

## Saviors and Sacrificial Lambs: Death and Race in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*

In Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* Trilogy, Collins casts protagonist Katniss and her friend Rue as opposites: Katniss is thin but strong whereas Rue is nimble and petite. Their differences go beyond their physical abilities. Collins describes Rue as having "dark eyes" and "satiny brown skin" (98), while Katniss has "straight black hair, olive skin, [and] grey eyes" (8). Despite depicting Rue through racialized terms, Collins never discusses race or these characters' racial differences in concrete terms. Her hesitancy to discuss race does not go unnoticed by readers or critics, but it is not unusual. It is emblematic of many YA dystopias that seemingly ignore race.

In this paper, I examine the racial hierarchies implicit to Panem generally and Katniss's experiences specifically. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which Katniss's friendship with Rue reveals Panem's racial inequities. I consider how Rue's murder, which draws on lynching imagery and is a result of her alliance with Katniss, inspires Katniss's eventual rebellion. I argue that the novel casts Katniss, who rejects the ways the Games have disciplined her to disregard the lives of her fellow citizens, as a white savior. Because of Rue's murder, its invocation of lynching, and its effects on Katniss, as well as Katniss's memorializing of Rue's black body, Katniss ultimately decides to rebel against the strictures of Panem's totalitarian regime in the series' first book. Thus, race plays a significant role in *The Hunger Games*, as its presence establishes a racial hierarchy amongst the characters as Katniss represents the benevolent white person who, inspired by the sacrifice of her black friend, seeks to free her fellow oppressed citizens. Presenting Katniss as a savior is significant to the series' plot as Rue's death compels Katniss to continue to rebel and encourages her to become the symbol of the rebellion throughout the series. Ultimately, examining Rue's death and the ways it affects Katniss throughout the series makes it possible to decode the ways in which systems of racial oppression are replicated in the series.