FEMALE WARRIORS, SOCIAL INJUSTICE
AND THE TRANSFORMATIONAL FORCE OF ANGER IN JAYE WELLS' SABINA KANE SERIES

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SUMMARY: Urban fantasy heroines tend to be highly trained supernatural or magical beings who unapologetically use violence to achieve their goals. Their stories, often plotted as revenge narratives, are in many cases driven by anger, a key force of good in the quest for justice. Heroines are transformed into protectors when their personal trajectories, often motivated by complicated family bonds, become entangled with the fate of specific cities. Rereading Jaye Wells' Sabina Kane series in the context of recent feminist reinterpretations of women's anger, I will argue that anger is a source of social responsibility, thus resolving the apparent contradiction between caring and violence, and can become a legitimate affect in romance fiction. I will explain how, in Wells series, the female questor achieves the transition from lone wolf to caring warrior without sacrificing her capacity to expertly wield extreme violence or deny her rage.

KEYWORDS: urban fantasy, anger, social justice, romance heroines

MUJERES GUERRERAS, JUSTICIA SOCIAL Y LA POTENCIA TRANSFORMADORA DE LA IRA EN LA SERIE SABINA KANE DE LA AUTORA JAYE WELLS

RESUMEN: Las heroínas de la fantasía urbana suelen ser seres sobrenaturales o mágicos altamente entrenados que desvergonzadamente ejercen la violencia para conseguir sus objetivos. Sus historias, con frecuencia organizadas como narrativas de venganza, están en muchos casos motivadas por la ira, una fuerza clave del bien en su búsqueda de justicia. Las heroínas se transforman en protectoras cuando sus trayectorias personales, frecuentemente complicadas por los lazos de parentesco, se entrelazan con el destino de ciudades particulares. A partir de la relectura de la serie de Sabina Kane de la autora Jaye Wells en el contexto de las recientes reinterpretaciones de la ira de las mujeres, argumento que la rabia es una fuente de responsabilidad social, resolviendo así la aparente contradicción entre el cuidado y la violencia, y puede integrarse en la novela romántica como un afecto legítimo. Explicaré cómo, en la serie de Wells , la guerrera transita de la soledad a la solidaridad sin sacrificar su capacidad para ejercer la violencia extrema o negar su ira.

PALABRAS CLAVE: fantasía urbana, ira, justicia social, heroínas románticas

"Anger made me a better fighter", Kaye Wells, *Blue-Blooded Vampire*, 55.
"Why do we so rarely learn how to be angry?" Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her*, 11.

INTRODUCTION: THE HEROINE'S DOUBLE JOURNEY

In Urban Fantasy (UF) romance for adult readers, heroines are often highly trained supernatural beings who unapologetically use violence to achieve their goals. Their stories, frequently plotted as revenge narratives, are regularly driven by anger, a feeling they fully inhabit until it becomes a key force of good in a quest for social justice. During their transformation from rage-filled avengers with a sense of self grounded in anger to legitimately angry warriors, these heroines become reluctant protectors of others when their personal trajectories, often motivated by a «checkered family history» (Wells, 2009: 101), intersect with the fate of particular cities, as in serialized novels by Laurell K. Hamilton, Charlaine Harris, Patricia Briggs, Faith Hunter, B. R. Kingsolver, Ilona Andrews, Shannon Mayer, T. R. Cameron and many more. I will argue, in the context of the "anger turn" (Wallaert, 2019: 10), that in popular romance fiction anger may motivate a sense of social responsibility and desire for political change, thus resolving the apparent contradiction between the desirability of a caring community implicit in the happy ending and the physical and verbal expression of anger, which is culturally deemed unfeminine, pathological, unwarranted, uncivil and destructive.

Definitions of the popular romance genre incorporate emotional integrity as a desirable outcome of character development: the «emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending» that the Romance Writers of America includes as a defining element of every romance novel, is tied to the «promise of a future with a unified emotional life for two or more protagonists […]. The genre's primary drive is to imagine ways that romantic love and desire (erotic or asexual) might serve as a path to self-fulfillment and, increasingly, socio-political equality» (Kamblé, Selinger and Teo, 2021: 2). Anger and rage, strong emotions often coded as negative, masculine and detrimental to relationships, would seem to be anathema to this aspiration of emotional wholeness. However, much has been written recently about the productivity and potential of female anger: Soraya Chemaly's *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* (2018)*, Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (2018) are perhaps the most popular books in this perspective, together with Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), not to mention more academic studies such as the *Signs* 2021 special issue or work by Jilly Boyce Kay (2020) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019), Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill (2019), Sara Ahmed (2023) and Amia Srinivasan, whose 2018 essay provides me with a framework to revisit a series of novels by Jaye Wells because she accepts that, although anger may be empirically counterproductive, it may be nonetheless an *apt* emotional reaction to the harmful consequences on victims of «unjust social arrangements» (2018: 133). «Affective injustice» is the phrase Srinivasan coins to identify the normative conflict in which victims of oppression find themselves when they must choose «between making the world as it should be and affectively appreciating the world as it is» (Srinivasan, 2018: 127), a situation which adequately describes one aspect of the conundrum that the heroine of the UF series I will be studying must resolve to achieve a happy ending: Sabina Kane's perception of structural injustice places her in this position through no fault of her own, she constantly has to choose between self-preservation and «justified daily rage» (Srinivasan, 2018: 135) against the social and political circumstances that are harmful to her and others.

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Sabina, an unapologetically angry UF romance heroine, expands the range of her emotions not by suppressing anger but by learning how to channel it outwards in the process of emotional growth, such that those very emotions marked as destructive of social bonds become productive and empowering, illustrating that, as Roxanne Gay states, «anger is not inherently a bad thing» (2016). In the series, the heroine achieves the transition from social pariah and loner to caring fighter without sacrificing her capacity to expertly wield extreme violence or deny her rage: in other words, however humanized she may become when she embraces her mage heritage, Sabina is not altogether «defanged» (Gerhards, 2022: 47). Wells' Sabina Kane five-book cross-generic series which began in 2009 with *Red-Headed Stepchild* and ended in 2012 with *Blue-Blooded Vamp*, merges the conventional journey of the female hero (Carriger, 2020: 136) with the structure of popular romance fiction (Regis, 2003) and integrates the world-building conventions, themes and characters of vampiric UF.[2] The narrative arcs of the love plot and the quest are interdependent when we focus on the heroine's journey rather than the love story. Jayashree Kamblé has noted that romance fiction in the 20th and 21st centuries offers female protagonists «a life of questing for their truth through -and *beyond*- love plots» (2023: 2), and Sabina Kane's journey reflects this shift: as the series progresses her search for a self-determined wholeness is entangled with her move from the margin to the center of her social milieu, occasioned by her publicly acknowledged role as a reluctant champion of the Dark Races.

Although Sabina has been read as needlessly violent and angry, this deviation from an implicit norm brings into focus the issue of the particular dilemmas she faces. Wells intentionally set out to portray a «sociopath», interested as she was in understanding the «razor's edge of morality», the «ethics of killing» and the explanations offered by assassins to justify and explain their questionable choices (Strider 2011). In other words, her character is deliberately jarring yet also typical of UF heroines for whom violence is natural (Deffenbacher, 2019). Kamblé has recently placed the popular romance heroine's journey at the center of the genre, understood as an internal quest «to find herself -or *selves*- fragmented by sociopolitical ideology- alongside external action» (2023:5). In romance, Kamblé argues, the heroine's journey is a «recognition and heroic rejection of the false choices that prevailing ideologies in different spheres force on women» (2023: 13). Sabina's journey moves, typically, towards her acceptance of her hybridity, but here I will focus on how the stereotypical gendering of rage and aggressive behaviour is the source of her self-loathing because it presents another false choice: between her own survival and the often harmful effects of her «counterproductive» rage, an example of which we encounter in the initial scene of the series when she murders her friend David Duchamp. As Robyn Warhol argues, feelings «are never gender-neutral»; indeed, they are constitutive of gender identity (2003: xviii). Readers and characters in the series are troubled by Sabina's gratuitous «brutality» (Choko, 2016), and she is «brash and proud» according to her partner Adam (2012a: 301); however, as we shall see, her anger becomes «apt counterproductive anger» (Srinivasan, 2018: 9), rather than unwarranted, an excessive rage, a self-serving overreaction.

Images of violent and angry women have a long history in the West that may be traced back to mythological figures such as the Amazons or Medea and Salome (Minowa, Maclaren and Stevens, 2015: 210); indeed, Wells' rewriting of the Lilith figure

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[2] Wells claims to «tweak» the vampire tradition when she chooses to «keep the blood lust and the immortality», while suggesting that vampires are a race created by Lilith through a liaison with Cain. Applewood stakes and apple juice are their weakness, a connection with the Biblical Fall story, and they are identifiable by their red hair, inherited from Cain (Devoti 2008).

incorporates Sabina into this mythical tradition. Additionally, in popular genres the genealogy of the female warrior or fighting heroine may be traced along several interconnected yet separate generic branches, including crime and spy fiction (see Dresner, 2007; White, 2007), vampire, fantasy, gothic and action genres (Crawford, 2014 and Gerhards, 2022; Anyiwo and Hobson, 2019; Wisker, 2016; Brown, 2015 respectively. See also Ramos-García, 2012: 147). Where we place Sabina Kane in this messy panorama depends upon which of her characteristics we choose to study, though whatever the case may be -read as an action heroine or an investigator- she is both transgressive of gender norms and conventional (adhering to generic conventions), since her depiction freely draws upon this broad repertoire of images and ideas with histories that bleed into each other in UF romance. Jaye Wells presents herself as a writer of UF and paranormal romance, so it is within this genealogy in which Sabina's character will be placed to understand her struggle to integrate anger into her emotional repertoire as one aspect of her effort to reconcile her vampiric and mage identities. I will come back to this point in due course.

UF and paranormal romance emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Leigh McLennon (2014), and resist definition despite their recognizable conventions as a consequence of their hybridity and adaptability to new realities and different media. This hybridity derives from the multiple sources merging into the genre, such as early fairy-centered urban fantasy and vampire fiction and other types of fiction (the new weird) which have eventually been gathered under the broad category used by the year 2000, identified by the destabilisation of boundaries as a recurring thematic element. Irrespective of whether we agree with her idea that UF and PR are one genre, for the purposes of this article what is relevant is the assimilation of vampires who «want to be good in the human world by acting as human as possible», abstaining from vampirism; additionally, at this point in the development of UF/PR, a strong female protagonist makes her appearance, in the role of «an investigator and action heroine», whose struggles differ from those of previous UF characters because women are already othered in a patriarchal society, an otherness which may be framed as monstrous and serve to establish an affinity between the heroine and the monsters she fights and loves. By the 21st century, the boundaries are further blurred, such that heroines are no longer humans who stumble into the supernatural world but are already a part of it. In this world of uncertain boundaries between self and monstrous other, good and evil, the female heroines have lost their «moral certainty» because the human and nonhuman inhabitants of their society cannot be accounted for with only one -human- law. Importantly for the study of the Sabina Kane series, more recently vampires no longer abstain from drinking blood; indeed, the exchange of blood «becomes a positive act of interconnection which also demonstrates acceptance of the lover's'"Otherness'» (McLennon, 2014). Against this UF/PR generic backdrop, Sabina Kane is typical: she no longer feeds from humans but does take the blood of her human/mage lover, who accepts her dual identity.

The books studied here follow vampire-mage Sabina Kane and the mage hero, Adam Lazarus, from Los Angeles, where she has spent most of her life working as an extremely efficient executioner for the vampire council -the Dominae- presided by her Alpha grandmother Lavinia and two aunts, Tanith and Persephone, to New York where she meets her newly discovered magical twin sister and double, Maisie Graecus, and begins to come to terms with her own disregarded magical heritage: she is the «mixed blood» daughter of a forbidden relationship between a mage and a vampire. Sabina becomes existentially unmoored when she chooses to turn her back on her ruthless, power-hungry and vindictive grandmother and the vampiric lifestyle to embark upon a quest for revenge which culminates when she finds a true home with a chosen family at

the end of the series. At this point she and Adam become the central couple of a multi-species queer affective community based upon shared values, experiences, goals and a sense of belonging to a community of outcasts. This more progressive model of relatedness replaces the genealogical imaginary prized by her grandmother and other morally objectionable characters, «dark-race supremacists» and «immortalists», who defend racial and ethnic exclusivity and superiority over other supernatural creatures as well as «mortally-challenged» humans (Wells, 2011: 24). Loyalty, honesty, respect and equality are the values that hold together a model that elides the structures of power sustained by a hatred of the other implied in the defense of elitist pedigrees and purity of socially conservative types of association, including hierarchical political forms of government, in the novel represented by the councils governing the different "Dark Races".

"MY VISION BLURRED RED": READING SABINA KANE THROUGH THE "ANGER TURN"

Although the series predates the hashtag activism of the #MeToo era by several years, a post-#MeToo rereading of this female hero's emotional transformation may confer greater legibility to her otherwise unintelligible rage. Sigrid Wallaert argues that the contemporary (re)emergence of women's anger in mainstream culture began, roughly, in 2018. She cites the #MeToo movement as a catalyst of the «new wave of female anger» (2019: 10) as well as the popularization of feminism which also played a crucial role in the public, collective and (above all) very visible female reclamation of anger as an apt reaction to the general culture of misogyny associated specifically with the Trump era (Boyce Kay, 2020: 31). Although initially the publicly expressed fury targeted the normalization of sexual harassment, abuse and assault and the impunity of the perpetrators, the anger turn, understood as a reaction to the frustrating, disempowering and humiliating «grotesque *unfairness* of the world» (Traister, 2018: 38), broadened the conversation to encompass many other forms of discrimination and mistreatment «against those with less power» as well as the conditions enabling sexual violence (Traister 2018: 277). Read through this affective social mood, Sabina Kane's rage becomes more than the expression of a personal grievance; instead, I suggest that it may also be interpreted as a demand to be heard, a «refusal to accept the suffocating terms of the social scripts» (Boyce Kay, 2020: 35) that she is compelled to adhere to by a deeply fragmented supernatural community.

On Goodreads readers have expressed their dislike of her: she is abrasive, smug, overbearing, hot-headed, vain, unrepentant, annoying, bad-tempered, «A trained fighter who seeks to hurt everyone and ask questions later, not caring about much besides herself», as Erin *Proud Book Hoarder* accurately states (2016). Readers' responses echo the interactions between Sabina Kane and other characters in the series, who constantly comment upon her «anger management issues» (2012a: 192). Yet it is precisely the move from a self-centered «red-hot anger and a need for revenge» (Wells, 2011: 99) to an empathic awareness of others that the series traces; due to her propensity to express anger violently Sabina is constantly and publicly shamed and belittled because of an unfeminine emotional inclination (and indeed rejected by her lover in *The Mage in Black*, before he embraces her «Fangs, magic, and all» (2012b: 191), yet is ultimately rewarded precisely because, by the last book in the series, *Blue-Blooded Vamp*, Sabina fully accepts her hybridity: «For as long as I could remember, I'd been at war with myself. On one side of the battlefield was my vampire side -the vicious, bloodthirsty, selfish Sabina. On the other side was her opponent, the more thoughtful, contemplative mage Sabina […]. So maybe, in the end, my goal was to find the sweet spot between these two.

Maybe then I'd finally be happy» (2012a: 231). Although Sabina's fury is initially also an expression of her inability to resolve the apparent contradictions between her two selves, once she accepts that she can contain them both after questioning and rejecting the «internalized false dichotomies» set up by her society (Kamblé, 2023: 15), her anger becomes more focused and ethical, the use of direct physical violence becomes an act of self-defense and defense of others, in contrast to her previous coercive aggressiveness, which was at the service of those unequal power relations that structure the despotic vampiric social order. This transformation also parallels the change in her identity from assassin to warrior and demigoddess, fighting to avenge family, home, friends and fellow citizens in the mundane realms and supernatural underworlds.

Sabina *learns* how to be angry, to recall Chemaly's question in my epigraph: she has been trained as a weapon to serve a vampiric oligarchy, so she must also learn to be angry differently by turning away from her own individual sense of victimhood to embrace a shared responsibility for and dependence upon others. Although this process may be read as yet another story of how female rage is «contained and reconfigured, modulated and rechanneled into something else» (Orgad & Gill, 2020: 2), it could also be argued that because UF creates another world governed by different norms and laws of reality, the possibility of expressing anger publicly to bring about significant change is viable. Indeed, by communicating her rage Sabina is able to identify her allies through their responses and actions and «demand […] accountability» (Chemaly, 2018: 491). In the broader context of popular romance, we can read the utilization of this type of heroine as an attempt to make sustained anger as intelligible as the other more «positive» feelings explored by the genre, anger also «an assertion of rights and worth» (Chemaly, 2018: 418). Angry heroines expand their emotional range by incorporating rage into the repertoire of women's emotional life, thus reclaiming an emotion culturally deemed unsuitable.

Even Sabina comes to realise that anger is «counterproductive» as a means to end injustice because it fuels rather than diffuses conflict. Amia Srinivasan agrees in general terms, yet she complicates the philosophical discussion of anger by arguing that «counterproductive anger» may be an «apt» response to an unfair situation because it is warranted, it is the *affective* register of an injustice. Srinivasan argues that a person's anger is apt when the object of that anger is responsible for a genuine moral violation and there is a personal reason to feel angry. Affective injustice signals a situation in which a person is ethically torn; to take an example from Sabina's experience, on the one hand she has an instinctive need to protect herself from harm, yet she also feels responsible for the well-being of others and risks her life to protect them. Sabina is constantly frustrated, trapped by her obligations to her grandmother, who exacts obedience and exerts psychological violence by humiliating Sabina because she makes her granddaughter pay for the consequences of her parents' actions; yet Sabina also wishes to be accepted by her family and vampiric society. As the series progresses, however, the characters -and readers- come to understand Sabina's palpable indignation. We learn that her rage is not unreasonable and exaggerated but «proportional» (Srinivasan, 2018: 138) to the circumstances that motivate it: her quest is marked by loss and suffering, first of her parents, then her friends and allies, her home, all victims of the systematic injustice of a warring world governed by powerful amoral and capricious deities and unjust institutions governed by ambitious politicians. There is value in the «moral and political knowledge» that anger may bring forth: «by reflecting on our anger, and the reactions of the powerful to our anger, we can come to know something about the existence and structure of previously unrecognized injustice» (141).

«I AM BOTH LIGHT AND DARK»: HYBRID IDENTITY

In relation specifically to genetically hybrid female protagonists such as Sabina, Kristina Deffenbacher suggests that their non-normative gender identities derive from the capacity for violence and aggression embedded in their genetic makeup, neither a supplement to their female identity that is fundamentally «not her» (i.e. an internalized monstruous other) nor a «performance of hegemonic masculinity» (2016: 30). Sabina is a killing machine from the very beginning; her innate violent tendencies, combined with the physical prowess with which she fights, do not transform her into a symbolically masculine character; rather, the decidedly masculine hero comes to accept and indeed celebrate this essential aspect of her identity, though he must learn to adjust his expectations of hetero-intimacy and embrace her contradictions. Both are empowered by their fighting skills, together they function as a «bridge between worlds and groups» (Mannolini-Winwood, 2016: 39) because they are seasoned urban dwellers and trained fighters, their very clothing an indication of their identities: Adam has an «urban commando look» (2009: 49) and Sabina dresses in the black leather pants or jeans and boots characteristic of UF female heroines, feels uncomfortable in conventionally feminine clothing and rides a sleek motorcycle. Their non-normative gender identities develop alongside a heterosexual romance, as Deffenbacher notes (2016: 30). Sabina's genetic predisposition to violence suggests that women are capable of «both a violence that defends and avenges and the emotional vulnerability that sustains one's humanity» (Deffenbacher 2016: 31) and allows for the formation of sustained social bonds of various kinds. This genetic predisposition can be read as a strategic form of essentialism, suggesting that she has the capacity to fight to the death irrespective of whether she makes use of her skill: she has a choice, biology is not destiny.

Sabina's very survival instincts depend upon the acknowledgement and expression of her anger, so all efforts to repress it are an act of self-destruction, as we see clearly throughout *Silver-Tongued Demon*, in which her vampiric violent tendencies and professional and magical training are clearly interdependent. Her effort to extirpate her «baser instincts» (8) is unsuccessful because «I am a vampire. My past really happened and it's as part of me as my fangs» (190). Sabina takes pride in her work because she has assiduously trained her natural gifts and excels at it. In this fourth book, after she has averted a war between the Dark Races in the previous *Green-Eyed Demon*, she feels at loose ends because she is no longer an Enforcer for the vampires, nor does she work for the mages. She feels «about as useless as a three-dollar bill. I'd tried to convince myself that I'd finally gotten the peace I'd dreamed of during all those months of disaster. But deep down I suspected I wasn't the type of female who thrived in calm waters because I was always waiting for the next tidal wave» (Wells, 2012b: 45). The generic characteristics of UF allow for the heroine to express her violent reactions and accommodate the cluster of emotions associated with the experience of violence (as both victim and perpetrator) alongside those emotions that are conventionally gendered as feminine and associated with romantic coupledom and friendship. The elation she experiences when she fights, described in great detail, is evidence of the pride she feels in her skill: fighting constitutes a form of liberating self-expression. Although she attempts -and fails- to turn her back on her vampiric heritage because in this world vampires are born, not made or undead, by eventually accepting and integrating both her softer and harsher sides, Sabina undermines the gendering of certain «negative» emotions and their translation into aggressiveness. In turn, Adam also challenges the experience and expression of gender stereotypes of emotions, so the couple's emotional work is in fact equally shared as he accepts her power as the Chosen, who will unite all the Dark

Races: teasingly, «he often referred to himself at [sic] the 'kept man of a goddess'» (2012a: 296).

As a genre, UF is characterized by its adaptability and an openness propitious to the exploration of the hybridity of its female protagonists whose survival depends upon a reconciliation of at least two heritages, one more human than the other, integrated by a transformation which eases the tensions between their dual roles as both victims and agents and incorporates their violent nature into the dynamics of hetero-intimacy (Deffenbacher, 2016: 30). Although the majority of UF romance series revolve around representations of white, cis and heterosexual characters despite the genre's defining thematic and formal destabilization of conventional binaries and boundaries (McLennon, 2014), the unjust social dynamics between many kinds of humans, monsters or magic (McLennon, 2014) that are dependent on the reproduction of marginality, disempowerment and exclusion, are central motivations for the avenging protagonist who, like many of the protagonists in paranormal and urban fantasy romance since 2000, are «framed as social and cultural minority groups» (McLennon, 2014). Hybridity here signifies in two ways, as Deffenbacher helpfully points out: Sabina cannot extirpate her violent tendencies because they are genetic, but culturally she negotiates her identity by refusing the split between gender and violence.

If her violence were only genetic it would be «read as the supplement that naturalizes violence» in an otherwise human woman, whereas the hybrid settings of UF «force the negotiation of human gender categories with other possibilities for identity and culture» (Deffenbacher, 2016: 36). In *Green-Eyed Demon* Sabrina acknowledges that up to that moment she has «allowed [her]self to be fueled only by red-hot anger and a need for revenge. But now I searched the far corners of myself for anything resembling what I assumed love might look like» (2011: 99). In this scene, in which her power is needed to heal Brooks' battered body by merging her magic with that of others, she moves past the «black cloud of anger» within to tap into softer, less destructive emotions, thus broadening her emotional range. As the series progresses, Sabina distances herself from a propensity to act before thinking to finally conclude that «anger is the easiest emotion, the least complex. When other feelings are too difficult to bear, you can wrap anger around you like insulation. Like a shield to deflect more complicated and hurtful emotions -like sadness and fear» (*Blue-Blooded Vamp*, 2012a: 33). By the end, she feels «balanced» (2012a: 302), able to recognize and accommodate both the «foreboding, achy sense of despair that had been part of me for so many years» and happiness, described as «something warm, glowy... pleasant even» (2021a: 302).

Srinivasan notes that violence is one of anger's stereotypical expressions, though the connection need not be necessary and is often deemed morally wrong because it is harmful. However, although it is possible to disengage on from the other, she accepts that for some people, especially those who -like Sabina- have been raised in such a manner in which they cannot get angry without being violent, «getting angry just *is* (in part) getting violent. If so, telling such people not to be violently angry is equivalent to telling them not to (here, now) be angry» (2018: 139). In the UF world inhabited by Sabina, the use of violence is a necessity: the series epilogue suggests that social stability is precarious, conflict rife, so her «journey from burned out assassin to demigoddess» (2012a: 302) and mediator of the Dark Races Cabinet does not conclude with the repression of her rage; rather, when it is democratically decided, the use of violence is acceptable to ensure the greater good.

Much has been written about how UF romance favors the exploration of empowered female protagonists capable of saving themselves *and* the world (Ramos-García, 2021; Crawford, 2014; Hobson and Anyiwo, 2019). Sabina's quest is no

exception to this rule, though her heroicity depends upon her uncommon capacity for aggression, which becomes a problem for her once she has lost her place as executioner and is expected to embrace her magical heritage, which is gendered as feminine, human and associated with harmony. Like most UF female heroines, Sabina often faces the question «What are you» (Deffenbacher, 2016: 31) because she does not smell like a pure-blooded vampire nor is her hair completely red (red hair signals «pure blood»), but this resistance to classification is also her strength (Deffenbacher, 2016: 33), the source of her social ostracism as well as the reason for her exceptionality: the title of the first novel of the series directly references her status as a «mixed blood» with the use of the idiomatic expression «red-headed stepchild», yet her ability to negotiate her own dual nature allows her to become a heroic figure who transforms the power dynamics of the supernatural world and saves the Dark Races from annihilation. The hero and her sister encourage Sabina to integrate her many selves because this process would prevent her from giving herself over to her drive for vengeance without losing her humanity (Deffenbacher, 2016: 39): «You have lived your life so far as if you were a pureblooded vampire. But you're not. Half your blood is mage. And until you accept that you'll never be whole», Adam tells her (2009: 143). (Indeed, her sister Maisie fails in this respect, ultimately overpowered by the vampiric heritage she has negated most of her life because she lacks the experience to assimilate it into herself.)

Initially Sabina chooses to ignore her magical abilities because her grandmother has cultivated in her a hatred of all things magical, but Sabina at one point vehemently turns against her vampiric heritage as it reminds her of the «vicious, bloodthirsty, selfish Sabina» (2012a: 231) and the murder of her sister for which she feels responsible. Her confidence and sense of her own self-worth are shaken when her vampiric self does not fit into life with the human/mage community: «My vampire self is a cancer. And like all cancer, it must be excised before life can flourish» (2012b: 35). In this she fails, yet her self-doubt prepares her to embrace the double heritage without sacrificing her «thirst for blood and fighting skills» (2012a: 273). Unlike more traditional figurations of the hero who embodies the good in a world of dualisms, Sabina's journey takes her from «a world of black-and-white» to the mage/human world in which «everything had the gray tinge of moral relativism» (2010: 126). Questioning the idea that «violence was so simple. Kill or be killed, wound or be wounded» (2010: 185) renders her retributive anger more problematic, yet introduces an element of doubt that creates the possibility of change. Indeed, by the end of the series she has become a seasoned «Chthonic mage» who harnesses a «dark» magic associated with «death, fertility, the underworld, the dark feminine» by tapping into the «ancient, primordial energy of the earth» (2010: 75). She is nothing like the earth mother figure of pastoral fantasy or the beneficent nurturing witch of some paranormal romance, which she would deem «bohemian» (2010: 29), «New Agey» (2010: 42) and «Hippie» (2010: 36), her instinctive violence is certainly not an expression of conventionally protective maternal instincts (Brown, 2015: 15). Her power arises from a genealogy of «Chthonic» goddesses with «dark energies»: Themis, Gaia, Persephone, Meline, Hekate, and Lilith, the «Great Mother» of the vampire race (2012b: 228). This other genealogy of insubordinate women who in our world are mythic yet in the fantasy world are real, enriches the repertoire of fantastic elements that make up the UF paradigm which usually includes vampires, werewolves, faeries, elves, demons, quests, swords, ritual and magic. But they also provide role models: in UF generally the ability to wield magic translates into a power to control the environment, and in the series it is also a means to regain some control over the self: in *The Mage in Black* Sabina learns how to concentrate -to gather herself- and use ritual to focus her rage rather than repress

it, harnessing an affective energy that «definitely trended toward the darker side with its emphasis on death and fertility magic» (2011: 18).

«GAZING OUT AT THE PARK'S SHADOWED TREETOPS WITH THE SPARKLING LIGHTS BEYOND CALMED ME»

Geography plays a crucial role in this romance subgenre and Wells' series is no exception to the rule: she is emotionally attuned to her environment. Sabina's chosen family, dubbed «Team Awesome» (2012a: 288) by its demonic member Giguhl, ultimately settles in New Orleans, rather than in either of the «dark race capitals» (2012a: 296) New York and Los Angeles, because Sabina turns her back on the establishment as «political maneuvering [gives her] heartburn» (Wells, 2009: 126), although she continues to work as a mediator for the Dark Races Cabinet. Sabina does not seek reward or personal glory, she is not interested in mastery except in battle, like a true warrior. The urban setting is closely entwined with the nature of the protagonist, as «crime and the city weren't exactly strangers» (2012b: 12). In contrast to the discovery narrative in which a supernatural world is revealed to the heroine and reader as she gets wise to her own supernatural powers, in this series the relevant relationships are those between groups of nonhumans viewed through the gaze of a nonhuman protagonist who is already attuned to their social dynamics. The external quest is plotted as a series of adventures that typically begin «with the simplest confrontations and dangers and escalates through more threatening and perilous encounters» (Senior, 2012: 190). However, the firm closure that usually implies that unequivocal success is attainable at the end of the quest, that all problems are solvable, that certainty is possible (Hourihan, 1997: 52) is absent: Sabina's future is as undefined as the boundaries of the contemporary city itself.

Sabina's «dual citizenship» (Deffenbacher, 2016: 36) in the vampire and mage worlds makes her an ideal urban hunter in cityscapes marked by the mixture of the mundane and other worlds (Clute, 1997). John Clute argues that the typical inhabitant of these fictional cities is a «kind of hunter-gatherer figure» able to cope with the «crack-up of the immensely rigid world system created over the previous few thousand years». According to Clute's classic definition, in UF «Fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly *about* a real city», though to this I would add that the city is also an affective atmosphere that exacts an emotional disposition attuned to it. UF cityscapes are as layered as the protagonist, who is flawed, contradictory, arrogant and skeptical. Unlike other forms of fantasy, UF is recognizable because of the contemporary real-world urban setting which, according to Clute's definition, can be traced to Charles Dickens' depiction of urban life in Victorian London: dark, dangerous, filthy, ruthless. Not all critics agree about the role that the city must play in UF, whether it be as a backdrop or a central character, but Sabina Kane is unimaginable in any other environment, because the grittiness of the city and her disenchanted worldview as well as her aggressiveness are incompatible with any other landscape: «I don't do perky», she wryly comments (2009: 70). Unlike some recent fictional vampires, Sabina is still an «edgy creature of the night» with «radical energies» (Wisker, 2016: 187). The urban hunter figure intermingles with non-human beings who may originally belong to traditional fantasy, folklore and fairy tales or popular culture (including vampires, zombies and lycanthropes), all transposed to the contemporary world of UF, unseen, tucked away in the pockets and interstitial spaces of the human metropolis. The UF city is «dark, labyrinthine» and subterranean, and Sabina «can move among marginalized social groups» (Ekman, 2016: 465) and petty criminals, familiar with the internal kingdoms and all those locations described by Stefan Ekman as «places that hide rather

than places to hide in» (Ekman, 2016: 464), especially those associated with the seedier dimension of cities at night, abandoned and neglected, populated by the homeless, addicts, sex workers and their exploiters (Ekman, 2016: 466). Sabina herself says that «Night was my kingdom» (2012a: 219) and comfortably «prowls through that street like [the] predator [she] was raised to be» (2011: 98). The size of the metropolis suggests that it is unknowable, the immensity itself «creates the cracks though which can seep the fantastic» or where it can coexist with the human world unnoticed (Irvine, 2012: 203).

The atmosphere of this city is suffused with «dark» emotions (Mannolini-Winwood, 2016: 17): fear, anxiety and danger are pervasive, particularly for women, but Sabina as urban hunter develops a state of mind and body style appropriate to deal with them, her instinctive use of violence a weapon to protect and present herself as not «rapable» (Deffenbacher, 2014: 924; Wells, 2012a: 46). These shadowy worlds are governed by murky moral coordinates with which she grows comfortable: good and evil are not as clearly defined as she initially believes although the different races, governed by their respective councils - the Hekate Council, the Seelie Court, the Vampire Dominae, and the Demon League-, are «institutions that have fostered enmity among all of the races» (2009: 78) by cultivating hatred of each other and vying for more power and wealth; Sabina, however, is an «antiestablishment» (Waites, 2017: 35) warrior whose path to justice often falls outside the parameters of the laws governing the Dark Races, so at the end of the series she safeguards her independent mobility between worlds by settling in New Orleans, far from the «centers of power» (2012a: 300). She is thus an embodiment of the urban hunter: not only is she a nocturnal being because of her vampiric blood, therefore at home in the seedier dimension of urban nightlife when she hangs out at clubs with names like Phantasmagoria, Vein and Sepulcher or the zone called the Black Light District; she is a harbinger of death, thriving in both the unseen underworlds -Irkalla, the dark-race underworld and the Christian Roman catacombs- and the cityscape:

> Times Square at night can blind a person. My sensitive eyes squinted at the swirling neon lights and flashing bulbs that invited worshippers to pray to the gods of consumerism. They are just rough on the eyes; it's hell on all the senses. The scent of exhaust mixed with hot, putrid steam rising from the sewer gates. Taxi horns and shouts mixed with blaring radios. Tourists who stopped to watch the lights on Broadway found themselves bumped and jostled by an erratic river of humanity.
> I loved it.
> I'm sure natives avoided the tourist-trap vibe, but to me, the place hummed with energy. The high was almost as good as the one I got from blood. Almost. (2010: 211)

As a predator, her association with death and darkness and the less savory, chaotic dimensions of urban life are only one aspect of the interdependent characterization of protagonist and city; another element of UF that the series assimilates is the portrayal of urban communities as political entities, «shaped by many actors with various and often contradictory interests, among which the official governments are rarely the most powerful or (at least from the narrative point of view) relevant ones» (Lozińska, 2023: 104). Sabina's hybridity is presented as an identity suited to a globalized world; she can move between interconnected locations unlike her twin sister, deities and supernatural or magical beings who are either loyal to their own group or are bigots, and mediate between them all.

«LOVE… THIS SUDDEN UNFAMILIAR BUT FIERCE NEED TO PROTECT»: THE
TRANSFORMATIONAL POWER OF ANGER

In *Red-Headed Stepchild* resentment is Sabina's dwelling (2009: 133) and
violence her primary form of interaction, she is caught between her obeisance to the social
dynamics of the only world she knows, the vampiric world, and her «tendency to question
any and all authority» (2011: 12). She is driven by a reactive rage arising from her
personal sense of injury and deep sense of betrayal by her grandmother, who becomes an
object of her anger and the focus of her desire for revenge. The thrust of Sabina's internal
quest throughout the series is emotional: her experience of pain is transformative, the
recasting of her self as a subject of injustice rather than a docile subject or a victim of
trauma becomes a source of resistance to the structural relations of power in her world.
As seen above, this trajectory requires a reconciliation of her two natures, the supernatural
(vampiric) and the more humanlike (magical), by means of overcoming «internalized»
restraints to her natural abilities (Deffenbacher, 2014: 931). This recasting entails a
rereading of the self whereby she makes a conscious judgement that her grandmother's
careless treatment of her is proof enough that Lavinia does not deserve either her loyalty,
respect or, ultimately, her affection. After her family fails to provide for her emotional
wellbeing and perpetuates a hierarchical model of the community based upon her
humiliation and disposability, Sabina redescribes her grandmother as «a benevolent
dictator -light on the benevolence, if truth be told» (2009: 51). Lavinia has
instrumentalized Sabina, her objectification is a denial of her autonomy and punishment
for being «a troublesome child» (2011: 28) and «an abomination» (2009: 189).

Rather than ensuring that she flourishes, Lavinia sacrifices Sabina to her hunger
for power when she orders her granddaughter to allow herself to be violated by a villain
while she is working undercover. Thus, her grandmother fails to honor her commitments
as the head of the family and as a leader: she hates her granddaughter because she is a
reminder of her own daughter's disobedience; but she also fails as a leader as she is
willing to sacrifice Sabina's integrity to a play for power: «I wondered how my
grandmother could ask me to do this. She understood the gravity of allowing another
vamp to take a vein. By letting Clovis do this, I was, in essence, saying he was now my
master. The thought caused my stomach to clench» (2009: 94). Sabina desperately wants
to prove to her grandmother that she isn't «just some fuckup» (2009: 26). Her hybrid
origins make her an outsider to both groups, a «loose cannon» (2009: 24) in the eyes of
her grandmother Lavinia, who consistently fails to acknowledge her «mixed blood»
granddaughter as anything other than an embarrassment. The scene in which Sabina
allows the evil Clovis to drink from her is a turning point: she feels that she has betrayed
herself, has failed to protect herself, has lost a part of her soul and consequently
«hyperventilates» (2009: 147) before experiencing an anxiety attack (2009: 151).
Trapped, helplessly, between her sense of duty to the vampire community and her survival
instincts, this scene is a watershed Sabina shares with other UF female heroes who
undergo similar violations, including rape, only to confront and defeat their abusers and
rape culture (Deffenbacher, 2014: 932). From this moment on Sabina begins to feel
empathy towards those humans from whom she «feeds» because she realizes she too is
vulnerable, until she eventually turns to bagged and synthetic blood, a «compromise
between violence and self-denial» (2010: 55). Critics have noted that the figure of the
vampire has become increasingly benevolent, the prohibition to drink human blood a sign
of humanization. Maisie and Sabina require blood as sustenance yet do not drink from
humans because it is a form of abuse. We should not forget that Sabina at first believes
that, as a vampire, «Mortal codes of good and evil don't apply» to her (209: 8), so her

decision signals an ethical evaluation of her behaviour and identity and a negotiation between her genetic need to feed on blood and the choice to not feed directly from reluctant humans, although «feeding from humans was as natural […] as breathing» (2012a: 60).

The association between a refusal to feed from unwilling humans and goodness also differentiates Sabina from her grandmother (and the other evil characters, Cain, Clovis and Master Mahan), who feeds off her granddaughter but also exsanguinates mages to produce stronger magic-wielding vampires. The novels set up a comparison between her grandmother's anger and her own: although Sabina is at first blinded by her self-serving, retributive rage, she learns to see past it and gain more clarity while, in comparison, her grandmother is unable to overcome this blindness and dies as a result: Sabina becomes ethically responsible of her own actions (her conscience begins to stir when she assassinates her friend at the beginning of the first novel and guilt haunts her throughout the series as she becomes more «humanized»), whereas her grandmother is incontrovertibly evil because she shows no respect for any form of life and is willing to torture and murder even her own granddaughters, with fatal consequences for Maisie. Sabina's anger triggers an alternative «reading of the world» (Ahmed 2014, 176), an awareness of and reflection on power relations, gender norms and others forms of exploitation and abuse. One example of this shift in her perspective will suffice to illustrate how anger prompts a reinterpretation of the world:

> My whole life was based on lies. Honor, loyalty, family- these words were currency used by my grandmother to manipulate me. My eyes stung with the realization that my loyalty had been misplaced. That my own flesh and blood used me. Silly Sabina, hoping one day, if she just tried hard enough, she'd be thrown a few meagre scraps of approval. I was a fool. A patsy. A goddamned idiot (2009: 173).

The moment she resignifies the rules that have governed her grandmother's actions is the moment Sabina begins her journey to redefine honor, loyalty, and family. One effect of the first-person narration is that we witness her humiliation, revulsion, impotence, vulnerability, so we understand that her anger is not unmotivated: «The past lay out behind me like a road map of pain» (2011:19).

We also witness the gradual expansion of her «circles of care», cultivated when she transfers her attachments from an uncaring «care-less» community with a sense of belonging and identity based upon ties of kinship and hatred of other supernatural races, to the creation of «alternative kinship structures» (Care Collective, 2020: 20) that uphold different forms of community and communal life. These circles of care expand as the threat to the Dark Races becomes greater, an acknowledgement that interdependency and connectedness are unavoidable: «I'd finally begun to rely on my mentor, my mage, and my demon more than I ever expected. Beyond just friendship and love. As allies. Warriors who had my back no matter the foe. As friends and champions» (2012b: 234). Her reaction to the injury caused by injustice is at first an exclusively individual matter, but gradually she moves beyond her personal pain to consider the pain of others and transform this shared experience of unfair treatment and indignation into motivation for a transformation of amoral hierarchical structures. Although Sabina initially rejects help from others, convinced that only she can care for herself, she learns to care for, care about, as well as care with others (Care Collective, 2020: 15). That is, she offers and receives hands-on care (usually when she has been injured in battle), she has an emotional investment and attachment to others, so much so that their well-being becomes the driving force behind her final journey in the underworld: «I couldn't walk away with everyone I

cared about in danger. Some lone wolf I turned out to be. But as worried as I was, part of me felt good to have a purpose. Something other than my own self-interest to focus on» (2010: 236). Lastly, she cares with the other members of her chosen family of social outsiders that mobilize collectively to transform and save all worlds: the human, supernatural and underworld.

Thus, although initially Sabina is «fueled only by red-hot anger and a need for revenge», by *Green-Eyed Demon* she learns to tap into a «deep pool» of gentler emotions that are «a deep purple rather than an angry red» (2011: 101), her emotional range expanding in her pursuit of self-determination and self-control, which is a response to a growing awareness of injustice and the dynamics of power relations and exploitation typical of her world. Anger here operates as a «transitional tool» (Chemaly, 2018: 9) because it allows her to think about her own integrity and survival at first, though further along it becomes an assertion of her rights and worth, drives her away from one uncaring community to change the world around her: anger is, in Chemaly's words, «memory and rage. It is rational thought and irrational pain […] freedom, independence, expansiveness, and entitlement. It is justice, passion, clarity, and motivation. Anger is instrumental, thoughtful, complicated, and resolved. In anger […] there is truth» as Sabina discovers when she demands accountability from all those characters who violently impose their will on the more vulnerable (Chemaly, 2018: 198). The novels seem to suggest that strong emotions are not in themselves harmful or morally objectionable but can in fact be the measure of an injustice when understood and reflected upon, an affirmative rebellious energy that can be understood as the result of a conscious judgement concerning a situation, such that the emotional reaction to such a perception is a choice. Sabina's internal quest is thus also about the exercise of choice and a recognition and respect of other's choices: «I accepted my role as pariah, because I was damn good at my job and it made me useful to the Dominae. At times, though, I still resented not having a choice in the matter» (2009: 53).

The experience and expression of anger is gendered: is it deemed unfeminine, unattractive, selfish and in women frankly alienating, while in men is it often a virtue, especially when it is used to protect, defend, or lead. As we have seen, Sabina's anger is openly reviled in the series, as are her assertiveness and aggression, read as hostile and a sign of uncontrollable, excessive willfulness. But the series explores what is at stake when violence is used as a mechanism for growth and character-development in the face of abuse, trauma and survivor's guilt, when women and vulnerable others are unprotected by the people and communities that purport to protect them and fail (D'Amore, 2021: 2). Sabina, together with other powerless characters for whom she feels responsible such as her fae friend Vinca who is killed in battle, her sister also murdered, her cross-dressing friend Brooks/Pussy Willow beaten senseless, her lesbian werewolf acquaintance Mac, forced into an arranged heterosexual marriage because the lycanthrope community is inflexibly patriarchal, are all subjected to the brutality of unhindered power. The series suggests that «in a violent world, non-violence is not an option» (Kramer, 2017: 21), especially in a world in which those institutions and figures of authority are *careless* of the powerless:

> [Lavinia] expected me to accept a death sentence – all in the name of honor […]. I'd always believed my grandmother cared about me. She wasn't warm or affectionate, and she drove me hard, but I figured that was just her way. If nothing else, our blood ties should be proof enough of some sort of connection. But her careless disregard for the possibility of my death showed me the truth. She saw me as a pawn- a means to an end. Well, this pawn wasn't going to lie down and die (2009: 126).

Sabina is taking action against the violence pervasive in her community to end it for all vulnerable subjects, especially female and queer characters. In the series, violence serves as both a personally fulfilling act, whereby Sabina regains a sense of control over her life, and a community act, whereby her actions intentionally center the quest around the safety of others (D'Amore, 2021: 12).

The questions that initially prompted this essay were whether anger has a role to play in the range of emotions explored in popular romance fiction and how female heroes who are both violent and caring, challenge figurations of gender in popular romance fiction by overcoming false dichotomies. These questions are crucial if we think of popular romance novels as affective technologies that explore, complicate and shape feelings and emotional states (Golubov, 2022). If we recall the definitions of romance quoted at the beginning of this article, emotional experience is at the heart of the genre, it is the hinge of social relationships and the essence of characterization, but also a social and cultural phenomenon precisely because emotions color and move the world. Yet they are also stereotypically gendered, and for this very reason they deserve our critical attention, because our female heroes are entitled to express a full emotional palette which would encompass compassion, happiness, embarrassment, shame, humility as well as jealousy, hate, arrogance and rage.

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