each Strigwach Sister has a wolf

\textsuperscript{5} Connecting witches to the devil and humans stopping witches as an act of God recalls the mass execution of witches at the hands of the Catholic and Protestant churches from the 15th century through the infamous Salem Witch Trials in Salem, Massachusetts from 1692-1693.
familiar, and from them they create the Wolves and the Haunting (a play on the annual winter “Hunting” of witches by the mundanes) to hunt and kill mundanes once a year as revenge. A few mundanes survive the first wolf attack and instead of leaving Haelsford for good, “‘they set out to find witches who could cleanse the corrupted earth that the Strigwachs left’” (Isabelle 29). Essentially, though the mundanes succeed in killing a great number of witches to clear the land for themselves, three witches manage to escape and curse them for stealing their land. The Strigwach Sisters not only use their magic to create a curse, but they also use the land to build underground tunnels to escape the mundanes. Furthermore, though the Strigwach sisters place a curse to haunt the mundanes with the Wolves, the mundanes believe the sisters cursed, or corrupted, the land. Again, this shows a vital difference in the way the two groups view the earth as the Strigwach Sisters would not corrupt or curse the very land that was ripped from them, but the mundanes only see the land as something to fight over at any cost. Put another way, the mundanes don’t even consider the idea that the Strigwach sisters would place a curse upon them as revenge for taking their land, which speaks to their assumption that there was no wrongdoing on their part. The Strigwach Sister curse, or the yearly Haunting of the Wolves, still occurs in present-day Haelsford and maintains the strained relationship between mundanes and witches. This imagery of the Strigwach witches using and viewing the land as a protection from mundanes who are committing acts of violence on the same land reinforces the present-day divide between how the two groups understand land and nature.

When the first Haunting takes place shortly after the Strigwach Sisters create the curse, the “‘mundanes began to offer up sacrifices in exchange for protection. Soon enough, Haelsford was a witch-town again, and this time, there was a common goal between us and them. To protect the town from the monsters’” (Isabelle 29-30). Ultimately, the mundanes of Haelsford
only cease killing the witches and allow them back onto their original land to use the witches’ magic and spells for protection. This tenuous collaboration between mundanes and witches is constructed on unequal footing, as the mundanes are just continuing to use the witches, and their knowledge of the land, for gain. Despite a yearly curse that sends murderous Wolves after them, the mundanes refuse to give back the stolen land to the witches. Instead, they erect a statue of the Strigwach Sisters in the town square and offer gifts to the witches once a year in exchange for protection spells. Barksdale contends that “private property and capitalism gave the bourgeoisie the tools to physically change our planet and ‘tame’ wild nature” (59). Through conquering Haelsford, the mundanes created private property and divided the land up among mundanes and witches, and instituted capitalism through the exchange of magic for safety and peace. In addition to still occupying their land, they also begin to require the witches to provide protection to the mundanes each year from the curse the Strigwach witches placed on the town to attack those same mundanes. Therefore, mundanes are requiring the witches to use the very magic they were killed for to protect their murderers. Ultimately, the mundanes are exercising control over the witches’ magic for their own protection just like they took control of the land they occupy. Thus, like the land, the mundanes are taking control over the witches’ magic in an effort to conquer it so they do not fear it.

In present-day Haelsford, the gendered divide is further exemplified through the two schools and the teens who attend them. Within Haelsford there are two schools, Mesmortes Coven Academy, an all-girls school for witches, and Hammersmitt School for Exceptional Young Men, a mundane all-boys school. The boy’s school is connected with wealth, power, greed—ultimately reflecting the patriarchal capitalism and mindset of the mundanes when they took the land from the witches to create Haelsford. The name of Hammersmitt School for
Exceptional Young Men suggests that all of their students are extraordinary and highly successful in comparison to other young men. More importantly, “hammers” is a verb meaning to hit or beat something and also a noun to define a tool that is used for breaking something or driving a nail in, and “mitt” is a protective glove worn to remove hot items from the oven. The hammer invokes a school and students who have the power to cause harm in breaking and beating others, which suggests the mundanes’ history of killing witches, and the mitt echoes the boys’ protection by the town. As the school is an all-boys school within a town whose history is created from mundane men killing witches, Hammersmitt functions as a reminder of who maintains power and control in Haelsford, despite the mundanes’ agreement with witches to provide yearly protection spells. Thus, Hammersmitt reflects the patriarchal control within Haelsford and surrounding land.

On the other hand, the girls' school’s connection to witches and nature is shown through the school’s physical location and the history of Haelsford. To begin with, the name “Mesmortes Coven Academy” instantly identifies the students as witches, first and foremost. Second, “mes” is French for “my,” and “mortes” is the French feminine plural for “morte” which means “dead,” so the witches’ school name is “my dead.” Even in the name of their school, the students are forever linked to their dead witch ancestors, another constant reminder of their past and the fact that the mundanes conquered their ancestors and land. Additionally, Mesmortes Coven Academy is set on the Hill, “an affectionate nickname for the tall curve of land that crested Mesmortes, placing it higher than the Hammersmitt School for Exceptional Young Men” (6). Though Mesmortes physically has the higher ground over Hammersmitt, the school is also directly next to The Cavern, which “served as cover for bodies hastily buried, or nightmares come to life. Witches were hanged there long ago, before Haelsford became a witch-town. A series of tunnels
ran under it, once used by witches to escape the mundanes’ violence” (Isabelle 7-8). Therefore, though Mesmortes occupies a higher ground than Hammersmitt, their position is still in proximity to the space in which their ancestors were killed at the hands of the town’s mundanes, ensuring a constant reminder of their history. Mesmortes’s buildings reside on a piece of land that physically places them above the all-boys mundane school, but it is a hollow indicator of the mundanes’ attempt to placate the witches and rectify the past. Despite the visual implication that the witches are above the mundanes with the school placement, the mundanes and Hammersmitt still maintain power over the witches through the land, such as The Cavern, reminding them of the historical witch killings that resulted in the very land they still stand on being taken away by mundanes.

Continuing to remind both witches and mundanes of Haelsford’s past, present-day Haelsford mundanes still participate in the yearly sacrifice to the witches in exchange for their protection spells. Sacrifices include “riches, antiques, and favors….even the mayor’s office would deliver something rare and expensive to the Haelsford Witchery Council, like solid-gold cauldrons or bushels of whatever coveted out-of-season plants were needed for their spells” (Isabelle 34). In the novel’s present day this is the first year that Hammersmitt makes a sacrifice to Mesmortes, as the town usually does it. The sacrifice to the Mesmortes witches is The Oak Trail, “the famed trail that led directly from Mesmortes to the Green, a massive garden of witchy herbs. It ran through the land where Hammersmitt was built, sparking the current tension between the student bodies” (Isabelle 121). The current Mesmortes students, “like other Haelsfordian witches, had never set foot” on The Oak Trail (Isabelle 121). The placement of Hammersmitt in the middle of the Green, a space utilized solely by Mesmortes, is a move by mundanes to signify their power to keep land from the witches. While Mesmortes is physically
above Hammersmitt, the Green’s location within Hammersmitt’s grounds shows how land placement and ownership takes power away from the witches and gives it to the mundanes. Giving this land (back) to the witches is both a power move and an olive branch, as it acknowledges the historical implications of the land and the current power bound up with land ownership. The mundanes have always maintained power and control over Haelsford land, as the mundanes christened the land with the name “Haelsford,” and since the creation of the Wolves mundanes have slowly given the witches bits and pieces back as they see fit—the land Mesmortes Coven Academy resides on and most recently The Oak Trail. The position of the schools within Haelsford, as well as the names of the institutions and the fact they’re divided by gender, are clear indicators of the ecophobic, gendered divide between man and nature. However, through transferring ownership of The Oak Trail back to the witches, the mundanes of Hammersmitt begin to create a bridge to understanding the power of land and the witches’ original claim on the Green.

Hammersmitt sacrificing The Oak Trail to Mesmortes is only the beginning of the process through which some of the mundane students start to come together with the witches to defeat the Wolves. Throughout the course of the novel Trent and Mathew, two Hammersmitt mundanes, assist the Mesmortes witches, Iris, Jailah, Thalia, and Logan, on their search for the spell to end the Wolves and the curse once and for all. The specifics of their adventures aren’t necessary to analyze for the purpose of my focus on the ways in which land ownership is gendered and complicated in this novel. However, by the end of the novel, the existence of this alliance between adolescent witches and mundanes speaks to a potential for change in the way Haelsford remembers its past and the treatment of the witches and nature in the present. Two months after the Haunting Season, Iris, Jailah, Thalia, Logan, Trent, and Mathew attend a
ceremony staged by the town of Haelsford in which they all receive gold medals for protecting Mesmortes from the Wolves. Jailah thinks, “as each moment passed on from that night, there was an itch in them as a collective to get over it. Not to forget, but to move on. Together” (Isabelle 365). Jailah is literally referencing the magical battle they just experienced against the Wolves and generations-old curse on Haelsford, but metaphorically her desire to move on together speaks to moving away from Haelsford’s current way of dividing the town’s land and power between mundanes and witches. None of the characters wish to forget Haelsford’s sordid past, but working together to defeat the Wolves brought the two groups of mundane and witch teens together, symbolizing a path towards the future where the land Haelsford occupies is no longer gendered in a way that maintains harmful stereotypes and a violent history. The curse on Haelsford is multi-generational, and no witches have been able to break the curse until Iris, Jailah, Thalia, and Logan. The difference between the past witches who failed at breaking the curse and these four teen witches is the fact that they team up with two mundanes. Therefore, ending the curse hinges on the collaboration between mundanes and witches, which symbolizes the necessary cooperation of nature and town for a peaceful future. Ultimately, reading *The Witchery* with an ecocritical lens allows for an analysis of the land that the story occupies to be complicated through its ties to gender and concepts of ownership and power. The collaboration between the mundanes and witches, boys and girls, nature and urban, not only complicates the binary, but it also provides a hopeful ending where that divide is crumbling. With the mundanes seeing nature as precious and the witches understanding the mundanes as capable of acceptance, they are able to work together to create a new generation that no longer sees nature through the gendered idea that women will protect and men will destroy.
Stories of Lies and Witches in *The Girl Who Drank The Moon*

Similar to *The Witchery, The Girl Who Drank The Moon* by Kelly Barnhill complicates the ecophobic division of town and forest. *The Girl Who Drank The Moon* revolves around a town called the Protectorate, where the villagers offer a baby as sacrifice to a witch in the nearby forest every year in exchange for her not attacking the town or townspeople. However, Xan is actually a kind witch who rescues the infants and takes them to families in the Free Cities, unaware that the town sacrifices the children to her. Xan accidentally feeds the most recent sacrifice, Luna, moonlight instead of starlight, imbuing her with magic. As Luna comes of age, she discovers the truth about her magical abilities and her past, which leads her on a quest to find her birth mother and break Protectorate’s oppressive tradition of sacrificing infants.

Beyond Protectorate telling scary stories about the forest and the witch in the forest to keep the townspeople from leaving, the characterization of the female witch as evil casts the forest she occupies as evil by association, and the male Elders as protectors and Protectorate as safe by association. This reinforces ecofeminism’s theory that the gendered association of women with nature and men with civilization reinforces gender assumptions that men and women are inherently, or biologically, preordained for particular characteristic traits. While the novel does often lean on these assumptions, I complicate that binary and focus on how the novel illustrates that caring for the land, rather than vilifying it, can break down the boundary between urban and nature, man and witch. Put another way, while the ending does play on the idea that women might be better suited to take care of the Earth, the women also show how they’re better at leading the town and bringing together two different communities—the town and the forest, magical and non-magical beings. Thus, the ending speaks to adapting a different, more feminist, approach towards urban sites’ associations with nature.
Like *The Witchery*, the narrative surrounding Protectorate’s past is an important starting point for understanding the present-day politics surrounding Protectorate and the forest. Protectorate’s past is told in bits and pieces throughout the novel via italicized chapters where the narrator is telling stories to an unknown listener. These sections represent oral storytelling and how stories, particularly about Protectorate’s creation and the forest surrounding it, can grow and change. The stories are told to scare children and keep them away from the forest but also to keep them from breaking societal norms and continue practicing the town’s yearly ritual sacrifice to the witch. According to the story:

> Once upon a time, there were good wizards and good witches, and they lived in a castle in the center of the wood. Well, of course the forest wasn’t dangerous in those days. We know who is responsible for cursing the forest. It is the same person who steals our children and poisons the water. In those days, the Protectorate was prosperous and wise.

> No one needed the Road to cross the forest. The forest was a friend to all. (Barnhill 57-58)

This peaceful collaboration between the Protectorate and the forest ends when an evil witch rode across the sky on a dragon and “howled her rage” (Barnhill 58). A good wizard tried to stand up to her but “the Witch killed him instead. This is why it doesn’t pay to be brave. Bravery makes nothing, protects nothing, results in nothing. It only makes you dead. And this is why we don’t stand up to the Witch. Because even a powerful old wizard was no match for her” (Barnhill 59). This tale ends with a lesson of submission, teaching listeners that if a brave wizard could not defeat the evil witch of the forest, then there’s no chance to stand up to the witch in the forest now. Protectorate must sacrifice the children because they do not have the power to say no.
Beyond this lesson, though, the tale shows that the forest has not always been an unsafe, unwelcoming space to the citizens of Protectorate. In fact, the forest’s depiction as evil is directly linked to the fact that there is an evil witch within the trees and when good witches and wizards lived in the forest, then the forest was “a friend to all.” The forest used to be so friendly that even the witches were friendly and Protectorate residents would seek out their magical remedies, showing that they have not always feared the forest nor the witches and their magic. However, once the good witches are no longer in the woods, the evil witch becomes the representative of how Protectorate interacts with the space. I note this origin story of the evil witch in the woods and Protectorate’s tradition of yearly infant sacrifice because it outlines how narratives not only create fear around a particular piece of land, but how that fear is specifically based on the people that occupy the land. Returning to Estok, this is Protectorate’s ecophobia. In fearing the evil witch who now, supposedly, lives in the forest and demands a yearly infant sacrifice, the townspeople of Protectorate also have a fear, or phobia, of the forest she lives in. This ecophobic mindset is complicated though, as explained below, when the Elders of Protectorate’s true intentions are revealed. Nevertheless, linking the forest’s safety and morality to the inhabitants creates a feedback loop that intrinsically ties the land to the people. In the case of both *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* and *The Witchery*, this loop shows that men do not believe women, or witches, have the right to occupy land. When they do occupy land the men either attempt to take it from them (*The Witchery*) and if that fails, as with the Protectorate, they demonize the land to keep others from accessing the land.

If we return to Estok and ecophobia where “nature becomes the hateful object in need of our control” (210) once more, it reveals that the Elders’ fear of the forest and Xan, the witch, causes them to strive for domination over the forest and Protectorate through manipulation. The
Elders leave a baby once a year in the woods telling the mothers, “‘we are not taking her at all…the Witch is taking her. We are simply doing as we’re told’” (Barnhill 8). The Elders push their culpability on Xan, the witch, claiming they’re only doing as Xan tells them in an effort to keep her happy in the forest and the town safe. This false narrative places Xan, and the forest, as dominating Protectorate, the Elders, and all other citizens. This narrative is complicated though, because it’s constructed and told by the Protectorate Elders, who leave the babies in the woods “knowing that there surely wasn’t a witch. There never had been a witch. There was only a dangerous forest and a single road and a thin grip on a life that the Elders had enjoyed for generations” (Barnhill 12). The Elders could not colonize the forest to expand Protectorate’s territory, so they use the story of an evil witch in the woods from years ago to maintain a complacency among their own people because they fear their own lack of control and power over the town. The Elders have been lying to the town, telling the Protectorate citizens they’re being dominated by Xan, when the truth is the Elders created this narrative and yearly sacrifice to enact their attempt at dominating the woods.

In present-day Protectorate, the forest is feared by all the residents and their fear is because of the witch who lives there. The woods are only safe in the eyes of the Protectorate townspeople if the witch(es) within the woods are deemed “good.” However, the narrative surrounding the witch in the woods is controlled by Protectorate Elders who own everything within Protectorate, the Bog “and the orchards. And the houses. And the market squares. Even the garden plots” (Barnhill 4). The Elders also own the Road, which is the only way to navigate around the forest to get to other towns. Protectorate Elders use the woods and the witch as a form of control over their town and townspeople, but because they are creating the woods as a feminine space that is an active evil entity against the male-dominated Protectorate, they provide
a way for their power to ultimately be disrupted. Andrea Blair argues, “landscape that is
gendered feminine but is constructed as active rather than passive, as dialogical rather than
monological, as subversive rather than hegemonic, and as the site of feminine rather than
masculine fantasies, might disrupt restrictive gender codings for women and environments alike”
(Blair 117). According to Blair, because the forest surrounding Protectorate is gendered feminine
and a piece of land that is actively working to threaten Protectorate’s safety, the forest is
disrupting both the gender code for women and environments as passive. Ultimately, rather than
land-as-woman being a space where land and women are dominated, women can reclaim the
land and subvert the domination.

Employing Blair’s “landscape fantasy,” Xan reclaims the forest and subverts
Protectorate’s domination through rescuing the babies left for sacrifice and placing them with
loving families in the Free Cities on the other side of the forest. Blair says further, “the reclaimed
metaphor land-as-woman, so often used to control and dominate women and the natural
environment, offers a space where an alternative feminine identity can be attempted. By creating
their own landscape fantasies, women can create new ways to imagine themselves and the
natural environment” (Blair 116-117). Xan’s actions of rescuing the babies, feeding them
starlight, and making sure they find nurturing homes creates the forest as a place of feminine
fantasy—one that prioritizes nurture and love—rather than the masculine fantasy the Elders
constructed of a forest full of evil witches, sinkholes, and mud pits. Upon finding Luna, Xan
“marche[s] into the woods” and begins showing her a waterfall, “a rocky outcropping with a
particularly fine view. And she noticed herself wanting to tell the baby stories” (Barnhill 24).
The forest begins with a land-as-woman metaphor because its morality, evil or good, is
intrinsically tied up with the morality of the female witch within the woods. Xan’s rejection of
her baby-eating persona, though unknown to her, is part of her reclaiming the natural environment. Through her love of Luna, and all the other babies she has rescued, and her showing off the beauty of the forest to the babies as she takes them to the Free Cities, Xan is reshaping the forest as a landscape in which miracles happen, rather than horror stories of babies being eaten alive by witches and animals.

The landscape fantasy, told orally as “once upon a time” stories to children is reclaimed fully by the end of the novel when the forest and witch is revealed as a safe space, one that has not killed and eaten babies but one that has saved babies and united them with families, shown them love through feeding them starlight, and allowed others to learn about the possibilities of the woods and those that reside within it. The novel ends with a new story of the witch:

_We are hers and she is ours. Her magic blesses us and all that we see. It blesses the farms and the orchards and the gardens. It blesses the Bog and the Forest and even the Volcano. It blesses us all equally. This is why the people of the Protectorate are healthy and hale and shining. This is why our children are rosy-cheeked and clever. This is why we have happiness in abundance._ (Barnhill 386)

Luna, the baby Xan rescued at the beginning of the novel, is now the witch in the stories of Protectorate: she is the witch in the story above. Though the townspeople of Protectorate aren’t seen venturing into the forest (yet) at the end of the novel, the re-framing of the oral stories told about the witch and the forest creates an opportunity for future generations to no longer associate the forest and witches with evil. Luna also travels to the Free Cities and tells them the story of Protectorate, their yearly sacrifices, and the sorrow-eating witch. The Free Cities and Protectorate are connected by the Road that travels through the Forest, so Luna’s stories open up a door between the two towns and Protectorate townspeople, again laying the groundwork for
future connection between the two people. The new stories allow the space of the forest to no
longer be an off-limits landscape, but an extension of Protectorate.

Before the reclamation of the forest and Protectorate happens at the end of the novel, it is
revealed that the story of the evil witch in the woods is partially true, but that evil witch is not
Xan, it is Sister Ignatia, the Head Sister of The Sisters of the Star. While Sister Ignatia is in the
forest hunting Antain, an ex-Elder who enters the forest to kill the witch in order to stop his baby
from being the next sacrifice victim, his wife, Ethyne, enters the Tower and tells the rest of the
Sisters who Sister Ignatia really is. When Ethyne was a teenager she joined the Sisters of the
Star, and while in the Tower she “saw one of her novitiate sisters weeping over the death of her
grandfather, and Sister Ignatia staring at the girl—all hunger and muscle and predatory leap”
(Barnhill 309). Ethyne knew then that the Witch was not in the forest, but in the “Tower casting
its shadow over the Protectorate” (Barnhill 309). Ethyne tells how Sister Ignatia formed the
Sisters of Star and “‘concocted stories about another Witch, a baby-eating Witch. [Sister Ignatia]
fed on the sorrows of the Protectorate. Our families. Our friends. Our sorrows were great, and
they have made her strong’’” (Barnhill 311). Sister Ignatia attempted to burn down the forest and
all the other witches years before becoming a Sister, but her attempts were only half-realized: she
only succeeded in burning down the Enchanters’ Castle and killing a large number of witches
and wizards. She was unsuccessful in destroying the forest in its entirety, making her attempts to
dominate the forest a failure. To compensate for this failure, and to assert control in a different
way, Sister Ignatia controls the narrative around the forest which in turn depicts the space as evil
and keeps Protectorate civilians out. Sister Ignatia, like the Haelsford mundanes, cannot control
the forest, yet she controls the narratives of the uncontrollable woods to make sure all the
townerspeople do not forget the stories of horror associated with the forest and future generations fear the woods.

Sister Ignatia and the other Sisters live in the Tower, “a massive structure that unsettled the eye and confounded the mind. The Tower stood in the very center of the Protectorate—it cast its shadow everywhere” (Barnhill 86). The Tower serves as a prison-like facility in Protectorate where most of the inhabitants are thought to be mad. For example, Luna’s mother is taken to the Tower for refusing to give Luna up willingly to the sacrifice. When the Elders go to take Luna she “screched and howled” and “hissed and spat like a cornered animal” (Barnhill 7). Luna’s mother’s behavior is immediately deemed as “mad” by Elder Gherland and she’s taken away by the special unit of guards provided by the Sisters of the Star that accompany the Elders each year to take away the babies (Barnhill 8-9). Sister Ignatia’s witch powers are maintained by feeding on sorrow, so her position as a Sister and head of the Tower allows her to freely feed on the Tower’s inhabitants’ sorrow. In addition to the Tower’s inhabitants, the Tower’s position in the middle of the Protectorate allows Sister Ignatia to maintain control over the people, as she can see everyone all the time and they’re constantly reminded of the rules they live by, mainly their yearly sacrifice. The Tower’s position in the middle of town serves as a Panopticon effect, because the townspeople are always under the impression of being watched, so they maintain the rules through self-policing. No one tries to escape Protectorate through the Road in the forest and no one attempts to save their babies from the sacrifice, lest they end up killed by Xan or becoming a prisoner in the Tower like Luna’s mother. Thus, even the townspeople of Protectorate are emitting sorrow at their lack of freedom, which again feeds Sister Ignatia’s powers.
Sister Ignatia as the true evil witch of the story provides a final layer of complication to the novel’s narrative of gender and land. Specifically, because a witch exists in a position of power over mundanes in both Protectorate and the forest it confounds the trope of evil witch in the woods, but it also complicates the gender binary that associates women with the desire to connect to nature and men with the desire to dominate nature. In this novel, it is women who do both—Xan protects the forest while Sister Ignatia desires to control the forest and the town. Beyond this complication, Sister Ignatia’s role also allows for a complication in the traditional narrative of men overtaking land and erecting towns, as it is Xan, Luna, and Ethyne (the mother of the most recent infant sacrifice) who establish the new order in Protectorate. After killing Sister Ignatia, Xan, Luna, and Ethyne create their own landscape fantasy: “the Council of Elders languished in prison, and new council members were elected by popular vote….And finally, the Road opened, allowing citizens of the Protectorate, for the first time in their lives, to venture forth” (Barnhill 373). Successfully restoring the power balance between Protectorate and the forest requires a restructuring of the hierarchy and rules within Protectorate. The council members are elected by the townspeople and there are no longer rules barring them from freely accessing the Road, which creates a unity between Protectorate and the forest along the border. As Gaard writes,

Domination of others—whether in the form of rape, slavery, animal experimentation, colonialism, clear-cutting, or damming—has been called ‘power over’ and is part of the violence and oppressive framework that feminists reject. In contrast, teaching or supporting others in using their own inner strength, deriving strength from their relationships, or working in coalition with other groups for the good of life on this earth has been called empowerment, or ‘power with.’ (Gaard 167-168)
Xan, Luna, and Ethyne help to restructure the Protectorate from a “power over” domination of the forest and inhabitants of the forest to a “power with” that allows the Protectorate, the forest, and the people inhabiting both spaces to work with one another instead of fearing one another. As a result, the forest is no longer an unsafe environment. Because the woods are viewed as a shared space with open access to all, no one is attempting to dominate or own the woods, which in turn allows for a coalition of nature and man, witches and non-witches.

While discussions surrounding the environment generally revolve around issues such as climate change, ecocriticism allows us to see the ideology that created environmental problems in reading literature. Clare Echterling writes that environmental texts overwhelmingly choose to avoid discussing the relationship between environmental issues and social inequalities, corporate/industrial culpability, and the necessity of far stricter government regulation tend to depoliticize environmentalism. Instead, they present environmentalism as a set of actions or lifestyle changes individuals and families can make that will, if enough people adopt them, solve our problems. (Echterling 293)

*The Witchery* by S. Isabelle and *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* by Kelly Barnhill are the exceptions to Echterling’s argument. Isabelle and Barnhill allow for a reading of environmentalism that is completely bound up with social inequalities, politics, and strict government regulation within the towns. Rather than presenting an environmental issue that can be solved by individuals and families recycling more, riding their bicycles instead of driving, and drinking out of paper straws, the environmental issues in the novels presented in this chapter are only solved by breaking down the hierarchy between the town and the forest, and bringing to light the culpability that the corporate vision for the town had on creating the tension between the two spaces. Ecofeminism highlights the historical link between the oppression and exploitation
of both women and nature. Environments, both natural and built, are shaped by power dynamics, and colonial ideology often frames nature as something to be conquered and controlled through the erection of buildings and civilizations. The understanding of nature and environment as something to ravage and own is intertwined with the patriarchal oppression of women.

These novels are not ecotopian, but rather play at the edges of ecofeminism and begin to ask questions about how the spaces and places relegated to men and women create boundaries and limitations and what it would look like to break free of those boundaries, to create new spaces and places, or eliminate them altogether. Rather than going out and finding their own utopia, a place where they can live free of the townspeople’s ecophobia, the teen witches create a home, a real space, for themselves and their lives where they currently are situated. Therefore, they refuse to let their otherness, their woman-ness, be a reason for finding another place when the dominant, male figures of their lives wish to push them out or cast them to the edges. This refusal to leave shows a failed attempt at subjugating women through the environment and vice versa. With each of the novels’ endings leaving the witch triumphant in reclaiming the land and her magic, they demonstrate a successful ecofeminist approach to oppression.
Chapter Four: “Pedagogical Power of Magic: Teaching Grief Through Witches in Young Adult Literature”

Death pervades media for adolescents. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997) begins with Harry losing both of his parents in a gruesome murder and countless lives of classmates, friends, and family are lost throughout the series. More recently, Netflix’s 2017 show *Thirteen Reasons Why* depicts the suicide of a high schooler after a sexual assault, and HBO’s teen drama *Euphoria* (2019-present) follows sixteen-year-old Rue, who became a drug addict after the death of her father. Many critics accused *Thirteen Reasons Why* of “romanticising and sensationalising teenage suicide,” while supporters said the accurate portrayal of suicide and high school life “would spark conversations between parents and their children and encourage viewers to seek information on depression, suicide, bullying and sexual assault” (Weale). Despite fears about representations of suicide encouraging copycat suicides by real children and young adults, completely avoiding watching or discussing a television show that depicts teen suicide does not, and will not, cause teen suicide to disappear. Similarly, not allowing adolescents to view any content that is deemed “too mature” (e.g. death, sex, suicide, drugs, or abuse) does not prevent adolescents from experiencing these things firsthand. These difficult issues can, and should, be addressed in the classroom because realistically, whether teachers want it to or not, these issues touch the lives of their students.

In what follows, I show how death experiences and the possibilities of navigating grief are based on the character’s experience with magic. I identify three recent books—*Edie in Between* (2021) by Laura Sibson, *Undead Girl Gang* (2018) by Lily Anderson, and *The Nature of Witches* (2021) by Rachel Griffin— as representative of the young adult witch literature genre more widely to show how the teen witches and their use of magic to overcome the death of a
loved one is pedagogically relevant in the classroom to teach themes of death, grief, and loss. While this chapter focuses specifically on young adult witch literature, the activities, discussion, assignments, and approaches below can be (and have been) adapted to teach other young adult narratives that deal with death and grief. First, I provide a summary of pedagogical scholarship and the three novels. Second, I outline a discussion to scaffold larger concepts of death at the beginning of the unit. Third, I provide several activities for each of the novels. Fourth and finally, I end with a major assignment for the end of the unit. These ideas are designed for a college level class but could be adapted for a middle/high school classroom and can be used for many different age levels. Whether used as a semester-long guide to structure a class around the themes of death and grief, or only implementing one activity in a single class period, I hope this unit showcases the vast potential for teaching young adult literature outside of the normal genre conventions of bildungsroman and teenage angst. Young adult literature can help educators achieve in-depth conversations within the classroom surrounding mental health and help students to seek out literature to guide them through emotionally turbulent times. Ultimately, my goal is to provide both teachers and students discussions of potentially useful witch texts that address grief and offer suggestions for using these texts in educational settings that acknowledge and explore responses to and experiences of grief.

**Young Adult Scholarship: Exploring Grief and Trauma in Fantasy Novels in the Classroom**

When encouraging students to engage with sensitive topics in the classroom, reading and discussing books about those topics is a common approach. According to Rozalski, Stewart, and Miller, bibliotherapy is used to “teach about difficult issues by encouraging students to make personal connections with characters in the book, thus allowing readers to evaluate their own
behavior and emotions through the experiences of the characters in the story” (34). Beyond this comprehensive definition, there are two distinct branches of bibliotherapy: cognitive and affective. Cognitive bibliotherapy focuses on “creating cognitive-behavioral change by using realistic literature that refer[s] directly to fears, anxieties, and behavior difficulties” to guide “readers in alternative ways to resolve a problem” (Betzalel and Shechtman 430). Affective bibliotherapy uses fictional texts that centers on allowing readers to “identify with the literary characters and connect to their own feelings and pain in a less threatening way” (Betzalel and Shechtman 430). The key difference between cognitive and affective bibliotherapy is the literature used. Cognitive bibliotherapy uses literature that obviously mentions techniques to overcome grief or fear, such as seeking help from an adult. On the other hand, affective bibliotherapy features characters that experience grief or fear, and by reading the story and understanding the ways in which the protagonist dealt with those feelings and emotions it “in turn motivate[s] participants to share their own emotions and experiences” (Betzalel and Shechtman 430). Thus, cognitive bibliotherapy asks readers to engage in developing awareness of their own thought processes in response to realistic textual representations of grief-related experiences, while affective bibliotherapy uses fiction and readers’ feelings about the fiction to offer readers who have experienced grief or have noticed others experiencing grief means of relating to the characters.

Bibliotherapy goes beyond simply offering students books for them to identify with: there are specific bibliotherapy case studies that show how children can use books to directly impact their grief. In her 2015 study on Child Life Specialists who use bibliotherapy to work with grieving children, Hania Thomas-Adams demonstrates that “[t]hrough sensitively facilitated bibliotherapy, grieving children can be given the words, permission, safety, and structure that
they need to cope and make meaning from their experiences” (55). Furthermore, Carol F. Berns contends that “children may have difficulty in defining and verbalizing their thoughts, feelings, and other aspects of their loss experiences” and for this reason are “more inclined to share in these ways through a third person or the safe distance of a storybook character, cartoon, or animal. Children can then talk about the characters rather than about themselves directly” (325). While I agree with Berns that children have difficulty expressing one’s feelings about loss, I maintain this difficulty does not stop once one reaches adolescence, or even adulthood. For this reason, reading young adult literature that combine descriptions of magic with descriptions of grief can provide representations of characters experiencing grief. Reading books with such representations may offer students ways navigate their grief in similar ways to Thomas-Adams’ and Berns’ arguments about how children’s storybooks and characters provide children with the dialogue needed to talk about their grief. Bibliotherapy has roots in mental health and therapy; however, for the purposes of this article, I’m grounding the idea of using books within the classroom to discuss difficult topics within bibliotherapy allowing students to relate to and connect with characters to manage difficult conversation topics. These explorations of scenes of grief in texts that also contain witches and magic are not presented with the idea that reading these books will replace the need for mental health care and mental health practices. Teachers are not licensed mental health providers, and I’m not suggesting they take on the added responsibility of providing their students with the support they may need in their grief. Providing literature that gives them the space to think and talk about their grief and loss is just one example of how diverse literary forms that address a variety of topics and experiences can provide significant expansion of Rudine Sims Bishop’s “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” that
acknowledge students’ lived experiences and recognize that those experiences have a place to be explored in the classroom.

Many scholars have argued for the benefits of addressing grief in the classroom. For example, one strategy is analyzing the embedded discourse of stereotypes and stigma surrounding mental health and suicide found in many young adult novels. Briana Hendrickson argues that teaching young adult representations of mental health equips students with a critical lens to deconstruct their own perspectives, identify the sociopolitical forces shaping them, and actively work towards a more nuanced and informed understanding of mental health in their own lives and communities (65). Furthermore, Hendrickson maintains that mental health struggles are a daily reality for students, so educators should find engaging ways to approach mental health and suicide with their students in the classroom. Paul B. Naylor et. al. conducted a similar study on the impact of implementing a mental health teaching program with adolescents which “consisted of six lessons on mental health issues common to young people: stress; depression; suicide/self-harm; eating disorders; being bullied; and intellectual disability” (365). The findings of this study “showed significantly more sensitivity and empathy towards people with mental health difficulties” (Naylor 365) for the students who received the mental health lessons compared to the control classroom who did not receive the lessons on mental health. While this study does not deal with young adult literature in the classroom, it does suggest that if educators implement discussions and lessons surrounding mental health, such as the stress and depression surrounding grief and loss of a loved one, they can provide resources for dealing with these problems to their students. Alissia Paglia’s case study conducted through interviews with teachers and educational professionals at a Catholic elementary school who use children’s literature to discuss loss with students shows how children’s literature “can be therapeutic for
children and allow educators the opportunity to listen, support and guide students” to understand the challenges surrounding loss (2). Paglia’s findings show that “through exposure to children’s literature that addresses the topic of death and models positive healing strategies, we are creating an open communication within our classrooms that support expression” (52). Hendrickson, Naylor, and Paglia outline the benefits to incorporating grief and mental health education into the classroom through using young adult literature. Engaging with these approaches can help students to navigate loss, provide solace, and alleviate isolation during times of grief.

In particular, fantasy novels can aid in constructing a safe environment for adolescents to cope with their own grief and ideas surrounding death through a version of affective bibliotherapy. Kathryn James writes in *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* that subgenres of fantasy have the ability to “confront distressing issues or resolve emotional crises by exploring them metaphorically” and these narratives often “use these themes and motifs in a therapeutic way; that is, to console the protagonist/s—and, thus, potentially the reader—often by working against the idea of death as permanent” (126). For example, Karin Kokorski shows how novels such as *The Chronicles of Narnia, House of Night,* and *Harry Potter* “display the (fictional) reality of an afterlife and the eternity of the soul in their stories” which “offers the potential to help the readers form an (almost) angst-free outlook on death” (340-341). By depicting death of a character in a fantastical world, readers are confronted with the protagonist’s grief. However, the element of magic, for example, allows authors to show the protagonists speaking with the deceased which both provides them closure over their death and the reader is given a way to think about the afterlife that isn’t a permanent remove from the ones they love or a scary space. Therefore, these fantasy novels leave readers with both a sense
of how to navigate their grief through the lessons the protagonist taught them and also provides them a way of thinking about death beyond traumatic loss.

Similarly, Courtney B. Strimel argues that *Harry Potter*’s use of terror is actually beneficial for adolescent readers because “the magic in *Harry Potter* novels may . . . diminish young readers’ anxieties. . . Magic comforts readers so that death is realistically permanent, but not completely terrifying” (42). In these novels (and movies), death isn’t terrifying because the presence of magic provides a buffer for readers to understand Voldemort and the Death Eaters’ murderous actions against the magical and muggle world as theoretical terrorist attacks and analyze the attacks from a safe distance. More specifically, the actions of Voldemort and the Death Eaters provide a way for readers to discuss evil and people’s choices to do bad things, such as murdering innocents. Therefore, though death occurs to beloved characters, the danger for similar attacks happening to the readers is minimized because it occurs in a fictional, magical world. Additionally, while death can cause adolescents to feel powerless over their lives and what happens to them, magic gives Harry Potter and his friends the power to fight back against Voledmort so their grief doesn’t consume them. Stephanie Dabrowski’s research on young adult fantasy literature and death shows how the protagonist comes to terms with their loss through a “fantasy companion or guide as a form of consolation that facilitates mourning” (2). One example is a miniature dragon in Alexia Casale’s *The Bone Dragon* which portrays the “process of adolescent mourning” which includes “the protagonist’s reversion to childhood as a way of confronting and working through experiences with which they are not yet able to cope” (Dabrowski 2). Like the use of magic, the monster within these novels combined with the realistic depictions of death and loss, allows for the expression of loneliness and vulnerability from the protagonists who were thrust into grown up situations before they were ready.
However, the monsters and magic, as Valentina Adami writes, “is precisely where the pedagogical value of YA fiction lies: by showing young adults that they have the power to do something in the world, it educates them into being better and more active citizens” (131). By portraying empowered adolescents in YA fiction, it reinforces the idea that they are allowed to take responsibility and action in their lives, rather than remain passive and let adults maintain all of the control. Adami’s focus is on young adult speculative fiction teaching environmental justice, but the same principles apply with the grief narratives in this chapter in that they show the young adult readers that they have the power to overcome their grief and create a new path in life post-loss.

*Edie In Between* (2021) by Laura Sibson, *Undead Girl Gang* (2018) by Lily Anderson, and *The Nature of Witches* (2021) by Rachel Griffin, teach adolescents that death “is more than a stage necessary toward growing up and away from one’s parents” it’s a “finality” (Trites 118). However, the main characters are also witches, and their magic provides the adolescent protagonists with a different way to manage grief. Practicing magic is a new direction, or path in life, without the deceased so it is the impetus the protagonists need to create a life away from their parents, a common young adult trope, but more importantly it also provides them with the power to move on from the death, instead of remaining frozen in grief, unable to maintain friendships, schoolwork, etc. Additionally, these characters discover or increase their own magical powers while grieving the death of their loved ones. This juxtaposition creates a paradox in the teen witch’s power. On one hand, she has magical powers to raise the dead and control the weather, but on the other hand she’s powerless to stop the death of a loved one.

I chose these three novels because they teach readers that when one entity (death) has power over you, you are not powerless all together because like the witches, readers themselves
have magic (power) within them. Teens often have little to no control over much of their lives, especially the loss of loved ones, but magic gives them the agency and power to cast a spell to control their environment and bodies, which affords them the feeling of being in control of their life. Witchcraft is used as a motif in these novels to describe young female power, but it’s also used to ease the pain of loss because the witches use their magic, often through words in the form of spells, to reconnect with the deceased and find closure from their death. The use of witchcraft positions the novels as great texts to be used in the classroom as the students are able to process grief at a remove and have conversations surrounding power and power imbalances in the lives of adolescents. This empowers the reader because it gives her new tools to understand how to control their own lives, body, and environment. Though the readers do not have access to magic, they do have the ability to find power (strength) within themselves to have conversations with friends and loved ones about their grief, and can use the protagonists’ experience as a springboard to open up that dialogue. Death reveals things in the world previously believed impossible (magic, ghosts) but is also the key to gaining friends, family, and lovers. Before the death of their best friend or parent, the teen witches only partially believe in their magical abilities, but with the death comes the realization that unexplainable things exist, including their own powers. The teen witches also learn that the death of a loved one does not mean the death of their own lives, as they gain new friends, family, and lovers while working through their grief.

**Summary of The Novels**

*Edie in Between* (2021) by Laura Sibson follows Edie Mitchell one year after her mom dies suddenly from a biking accident. After her mom’s death, Edie moves to live with her grandmother, GG, in her houseboat. Edie grew up knowing that her mom and grandmother are witches and that the Mitchell family sticks around in ghost form once they’ve died but Edie
doesn’t want anything to do with magic, especially now that her mom has died and her uncommunicable ghost is hovering. But Edie soon learns that Mitchell magic is bound up with grief, and she has to embrace her magic before it destroys her.

Mila Flores does not believe her best friend, Riley, killed herself as part of a suicide pact with fellow Fairmont Academy students June Phelan-Park and Dayton Nesseth. Undead Girl Gang (2018) by Lily Anderson follows Mila as she uses a spell from an ancient grimoire to bring the three girls back from the dead for seven days to uncover their murderer. One problem: the girls don’t have any memory of their death. The four girls work together to solve the case and ultimately help Riley, June, and Dayton say their goodbyes and allow Mila to process Riley’s death.

In Rachel Griffin’s The Nature of Witches (2021) witches use their magic to control and regulate the weather, but shaders (non-magical people) have pushed the Earth too far and now witches’ magic cannot contain the climate change reactions at the rate they used to. The novel follows Clara Densmore, the first Everwitch in 100 years, as she learns to navigate using her power to her full potential. Everwitch magic is tied to all four seasons while other witches are only strong during one season of the year (fall, winter, spring, or summer). As an Everwitch, Clara’s magic is the only chance witches, and the planet, have to survive the tumultuous weather due to climate change, but since her magic accidentally killed her parents and best friend, Nikki, she’s too scared to use her magic. After reading the journal of the last known Everwitch, Clara finds renewed hope in living with her magic, and ends up learning how to properly channel her powers to save music festival attendees from a flash flood.
Scaffolding Student Engagement With Grief

Before jumping into assigning any novel that heavily focuses on death, grief, and loss, scaffolding the upcoming discussions is necessary to establish the students’ understandings of death and grief. Generating conversation on death before students’ responses are clouded with what the characters think and say is a benefit of the discussion questions I outline below. In a classroom of readers, no matter what age they are, it is difficult to identify the many experiences participates might have had, and it is even more difficult to expect all students to respond to representations of grief in the same way. While it may be impossible to provide space for all students to mentally prepare, it is necessary for the teachers or discussion facilitators to mention that some of the topics might be difficult and complex and provide options for students to decide how they want to encounter these texts or even refuse certain difficult scenes. As death and grief are often difficult topics that students may want to shy away from discussing, opening up the unit with talking about these notions helps students to understand and process their emotions towards death and grief. More specifically, “teaching YAL emphasizes the importance of student voices in constructing meaning and provides space for students to become active learners rather than passive receivers of information” (Rybakova and Roccanti 32). Rather than continuing to perpetuate the notion that adolescents are “too young” for such serious conversations, allowing students space to talk about their understanding of death and grief provides them a place to actively participate in their learning. Beginning the conversations with students informing the teacher what they know instead of simply sitting and being told about death and grief reinforces for students that their voice and opinions matter in the classroom. This is particularly important for students to understand before going into discussions on the specific texts, as it lays the groundwork for them to feel comfortable speaking about the novels later on in the unit. At the
beginning of the class allow students a few minutes of quiet writing time to answer the following questions:

- How do we talk about death in American culture?
- Do you think young children feel differently about discussing death than teenagers or adults? Why or why not?
- When you talk about death with family or friends, what words or images do you use to describe your thoughts?

After students have had time to write out their thoughts, it’s useful to pair students up to share their answers with each other for a few minutes and then open it up to a full class discussion. By beginning the discussions with student’s knowledge and then encouraging them to listen and participate with other students, it is a way to “encourage and support students’ self-knowledge as a preliminary stage for world knowledge” (Harris 189). Not only are the young adult novels showing students that adolescent voices matter, but by beginning the lesson with the knowledge they bring to the classroom, students are encouraged to see themselves as arbiters of knowledge rather than empty vessels waiting for instructors to fill up.

In a recent general education literature course I taught, I used the questions above in a Think Pair Share format to preface *Cold* by Mariko Tamaki. While this novel is not in the witch genre, *Cold* explicitly deals with death as one major character, Todd, is murdered and the other major character, Georgia, is uncovering what happened to him in real time alongside the reader. My class’s discussion focused on how feelings surrounding death are dependent on the circumstances of the deceased: how old were they when they died, and was it a sudden death or expected due to illness or age? The general consensus is that elderly folks are more or less “expected” to die and their deaths are easier to discuss, whereas children, adolescents, and young
adults are seen as having their entire lives ahead of them so regardless of whether their death is sudden or expected due to illness, it’s always more difficult to talk about.

My students were also quick to point out that they’re inundated daily with news and media broadcasting death—most often mass shootings and brutal murders—so that it’s almost become a routine event to hear about. Because students will naturally position their idea of death within the realm of media, a way to broaden this discussion into an activity is through prompting students to find an example of a movie, television show, or book that depicts death and grief in a constructive or helpful way. Then, find a second example where the depiction of death and grief is not constructive or helpful and have students volunteer to share with the class their example(s) and explanation of why it is or is not helpful for them to understand and navigate death and grief. Student’s examples will differ depending on the tastes and experiences of the readers and the participants in the discussion, but this activity broadens the discussion and allows students to discuss death outside of personal anecdotes that might be too traumatizing. This activity also provides a practice lesson for students in analyzing media and grief, which prepares them for applying the same skills to the novels.

For my class in particular, the majority of students identified young adult or children’s movies, such as *Up*, *The Bridge to Terabithia*, and *Coco*, as helpful for understanding death and horror movies like *Final Destination* and *Smile*, as unhelpful for processing death and grief. When discussing this general consensus surrounding genres that are helpful and unhelpful, my students told me that the horror movies cause viewers to be afraid of death because it’s depicted as extremely painful or bloody and the characters spend the whole movie looking over their shoulder waiting for death to capture them at any second. On the other hand, the young adult and children’s movies show death as peaceful and a way to reconnect with loved ones, a more natural
part of life that you can’t avoid but not something to fear. These themes they identified in YA and children’s movies also applied to the novel they were reading, and so I was able to transition the discussion to *Cold* and guide students to think about how the novel is doing something similar for a similar audience.

Scaffolding should not only take place when introducing the entire unit on grief and loss, it’s also useful to start with smaller, specific discussions within the unit such as what agency, power, and delusions are. In *Undead Girl Gang*, Mila doesn’t trust the police or any other adults to find Riley’s killer, or even believe she was murdered in the first place, but she does trust herself and her agency to perform a magic spell to find out the truth on her own. After finding “*The Seven-Day Breath of Life*” spell, Mila thinks, “If magic is about being grateful, I’m more grateful than I’ve ever been before. There’s hope. For the first time since Riley went down to the creek, something other than darkness cracks open in my chest” (Anderson 36). Magic has transformed into hope for Mila: hope that she can bring back Riley, but more importantly hope that she will be able to prove to everyone that her intuition is right and that Riley was murdered and would never commit suicide. It's important for students to note that Mila understands from the beginning that Riley will only come back from the dead for seven days with the spell, so she’s not using magic as a form of denial to try and bring Riley back from the dead permanently. Instead, she’s using magic as her voice to make herself heard by the adults in her life and reveal the truth, her truth, about Riley’s death. Pedagogically this is an important distinction because magic is not permitting delusions, but is rather working as a form of agency and power within Mila’s life when she feels like she has neither. Therefore, magic is a symbol for the agency and power that adolescents can obtain, particularly when working through grief.
Classroom Activity: Exploring Grief Through Song

In a modification of Lori D. Ungemah’s song activity outlined in “The Absolutely True Diary of My Accidental (and Successful) Unit Studying Death,” (2017) have students find a song they listen to that makes them feel powerful and journal for a few minutes about why they feel powerful when they listen to the song. Once the students have chosen a song and had a few minutes to write, volunteers can play their song for the class and discuss why it makes them feel powerful. This activity reinforces the same concept of self-knowledge as the unit’s opening discussion around death and grief. By encouraging students to bring their own outside knowledge into the classroom and connect it to the readings, it leads “students to realize that literature can and does connect to their lives—to the very music they love” (Johnson and Ciancio 43). By seeing the connection between literature and their lives, students are then able to begin making connections between how the characters deal with their grief and discuss whether the ways that the characters deal with their grief might be useful or replicable in real experiences. To connect back to Mila in Undead Girl Gang, and the larger concept of agency and magic, teachers can ask students to elaborate on why these songs don't make them feel like they can do something fantastical, like fly like Superman or bring back the dead like Mila. Then, turning the discussion to why they think it's important that Mila remains cognizant of the fact that she can't bring Riley back permanently shifts the focus of the assignment and conversation back to the novel.

Later, when students have finished reading Undead Girl Gang, teachers can come back to the song lesson and now have students find a song that brings them joy or provides some measure of comfort in times of grief. When the seven days are up, Mila sends Riley, Dayton, and June back to their graves and thinks, “putting off this goodbye is almost too much to bear. But
our paths are diverging, and all I can do is be grateful that we had this week that I extorted from
the universe. I’m a witch. I’m always grateful” (Anderson 300). Mila has come full circle with
her grief process. At the beginning of the novel she was angry at the police and her parents for
ignoring her concerns that Riley wouldn’t commit suicide and desperate to find out the truth.
Now that Mila has uncovered the killer and found out the truth about Riley’s death, she is able to
let her go. Mila is not only grateful for her extra week with Riley, she’s also grateful for her
identity as a witch. Without magic, Mila would not have been able to solve Riley’s murder and
would likely still be stuck in her cycle of grief. Mila has processed the loss of her best friend so
successfully that she’s able to refer to Riley’s death as suicide with her parents, “even though I
know that she didn’t mean to die. It makes them feel like I’ve made emotional progress”
(Anderson 302). Even though Mila knows Riley didn’t commit suicide, she’s made peace with
her loss and is able to show her parents the emotional progress she’s made, even if they don’t
know that it’s magic that allowed her to make that progress. Wicca/witchcraft frames grief and
loss through gratitude—gratitude for having known the deceased and gratitude for the time spent
with them.

Echoing Mila’s gratitude at the end of Undead Girl Gang, students can choose songs that
make them feel joy or gratitude despite their loss. This not only circles back to the previous
activity where students find a song that makes them feel powerful, it also helps students compare
and contrast the two songs and their relation to Undead Girl Gang and the larger themes of death
and loss. Encapsulating Mila’s gratitude with a song that speaks to the student’s own gratitude
allows students an opportunity to speak about grief without having to reveal their own trauma.
Instead, the students can use Mila as an outlet to discuss their song choice, placing the feelings
on Mila rather than disclosing their own dealings with death. Lori D. Ungemah uses these same
song activities, alongside a lesson to introduce “poetic devices of imagery, alliteration, symbolism, and tone” (Ungemah 57) and even expands the activity to include poetic analysis of the songs students brought to class. Ungemah describes how her students brought in songs “that made them feel peaceful or hopeful in grief” and while listening to them in the classroom with the lights off many students were moved to tears. Ungemah says that this lesson “remains one of the most sacred experiences I have had in the classroom” due to the “unifying topic for all of us…grief and death” (57). While I’m borrowing Ungemah’s activity, I diverge from the original in that the focus of the discussions is centered around death and grief as it relates to the novel. Ungemah utilizes the song activity to learn about poetic devices, analysis, and inadvertently create a close-knit community through the theme of death and grief, but I am using this activity as a way to generate conversation about the death and grief within Undead Girl Gang. Through the students bringing in their songs they can show their understanding of the novel, but also apply the songs to the particular aspects of the novel and character’s grief. While this activity can also be useful to bridge the end of Undead Girl Gang, or another grief novel, with an upcoming poetry unit, the goal is to generate discussion surrounding the novel.

**Creative Writing Activities for Novel Exploration**

Building on these discussions, specific activities can help students learn how each novel uses magic to provide comfort and a way for the witch to cope with their grief, ultimately giving readers the opportunity to learn from, experience, and practice their own coping mechanisms to deal with grief. Creative writing activities can take many forms in the literature classroom, from low stakes activities such as brief in class responses to high stakes activities such as a major project at the end of the semester. Christian Knoeller argues that “writing imaginatively in response to literary works engages students with a text, enriches their appreciation, and yields
valuable insights into interpreting the work. A natural consequence of imaginative response appears to be close and, importantly, focused rereading” (Knoeller 43). As Knoeller expresses, in order for a student to write a successful piece of creative writing based on a literary work, they will need to perform multiple close, focused rereads of the work to interpret it in a way that allows them to write a creative response or extension of it. Put simply, in order to write creatively about the novel, students will need to have a firm grasp on the text, beyond a simple understanding of plot and characters. Petryna Venuta similarly praises creative writing in the classroom claiming, “if we are to cultivate an education that encourages myriad perspectives, understandings, and truths, then we must motivate our students to write creatively. Creative writing does not report–it engages. Creative writing forces the writer to assume the point of view of the subject material” (240). Veronica J. Austen advocates for creative writing in literature courses because it “(1) dispels the awe of literature and creates active learners; (2) develops critical readers; (3) furthers student understanding of literary criticism; (4) inspires deeper commitment to excellence; and (5) motivates class bonding and dismantles the classroom hierarchy” (138). As these scholars detail, utilizing creative writing in the classroom allows students to experience the writing process, promotes close reading, requires analysis, and shows students that there is more than one way to convey their understanding of the reading material.

Building off of the scholarship above, I outline two low to mid stakes activities and their applicability to the different novels, and end the chapter with a high stakes major project. The first creative writing activities are low to mid stakes depending on whether they’re assigned as quick in class prompts or part of a homework journal series that’s worth a portion of the student’s final grade (for instance, 15%). Regardless of how these assignments are incorporated
into the class, connecting creative writing to course readings provides an effective way to evaluate a student's knowledge and skills.

These novels do not focus solely on the witch’s struggle with grief, but also on their opportunities for coping and empowerment in their magic. The teens are therefore presented as the authors of their own stories, claiming their grief as meaningful but not defining or restraining their potential future and identity. Robert Neimeyer (2005) explores how adolescents need to reconstruct meaning for their lives after a loss, and this is often achieved through constructivist or narrative approach. Neimeyer suggests that “the grieving individual is forced to author a new life story, and seek an audience for the new sense of self that results” (29). Particularly with the loss of a parent or best friend, adolescents are left with a radically different life and this means constructing a new direction for their life without their parent(s) or best friend. Similarly, Thomas Attig (2000) claims “grieving persons who want their loved ones back need to look for some other way to love them while they are apart” (xii). A creative writing activity to help students see that practicing magic is the way the teen protagonists create a new life story, according to Neimeyer, and love their loved ones while they’re apart, as Attig says, is to have them write an epilogue that’s set approximately one year after the end of the novel.

Writing an epilogue of Mila’s life one year after the end of the novel allows students to actively participate in understanding and imagining Mila’s life after Riley’s death. In order to generate an epilogue, students will need to conduct a focused rereading of portions of the text. Writing this type of creative response, students will also produce an analysis of the text in order to be able to continue the story. One part of the novel students will need to focus on for the epilogue of Undead Girl Gang is to examine how magic allows Mia to create a new life without Riley while simultaneously loving Riley and their friendship. For example, Mila became a witch
because of Riley, so it’s her last connection to her best friend. Though Mila doesn’t really believe the spells they cast together when Riley was alive did anything, she decides to cast a spell to bring back Riley and prove that she was murdered. Riley and Mila’s friendship is founded on witchcraft, so it’s only natural for Mila to use magic as a way to find Riley again and accept her death. At the cemetery after performing the resurrection spell Mila believes it is a failure, but just when she thinks she’s powerless, Riley appears, confirming her status as witch and more importantly that she has powers within her. Without even really meaning to do so, Mila’s use of magic jumpstarts her acceptance of Riley’s death because it shows Mila she has agency and power within her life at a time when the only thing she feels is the opposite. The ability to focus on solving Riley’s murder allows Mila to shift focus away from the fact that she’s lost her best friend and allows her to spend an extra seven days with her to come to terms with the fact that she’s really gone.

An important aspect for students to understand in order to write an epilogue is Mila’s evolving use of magic. Teachers can guide students through this evolution by tracking the shifts in Mila’s magic using a timeline or analyzing specific scenes in small groups or as a large class discussion. Students can discuss how Mila moves from not really believing in magic at the beginning of the novel, to seeing magic as a way to bring Riley back and avenge her death, to creating a new life without Riley, and ending with full acceptance of Riley’s death and appreciating her own witch powers. By charting this growth in Mila during the novel, students can see how Mila’s life one year later will look very different: she’s had a year to process her grief even more, working in the magic shop with other witches, and practicing her spells. Students will need to use all the knowledge about Mila’s life in Undead Girl Gang to make educated predictions about what she would be doing, how she would think, and what she would
say in one year. This writing activity also gets students to reflect on the long-term process of grieving. Since the novel only shows Mila’s perception and life for two weeks after her best friend’s death, her grief is easily slotted into emotions such as anger and defiance, but it’s more complicated to think about how Mila would feel one year later. Students would also be able to write about their own understandings of long-term effects of grief through Mila, which develops various skills such as enhancing their ability to empathize with various perspectives and personalities by taking on Mila’s, and being able to apply analytical skills so the epilogue remains true to the original author’s writing, and delve deeper into the themes of death and grief.

Assigning this writing activity again after reading a second novel, such as *Edie in Between*, creates an even richer opportunity to show and discuss with students the variations of grief. While both Mila and Edie are teen witches who learn to harness their magic in the face of loss, their journeys with grief and magic are ultimately different. Unlike Mila, Edie’s magic is matrilineal, as she grew up knowing her mom and grandmother are witches and was even beginning to learn about the craft from her mother. The first time Edie uses magic is with her dead mom’s lock spell to break into the family cabin, but she decides to properly learn how to use magic once she’s infected by dark magic. Like Mila, Edie’s reasons for using magic are concrete and specific with a defined end goal in sight, but the more Edie continues to practice magic the more she learns about her history at the cabin and her family’s history with mixing magic and grief. Therefore, Edie’s use of magic is tangibly rewarded with learning more about her family (particularly her mother), working through her grief instead of suppressing it, and embracing her witch identity. However, unlike Mila, Edie’s story ends with her moving back to her hometown and continuing school despite growing closer with her grandmother, making a new friend, meeting her birth father, and having a crush on one of the local girls. By writing their
own epilogue, students will analyze the different ways Anderson and Sibson convey death and grief in their novels and learn that the authors made specific narrative choices in order to communicate these themes with varying outcomes. The students themselves will then learn how to make similar choices in their own creative writing of the epilogue.

Writing Edie’s epilogue looks very different for students than writing Mila’s. Students will need not only to conceive of the difference between the death of a best friend (Mila) and the death of a mother (Edie), but also how those deaths created the novels’ endings and potential futures. For instance, Edie one year later could begin with her coming back to her grandmother’s house for the summer and reconnecting with friends and family while reminiscing about what she learned about her mother the last time she was there. On the other hand, Mila one year later could be just deciding to leave her hometown after high school graduation and imagining what it will be like to live away from the places where she created memories with Riley. For both narratives, students would need to grapple with the character’s grief a year later, but the ways in which these characters conceptualize their relationship with the deceased now will be different and the level to which they have further processed their loss will also differ. Having students repeat the writing assignment for two different narratives allows for them to analyze the differences between the use of death and grief in two novels of the same genre, which in turn creates an opportunity for conversations around genre conventions and different forms of grief.

Edie in Between and The Nature of Witches both feature the main character finding the diary of a deceased witch: Edie’s mother and the only other known Everwitch before Clara. In Edie in Between, GG gives Edie her mom’s teenage diary hoping it will help her to stay close to her mom. It does and Edie learns about her mom’s adolescence and life just before she was conceived, but the diary also begins Edie’s journey in casting spells and learning about magic,
which she swore to GG she wasn’t interested in doing. Unbeknownst to GG at this time, Edie is using her mom’s diary spells to solve the mystery of the hidden family cabin by the lake in addition to continuing to learn more about her mom’s adolescence. However, also like Mila, magic soon becomes more than a way to solve a mystery and develops into an outlet for Edie to overcome the sadness, find her own identity outside of “girl whose mom died,” and process her grief by finally accepting her mom’s death and moving on. Edie connects with her mother’s past by reading her diary and casting the spells she hid among the pages, and though magic gives her a deadly infection, it ultimately forces her to reconcile with her witch heritage and begin learning the practice with GG. Consequently, magic also gives Edie the chance to have a proper goodbye with her mother and tell her she loves her one more time, allowing her to fully let her go.

Clara is reading the memoir of Alice, the last known Everwitch, and stumbled upon her entry written right after she lost her close friend at age nineteen. Clara thinks, “Something snapped in her [Alice], and she decided the only way to move forward was to immerse herself in the thing she feared. I’ve tried everything—holding my magic back, isolating myself, keeping my guard up at all times. Everything except leaning into my magic” (Griffin 124). It’s at this point that Clara decides she’s going to “use my magic…all of it” (Griffin 24). In this scene Clara’s magic that she’s decided to immerse herself in is very similar to grief—because the two are tied together for Clara, in order to immerse herself into her magic she also needs to immerse herself into the grief, fully give into it in order to let it go and gain control of both her magic and her guilt. Clara credits Alice’s words with creating a shift in her, which students could take to mean that Clara wants her own memoir to be inspirational for future readers and therefore they could take that particular voice with their assignment.
This creative writing assignment asks students to analyze the diary entries provided in the novel and then produce their own version through another character’s voice. This activity differs from writing the epilogue because students are not only imitating the author’s style, but they’re also having to understand and deeply analyze characters to decide what they would say in a diary entry. For example, Edie herself never writes in her own diary or writes back to her mom’s diary entries, but students can choose to write as if Edie kept a diary during the plot of the novel chronicling her magical endeavors or writing diary entries as if they’re addressed to her mom and replying to her mom’s diary entries. Edie’s mom’s diary entries are written out in the novel in their entirety, so through writing their own diary entries utilizing Edie’s voice, students can imagine Edie’s written responses to her dead mother is a creative way for them to articulate her process of grieving and learning to use magic simultaneously. The novel is already in Edie’s first-person point of view, so students would not need to switch narrative point of view for this writing activity, but they would need to analyze Edie's inner dialogue versus her dialogue with her friends and GG.

Prompting students to complete this writing exercise would hinge on them being able to analyze the diary entries in comparison to Edie’s current first-person point of view and articulate the differences between Edie’s voice and her mom’s voice. This guidance will help students to avoid replicating diary entries that sound like her mom’s and are simply replacing plot points and dates with what’s happening with Edie. Instead, guiding students to consider the differences in their style of writing and voice, their different forms of grief, and the differences in their magical knowledge at the time are key. These discussions are easily held in the classroom and also provide a chance to have students practice and hone their close reading and analysis skills. This activity not only encourages students to immerse themselves in the narrative, it also teaches the
power of storytelling as a means of passing down knowledge, highlighting the significance of the written word in both the characters’ lives and their own. Diary entries are traditionally very personal, and written only for the writer’s consumption which could lead to a different voice used in the diary entries compared to the voice used in front of friends and family—a voice reserved only for the self, that reflects all the fears and thoughts that might be too much for others. Therefore, students will need to create a specific voice for Edie’s diary entries and predict what she would write down, or back to her mother’s diary entries. Because this activity asks students to, “assum[e] ‘textual voices,’” of imaginative characters in a novel, it “provides students with a variety of vantage points from which to examine and interpret a work” (Knoeller 44). This offers students creative freedom within a narrowed scope, so their responses can be both direct in providing instructors a glimpse at their analysis skills and vary with creativity.

To adapt the writing assignment for *The Nature of Witches*, students can write a segment of the journal that Clara says she’s going to write at the end of the novel for future Everwitches. This assignment is similar in that it asks students to adopt Clara’s voice and write in a diary-style, yet it differs in that Clara imagines her journal will be read by future Everwitches to help them understand their powers and expectations for their lifestyle. Therefore, Clara’s voice will differ from Edie’s in that she’s writing for a specific, target audience and will likely include instructions, or teaching moments, for future Everwitches or other witches curious about Everwitch powers. The prompt for this assignment would then differ from *Edie In Between* because of the different audience—Edie’s is a private diary while Clara’s is written in a journal style that’s anticipated for a vast readership. Clara tells readers that she is going to write this memoir-style journal after reading Alice’s journal, which saves Clara’s life and keeps her from stripping herself of magic. Students could choose to write the segment of Clara’s memoir where
she focuses on her time under the solar eclipse when she wasn’t sure if she would emerge with her magic or be stripped. While Clara is under the eclipse she’s in excruciating pain, as her magical connection to the sun is temporarily gone, “but something inside me tells me to stay present, to experience this infinite darkness even though it hurts, even though it feels like I’m breaking. Then, clarity. Perfect clarity” (Griffin 336). This is a metaphor for Clara’s entire journey thus far, she’s endured a darkness of grief and guilt over her magic seeking out and killing her parents and best friend; a painful isolation and loneliness from peers and friends. But, now that she’s made it through that pain, she’s on the other side and has clarity—happiness and relationships. By focusing on this moment in the memoir, students could implement flashbacks to Clara’s magic killing her parents and best friend, her time spent grieving them, or the confusion she felt over not knowing how to control her magic.

These writing assignments allow students to hone their creative writing skills while also immersing themselves into the characters and story in a way that utilizes analysis, voice, and prediction skills to create a branch of the narrative that still honors the original. Creative writing assignments also allow students an outlet to process their own grief or trauma in a way that can be channeled through a character’s thoughts and actions. Because death and grief is extremely personal, I would never insist that students talk about or write about their own experiences with death, but this assignment is a way for them to potentially do so through identification with a fictional character.

Broadening the definition of creative writing to also include creative visual writing, I propose two artistic activities to ground students’ analysis of the themes of death and grief in Undead Girl Gang, Edie in Between, and The Nature of Witches. This activity could be placed at any point in the course and students could be told which novel to use or given free choice at the
end of the unit. The activity is to create a social media post with images and a caption about the
death of the character. This assignment could be given more specific parameters by dictating
which particular social media platform, number of images required, and a caption word count
minimum.

Students are very accustomed to seeing social media posts announcing the death of a
celebrity, classmate, or friend from different people in the deceased’s lives, so they understand
the format and generally how the message differs depending on who created the post. For
example, Mila’s post about Riley’s death is going to contain different pictures and memories
than her brother, Xander’s, post or an official post from the school or local news station.
Students would be able to choose whose account they’re creating the post from, and then can
also submit a short response explaining their choices in the post and why they believe that
particular character would have made those decisions. By bridging images with writing students
are further provoking their own imaginations, and the use of social media allows for students' 
own expertise to come into the activity. Lastly, selecting images to represent text puts emphasis
on students translating and analyzing the novel in ways that traditional analytical essays cannot
reflect. This is also a great low stakes assignment for students to get accustomed to the idea of
relating images to the text and explaining why certain images represent parts of the narrative or
invoke particular attributes of the characters, which is a major part of the high stakes assignment
outlined next.

Final Project: Putting Knowledge into Practice

For this major assignment I am re-imagining the capstone project I assigned in my
general-education literature course. For this project students worked to create a physical or
digital visual poster representing their experience with each of the readings over the course of the
semester. This was a Tuesday/Thursday class, and the course covered short stories, poems, one novel, one nonfiction book, and one play. For each ninety-minute class period the students were assigned a different reading, or portion of the longer readings, and were instructed to add “something” to their poster for each class period. This “something” could be a specific quote, an image (of a character, scene, etc.) that they can’t get out of their head, AI generated fan art (my students used DALL-E), or any imageQUOTEVERSESONG lyric in the real world that they related to the novel. This project reflects each student’s journey with the semester’s readings in a unique way, but since they also presented the final posters to the class at the end of the semester, everyone was able to see how they generated a series of ideas about our readings as separate entities in conversation with one another. Instead of just having one idea about each of the readings and all our readings remaining separate, this project allowed students to see the readings collectively. Also, this project allowed me to see their thought process and growth over the course of the semester through the short weekly discussion posts in which they detailed what they added to the poster and why. I heavily emphasized their “why” in these weekly discussion posts as I wanted to know their rationale behind why they picked that particular image or quote to add to the poster to represent their personalized reading that week.

I’m envisioning Undead Girl Gang, Edie in Between, and The Nature of Witches as three texts in a themed unit on death and grief, with my capstone project scaled down to a visual poster for these three novels depicting each character’s process of dealing with grief. The benefit of localizing the project around a specific theme is that students can conceive of a larger theme (such as color scheme, organization, etc.) for the poster early in the unit. I did check-ins with my students on their posters after each unit (at the end of short stories, poems, etc.) and because there was not a clear, overarching theme or connection between all of the readings my students
had a hard time creating a larger organizational concept for their posters. A lot of them were just in semi-chronological order of the readings and not designed with much attention to aesthetics.

Another revision for the capstone project would be including a larger written component alongside the final poster. As mentioned, I had my students submit weekly discussion posts where they detail their item added to the poster alongside their explanation of why they chose that item. However, I think it would be even more beneficial for students to submit a short essay on the rationale behind their poster choices for Undead Girl Gang, Edie in Between, and The Nature of Witches and a brief analysis on how each of the novels dealt with death and grief in similar yet different ways. Rather than leaving this open ended, it might be useful to provide a few questions for students to answer as “prompts can be shaped to ensure that writing creatively directly complements specific aspects of traditional literary analysis, contributing to textual interpretation in meaningful ways. Moreover, writing reflectively afterward, students can bridge from the creative to the interpretive, articulating insights into a work arrived at while writing imaginatively” (Knoeller 43-44). Some potential questions might include the following:

1. How do the main characters’ personal experiences with death and grief shape their individual journeys and character development?

2. How do the characters’ witch identities influence their abilities to handle their emotions and navigate their grief? Are there any notable differences in the use of magic across the novels?

3. Analyze the relationships between the protagonists and their deceased loved ones in all three novels. How do these relationships evolve through the stories, and how do they contribute to the characters’ grieving processes?
4. How do societal expectations influence the characters’ and/or the authors’
approaches to death and grief? Consider factors such as gender, race, community,
etc.

These guided questions alongside the visual poster will provide a well-rounded and creative
illustration of the student’s understanding of the novels, analysis of larger themes, and ability to
synthesize what they learned into a multimodal format.

People often seek out magical practitioners (fortune tellers, mediums, tarot card readers,
and palm readers) to deal with the loss of a loved one. Magic allows a person to connect with
their dead loved one and find closure to heal. The main characters in the novels above are
witches in addition to teenage girls, which shows readers a different way to grieve. Ultimately,
the protagonists and their journey to processing the death in the novels relates embracing their
inner power with accepting the loss of a loved one. This then normalizes death as a part of
nature, which is a common bildungsroman feature, but the element of magic offers a new way
for teen mourners to enact control over their lives and their grief. Death magic is always a
forbidden magic—witches are never supposed to practice necromancy and bring back the dead
because changing nature’s cycle always has dangerous repercussions. The magic used in these
novels does not attempt to alter nature’s cycle and bring the dead back permanently, but the
magic used does show how intertwined death, which is inextricably linked with emotions, is with
magic.

This chapter works on Kokorski’s claim that “literature functions not only as a tool of
education and socialization, but most of all as a means of consolation, and a brightly shining
glimmer of hope which tries to soothe their (young) readers’ anxieties about death and dying to
allow a positive outlook on the future” (Kokorski 324). Emotions mixing with magic is a theme
in all three books, as it is the teen witch’s emotions surrounding the grief over the deceased that leads them to seek out magic in the first place. Edie only begins casting spells once she finds them hidden in her mom’s diary and wants to learn more about her past; Mila never believed in the magic she practiced with Riley, but turns to a spell to bring her back from the dead so she can find her killer; and, Clara has decided to strip herself of her magic until she finds inspiration from the last Everwitch. Magic helps each of these witches to navigate the pain surrounding the loss of their best friends and parents, but it also leads them to find their identity in the end. Through the discussions and activities outlined above, I have shown how witches and their use of magic to manage grief sends a message to adolescent readers that while grief is powerful, there are powerful ways to acknowledge grief’s power. Understanding these forces might help them to see they do not need to “overcome” a loss but can acknowledge it and experience it alongside and through other powerful experiences and emotions.
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