(In)humans:
Shifting Narratives of Race and Species in Contemporary Fantasy Fiction

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ABSTRACT (ACADEMIC)

In this dissertation I interrogate the ways in which the fantasy genre engages with the topic of race, in particular the ways in which it uses the established genre convention of non-human sentient species to tell stories that both critique and reinforce hegemonic narratives of race. I begin with an overview of the fantasy genre's thorny history with race, tracing the timeline from the early days of what is recognizable as the 'modern' fantasy genre (largely beginning with Tolkien) all the way to the present day. My primary focus is on the last several decades (the 21st century) and the ways in which the genre has evolved to be more critical of both its own history with race and the dominant narratives around race in society at large, while still oftentimes being held back by the habits and habitus that it developed in its early days.

I examine a wide range of primary sources across different mediums (novels, video games, television series) to demonstrate different strategies employed by contemporary fantasy authors who are interested in engaging critically with race, while also identifying their shortcomings and foibles. In the process I call upon a wide range of theoretical perspectives, from literary theory, to psychology, to Black feminism, Critical race theory, and post-colonial thought. The dissertation concludes with my thoughts on the future of the fantasy genre vis-à-vis race, and the advantages and disadvantages it has for dealing with this topic as a result of the unique history and qualities of the genre.

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ABSTRACT (GENERAL AUDIENCE)

In this dissertation, I look at popular works of fiction in the contemporary fantasy genre and analyze the ways in which they engage with the topic of race. I specifically look at how this engagement relates to the long history of the fantasy genre with this topic, as well as provide an overview of that history. I argue that contemporary fantasy has changed its approach to tackling race when compared to older works of fantasy, in particular by attempting to avoid some of the racist tropes and narratives that older works of fantasy employed. I also argue that in the process these newer works seem to embrace an entirely different understanding of what "race" even means, one more in line with contemporary ideas of race as a socially constructed category weaponized for the maintenance of unjust power structures. By looking at a wide range of fantasy texts belonging to different mediums – books, video games, television series – the dissertation demonstrates different forms of this new, more critical engagement with race. I conclude by offering some prescriptions for the future of the fantasy genre if it wants to avoid reproducing the racist narratives that were common in its past.

DEDICATION

To the future, and the ways it could be

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The number of people who have, in some way or another, contributed to my success over the four years it has taken to write this dissertation is far, far greater than can fit on this page, so I will only single out a small selection.

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INTRODUCTION:

"At the Gates of Difference"

Why Race Matters to Fantasy – And Vice Versa

Prologue: The Way It Is

In late 2022, two seemingly unrelated events happened, only a few months apart, which reverberated throughout online communities dedicated to popular works of fiction in the fantasy genre and reignited long-standing conversations about the genre's thorny relationship to questions of race. First, beginning in September, Amazon Studios released the first season of its enormously expensive and long-anticipated adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (henceforth referred to only as *Rings of Power*). This release followed almost a whole year of discourse, both in traditional media and online, about the show's casting, primarily when it comes to the races of the principal cast – although 'discourse' might be too euphemistic a word for a racist backlash that involved prolonged abuse aimed at actors of color and a weaponization of Tolkien fandom in the interests of a white supremacist agenda (Young, 2022). Rather than following in the footsteps of prior visual depictions of Tolkien's world (most notably

Peter Jackson's two film trilogies), *Rings of Power* cast actors of color in roles belonging to all of the "races" (or more accurately, if less poetically, species) of Tolkien's world – humans (or "Men"), elves, dwarves, and hobbits (called "Harfoots" in the time period depicted in the show).

The show also changed how some of these groups were narratively depicted – instead of the near-perfect, wise and ever-benevolent elves of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Rings of Power* portrays them as deeply flawed, often haughty, proud, and prejudiced against the other races whom they deem lesser than them, for instance. The orcs, too, are given at least a sliver of humanity – instead of the "irredeemably evil race" of the original books, *Rings of Power* portrays them as "socially constructed as evil" (Naraharisetty, 2022), suggesting that their grievances against the other races might be justified, and portraying the elven protagonist's genocidal desire to wipe them out as obviously problematic (Payne et al, 2022: episode 6). This, too, proved controversial, albeit not to the extent that it received major media coverage the way the response to the casting did.

The second event came a few months later, in December 2022. Wizards of the Coast, the company that produces the popular tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), announced a change to a core part of the game's rules – the "race" a player chose for their character when starting the game would no longer have certain effects on the player character's core attributes, such as strength, dexterity, wisdom, and intelligence. Changes were also made to the system of "racial alignment," with "races" no longer being tied to specific moral alignments (e.g., "lawful good," "neutral," "chaotic evil," etc.). Finally, the flavor text and backstory for some "races" was changed to no longer imply the existence of homogenous traits such as stupidity or battle-lust in certain "races" (mostly ones deemed traditionally 'monstrous', such as orcs or hobgoblins). The change was directly linked to a desire to make the game more inclusive and remove any unintended racist implications present in the rules. This caused no small amount of

controversy and discourse in various online spaces dedicated to TTRPGs, with both praise and criticism for the decision.

At the same time, Wizards of the Coast changed the terminology surrounding these game mechanics, switching the official nomenclature for what had always been called "races" to "species"[1] – a more accurate term, as the "races" of *D&D* were always entirely biologically distinct types of sapient creatures, with sometimes radically different physiognomies and even fundamental natures (i.e. some races originate from alternate planes of existence, or are artificially created through magic, etc.). In the words of the official announcement on the *Dungeons & Dragons* website: "*Dungeons & Dragons* has a history of evolving to meet the needs of our players and foster an inviting space for everyone. With that in mind, we understand "race" is a problematic term that has had prejudiced links between real world people and the fantasy peoples of *D&D* worlds. The usage of the term across D&D and other popular IP has evolved over time. Now it's time for the next evolution" (DND Staff, 2022).

These two events, and many other similar ones in recent years[2], are part of a larger conversation about fantasy and race, which has unfolded, and continues to unfold, everywhere from insular fan communities, to large online forums and social media, to works of fantasy fiction themselves. While this conversation has a long history, dating back to the roots of the modern Western fantasy genre, recent decades have seen it accelerate and start bearing fruit in the form of palpable changes to the ways in which much of the genre handles race. I posit that this acceleration is a result of several factors: the increased level of connection and mass discussion across cultural

[1] See the official announcement post here.
[2] For other recent examples, see the similar backlashes to diverse casting decisions in other major fantasy adaptations, such as Amazon's *The Wheel of Time*, HBO's *House of the Dragon*, or Netflix's *The Witcher*, as well as events like the "Sad Puppies" affair which will be detailed later in the dissertation.

and geographic divides made possible by the internet; cultural and political changes in society at large vis-à-vis race, such as the series of major racial reckonings in the United States tied to the election of Barack Obama, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the political ascendancy of Donald Trump and his large base of openly white supremacist support; and the increasing presence, visibility, and mainstream success of marginalized authors and fans in the fantasy genre itself, including authors and fans of color.

The actual conversation being had within the genre might better be described as two interconnected conversations, both of which are to some extent illustrated by the recent examples above. First, there is the long-standing issue of the fantasy genre's overwhelming whiteness, in terms of both the kinds of voices and perspectives that are seen as legitimate and respectable in the ranks of authors and fans, and in terms of the actual racial diversity (or lack thereof) of the fictional worldscapes within popular fantasy works. This conversation is arguably the oldest, and certainly the one that has received the most academic attention, and as such is the one I have the least to contribute to in terms of my original research. It is also hardly unique to fantasy as a genre, being a shared problem not just across most other genres of fiction but also across most other areas of cultural and social life in Western countries with histories of white supremacy.

The second conversation is one largely unique to the fantasy genre and its narrative tropes and conventions – that of the portrayal of fantastical species such as orcs, goblins, elves, and dwarves, which are still usually referred to as "races" by most works of fantasy and in most conversations about fantasy. Even where efforts have been made to actively move away from this nomenclature in the source material, as in the example of *D&D* given above, "race" continues to be almost universally used colloquially. This terminological overlap, far from being incidental, is in fact indicative of how these species have often been portrayed by authors and perceived by

audiences – as proxies or stand-ins for real-life cultures, ethnicities, and racial groups. Sometimes this takes the form of direct racial coding: a fictional non-human group might be portrayed with cultural, phenotypical, linguistic, or other qualities that directly reflect those associated with a specific group in real life (or, in some cases, with offensive and bigoted caricatures of a real group, which have historically been used as tools of oppression and domination). Other times, the coding is indirect, with fictional groups mirroring the relative positionalities and relationships between real-life groups without necessarily being directly equated to any particular group of human beings. Racial coding of both varieties is a phenomenon that stretches beyond the bounds of any single medium; it is present in novels and comic books, tabletop and video games, film and television. It is also a phenomenon that stretches through time, from the earliest days of modern western fantasy (Tolkien and Lewis) to today. It is these ways of engaging with the question of race through the lens of fictional species, unique to fantasy and, to a lesser extent, its sister-genre of science fiction, that I will primarily be exploring in this dissertation.

Much has been written on the social conservatism inherent in the fantasy genre, and in particular the troubling racial implications of much of "classic" fantasy (i.e., works of fantasy from the 20th century, starting with Tolkien).[3] These works often featured categorically evil or good "races," seemingly biologically predestined for certain moral values – and even when they allowed for exceptions, fantastical species tended to be fairly homogeneous in terms of behavior and values. But fantasy is far from a monolith, and more recent works within the genre have gone in a few different directions, distancing themselves from those roots. Some have abandoned the idea of non-human sapient species altogether, opting for fantastical worlds inhabited entirely by

[3] See: Manlove 1983, Young 2016, Mills 2022, elaborated in the Literature Review

humans[4]; this avoids the risk of reproducing racist narratives through the lens of the fantastical, but also sacrifices any potential for using that lens to challenge and subvert such narratives in ways that fantasy is uniquely positioned to do. Others, like the new direction taken by *D&D*, have tried to scrub racial implication from the non-human; this is a project which has met with dubious success, and it's unclear if it's really possible to do so at all, given how deeply entrenched a lot of the genre's racial coding and tropes are. Others still have opted to keep the racial coding of human / non-human species and their mutual relations, but to tell more progressive, even radically anti-racist and anti-colonial stories with it. These might be stories in which humans and other typically "good" fantasy species are depicted as oppressive or conquering forces, empires subjecting the non-human to brutal repression, either at the time the story takes place, or within the history of the story's setting. But they are also, more often than not, stories about human protagonists grappling with this realization rather than stories centering the characters who are placed in the racially othered or subaltern position; and many still choose to cast the racial other and subaltern as, literally, non-human, while maintaining the humanity of the hegemon. In this way they often both challenge *and* reinforce the established racialized tropes of the genre.

There is tension inherent in all of these approaches – tension between contemporary progressive views on race and the genre's own regressive habits; tension between different currents within the communities of fantasy authors and fans; tension between narrative tropes and conventions that have historically been used to uphold racial hegemony, but which are now being utilized in attempts to subvert it. These tensions are what this dissertation explores. What I seek to uncover is how the portrayal of the monstrous and inhuman in contemporary anglophone western

[4] This includes some of the most popular and successful American adult fantasy fiction in recent decades: George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its HBO television adaptation, Joe Abercrombie's *First Law* series, Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn*, to name a few.

fantasy fiction has evolved to reflect shifting social anxieties, concerns, and insecurities around race and colonialism. I initially intended to make my claims only about American fantasy, but that would imply a meaningful distinction between different western anglophone fantasy traditions, which I do not believe exists – especially not today, when the media landscapes of the USA, Canada, the UK, and other anglophone countries are increasingly overlapping, and in the case of fiction and entertainment media I would even say are becoming homogeneous. So while the majority of my primary sources are American, it should be noted that I am looking at a broader cultural context – in fact, I only limit myself to the anglophone world out of necessity due to my own linguistic limitations; if I had to hazard a guess I would assume similar patterns could be observed across most of what we deem the Global North.

The historical cutoff point I have elected to use is the turn of the 21st century, because I have found that this is the point when a larger shift in the fantasy genre's depiction of race and species seems to occur. This is not a hard line, of course – there are examples of the trends I'm discussing in the 1990s, and there are certainly plenty of works of fantasy that continue to replicate older trends in the 2000s, 2010s, and even being created today. But the turn of the century is a useful scope for my work as it allows me to focus my efforts on the time period where I believe the most relevant works can be found. The reasons for this shift in the genre are difficult to pin down, and ascertaining or proving what they are is far beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I would posit a combination of several factors: a broader shift in western culture in regards to race and an increased awareness of systemic and structural racism; an awareness of potential consumer demographics for fantasy media that differ from the traditional white male demographic the genre was historically targeted at; a desire among the writers of fantasy themselves to reckon with and move past the genre's racial legacy, which has become a much more widely discussed topic; and

a shift in the demographics of the genre's authors themselves – or at least a shift in which authors are allowed to take part in the conversations that shape the genre as a whole.

I also do not seek to create a comprehensive analysis of the entire genre, but rather to identify specific trends present within it, relating to the depiction of race, racial coding, and the human / non-human dichotomy. In doing so, I focus on a handful of core works of contemporary fantasy fiction: Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* series, Robin Hobb's *Soldier Son* trilogy, Katherine Addison's novel *The Goblin Emperor*, N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, the *Warcraft* video game franchise, and Amazon's recent television series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*. These works were selected in order to represent many different facets of the genre, including different mediums (novels, serialized television, video games), different target audiences (ranging from *The Rings of Power*, which is positioned as Amazon's current flagship show aimed at the widest possible general audience, to *The Goblin Emperor* and *Stormlight Archive*, novels that are marketed primarily to the core literary fantasy fan demographics), and of course, different approaches to the question of race and species. What all of these works have in common is that they fall into the general category of what might be described as "mainstream" fantasy – popular works, by popular authors, likely to be widely known among most fantasy fans, as opposed to more niche or obscure works. This is because my view is not that what these works are doing is necessarily completely new, but merely new within the context of the genre's mainstream – where prior works that engaged critically with race in this way would have been relegated to the fringes of the genre, such engagement is now relatively common within the ranks of the most popular fantasy narratives.

My choice to use different mediums is also very intentional, as focusing on any one medium could easily imply that the phenomena I am analyzing are unique to that medium, or

particularly emblematic of it, which I do not wish to imply. That being said, I am interested in the commonalities and similarities between these disparate works, not their differences – as such, I analyze them primarily as narrative works, rather than going in-depth into the specifics of each medium. Each of these works is used to illustrate a different approach to the topics listed above, and my analysis of them is interdisciplinary, incorporating critical race theory, post-colonial theory, Black feminism, as well as elements of Queer theory.

The dissertation is broken down into three main chapters and a conclusion, following this introduction, a literature review, and a section on methodology. The first chapter is an overview of the fantasy genre's tumultuous history with race, with a special focus on the ways in which fantasy has proven uniquely able to both advance and challenge racist narratives using tools not available to other genres. The second chapter traces some of the shifts in the genre's attitudes towards race over the past several decades by following the *Warcraft* video game series as a case study, since it happens to stretch across the entire period in question and is in many ways reflective of broader trends in both the video games industry and the fantasy genre. The third chapter looks at one of the ways (established in chapter 1) that fantasy is uniquely able to challenge and subvert racist narratives, specifically by subverting the foundational narrative of race as a cogent category in the first place. The works of Robin Hobb and Katherine Addison are used to illustrate this in action when it comes to deconstructing the audience's subconscious racial biases, while Sanderson and Jemisin's literary series are used to illustrate a second approach to the same problem: that of interrogating hegemonic narratives about history, and bringing into question racial and colonial histories that are taken for granted and treated as gospel by much of society. Finally, in the conclusion, I circle back to the example that I opened with – Amazon's *Rings of Power*, as I examine the ways in which it attempts to participate in these same interventions, but also the ways

in which it falls short precisely because of its place in the fantasy genre and the ways in which it is shackled to the genre's history, habits, and legacy.

Literature Review

Literature about my primary cases

For as long as the modern fantasy genre has existed, it has been the subject of political and cultural critique – especially from the final decades of the 20th century onwards. Analyses of them specifically through the lens of race have become more common in the last couple of decades, although almost always focusing on a handful of the most well-known or popular works. None of the specific primary cases of this dissertation have been the subject of extensive analysis in the past, but some of them have received more attention than others. I will begin with a breakdown of the existing literature on race that directly relates to one or more of my primary sources.

Amazon's *The Rings of Power*, being a very recent series, hasn't had time to amass a body of academic research around it. That said, a few authors writing in the public humanities have analyzed the show's racial dynamics in different ways. Rohitha Naraharisetty, writing for *The Swaddle* in 2022 shortly after the release of the final episode of the show's debut season, is one of the only authors to focus specifically on the depiction of Orcs, which is also my main angle of analysis. She identifies an attempt by the show to humanize the Orcs by casting them as a silenced

and oppressed racialized minority within the world of Middle-Earth – a "vilified race socially constructed as evil," as opposed to being "irredeemably evil" as they are in Tolkien's original work (Naraharisetty, 2022). However, I think Naraharisetty gives *The Rings of Power* too much credit – it is true that the Orcs in the show are seemingly written with precisely that intent, but as I show in the final chapter, there is still too much of the "irredeemably evil" Orc in the way the show chooses to ultimately depict them, and this not only prevents the kind of nuanced message Naraharisetty hopes to see from actually materializing, but actively undermines it.

Helen Young, writing for *The Conversation*, focuses on the real-life races of the show's main cast, and the racist backlash that followed the announcement of these casting decisions (Young, 2021) – as does much of the overall media coverage of the series. The show's diverse approach to casting is part of the relevant context for discussing its depiction of race / species, but it is not directly connected to my work. What is more relevant, however, is that Young explicitly positions this modern debate around diverse casting as intimately connected to the racial dimensions of Tolkien's original text – something Naraharisetty and others writing about the Amazon show inevitably find themselves doing as well. The show, its critiques, its defenses, and my own analysis are all necessarily in conversation with Tolkien's work, and more specifically with its racial politics. So while it might be too soon to have a lot of academic work about *The Rings of Power*, this is actually the case with the largest body of work dedicated to it if we count the decades-long legacy of critical analyses of *The Lord of the Rings*.

As one might expect, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, often considered the foundational texts of the fantasy genre, were the first to receive widespread scrutiny from a wide range of critical academic fields, from general analyses of the inherent conservatism of the genre (Manlove 1983, Robinson 2003) to feminist critiques and, especially in recent decades, critiques of the fairly

unsubtle racial coding present in the fantastical non-human species of Tolkien's world (Rearick 2004; Reid 2020). A few critiques within this body of work particularly stand out. The first of these is the recently posthumously published *The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto*, by Charles W. Mills, written most likely in 1988/89 (Jeffers & Gray, 2022). In it, Mills illustrates that *The Lord of the Rings* can be viewed as a universe with a "*racially-structured* character," (emphasis mine) which reproduces and reinforces white supremacist ideologies such as the Aryan myth (2022, Mills: 3). This scathing critique of the implicit and explicit racial politics of Tolkien's work is both significantly more thorough than most other analyses of the same topic, and predates all of them if estimates of when it was written are correct. It represents the clearest and most radical formulation of the critiques levied against the racial ontologies of classical fantasy, as much of that genre borrows from Tolkien to some extent. It forms a theoretical basis for much of my later analysis not only of *Rings of Power*, but of the fantasy genre as a whole, as it describes what one might poetically call the original sin of the genre, which the modern works this dissertation analyzes are, in various ways and to various degrees, trying to atone for.

The other critique of *The Lord of the Rings* that stands out as relevant to this dissertation is not actually about Tolkien's novels per se, but about their extremely successful film adaptations (although it does tackle the novels as well, to a lesser degree). In *Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in 'The Lord of the Rings' Films* (2004), Sue Kim provides a detailed breakdown of the various ways in which the species and ethnic groups present in the films are textually and visually coded as specific real-world racial or ethnic groups. By synthesizing the work of others on the topic of racial coding, Kim provides an incredibly thorough picture of the phenomenon, and her work is exemplary of the kind of work this dissertation builds on. She looks at the costuming and casting choices made in the films, as well as the narrative presentation of

different species and the relationships between them, to show that the films' irredeemably evil and monstrous species (orcs, goblins, and *Uruk-hai*) are heavily racialized while the "good" species are invariably white. She also touches on the more literal depiction of race in the form of the "evil" human races, who are all portrayed as either explicitly non-white or implied to be so through cultural and geographic signifiers.

The *Warcraft* franchise is in a similar, if inverted, situation – it has been the subject of extremely extensive academic analysis, including through a racial lens, but that analysis has been almost entirely focused on the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, which has been the primary form of the franchise since its release in 2004. My analysis, while touching on *WoW*, focuses more on the earlier games in the series, especially 2002's *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, which has not received any serious academic attention.[5] So, whereas in the case of *Rings of Power* I use the existing research on *The Lord of the Rings* as a foundation and background to build on, in the case of *Warcraft* I am in a position to fill in a gap in the historical context for an otherwise thorough body of work.

Of the many analyses of race in *World of Warcraft*, a few stand out as particularly relevant. Melissa J. Monson's *Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft* (2012) is an analysis of the multiple ways in which *WoW* creates a fundamentally racial ontology for its fictional setting[6], as well as, notably, how real-life white supremacist groups have recognized the (almost certainly unintentional) elements of their own ideology present in the game's setting

[5] My reasoning for focusing on this particular entry is explained in more detail in the Cases section of the proposal, but in brief, *World of Warcraft* is both already thoroughly analyzed by other authors and due to its nature as an ever-evolving online game has a much less clear narrative and thematic throughline to analyze. *Warcraft III*, on the other hand, is structurally much more of a classic linear fantasy narrative, making its themes and implications much easier to untangle and interpret.

[6] Similarly to Mills's work on Tolkien, mentioned earlier, although Monson is less scathing in her condemnation.

(Monson, 2012: 63). In his dissertation, *Why the Humans Are White: Fantasy, Modernity, and the Rhetorics of Racism in World of Warcraft* (2010), Christopher Jonas Ritter focuses on each of *WoW*'s playable races (or in my terminology, species[7]) in turn and breaks down the apparent real-life ethnicities that they are racially coded as, looking at their in-game culture, architecture, languages, physical appearance, and backgrounds[8]. This work has proven especially useful to me as it allows me to avoid having to demonstrate the very presence of racial coding in the *Warcraft* setting from scratch, giving me more room to focus on the specific kind of racial coding I'm interested in – the *relational* kind[9]. Finally, in *Digital Elves as Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgement and Avoidance* (2012), Nathaniel Poor looks at how one staple species of the fantasy genre – elves – has been depicted as a racial Other in multiple fantasy video game franchises, including *WoW*. By tracking the evolution of tropes associated with elves across multiple decades of the fantasy genre (Poor, 2012: 380-383), Poor's work proves to be a valuable resource for my own analysis.

Finally, there are my literary cases – Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archive* series, Hobb's *Soldier Son* trilogy, Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, and Addison's *The Goblin Emperor*. Perhaps somewhat ironically given their nature as written works, these cases have had much less written *about* them compared to the others, and less still about the topics of race and colonialism within them. Helen Young, whose other work is quite essential to this dissertation, has written an analysis of themes of colonialism in *Soldier Son* (Young, 2014), which is where the existing literature on the topic seems to begin and end. It is quite a thorough analysis, however, and is almost enough to

[7] See section on "Theoretical framework"
[8] For instance, the Tauren are coded as Native American, the Trolls as Caribbean and Mesoamerican, and the Draenei as Jewish.
[9] Elaborated in the Theoretical Framework section.

make my contribution superfluous, but I believe Young does not adequately critique the final chapters of the narrative, which cast the rest of the trilogy in a very different (and potentially more troubling) light than she ends up doing. Namely, in the trilogy's final act Hobb abandons the perspective of the colonized, indigenous population in the setting entirely, and firmly positions them as "Other" to both the reader and the point of view character, despite doing the opposite for much of the narrative – the fact that the story ends in this manner seems retroactively relevant for an analysis of themes of colonialism and racial othering in the trilogy as a whole. In addition, while Young quite thoroughly analyzes the ways in which Hobb tackles the structures of systemic racism and colonialism, I focus more on the way the work disrupts ideas about race and species as ontological categories.

The lack of extensive literature about *Soldier Son* is not surprising. While Hobb is something of a household name within the fantasy genre, that is almost entirely due to her other, much larger and more well-known series, *Realm of the Elderlings* (1995-2017), with *Soldier Son* often being neglected in favor of it. A similar lack of critical coverage for Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive* is a bit harder to explain, as it is arguably the most successful and largest work by one of the most well-known names in contemporary fantasy. Perhaps the series, which began in 2011, is still too new to have garnered much attention in academic circles. As it stands, the literature specifically dealing with race and colonialism in *Stormlight* is seemingly limited to Sigurd Sigmo Dahle's Master's thesis, *Slavery and Imperialism in Fantasy Fiction: A Study of Oppression in "The Great Hunt" and "The Way of Kings"* (2021), half of which is devoted to the first *Stormlight* book. It provides a very thorough analysis of the way *The Way of Kings* deals with these themes (Dahle, 2021), but is obviously limited by the fact that it does not incorporate later books in the

series (which, as I demonstrate in chapter 3, significantly alter the series' narrative about slavery, race, and colonialism).

Addison's novel has likewise seen little serious study through a racial lens. One exception to this is a brief article pontificating on *The Goblin Emperor*'s relationship to Tolkien's racial worldbuilding by Tolkien scholar Robin Reid (2022), which is limited by its very short length and therefore unable to really delve deeply into the racial politics at play in Addison's work. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy has been the subject of a bit more scholarly work, possibly due to the series' record-breaking critical acclaim (being, for instance, the first series to win three consecutive Best Novel awards at the prestigious Hugo awards for speculative fiction), but most of that work has either focused on the novel's environmental themes, reading it primarily as an allegory on climate change and the ways both its causes and unequally distributed effects are intertwined with colonialism and systemic racism (Iles 2019), or it has focused on Jemisin's innovative use of perspective shifts, combining first, second, and third person narration, and ways in which this literary technique is used to enhance a narrative about race and slavery (Wickham, 2019). Both of these perspectives are valuable – even vital – for the work of this dissertation, but they also both focus on the situation as it is within the novel's setting at the time of the story, the fictional *status quo* of Jemisin's world that is disrupted as the trilogy progresses. What has thus far gone under-explored, and what I focus on in my work, is the fictional *history* of the novel's world, and the way it uses its fantastical setting to challenge hegemonic narratives of race and empire in the real world.

Literature about race in fantasy in general

In addition to these works relating directly to specific primary cases, there is a larger body of work on the subject of race and colonialism in the fantasy genre in general. The critical lenses honed on Tolkien's work and a few other "classics" of fantasy have since turned to the rest of the genre, tracking overarching patterns of troubling racial implications not only in individual works, but across the whole body of western fantasy literature. Most notably among such analyses, Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2016) represents the most thorough exploration of the topic thus far. Young locates the origins of fantasy's troubled relationship to race in the history of genre, as well as the real-world history the genre tends to draw from, before explaining the ways in which modern works of fantasy are burdened by a legacy centering white bodies, voices, and narratives (Young, 2016: 10-11). Her term for this – *habits of whiteness* – describes the ways in which the fantasy genre is limited by ways in which its identity and history was formed. Young also looks at some recent attempts by fantasy authors to break free of these habits, as well as the general climate within the community of fantasy writers and readers in the 21st century (Young, 2016: Ch. 7) – an analysis which provides the necessary cultural context for my own work. She finds plenty of examples of very positive changes in the ways the genre depicts racial difference, colonialism, and empire – but she doesn't really touch on the human / non-human divide that I am interested in. Instead, she focuses primarily on the genre's depictions of real-life racial groups, as well as the broader political climate within the genre's various communities. Young's work is one of the main theoretical sources for this dissertation, as her theoretical framework lays out many of the tools I make use of, although I use them to zero in on a slightly different question.

Besides Young, similar work has been done by a few other authors. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2011) focuses on the depiction of characters of color (with a special focus on Black female characters) within popular fantasy franchises (Thomas 2011). She concludes that there is what she refers to as an "imagination gap" (ibid.: 5-7) among writers, publishers, critics, and fans, on which she blames a lot of the severe deficiencies in the depictions of characters of color in popular franchises. This is similar, I find, to Young's notion of "habits," pointing to a failure to imagine different racial worlds than the one we live in, or the ones the fantasy genre is used to. While my own work is focused on racial coding rather than actual depictions of real-life racial groups, Thomas's work provides a valuable point of comparison when I need to demonstrate that there are parallels between the genre's depictions of non-human characters and racialized humans, and the concept of an "imagination gap" will also prove useful.

John Henry Rumsby's dissertation, *Otherworldly Others: Racial Representation in Fantasy Literature* (2017), focuses on finding ways the genre could evolve past the *habits* Young noted, and includes Rumsby's own attempt at writing such a work of fantasy fiction (Rumsby, 2017). In the process, he traces the roots of many of the racist and colonialist ideas present in classic fantasy fiction.

Most of these texts, however, focus on the extremes – either the legacy of a genre deeply steeped in racism and colonialism that continues to reproduce pernicious tropes and narratives about racialized Others (Young 2016; Thomas 2011), or the ways in which a newer, more diverse crop of fantasy authors is challenging and overthrowing this legacy in their work (Young 2014;

Iles 2019, arguably Reid 2020)[10]. But there is a wide gulf between these two extremes, a gulf that my research slots into. Here there are works that both challenge *and* reproduce the problematic tropes of the genre, which cannot be as easily categorized because they exist with one foot in fantasy's past and one in the present. These works attempt to turn the racist narratives of old on their head by depicting the evils of oppression and encouraging audiences to sympathize with the downtrodden and subaltern, but still end up making the oppressors and colonizers more relatable than their victims by making the former human and the latter not. Thus, what I view to be the "missing piece" in the existing literature on the topic is an examination of the relative, relational placement of the human and non-human in these narratives, and the possible implications of that placement.[11]

Finally, there is a body of texts which does not quite fit into any category and stands on its own as a relevant source for this dissertation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's work on *Monster Theory* (1996), although primarily focused on the genre of horror, has a lot of overlap with depictions of the nonhuman in fantasy. His seven theses for understanding cultures through the lens of the monsters they invent are not universally applicable to fantastical species, but several of them are – in particular thesis IV: "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference" (Cohen, 1996: 7). In articulating this point, Cohen looks at the history of monstrous figures which represent anxieties and fears about racial, cultural, and gendered Others. Cohen's point about "one kind of difference [becoming] another […] abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster" (ibid.: 11) is an especially great description of precisely what happens in many fantasy narratives with

[10] Reid 2020 is particularly interesting in this regard as she talks about modern reimaginings of classic fantasy (specifically Tolkien) not by newer published authors, but by writers of Tolkien fanfiction – a case of Tolkien's own biggest fans responding critically to the racial ideologies inherent in his work.
[11] Referring here to both meanings of "humanity," as defined later in the Theoretical Framework section.

nonhuman species: differences within the human race of the real world turn into differences between entirely different kinds of being when transcribed into the realm of the fantastic - the racialized Other becomes the inhuman, monstrous Orc (or Goblin, or Elf, or anything else a given work of fantasy uses to signify Otherness).

The other related work is Mabel Moraña's *The Monster As War Machine* (2018), which is a much broader and more extensive look at the figure of the monster in culture in general, and in Latin America in particular. Much like Cohen's work, many of Moraña's points are not directly applicable to my notion of the non-human in fantasy, but Chapter 7, "Monsters on the Margin," definitely is. Here Moraña draws a direct connection between the colonized and marginalized "Other" and "monstruous" figures such as "Amazons, cannibals, [and] zombies" (Moraña, 2018: 268). She focuses in particular on those places where the lines drawn by colonialism are blurred – between those deemed civilized, human, and those deemed savage, less-than-human, or between what is deemed natural and what is deemed artificial – as the primary locus of monstrosity; in this way her notion of the monster is similar to Haraway's famous *cyborg*, as Moraña herself points out (ibid.: 278). This articulation of the monstruous as arising from such places of contradiction provides a useful backdrop for my own discussion of the species and characters in fantasy who are simultaneously human (in one sense of the word) and not (in another)[12].

[12] See Theoretical Framework for my explanation of the two senses of humanity

Methodology

This dissertation is, by its very nature, an interdisciplinary project. The theoretical lenses through which I analyze my primary sources incorporate elements of Critical Race Theory and Black feminism (to frame my analysis of the fundamental nature of race as a category, and what it means for certain subjects to be racialized within a narrative, as well as the critical role of gender in creating race and vice versa), as well as Postcolonial theory and Indigenous history (to draw on historically grounded understandings of colonial violence and discourse, which play a significant role in my analysis of many of my primary sources). My methods need to be varied to account for the different mediums of my sources. For both the literary and non-literary sources, I focus primarily on a narrative textual analysis of the sources, because what I am interested in exploring is a particular kind of narrative being told within works of contemporary fantasy. Audio-visual elements still play a role in my analysis, however, as they can certainly contribute to explicit or implicit racial coding of non-human species (e.g., through accent, facial features, elements of cultural dress, etc.). When it comes to the video games specifically, elements of gameplay are only relevant insofar as they impact the narrative framing of certain characters or groups, which is to say the primary gameplay element to look out for is the positionality of the player (or player character) in relation to these characters or groups (e.g., what species is the player meant to identify with? Which species are interacted with primarily through violence or conflict, and which through conversation or other friendly interactions?). In doing so, I am essentially be employing a version of Penix-Tadsen's (2016) "cultural ludology" approach – focusing on "the analysis of video games as such, attending to the myriad ways culture is incorporated into game mechanics, but at the same time [recognizing] the signifying potential of the cultural environment in which games are created,

designed, manufactured, purchased, played, and otherwise put to use" (Penix-Tadsen, 2016: 3). After all, that is my only real interest in analyzing these sources – the ways in which they have been shaped by, and are reflective of, the cultural discourses around race within the society that produced them.

My use of non-literary cases does come with some caveats. There is a broad spectrum of theory and methodology that has been developed for analyzing both film and video games, and it is not really feasible for me to properly utilize such disparate methods and adequately incorporate them in the scope of a single dissertation, nor would I want to; the end result would doubtless be too unfocused and almost impossible to turn into a holistic whole. As such, I focus my own efforts on direct analysis of the textual and narrative elements of the works in question, essentially treating them as primarily written works, while relying on secondary sources where necessary (and available) to cover other elements of the works (such as visuals, audio, costuming, or gameplay). My cases were selected with this limitation in mind, and all contain plenty of textual and narrative elements useful for my analysis.

Units of analysis

The units of analysis for this project are individual fantasy narratives, which can take the form of individual pieces of media – books, movies, video games, etc. – or larger series or franchises consisting of many individual pieces of media. In such cases, I might differentiate between individual works within a series or franchise if the case demands it, or I might treat the whole series or franchise as a single narrative. Which case receives which treatment is entirely dependent on the nature of the case in question, as some of the cases make a more holistic whole

than others. There are also some series or franchises where I only include some entries in my analysis, because only some entries actually feature elements relevant to the topic of this dissertation.

The choice to use sources belonging to different mediums was a difficult one. My original intention was to focus only on literature, but I found that this choice carried unintended implications – namely, that there was something unique or specific to fantasy *literature* about this research topic, which I do not believe to be the case. It also excluded a couple of cases that are ideally suited for illustrating the specific theses of this project. By including a broad range of primary sources from different mediums I am able to more clearly focus on what I view as commonalities across the genre as a whole, rather than specific attributes of given mediums. This also informs my choice to largely focus my analysis on narrative elements, as opposed to elements specific to mediums such as film or games, because clear, textual narrative is what all of my sources have in common, as do most works in the fantasy genre.

The literary and film sources I read and watched directly for my analysis; the video games I likewise played myself. As such, I have first-hand experience of the intended means of experiencing these narratives, which I can incorporate into my analysis as and when it seems appropriate. The exception to this is the very first *Warcraft* game, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, which I have not been able to get running on my computer or laptop due to the game's age. Instead I rely on second-hand sources in the form of video recordings of the game uploaded to YouTube by various users, as well as those parts of the original game experience that do not require actually running the game program (specifically, the user manual, which has several sections relevant for analysis). This should not have any impact on the analysis, because this particular game plays a small role in the dissertation, and I have also played it myself in the past.

Cases / Primary sources

By its nature, this project requires looking at a wide variety of different narratives, told using different media and artforms. It can never be fully exhaustive – the number of narratives that include some degree of racially coded non-human characters in oppressed or subaltern positions is higher than any individual study could account for, and I can only cover a fragment of the whole. As such, I chose certain exemplary cases to focus my attention on. Each of these has been selected because I believe it illustrates a different angle of the issue at hand, or is best suited for demonstrating a particular aspect of racial coding in contemporary fantasy that I want to focus on. This is also where my decision to look in diverse mediums is helpful – the fact that my cases span across literature, video games, and television will help demonstrate that the threads I follow through all five are relatively widespread across the modern fantasy genre. What follows is a list of cases I examine in the coming chapters. I have also included a list of primary sources in each case. I have chosen to group sources by case rather than by source type, as there are some cases which involve multiple different types of media and it makes more sense to cluster them together.

- The *Stormlight Archive* series, by Brandon Sanderson: 4 novels (*The Way of Kings*, *Words of Radiance*, *Oathbringer,* and *Rhythm of War*) and 2 novellas (*Edgedancer* and *Dawnshard*). This series centers on a narrative of inter-species colonialism, and the ways in which the largely forgotten legacy of that colonialism (which occurred thousands of years before the time the story takes place) comes back to haunt the colonizers. What is most relevant to my analysis is how it obfuscates the exact nature of the historical events from both the characters and the reader for quite some time, only revealing who was the original colonizer and who the victims of colonialism

towards the end of the third novel. In this obfuscation, it plays with genre expectations rooted in the tropes employed by works of fantasy in the past. As such, it represents both a pointed response to racist and colonialist tropes that have become entrenched in the genre, and, as I argue later, a less explicit continuation of some of those tropes through the choice to depict the victims of colonization as non-human. It also represents fantasy's unique ability to challenge not only specific historical narratives (which other genres can do just as well if not better), but also the notion of clear-cut historical narratives in general, especially when all such narratives are colored by the ideological assumptions of the hegemonic culture that produced them.

- The *Soldier Son* trilogy, by Robin Hobb: 3 novels (*Shaman's Crossing*, *Forest Mage,* and *Renegade's Magic*). This source is the most direct and overt in its real-life inspirations, being an all-but-explicit fantasy retelling of the colonization of North America and the genocide of Native Americans, but filtered through the lens of a fictional world and its fictional cultures. What my analysis focuses on is how it problematizes the issue of *humanity*, by choosing to remain fairly vague about whether the colonized peoples of its setting are biologically human or not, with different scenes and plot elements suggesting different answers; it similarly seems to question the real-life category of *race*, depicting it as relative and dependent on perspective. It ultimately seems to reject the question of species and racial differentiation entirely, and with it also rejects narratives of the colonized and racialized as "Other." However, in its choice of primary point of view character, the trilogy still centers whiteness and white perspectives, even as it interrogates and deconstructs the assumptions inherent to such perspectives, and the way the narrative ultimately resolves seems to be a rejection of the deconstruction of racial categories that the rest of the trilogy engages in. Soldier Son is also uniquely suited to my demonstration of how the psychological

concept of schemas relates to the ways in which fiction engages with races, which forms a major part of chapter 3.

- *The Goblin Emperor*, a 2014 novel by Katherine Addison. The smallest of my primary cases, but one which still offers a lot of material to consider when placed in the broader context of the fantasy genre and the other works analyzed in this dissertation. The novel is primarily a story of political intrigue set in the imperial court of an elven empire, told through the eyes of the new emperor, a young man who is half-elf, half-goblin. The way Addison depicts these very traditional fantasy species and their relationship represents a significant departure from genre conventions, and seems designed to bring into question readers' pre-conceived notions about both fantasy species and real-world races. My reading of *The Goblin Emperor* is primarily as a counterpart to *Soldier Son*, with both works representing different ways to accomplish the same thing – the dissolution of entrenched racial categories by writing against the established conventions of the fantasy genre.

- The *Broken Earth* trilogy, by N.K. Jemisin, consisting of three novels: *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*, published in 2015, 2016, and 2017 respectively. The trilogy is a work of post-apocalyptic fantasy, set in a fictional world that has just undergone a cataclysmic series of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes and which seems highly unlikely to remain suitable for life for much longer; it deals heavily with themes of colonialism, empire, resource extraction, and systemic violence and oppression, all of which are ultimately connected to the reasons for the apocalyptic seismic event, even if none of the characters of the novels are aware of it. This "hidden" history of racial and colonial violence that nonetheless informs the present is what makes this trilogy worth analyzing in this dissertation, as it demonstrates the ways in which fully fictional worlds, such as those in many works of fantasy, can be used to explore the nature of historical

narratives, and especially the ways in which those narratives are obfuscated or altered to serve the interests of hegemonic power structures like white supremacy. The trilogy also seems to directly depict the theoretical concept of *homo sacer*, first articulated by Agamben and then elaborated by Black feminist writers and directly linked to race, in a way that feels intentional, although I have no hard evidence for that claim. In general, *Broken Earth* serves the purpose of an exemplary case in this dissertation, a perfectly executed critique of systemic racism which avoids the pitfalls many of the other cases fall into.

- The *Warcraft* franchise, produced by Blizzard Entertainment, consists of three single-player linear narrative games (*Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness*, and *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*) and one massively-multiplayer online game with an ever evolving narrative (*World of Warcraft*). My analysis also includes one *Warcraft* official tie-in novel, *Lord of the Clans* by Christie Golden, as it represents a crucial turning point in the franchise's history vis-à-vis race. This franchise is particularly useful because it allows me to track changes in the depiction of certain narratives over the course of several decades, and its status as a successful mainstream video game franchise not known for particularly daring or unconventional narratives means that its evolution, in broad strokes, follows the evolution of fairly mainstream trends in the genre. The earlier entries in the series depict the relationship between species in a way more in line with traditional Tolkienian fantasy (and in particular with Mills's analysis of Tolkien), but as the franchise evolved, each new entry made this relationship more complicated, culminating in a veritable Gordian knot of inter-species colonization and oppression. It is probably the most difficult on this list to untangle into a single coherent meaning, but it is precisely that ambiguity that makes it an interesting case study. The very different nature of *World of Warcraft* compared to both the rest of this franchise and all the other cases, as a much less linear and ever-evolving

narrative spread out over two decades of updates and patches, also necessitates a different approach to analysis; rather than looking at the minutiae of the game's narrative I instead focus on broader trends in the game's approach to race over time, and contrast them with those present in the earlier entries in the franchise. *World of Warcraft* has also already been the subject of extensive academic analysis, which I rely upon to fill in some of the inevitable gaps left by this "broad strokes" approach to the game's narrative.

- The television series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, produced by Amazon – currently two seasons long. This case is distinct from the others, because it is in very direct and explicit conversation with a work of "classic" fantasy – the quintessential work of classic fantasy, in fact. As elaborated on at length in the literature review, *The Lord of the Rings* and its racial politics have been analyzed by academics and laypeople almost *ad nauseam*, and this new adaptation inevitably has to, at least in part, respond to that existing body of discourse. In the process, *The Rings of Power* also responds – or at least, attempts to respond – to recent trends in fantasy in general. It does this both in regard to the depiction of human races and Tolkien's menagerie of fantastical species, and largely succeeds at the former while fumbling the latter spectacularly in ways that might be more informative for this project than many more successful attempts at reckoning with the genre's legacy of racial coding. In particular, the series' treatment of orcs has been almost entirely overshadowed, in popular discourse about the show's racial politics, by discussion of its casting of actors of color to portray elves, dwarves, hobbits, and humans, and I hope to highlight some of the troubling implications concealed within the orcish subplot – especially the ways in which that plot develops in the show's second season, and what it seems to retroactively imply about the events of the first.

Theoretical framework

Fantasy

Given the focus of this dissertation on the fantasy genre, it might be good to begin with a discussion of that genre as a whole. Trying to provide precise definitions of literary genres is always fraught, and any such definition will inevitably leave out some works that many would include, or include some that many would not. Instead of attempting to set such firm boundaries, I tend to favor the definition set forth by Brian Atteberry, a prominent scholar of fantasy, who defines all literary genres as what he refers to as "fuzzy sets": "categories defined not by a clear boundary or any defining characteristic, but by resemblance to a single core example or group of examples" (Atteberry, 2014: 59). Atteberry lists as his chosen "core examples" the following: "the Romantic and Gothic passion for the supernatural; the Victorian and Edwardian fairy tale revival; such magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Unknown*; the unexpected best-sellerdom of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the paperback book industry's response" (ibid.). It is from this complicated and fractured lineage of influences that the modern western fantasy genre, in large part, draws its inspirations, tropes, and audience expectations, and it is therefore here that we can begin to identify the roots of fantasy's thorny history with race. In addition, my own work is very much in conversation with, and following a long tradition of, critiques of race in Tolkien's work in particular. Many of the racial tropes the modern fantasy genre is simultaneously reproducing and trying to shed are owed in large part to Tolkien's own racial cosmology. As such, it is primarily works that continue this particular fantasy tradition in one way or another that I am interested in.

But even defined as a "fuzzy set," fantasy is a rather broad category, potentially including everything from works set in highly fantastical versions of the "real" world (J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter,* to name the most famous example), to fully fictional worlds that contain almost no fantastical elements (e.g. George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*), to worlds both fictional and highly fantastical (e.g. most of the works of Brandon Sanderson or N.K. Jemisin), and a whole spectrum of works in between and outside of this spectrum. Therefore, I have elected to focus on a more specific subset of fantasy – a subgenre commonly referred to as *secondary world fantasy*, which refers to stories taking place in entirely fictional worlds with no diegetic link to our own. This category is similar to Farah Mendelsohn's concept of "Immersive fantasy," defined as "a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world […] impervious to external influence" (Mendelsohn, 2008: 89). However, Mendelsohn emphasizes the positionality of the reader in relation to the fictional world ("The immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as are those being read about" (ibid.)), whereas I only care about the self-contained nature of the fictional world, and not about the distance or lack thereof created between that world and the reader. This means that there are some select works (what Mendelsohn calls "quest fantasies") which are excluded from her definition but included in mine. *The Lord of the Rings* would, for instance, be excluded from the "Immersive fantasy" – it is written in such a way that the reader is addressed as an inhabitant of our own, modern, world, not of Middle-Earth; but for the purposes of my analysis, this matters less than the fact that the setting of the story is itself a fully realized fictional world.

The reason I choose to focus on fantasy stories set in entirely fictional worlds divorced from reality is that the inclusion of the real world (and, by extension, its existing web of racial and cultural relations) makes any analysis of allegorical or analogous fantastical race relations messier.

For a good example of this, one need only look at the 2017 Netflix film *Bright* (Ayer, 2017), which places a set of traditional fantasy species (orcs, elves, fairies etc.) into modern-day Los Angeles and alternates between depicting the prejudice between them as directly analogous to, and an allegory for, real-life systemic racism (Will Smith's character infamously shouting "Fairy lives don't matter" at one point in the film), and as an entirely parallel system of prejudice and oppression that exists alongside racism against Black and Latino characters but has its own set of internal logics. On the one hand, this makes *Bright* and similar works potentially very interesting for analysis, but at the same time it complicates such analysis, as it is much harder to discern between elements of textual race relations that are the result of fantasy genre tropes, and elements that are directly and intentionally referencing real-life race relations. As such, fantasy set in some version of the "real world," such as *Bright*, would probably be a distinct enough topic to warrant a whole separate dissertation.[13]

Race

Writing about race, in any context, is inherently fraught. Not only because of the political implications inherent in the term, but because the term does not lend itself to easy definition. There are as many conceptions of race as there are theorists of it, and rather than being mutually exclusive, many of them are merely different facets of the same term, simultaneously true but differing in perspective. As my purpose is to analyze my primary cases' connections with race

[13] Other examples of works that fall in the same category as *Bright* include Amazon's series *Carnival Row*, and the HBO series *True Blood*, both of which place fantastical creatures in the "real world" and depict an overlap between real-life racism and fantasy speciesism.

holistically, I do not limit myself to only one concept of race, but utilize multiple. Three in particular stand out as uniquely relevant to my work.

First is what Michael Hardimon terms the "ordinary" concept of race – the one used every day by laypeople, existing outside of both natural and social science, and used to enable "racialized social practices" (Hardimon, 2003: 437). Hardimon identifies three core theses at the center of the ordinary concept of race: that different races are distinguished from each other by visible bodily features (ibid., 442), common ancestry (ibid., 445), and common geographic origin (ibid., 447). This does not necessarily mean that everyone who talks about race as an ordinary term is explicitly and intentionally referring to all three of these theses, but rather that, to the average person, all three are implicitly present. This concept of race is very fluid, able to accommodate both essentialist and antiessentialist conceptions (ibid., 450). It can be compatible with the more complex concepts that will be discussed shortly, such as ideological or systemic accounts, as it makes no claims about the social role of race, merely its nature as a category. At the same time, and for the same reasons, it is perfectly compatible with the most extreme forms of racist thought. While its vagueness makes it less useful in the context of a theoretical study than other, more theoretical concepts of race, it is a vital starting point for understanding how the majority of people – certainly the majority of people in contemporary, majority-white, Western societies – think about race. Within the context of my own work, this means it must be kept in mind when discussing the audience of mass entertainment media, because the majority of that audience is likely to bring something akin to the ordinary concept of race to their reading of these texts. It is also likely to be the understanding of race most of the discussed *authors* have, and thus the understanding of race most likely to influence the creation of their fictional worlds.

Second, there is what I would term the *ideological* account of race, which views race primarily as emerging from a collection of ideas, narratives, discourses, and myths (most originating from European racial thought in the era of colonialism (Gruffydd Jones, 2016: 173)). This includes a very wide range of different sources all coming together to formulate *race* as a useful (to the colonial project) means of categorizing and articulating different human groups. These foundational race myths range from the various "scientific" human taxonomies emerging from natural history and biology, such as those of Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and Kant, which all shared the same "underlying epistemological presuppositions" (ibid., 177) about the necessity of clear classification, to more *theological* approaches, such as the narrative of the "Curse of Ham," which both sought to explain racial difference and justify racial supremacy and enslavement through reference to the Biblical sons of Noah and their different fates (Goetz, 2012: 27). Ideological accounts frame race as existing primarily in the thoughts and beliefs of people; Hardimon's account of the ordinary concept of race, for instance, would be an example (although the ordinary concept of race itself would not). Fantasy being, as it is, a genre all about fictional narratives and mythologies, this conception of race is profoundly relevant to my work, especially when it comes to placing the works I analyze in a wider cultural context and identifying the ways in which they engage (or fail to) with these racial myths. I write about this in greater detail in chapter 1, when discussing the specific racial narratives that the genre is most closely entangled with.

Finally, there are the *systemic* accounts of race, which articulate race not as a category of human beings in and of itself, but as part of a broader system of racial oppression that is present in, and enforced through, practically all elements of social structure. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's account is representative of this – in contrast to an understanding of racism as primarily existing

in people's hearts and minds, he argues that "racism is the product of racial domination projects (e.g. colonialism, slavery, labor migration). Once these racial projects emerged in human history, racism became *embedded* in societies, that is, it became *systemic* racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 20). This system then produced "races", turning the various (previously disparate) peoples of Europe "white", the indigenous peoples of the Americas "Indian", and the many nations and tribes of Africa "Black" (ibid.).

This account of race contains several important theses within it. First, while races were created as ideological constructs, invented basically out of whole cloth, they have become "socially real," and exist in a materialist sense (ibid., 21). Racism is both reproduced by "real actions and practices", and results in very real differences in outcomes for different racial categories – it directly and materially benefits some, while disadvantaging others (ibid.). So, while the classic racist account of race as an essential biological category is obviously wrong, it is actually possible to see significant differences along racial lines – just not essential ones. Gravlee (2009) argues that "ironically, biology may provide some of the strongest evidence for the persistence of race and racism as socio-cultural phenomena" (Gravlee, 2009: 47-48), due to the deleterious effects on both mental and physical health of long-term, multi-generational inequality, oppression, and exploitation. By way of systemically enforcing different economic, environmental, and health outcomes for individuals of different races, racism reifies the invented categories of race, making them into material reality (ibid.). Systemic racism is "a network of social relations at the social, political, economic, and ideological levels that shapes the life chances of the various races" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 21), creating a dominant, privileged group (white people) and various disadvantaged, subordinate ones. Thus race is not some essential quality that is found within an individual or group of individuals, but a *structural relationship* those individuals have with other

individuals, groups, and social systems. This more nuanced understanding of racial difference, which acknowledges it as *both* socially constructed *and* materially real, is necessary for my analysis of the fantasy genre, which often plays with the uncertainty of that distinction with its textual treatment of race.

Second, systemic racism is not an opt-in affair. That is precisely what makes it *systemic* – "all members of the polity participate in the system, whether they like it or not, or are aware of it. This is the nature of systems" (ibid., xvii). "If you are a White [sic] reader," Bonilla-Silva asserts, you belong "to the White team. You were born into that team, raised as a member of that team, and navigate [...] the 'White habitus,' factors which contribute to the solidification of your White subjectivity" (ibid., xviii). There is no escape from this for the vast majority of people, who are raised in a specific racial habitus which configures their self-identity and their relationship to other groups. They are also born with certain racial privileges or disadvantages, which in turn impact the formation of their identity. White people, thus, are "signatories" of what Charles W. Mills famously termed "The racial contract" (Mills, 1997: 12) – the founding (if unspoken) document of much of contemporary Western civilization, ensuring the racial domination and exploitation of non-white peoples by white Europeans and Americans. Importantly for the issue of white complicity and participation in systemic racism, Mills noted that this contract was, among other things, an *epistemological* one, requiring its "signatories" to inflict on themselves "a pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (ibid., 18). This is why Bonilla-Silva says that systemic racism is not about "you as a [white] person," but about "the ways in which racist systems are "expressed in you as an individual living in a racialized society" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: xviii). This understanding of

systemic racism, as something that pervades both the (in)actions of white individuals and of larger social structures built by and for them, without necessitating any explicit racist intent, has proven vital for my analysis of the authorial and industry side of the fantasy genre, as authors, publishers, studios, game developers, and all others involved in the creation of works of fantasy fiction cannot help but inhabit their own specific racial habituses which inform the nature of their work.

Finally, one perspective on race that is worth keeping in mind is that of Molina et al. (2019), who argue that "the racialization and formation of subordinated groups" does not occur in a vacuum, or even only in relation to whiteness, but also "in relation to one another" (Molina et al, 2019: 2). Rather than dividing the world simply into simply binaries of oppressed / oppressor, non-white / white, this *relational* conception of race accounts for the ways in which different racialized groups have different experiences, face different oppressions, have varied relationships to each other and to whiteness, and play different roles in the overall racial structure of systemic racism. "Colonialism and white supremacy have always been relational projects," Molina et al say, "They rely on logics of sorting, ranking, and comparison that produce and naturalize categories of racial difference necessary for the legitimation of slavery, settler colonialism, and imperial expansion" (ibid., 3). By studying racial categories within the context of those settler colonial logics, rather than as discrete entities, we both gain a better understanding of the complex dynamics involved, and avoid accidentally reinforcing the racist view that races are essential categories *sui generis*. "Race is not legible or significant outside a relational context [...] race does not define the characteristics of a person; instead, it is better understood as the space and connections between people that structure and regulate their association. To inhabit, claim, or be ascribed a particular racialized identity or grouping is to be located in an assemblage of historical and contemporary

relationships" (ibid., 6-7). In other words, race is the *effect* of interracial relations, not their cause (ibid.).

Species

Race exists in the real world as a social, cultural, political and economic category – and, importantly, a relational one – rather than a biological one; even if it were theoretically possible to discern physically distinct groups of human beings on genetic grounds, any such division would result in very different categories and boundaries than those circumscribed by our social category of race[14]. Indeed, as Gruffydd Jones (2016) demonstrates, what notions we have of "biological" distinction between races were produced precisely to naturalize the social and political category: "The logic of classification was not only central to the early articulation of a scientific discourse on race, but was also integral to various modes of government which produced social and international orders – as Barnor Hesse has argued, 'epistemological racialization' is inherently related to 'governmental racialization'" (Gruffydd Jones, 2016: 178).

This "real world" concept of race, however, is starkly different from how many works of fantasy fiction depict the groups the genre traditionally labels "races." If the real world concept is hard to define due to the multitude of meanings it has been imbued with, then the fictional concept

[14] Note: when I say "our" or "real world" conceptions of race, I am referring to the cultural context in which both this dissertation and the works being discussed are written – contemporary western societies that have been the most significant beneficiaries of colonialism and white supremacy, and whose conceptions of race were largely formed to support those systems of exploitation and extraction. I recognize that there are other, alternative cultural conceptions of these categories in other parts of the world, but this is the one that represents the "real world" from which contemporary western authors are writing, and from which I am approaching my analysis – and also, frankly, the one that has most thoroughly defined global racial dynamics across the board thanks to imperial conquest and colonization.

is even more so, as every work of fiction that deals in it produces another distinct meaning for the word. As mentioned previously, there is an established tradition within the fantasy genre of using the term "race" to refer to all different forms of sapient, humanoid life, such as elves, dwarves, orcs, and goblins. Unlike real-world racial categories, here the physical, biological difference tends to be unquestionable, and often even more exaggerated than the wildest claims of any 18th century race scientist – not even Karl Linnaeus claimed that any one race of humans was biologically immortal, for instance, while this is a common trait associated with elves and similar "races" across the fantasy genre. There would be potential benefits to my dissertation if I were to use this common fantasy parlance, and refer to these fictional beings as "races" – it makes the connection with real-life race relations much clearer, and it emphasizes the shared (metaphorical, see below) *humanity* of the groups involved. However, it is also potentially a source of confusion and could be detrimental to the clarity of my arguments, since both this fantastical meaning of the term, and the more mundane meaning will come up quite often in this dissertation, and distinguishing between them is vital. After all, the very thing I want to draw attention to more than anything is the way in which these fantasy "races" imply a biological basis for race, something that the real-life concept of race decidedly *does not have*.

As such, I use the term "species" to designate these different fantastical groups, and the term "race" to refer to the different racial groups that exist within humanity in the real world. There are several good reasons to do this: First, it allows for greater clarity in writing, as using "race" for both categories would get confusing quickly when talking about the complex relationships between the two. Second, it maintains a clear terminological distinction between "race" and any implication of true biological difference, which is very important as to do otherwise would be at best ethically irresponsible. Third, it is more accurate to how these groups are typically depicted

in works of fantasy – most fantasy species have explicitly different origins without even the kind of common ancestry many real-life animal species share; different fantasy species might be created by different supernatural means, for instance, or even hail from entirely different planets, making the term "race" taxonomically inaccurate. "Species" is also not perfectly accurate, at least going by the common definition that requires the inability to produce fertile offspring through inter-species breeding, since many fantasy narratives (indeed, all of the ones I cover in detail in this dissertation) feature at least some species that are able to have children with each other. As this is not a dissertation on biology, real or fantastical, taxonomical accuracy is a minor quibble at best, so the other arguments in favor of using the word "species" easily win out.

Racial Coding

But how are real-world races and the non-human species of fantasy fiction even related? This is where the concept of racial coding comes in. When referring to racial coding of non-human species, I am not necessarily implying that a given fictional species is coded with the traits of any one specific real-life racial group or culture. That was certainly a common enough model of racial coding in older fantasy, and continues to be present in much of modern fantasy.[15] This kind of coding is certainly present in many of the examples I analyze, with fictional species taking physical, cultural, and linguistic traits from either real-world racial and ethnic groups, or in more pernicious cases from crude and reductive stereotypes of those groups. This is also what is usually colloquially meant by "racial coding" when discussing works of fiction, especially those involving non-human characters who don't already have obvious human racial identities. However, there is

[15] See the long history of analyses of race in Tolkien in the literature review section.

another kind of racial coding that is present within the modern fantasy genre, which has received less academic attention. This coding is of a *relational* form, mirroring real-world inter-racial and inter-cultural relations (specifically, ones of oppression, colonization, conquest, and genocide) without either party strictly representing any real-world group, but merely the relative positionalities of real-world groups within racialized and colonial systems of power and hegemony. In other words, it is not necessarily the fantastical species that are racially coded in and of themselves, but the relations between them are.

The quickest way to illustrate this distinction is with a concrete example, taken from one of my primary sources: in the *Warcraft* franchise, the Troll species is explicitly coded as a racist stereotype of Caribbean culture, speaking with Jamaican accents, practicing "voodoo" and worshipping "Loa," along with more pernicious tropes such as cannibalism and headhunting. This is an example of the "standard" model of racial coding, where a fantastical species is directly coded as a specific real-world race or culture[16]. The Orc species in the same setting, on the other hand, does not have such direct markers connecting them to any given real-life group, but, as I explore in greater detail in chapter 2, at various points in the narrative play the role of both "Oriental invaders," being an alien group of "savage" conquerors arriving from the Southeastern corner of the map and burning and pillaging the European-coded human kingdoms, and the role of enslaved and colonized victims, spending a period of time in brutal human-run internment camps and used for slave labor until they manage to liberate themselves and go on a religiously-inspired exodus to a distant promised land. In this way, while not directly and explicitly referencing physical, cultural, or character traits associated with any of these groups, they at various points fill *roles* within the

[16] Also quite similar to a much more well-known, arguably fantasy example – that of the *Star Wars* prequel film trilogy, and the character of Jar-Jar Binks, who was reminiscent of minstrel show racial caricatures.

fictional interracial dynamics of *Warcraft* which might be loosely analogous to Muslim invaders in the fearful fantasies of medieval Europeans, to enslaved Africans, and even to Biblical Hebrews. Rather than being coded as any individual real group, they are instead coded merely as the vague notion of the Other in relation to the implicitly white and European subject.

While less overt and obvious than the direct racial coding shown in the example of the trolls, this kind of relational coding can actually be a more accurate portrayal of the realities of race – as Molina and Martinez HoSang point out, it is in the relations between racial groups, and not in the superficial traits associated with specific groups, that "race" is actually constructed and made legible, and it is only in the form of those relations that race meaningfully exists (see above). So by being coded into a relational positionality analogous to that of a real-world racial or ethnic group, it could be argued that a fantastical species *is*, in fact, being directly coded as that racial or ethnic group, even if it has none of the traits of the group in question. While this might be true in terms of the end result, I believe there is still a meaningful difference between these two approaches to coding, because the latter implies a greater understanding of the complex social and political dynamics inherent in racial categorization, while the former merely reproduces racial essentialism. This makes relational coding a potentially far more potent tool for telling narratives that directly challenge hegemonic structures of racial inequality – but also a more subtle and harder to identify one for reinforcing those same structures.

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive concepts – indeed, it is fairly common for both forms of racial coding to be present to some extent. To use another example, the Gernians in the *Soldier Son* trilogy are directly coded as white Europeans from the Colonial era – they have the requisite physical features, their language and naming conventions are rooted in European linguistic lineages, their religion, architecture, clothing, and culture are all familiar to anyone who

knows European history; however, they are also *relationally* coded as white Europeans, insofar as they are a colonial force that ruthlessly conquers and subjugates other groups, and do so with the aid of superior technology and military might, in the name of both resource extraction and religious evangelism. The same is true of the Plainspeople in the same story, who are doubly coded as Native Americans. The presence of such double coding does not, in my view, add anything that is not already accounted for by the sum of its parts, other than making the intentionality behind the coding much more explicit and clear – but it is still worth noting that we are talking about two parallel approaches that can and do coexist, rather than an oppositional binary.

The human and the non-human

Finally, there is the issue of humanity – and by extension, non-humanity. This is a complex topic, made more so by the fact that this dissertation attempts to synthesize two distinct meanings of the term. On the one hand, there is the literal meaning, *humanity* as mere biological belonging to the species *homo sapiens*. This is the kind of humanity absent from what I am calling "non-human species" in works of fantasy: elves, orcs, and the like. On the other hand, there is the humanity that is denied to groups of (otherwise biologically quite human) people systemically as part of hierarchical social structures, humanity defined not by biology but by the value placed on individual lives and experiences.

This latter kind of "human" has been the subject of extensive exploration by theorists from very different fields. It is what Sylvia Wynter calls "Man," or "our present ethnoclass (i.e. Western

bourgeois) conception of the human" (Wynter, 2003: 260) – a conception that implicitly or explicitly excludes vast swaths of the Earth's population on racialized and colonial grounds. In essence, what Wynter and others have argued is that the figure of the human as established by white, European culture is one that is, itself, white and European (and, often, male and heterosexual), leaving everyone else on the fringes of "humanity," or outside it entirely. This in turn allowed for a whole new discourse to emerge that was used to justify the violence and exploitation of colonialism and slavery – the "by-nature difference" between "monkeys and men" of colonial lexicons (ibid.: 264). This discourse has been observed by many critical theorists of colonialism, most notably by Edward Said: "a white middle-class Westerner believes it his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world but also to own it, just because by definition "it" is not quite as human as "we" are" (Said, 1977: 109). Thus was the notion of the "human" – and the possibility of exclusion from it – weaponized to justify atrocity.

These two meanings of the word are separate, but interconnected – after all, the sociopolitical denial of the latter kind of humanity to racial minority groups has often been enacted through the "scientific" denial of the former. One need not look very hard in the annals of racist propaganda to find imagery and language comparing various racial groups marked as "Other" to animals or inhuman monsters, from White supremacist associations between Black people and monkeys or apes, to Nazi comparisons of Jews and other "undesirables" to rats or cockroaches. This also connects directly with the race/species distinction presented above, because while the idea that all humans are the same "species" but belong to different "races" is pretty universally accepted today, with all the attendant baggage that Hardimon's "ordinary" concept of race implies, this was not always the case. In the heyday of colonial racial "science," there were many who fervently argued for human polygenesis (i.e. the idea that human races were in fact distinct species

with separate origins). Famous 19th century biologist Louis Agassiz insisted that Black and white people belonged to separate species, citing primarily his subjective "feeling" of difference when encountering Black people (Roberts, 2011: 32), and used this polygenic hypothesis as the basis for opposing any attempt to create racial equality or permit interracial procreation (ibid, 33). Samuel Morton, known for his racial taxonomies based on phrenological studies of skull shapes, likewise insisted that the four categories of humanity he identified were in fact different species, and that in time people of mixed race would prove to have reduced fertility, thereby proving his claims (ibid, 34). This, obviously, did not happen. So entrenched was this belief in humans being divided into multiple species that one of the most prominent sources of opposition to Darwin's evolutionary theory was abject horror at the very implication that "blacks and whites [would] find a common ancestor," with a contemporary of Darwin's remarking that to even suggest such a thing would lead to expulsion from most academic institutions (ibid.). This muddying of the race/species distinction was of course an attempt to literally *dehumanize* populations that were targeted for systemic exploitation and subjugation – by suggesting that they are *not actually human*.

Many authors, especially in fields such as Black feminism and Critical race theory, have written about the ways in which "humanity," in the metaphorical sense, is systematically denied to those deemed as Other: Weheliye (2014) argues that the "human" as conceptualized in Western culture is, inherently, a racial category, one that was formed through exclusion – indeed, he defines race itself as "a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye, 2014: 3). This does not refer to literal, biological humanity of course, but it illustrates how the language around race and species is never clear-cut, the two categories always melding into each other in discourses of subjugation and control. In particular, Weheliye brings Agamben's notions of bare life and *homo sacer* into conversation with Black

feminist and Critical race theory in a way that is especially relevant for my analysis. Curry (2017) brings in the vital dimension of gender, arguing that the denial of normative (i.e. white) gender to racialized people is a vital part of denying them full humanity (Curry, 2017: 6-7) – that the category of "human" has been defined with certain gendered forms of existence in mind, and that to exist outside those forms, whether by choice or through structural denial, is to exist outside the category of "human".

Finally (or perhaps better: firstly, since her work predates all of the above except Said's), Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (1989) demonstrates the ways in which (white) Western discourses about non-human animals (in particular, primates) are wrapped up in highly racialized notions of what it means to be 'human', due to a long history of people of color being "constructed as objects of knowledge as 'primitives,' more closely connected to the apes than the white 'race'" (Haraway, 1989: 153). When Haraway says that European culture "questioned the humanity" of people of color by connecting them to apes (ibid.: 154), she is using both senses of the word – through an association with literal non-humanity, their metaphorical humanity was also questioned, allowing and justifying their treatment as subhuman. Relevantly for my own work, Haraway also demonstrates how the depiction of the non-human in fiction (in this case, 1933's *King Kong* (ibid.: 160-162)) can be read as a representation of (white) society's anxieties, fears, and beliefs about the racial other.

For the sake of clarity, I use the terms "literal" and "metaphorical" humanity for the two concepts that the term "humanity" typically signifies, with literal humanity referring to biological belonging to the species *homo sapiens*, and metaphorical humanity referring to what Wynter et al. argue has been denied to marginalized and subaltern populations and individuals. The troubled space between these two humanities is where so many contemporary fantasy stories seem to exist,

creating literally non-human species and then going to great lengths to metaphorically *humanize* them. While this is seemingly an effort to combat dehumanization in general, through showing the inherent *humanity* of even the literally non-human, it is also complicated by the fact that we colloquially use the same word to refer to both concepts. This results in some of these narratives drawing a connection between the literally non-human within the fantasy world, and metaphorically dehumanized groups in the "real" world, which in turn (presumably unintentionally, or even directly counter to intention) reinforces a form of dehumanization. This complexity is what many of the primary sources considered in the following chapters seek, with varying levels of success, to navigate.

CHAPTER 1:

Of Myths and Habits

The Racial Politics of Fantasy

When observing any of the many recent racist backlashes against racial diversity in popular works of fiction – like the one regarding *The Rings of Power* elaborated on in the introduction – one begins to notice certain patterns. First, many of the most prominent such backlashes involve specifically works of fantasy: Amazon's *The Rings of Power* and *The Wheel of Time* series, Netflix's *The Witcher*[17] series, the latest *Star Wars* film trilogy (episodes VII-IX) and the various Disney+ series that followed it[18], HBO's *House of the Dragon*[19], and even the somewhat more niche case of the *Lord of the Rings*-themed expansion pack for the popular trading card game *Magic: The Gathering*[20]. The fact that so many similar controversies center on works of art falling under the broad umbrella of fantasy is surely not a coincidence. Rather, it is merely a continuation

[17] See: Nakamura, Reid. 2018. *'The Witcher' Showrunner Takes Twitter Hiatus Over Diverse Casting Backlash*. Posted on: www.thewrap.com. https://www.thewrap.com/the-witcher-showrunner-takes-twitter-hiatus-over-racial-casting-backlash/ (last accessed: 1/25/2025). Note that this example shows racist backlash before any actual casting decisions had even been made, instead being in response to the mere possibility of a non-white actress being cast.

[18] For the most recent of countless such incidents in relation to Star Wars in particular, see: Deggans, Eric. 2022. *Racist 'Star Wars' fans aren't new. Why doesn't Disney do more to protect its actors?* Posted on: www.npr.org. https://www.npr.org/2022/06/02/1102509719/star-wars-obi-wan-kenobi-moses-ingram-racist-messages-disney (last accessed: 1/25/2025).

[19] See: Moloney, Charlie. 2022. *Steve Toussaint reveals racist abuse after being cast in House of the Dragon*. Posted on: www.theguardian.com. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/aug/16/steve-toussaint-reveals-racist-abuse-after-being-cast-in-house-of-the-dragon (last accessed: 1/25/2025).

[20] See: Sledge, Ben. 2023. *Magic: The Gathering's Aragorn Backlash Is Just Another Racist Trap*. Posted on: www.thegamer.com. https://www.thegamer.com/magic-the-gathering-aragorn-backlash-another-racist-trap/ (last accessed: 1/25/2025)

of a conversation the fantasy genre has been having with itself for a very long time, one about fantasy's place in shifting political discourse around race, colonialism, and the Other. Often perceived as a fundamentally "white" genre, in terms of both readership and authorship (Young, 2010: 351), there is a long history of works both reinforcing this perception, and actively working to fight against it. The casting choices in the shows and films listed above seem to be an example of the latter, but the backlash they received also shows that the perception of the genre's "Caucasian persuasion" (ibid.) is not entirely unwarranted either.

The second pattern is that most of the most prominent examples of such backlash do not relate to totally original intellectual properties, but rather to adaptations of, and sequels to, established and popular franchises. Obviously, part of this is tied to these properties simply garnering more attention in general, and there *have* been significant backlashes to new fantasy stories as well, but I believe there is a qualitative difference in the intensity and type of racist backlash that can be observed when the work that triggers it is connected to a franchise with the weight of established popularity and legacy behind it. This difference can be seen in the kind of language and narratives used by those putting forth these racist criticisms – anecdotally, I have seen countless posts on social media referring to the casting of actors of colors in *Rings of Power* as "disrespectful" to Tolkien's mythos, or even "blasphemous", and treating Tolkien's work itself as a kind of semi-sacred text, a foundational document of Western civilization. Likewise for the other works listed, despite the works being adapted or expanded on being far younger than Tolkien's, and therefore much harder to argue as *foundational* to anything. This, too, is a continuation of an older discourse – one about fantasy as the locus for the (re)creation of myths, both ancient and modern. Indeed, fantasy is arguably one of the primary arenas in which "competing claims about myth can be contested and different relationships with myth tried out"

(Attebery, 2014: 20) – and this includes not only what we traditionally think of as "myth" (ancient religious stories, cultural narratives about creation and the supernatural, etc.) but also more "mundane" mythical narratives, such as colonial narratives of manifest destiny or racial superiority.

In this chapter, I look at both of these factors – the "whiteness" of the genre as a whole, and the genre's relationship to mythmaking, racial and otherwise – individually, before synthesizing them into a theoretical understanding of fantasy's relationship to race that will form the framework for all of the following chapters.

The Racial Habitus of the Fantasy Genre

To say that the fantasy genre has a whiteness problem is to repeat what countless voices have been saying, both in academia and in various fantasy fandom communities, for decades. As Ebony Elizabeth Thomas so poignantly puts it, "when people of color seek passages into the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred" (Thomas, 2019: 2), a statement that has historically been true both literally – as authors of color were often hamstrung by limited access to funding, publication, etc. – and figuratively, as readers of color picking up most fantasy books would find themselves at best absent from the pages, and at worst rendered in racist stereotype. Thomas ascribes this to an "imagination gap" among both white writers and readers of fantasy, who are unable to imagine non-white faces on their fantastical heroes, or accept any criticism of

their portrayals of non-white people (ibid., 6-7). I am not sure if it is fair to say this is more of a problem for fantasy than for other genres – fantasy's sister genres of science fiction, horror, and romance, for instance, also regularly experience similar well-founded critiques – but it certainly *is* a problem. The reasons for this range from the history of the genre, to its current systemic position, to the racial makeup of its authors and audiences, which itself stems from the previous factors.

Historically speaking, the foundational texts from which much of contemporary Western fantasy draws its roots were extremely white – not just in that they were written by white authors for white audiences, but also that they were deeply rooted in white supremacist mythologies and completely bereft of non-white heroic characters. When Brian Attebery lists exclusively white European and American narratives – "the Romantic and Gothic passion for the supernatural; the Victorian and Edwardian fairy tale revival; such magazines as *Weird Tales* and *Unknown*; the unexpected best-sellerdom of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the paperback industry's response" (Attebery, 2014: 44) as the foundational texts of the genre, the ones he uses to define fantasy itself using his "fuzzy set" approach (detailed previously), he is not wrong. While there have always, of course, been non-white authors writing fantasy, as well as fantasy being written in cultural contexts other than the Euro-American Anglosphere, these authors have rarely found themselves included in the foundational canon of the genre, and their works have thus not had nearly as much influence on shaping both the genre's public perception, and it's self-perception, as the works listed above. This, combined with the more general economic and social systemic obstacles for aspiring authors of color that were even more entrenched in the early days of the genre than they are today, led to an environment where the communities of both fantasy authors and nascent fantasy fandoms were predominantly white. As Bonilla-Silva says, one of the main ways in which systemic racism is maintained and reproduced is through the maintenance of single-

race social circles – "it should surprise no one that individuals who live together, are friends with one another, marry one another, and go to church together, among other things, develop similar views about those who do not live with them, are not their friends, partners, and spouses, and whom they do not see in church, synagogue, or temple" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 21). Fantasy authorial and fan communities are not defined by such physical, geographical proximity, but if one replaces the list of common activities in the above quote with "write together, read the same books and discuss them, talk only to each other about their fictional interests, read the same magazines and publications, and go to the same fan conventions or writing retreats," one begins to get a picture of how the early fantasy genre ended up self-reinforcing and reproducing its own overwhelming whiteness.

Of course, fantasy is no longer quite as much of a "white boys' club," with a boom in more diverse authors and readers occurring in recent decades, but in many ways, the damage has already been done. The fantasy genre is not just a collection of texts, it also has its own *culture*, which "places textual practices within a wider set of social processes that include not only Fantasy conventions, but the behaviors of authors and audiences, the ideological arguments that circulate around the texts, and the meaning and location of Fantasy within a political economy" (Young, 2016: 5). So the genre has its own distinct culture – and cultures do not transform overnight simply because new people join them. Instead, the culture of fantasy has its entrenched conventions – or "habits," "automatic, unthinking repetition[s]" (ibid., 6) – which include both those around textual content and form, and those around which voices are uplifted and seen as default, and which are sidelined and excluded. These are what Young refers to as fantasy's "habits of whiteness," formed in the genre's nascent years and now haunting it, as newer authors and fans alike struggle to break them (ibid., 10). In her account of "habits," Young cites Sara Ahmed, who says "if habits are about

what bodies do, in ways that are repeated, then they might also shape what bodies *can* do," as well as that "spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that 'inhabit' them" (Ahmed cited by Young, 2016: 11). Thus, by being white-dominated for so long, by being inhabited almost exclusively by white bodies and white narratives, the culture of the fantasy genre has to a certain extent become trapped in whiteness. Habits are not fate, of course, and can always be broken, but it is more complicated than simply deciding to do so – if something as vast and made up of as many people as an entire genre of fiction can ever meaningfully be said to have "decided" anything, that is. This is especially true of a genre that remains, despite recent shifts, majority white – and as Bonilla-Silva argues, even white people who are very progressive in their understanding of race are often still stuck in a "white habitus" that "impedes the development of empathy towards people of color and fosters a sense (and the views that accompany this sense) of 'us versus them'" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 188).

Young cites a comment on an online message board from a presumed fantasy fan, in response to an article about the lack of non-white representation in fantasy, which reads in part: "Most of [sic] US book readers and movies [sic] reviewers have absolutely no curiosity or interest in worlds – I wouldn't say alien – but simply non-US cultures; they want to find their own values and frame of mind under fake exotic appearances. And of course those leanings are served, but also generated by political and economic powers [...] I don't see any reason to fight the windmills... unless you are intending to change the very DNA of US culture" (Young, 2016: 179). This comment, if taken as representative of a common viewpoint among many contemporary fantasy fans (which both Young and I consider it to be, based on personal experience), seems to suggest that many are *aware* of the genre's pernicious habits, and even *critical* of them to an extent, but also view them, essentially, as "just the way things are" – something that it is not possible, or worthwhile, to put effort into changing. Never has the term "habit" seemed as appropriate – I am

reminded of several smokers I know, who will openly acknowledge that smoking is harmful and that no one should do it, while in the same breath insisting that it's unfortunately "too late" for them to ever quit.

The quote above shows that the genre-culture of fantasy, and the habits it engenders, extends beyond authors and primary texts, and affects audiences (readers, players, watchers, etc.) as well, especially considering conducive fantasy tales seem to be to the formation of tight-knit fan communities. These communities, and the overall makeup of the genre's audience, are profoundly affected – and indeed, formed – by the habits, racial and otherwise, that fantasy has accumulated over the decades. If the general perception of fantasy for much of its history was that it is of a "Caucasian persuasion" (Young, 2010: 351), that "the doors are barred" (Thomas, 2019: 2) for readers of color, then over time that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, with people of color looking elsewhere to find more welcoming environments, and white readers believing their assumptions about the whiteness of their genre to be validated by the absence of non-white people in their communities. This is eerily similar to what Bonilla-Silva describes as the "racial script" of the "New Racism" in contemporary American society – "most Whites living in segregated communities, having very limited and mostly superficial interactions with people of color, feeling the deep urge to discipline and correct people of color in all kinds of venues and situations, and seldom challenging the racial system that benefits them" (Bonilla-Sila, 2019: xix). This segregation, in turn, "shapes profoundly how you [in context: white people] view race affairs. Your all-White bread diet influences your views and emotions regarding people of color. You hear 24/7 the recycled White noise in the echo chamber you inhabit, which explains why you cannot understand us; why you cannot understand our deep concern with race ('If you guys just stop talking about race all the time, things would be much better')" (ibid., 33).

Many fantasy fandom communities have been, and in some cases continue to be, such echo chambers. The above example of the fantasy fan's patronizing explanation of the inevitability of the genre's whiteness seems like a textbook example of what Bonilla-Silva describes, complete with a supposed bafflement as to why people of color seem to care about this issue so much. Young defines fan communities as "affective networks" (Young, 2016: 169), communities held together by shared affect (or feelings) towards the fantasy works they are built around, towards various authors, towards the genre as a whole, towards each other and members of the same community, and, importantly, towards those perceived as Other to the community, especially those who critique or question the things that the community has cohered around (ibid., 170). This reinforces the homogeneity of these communities, and also forms the lens through which texts are likely to be read by their members. This shared affect, of course, also extends to the genre's conventions and habits – when an affective network forms around a genre, then familiarity and the repetition of established tropes becomes a value in and of itself, and it is not uncommon for works to receive praise from fans just for "feeling like classic fantasy," or conversely criticism for being too different from what the genre has become comfortable with.

What do the habits of whiteness in fantasy look like? First of all, of course, they look like a genre where the majority of published authors are still white, and where the presumed median reader is as well. This affects which books get published, which films and television series get filmed, which video games get funding for development. It affects the content of these texts – texts speaking too explicitly primarily to non-white readers might be expected, by the industry at large, to not sell as well, and therefore never hit the shelves. However, it also influences the content of the texts more subtly, through established genre tropes and conventions; authors of fantasy are, by and large, also readers of fantasy (as is true of any genre), and their ideas of what a fantasy story

looks like are shaped by the countless fantasy stories they have read. If those stories all feature white heroes having adventures in a thinly-veiled medieval Europe, fighting evil hordes of inhuman, often literally dark-skinned creatures invading from the mysterious and foreign East and South, then that will be the sort of story they are likely to produce themselves.

The above is a bit of an extreme example, seldom seen nowadays – partially because the genre at large seems to know better now, and partially because such blatantly Tolkienesque narratives are rightly seen as unoriginal and derivative. But there are subtler tropes that still pervade the genre – essentially evil races, heroism modeled on medieval European knighthood, racial differences depicted as fundamental and genetic (albeit usually not between different *human* races). In order to understand the nature of these narratives, the reasons they can be so toxic when viewed through a racial lens, and the ways in which fantasy reproduces them, it is necessary to understand the complex relationship between the fantasy genre and *myth*.

Fantasy and Myth

In a 1995 article in *Pravoslavlje*, the official bimonthly paper of the Serbian Orthodox Church, theologian Djordje Janic responds to the, at the time recent, publication of several works of historical research that indicated that the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, central to the Church's nationalist mythos, did not actually play out the way that Church doctrine (and the nationalist narrative commonly taught in Serbian schools) would have it. Fascinatingly, Janic does not deny

that the factual historical events differ from his religiously and politically tinged version (which other articles in *Pravoslavlje* were at the time regularly using to provide ideological backing for the genocidal wars in Bosnia and Kosovo itself, among other things).[21] Instead, he asserts that there are "two truths about the Battle of Kosovo. One is the truth of historical science, and the other of national lore […] and this example of Kosovo lets us ask: which of those two truths is closer to God's Truth? What is Truth if not life, and what is the life of a man or a people, if not the Spirit that fills them and guides them into Eternity. Therefore, the only truth of a people can be the one that makes that people alive, meaning the truth that reflects God's law in the life of the people. […] Thus is lore closer to Truth than historical science is. Each new piece of data can change the truth of science; Lore has nothing to change because it is a picture of Divine Truth" (Janic, 1995, translation mine). This quote is, at first glance, largely nonsense; placed in its particular historical context, it is morally abhorrent in its implied politics. And yet it is a common view among many religious people when the narratives of their scripture or mythology conflict with seeming historical fact, even when there is no pressing political motivation to insist on the verisimilitude of myth. The Church narrative about the Battle of Kosovo, the *myth* of the battle rather than the battle itself – historically false as it is – is still taught as fact in Serbian schools and still believed by many and used as justification for foreign policy, albeit purged of its overtly supernatural and divine elements; this secularized version is even broadly accepted by many atheists I know. It clearly has a potent power to move people to believe in it, and to drive them to action – in this case, disastrous and violent action.[22]

[21] The details of the two competing narratives do not matter for us here, but the short version is that the official Church narrative is one of catastrophic defeat for the Serbian side as a form of holy martyrdom, while the historical record seems to indicate either a stalemate or even a victory.

[22] I've written about this in my (as yet unpublished) Master's thesis, *A Sociological Analysis of the Political Theology of War of the Serbian Orthodox Church (1990-2000),* successfully defended at the University of Belgrade in 2020.

In *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (2014), Brian Attebery defines myths as not mere stories, but "narratives that reshape the world" (Attebery, 2014: 19), possessed of a powerful potential for social change both for the better and the worse. They are "not literature," the way most works of fantasy are typically viewed, but "sacred narrative" (ibid., 22). Neither are they fables, "making moral points through amusing narratives that cannot be taken literally;" instead they "mean what they say, however difficult that meaning might be to grasp" (ibid.). What gives myths a unique position in culture – and, as Attebery and myself would both argue, a unique transformative power – is this commitment to a sort of truth, the fact that they present their narratives not as fiction or allegory but as reality, after a fashion. Of course, myths do not describe actual history, and even many of those most committed to insisting they are "true" really claim that they do – see Janic, above – instead, the truth of myth is of a different sort, *true* in the sense that it presents a narrative that forms a world worth living in, and provides reasons for doing so. This is equally true of religious myths, contained in scripture or "lore", as it is of more secular ones rooted in political ideology.

What does all this have to do with fantasy, though? Attebery approaches fantasy not merely as a genre of fiction, but as a way of reinterpreting and recontextualizing myths – the religious and secular alike. Whether it is taking existing mythologies out of their original context and presenting them in a new one (responsibly or otherwise), reinforcing the often unspoken myths on which our society is built, or taking those same myths and engaging with them with the explicit goal of unmaking them, fantasy is often fundamentally *about* these narratives, even if that often goes unspoken and unacknowledged by both authors and audiences.

For our purposes, what is most relevant is the ways in which fantasy has engaged, and continues to engage, with the power dynamics of colonialism and racial supremacy – power

dynamics that are absolutely steeped in myth. On the one hand, there is the way that white supremacy and colonial conquest interact with the existing myths of the peoples who are subject to them, enacting cultural violence against these narratives, which in turn empowers such narratives as potential tools of resistance. On the other, there are the (usually more secular) mythical narratives that are created in order to justify these unjust systems of power and domination. Both of these are areas in which fantasy has, in a wide variety of ways, intervened.

Fantasy and the colonization of myths

Attebery dedicates a large portion of his work to looking at attempts by authors belonging to colonial hegemonic groups – i.e. primarily white Americans, Europeans, and Australians – to expand the cultural lexicon of fantasy beyond that presented by the genre's ostensible founding fathers (i.e. the works that make up the core of the 'fuzzy set'). The majority of these initial sources were rooted in white European mythology, drawing from various mixtures of Greek, Germanic, Norse, Arthurian, Christian, and other myths when crafting their fictional worlds. A desire to move beyond these bounds, whether due to a genuine desire to give other cultural worldviews the spotlight or simply due to a longing for novelty, naturally involves looking to the mythologies of other, non-European cultures for inspiration.

In doing so with the mythologies of colonized peoples, however, especially those that are still extant religious beliefs and practices rather than the long-abandoned myths of the ancient Greeks or Vikings, there is a risk of reproducing the history of colonialism within fantasy fiction, with white authors, publishers, and readers pillaging the cultural and spiritual cache of indigenous populations for profit and entertainment – a "sort of imaginative manifest destiny" among fantasy

writers and readers (ibid., 138). As colonial empires pillaged resources, land, and labor from indigenous populations around the world, many authors of fantasy ended up pillaging their cultures and traditions. Attebery attributes this to an impulse of white society to "acquire whatever is of value in indigenous culture while consigning the bearers of that culture to invisibility or extinction" (ibid., 140) – the very extractive impulse that motivated the violence of colonialism in the first place. While Attebery goes on to point out that not all white authors engaging in this kind of appropriative mythopoesis did so carelessly or non-consensually, the trend in fantasy of the 70s and 80s was definitely one of exploitation and appropriation – hardly a surprise given what has already been established about the genre's often blindingly white racial habitus.

At the same time though, members of those colonized and subaltern cultures were finding their own place in fantasy – "the empire wrote back" (ibid., 168), with many authors taking the framework of fantasy and using it to tell authentic stories both of their own cultures, and of resistance against colonialism. This ranges from relatively straightforward adaptations of non-Western mythological narratives into the format of fantasy literature, to more complex engagements with the history of racial and colonial hierarchies, such as Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) and Archie Weller's *Land of the Golden Clouds* (1998), both of which are explicitly about the relationship between colonized, colonizer, and land, from the perspective of the colonized (ibid., 190-193). The rise in fantasy written by marginalized authors and utilizing their cultural perspectives coincides with a rise in more conscientious white authors, who rather than extracting and consuming the cultural wealth of the colonized, sought to engage with these cultures more responsibly – Attebery attributes this to "feminism, neo-Marxism, and postcolonial theory" which became more present in the culture of the 1980s and "invited readers to examine texts for reflections of real-world injustice and power imbalances" (ibid., 149). The same invitation

was, of course, extended to authors. The result is that, while there is certainly still fantasy being written that fits the appropriative and exploitative model of the previous decades, it is no longer at the forefront of the genre, bedecked in awards and critical acclaim. So while the genre still has plenty of its old *habits of whiteness*, it is worth keeping in mind that not only is this not all that fantasy is – it never has been. There has always been a tradition of fantasy that *writes back*, even if it has been marginalized within the mainstream view of the genre.

Colonial myths of race

But the ways in which fantasy engages with the mythologies of the colonized – respectfully or not, from their own perspective or from the colonizers', etc. – are only one part of the conversation when it comes to the colonial mythmaking of the genre. There are also the myths of the colonizers to consider – myths created and used to justify colonial violence, exploitation, and enslavement across the world. These, too, can be both reinforced and challenged by fantasy, often in ways unavailable to other genres.

Sometime in the late 80s, before Peter Jackson's film adaptations launched a renaissance of Tolkien analysis and criticism, Charles W. Mills wrote *The Wretched of Middle-Earth: An Orkish Manifesto*, which would not see publication until 2022, after Mills's death. While its publication came decades later, it was written over a decade *before* the earliest academic publication on race in Tolkien's work (as argued by Reid et al, 2023: 184). In this text, whose title references Fanon's most famous work of postcolonial theory, Mills lays out his claim that the very universe of Tolkien's work is "*racially-structured*" and represents "a literal transcription of one of the most malignant ideologies of the past millennium: the racist 'Aryan Myth,' which, in one form

or another, would ultimately justify both the conquest and mass murder of the non white [sic] world by Europeans, and the later Nazi genocide of Europeans themselves" (Mills, 2022: 3).

That Tolkien's Middle-Earth is racially structured is quite plain – humans, elves, dwarves, hobbits, and orcs are all described as "races", and have clear-cut roles in both the narrative and the world of *The Lord of the Rings* that are determined by their race. What Mills argues, however, is that this structure is a direct reflection of racist ideologies in the real world – that the *Untermenschen* of Nazi propaganda are directly mirrored in the "*literally* sub-human" orcs of Middle-Earth (ibid., 6). Mills breaks down the fundamental ideas he finds in both Tolkien's world and the "central racist myth of European thought": a three-tiered division of humanity based on the sons of Noah (ibid.), the existence of an objectively superior race with ancient roots predating other races (elves in Middle-Earth, Aryans in our world) (ibid., 7-9), the portrayal of race-mixing as a great evil (ibid., 19), and of course, a racial underclass whose total genocide is seen not only as morally just, but a necessary part of the triumph of good over evil – a 'Final Solution', as it were (ibid., 23-24). With these chilling parallels, Mills does not seek to imply that Tolkien was, himself, a Nazi, or even necessarily a white supremacist – but rather that both Nazism and Tolkien's work "grew out of a central tradition within European thought" and exist "fully within that tradition" (ibid.). In essence, the myths of racial ontology that had been used to justify everything from the Atlantic slave trade (see the extensive rhetorical use of the Curse of Ham in 19th century America, for instance (Goetz, 2016: 10)) to the Holocaust are baked into Tolkien's worldview, and are thus reproduced in his writing, and further entrenched in the minds of his readers.

Mills's take on Tolkien is perhaps the most extreme example of this kind of analysis of fantasy fiction, which reads the fantastical species of the genre as analogous to real-world racial

groups, a reading significantly reinforced by the widely accepted genre standard of using the word "race" to refer to them. And it is a shockingly obvious and clear reading, once Mills lays it out. It is difficult to go back to seeing anything else in Tolkien's work after reading *An Orkish Manifesto*. The same applies to much of what is known as "classic" fantasy – works following in Tolkien's footsteps, mostly from the latter half of the 20th century; these works often mimic Tolkien's racial cosmology, sometimes changing the names and attributes of the species but leaving the fundamental framework intact. Even when the story being told about these species does not so chillingly mirror real-world racist ideology, the very existence of "races" with entirely different fundamental biological attributes, physical, mental, and moral alike, seems to negate the very possibility of true equality. How could, for instance, Tolkien's elves, immortal, supernaturally gifted with both physical and mental capacity, universally tall, beautiful, and wise, ever be seen as equal to humans with all their flaws, let alone to the hideous, barely sapient, naturally evil orcs?

The answer is that, by and large, we are not supposed to think of them in these terms – the fantasy genre, rooted in myth and religion as its foundational texts were, conceptualizes its "races" as "not so much biological as theological" (Attebery, 2010: 335), as Attebery so succinctly put it in his introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, dedicated to the question of race in fantasy. They were almost invariably created as fundamentally different by some divine creative force, rather than being naturally evolving variations. Many authors have taken this to its logical conclusion, and incorporated angels, demons, and other Biblical creatures into their work as fantastical races alongside the classic elves, dwarves, and trolls (Attebery, 2014: 151-170). This theological approach to race does not absolve fantasy from comparison to white supremacist foundational mythology – quite the opposite, for before the "scientific" racism of phrenology and eugenics, racial supremacy was rooted precisely in such divine justification (see,

again, the Curse of Ham, as well as the infamous now-abolished Mormon teachings about Black people). As early as the 5th century C.E., Christian theologians were ascribing the dark skin of Africans to having been "scorched by sin" and "the fires of hell" (Cohen, 1996: 10). Because it harkens back to this ancient understanding of race, fantasy often paints its races as fundamentally "real" categories, as opposed to what most now agree is the "imagined" nature of race in the real world (Attebery, 2010: 336).

This does not necessarily mean that fantasy is doomed to only regurgitate these pernicious narratives under a thin veil of fiction. Tolkien's own work can be – and has been – read in ways counter to Mills's, some of which are just as compelling as his[23], and the generations of fantasists who followed and who continue to write in the genre today often actively push back against such narratives. As Attebery points out, while "the history of fantasy is bound together with Romantic nationalism, pseudoscientific racism, and empire," it is often that very history which "allows fantastic genres to function as laboratories for investigating and reformulating racial differences" (ibid.). In other words, it is precisely because fantastical narratives have so often been weapons in the arsenal of white supremacy, that they are uniquely positioned to be utilized against it, by questioning, challenging, and dismantling the very myths that the genre has so often reinforced.

[23] As just one example, it is worth noting that within Tolkien's mythos, orcs are not in fact a genetically distinct species, but elves who have been corrupted and debased by evil. They are also strongly associated with industrial machinery and environmental despoilment, while elves are associated with nature. Putting these facts together, it is easy to construct a reading of the racial cosmology completely opposite to Mills's: one in which orcs represent not a "lesser" race, but the dangers of technological and economic excess of the "higher" races. Mapped onto the Nazi racial taxonomy, this lends itself to a reading of Tolkien's orcs as analogous to the Nazis themselves (members of a race that thought itself the "highest" race and, in their folly and hubris, rendered themselves monstruous and evil), more so than as their victims. This reading is not necessarily more or less valid than Mills's, although I would argue it does seem closer to Tolkien's real-life politics.

In a sense, much of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen wrote about mythical and fictional monsters in his seminal work, *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* (1996), is true of fantasy as well, and of the sometimes monstrous, sometimes not, species and races that inhabit its pages. So much of what makes oppressive structures such as colonialism and white supremacy possible is rooted in *categorization* – white vs. non-white, civilized vs. primitive, human vs. less-than-human, us vs. the Other; it is largely through a belief in the existence of such divisions (conscious or otherwise) that unjust ideologies persevere and prosper. "The monster is the harbinger of category crisis," Cohen writes; "because of its ontological liminality, the monster notoriously appears at times of crisis as a kind of third term that problematizes the clash of extremes – as 'that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis'" (ibid., 6). By refusing to fit neatly into existing categories, or by seeming to fit but then turning out to be something else entirely, monsters allow us to question the categories themselves in ways that we might not be able to using only "real" referents – those referents having been created within, and long ago subsumed by, the very categorizing systems in question. The same is true of the fantastical. By externalizing our explorations into a secondary world, one without all the baggage of historical context burdening our own world, it might be possible to see certain things we take for granted in a new light – a "rhetorical distance" that makes it seemingly "safer" to deal with fraught topics (Young, 2016: 2). In this way, much like Cohen's monsters, fantasy "dwells at the gates of difference" (Cohen, 1996: 7) and has the potential to "[reveal] that difference is arbitrary and potentially free-floating" (ibid., 12), undoing the work of centuries of racializing ideology.

Fantasy and the Nature of Narrative

As demonstrated above, fantasy is often closely linked with mythical narratives; rather than being merely examples of modern storytelling, many works in the genre are in fact just as concerned with retelling, reinterpreting, recontextualizing, reinforcing or challenging older stories, stories that are foundational to many facets of culture and society. This is most often done indirectly or implicitly, sometimes knowingly but just as often, if not more often, without the author even consciously trying to engage in this kind of mythical discourse. This makes those works of fantasy that do explicitly and intentionally engage with this theme, embracing the fact that they are *stories about stories*, especially compelling.

Attebery dedicates the final chapter of his book to this kind of metafictional fantasy, specifically to those examples of it that directly engage with the topics of race and colonialism. He calls these works *situated fantasies*, after Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge," originally intended to refer specifically to the epistemology of science (ibid., 196-197). What Haraway was seeking was an alternative to the notion of a disembodied (implicitly white, male, European) 'objective' observer who serves as the presumed perspective of the scientist, an alternative which would be able "partially to translate knowledge among very different – and power-differentiated – communities" (Haraway quoted from: ibid., 198). In essence, she called for scientists to remove themselves from this presumed omniscient point of view and to instead be aware of their own positionality, and also of how the world might appear from other positionalities.

Transferring this to fantasy, and its engagement with racist and colonial power structures, situatedness means an acknowledgement that "what one sees is determined by one's culture, but one need not be constrained to a single cultural system" (ibid.). The supernatural elements of fantasy are uniquely suited to presenting this metaphorical melding of perspectives as more literal, such as in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Buffalo Gals*, whose protagonist ends up with one normal eye,

which sees the world as she has always seen it, and one magical eye, which sees the world as the mythical beings of the local Indigenous population see it (ibid., 196-197). For instance, when looking at a ranch built by the European colonizers, her own eye sees it as a ranch, but her new eye, the one representing the Indigenous sacred perspective, sees it as "a hole in the world, a burned place like a cigarette burn" (ibid.). In this way, the fantastical allows for imagery more evocative, more devastating, and more potent in its challenge to hegemonic narratives, than a mere description of the literal reality of colonial genocide could be. It also serves as a direct challenge to the reader who, depending on their own situatedness, may not be prepared to see the marks of Western so-called "civilization" as "holes in the world", instead of as the very fabric that makes the world. By making the figurative literal, Le Guin is able to hone her message to a razor's edge and force her readers to, however briefly, inhabit perspectives that they might otherwise reject outright, and see the narratives that come naturally to them through the eyes of someone who might be able to see them more clearly.

This brings us, once again, to what Helen Young called the genre's "habits of whiteness" (Young, 2016) - the limitations in perspective that the genre has due to the fact that its identity, tropes, and audience expectations were all formulated largely by white, Western authors writing in a decidedly white (and racist) milieu. One need only look at the list of Attebery's core examples around which he builds his 'fuzzy set' definition – Tolkien and his imitators, American fantasy magazines from the early 20th century, Victorian, Edwardian, Romantic and Gothic literature from Europe – to see that this description of fantasy's roots is accurate. As such, certain pernicious elements of the genre, such as Tolkienesque racial ontologies, the ubiquity of white heroes, the association of blackness (both the color and the race) with darkness and evil, the freedom to pillage colonized cultures of their mythology and storytelling, "imperialist nostalgia" (ibid., 12), have all

essentially become “baked in” to the very fabric of the genre. All of this is, ultimately, a problem of perspective – of (mostly) white authors and audiences who are unable or unwilling to look at the genre they exist within through any eyes but their own, and to acknowledge that the genre itself has its own, highly limited, perspective. This, too, is a reason why works like Le Guin’s are so important – they work both as powerful social commentary that questions hegemonic cultural narratives, and as commentary on the genre of fantasy itself, showing that the habits fantasists have acquired over the decades are not ironclad rules. They can and should be challenged.

That such works, challenging and contrarian to the white hegemonic habitus of the genre, have always existed is not in question. But they have historically been both exceptional and marginalized within the greater picture of fantasy, relegated to the more literary and less popular reaches of the market. The past few decades have seen that begin to change, with more mainstream, popular works seeming to be at least aware of, if not always actively dedicated to combating, the genre’s racist legacy. In the following chapter, I trace this shift and explore some of the reasons behind it, and some of the forms it takes.

CHAPTER 2:

Evolving Genre Attitudes to Race

Tracing Race Through the *Warcraft* Franchise

We are living through a period of widespread reckoning with racism in American society – and by extension, in much of the white Anglosphere which is culturally entangled with the US. Ever since the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the 60s, there has been a general perception among many white people that racism as a broader social force is "over", a problem that plagued us in the past but has now been *solved*, relegated to the outmoded prejudices of a few bad apples (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 37). This impression was enhanced by the election of Barack Obama as president, a moment interpreted by some as the final frontier of the fight against racism, one that marked a move "beyond race" (ibid.). The years since have shown this to have been anything but true. A slew of high-profile police killings of Black people and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed, a virulently racist anti-immigration movement, the racist backlash to Obama himself in the form of the birther conspiracy theory, and of course, the rise of Donald Trump as a political figure largely buoyed to the top on a tide of racial animus, have all served to force race back into the conversation. Where just a few decades ago mentions of race were often seen as passé at best, and inherently racist at worst, it is now a regular, ever-present part of the political lexicon on the political left and center (and the right, albeit in an entirely opposite way). Whether we take the new critical engagements with race from liberal establishment institutions at face value as a

genuine, well-meaning reckoning with the country's racist legacy, or merely as a cynical attempt to politically capitalize on the zeitgeist (my opinion is that there are elements of both at play), it is undeniable that open articulation of opposition to systemic racism has become a major rhetorical factor in American electoral politics.

This pattern – years of complacency and willful ignorance about the continued impacts of systemic racism interrupted by sudden eruptions of racist vitriol, followed by a general reckoning with and renewed opposition to systemic racism – occurred in parallel in other areas of society, not just in politics. Whether there was a causal or correlative relationship there would be pure speculation on my part, but suffice to say that various cultural institutions and fields – academia, mainstream journalism, various online communities, various subcultures – all seemed to go through similar processes in the past decade or so. Two such loci where I anecdotally observed this shift and followed it in real time were literary fantasy and video games.

In the sphere of literary fantasy, two incidents in particular stand out as examples of racially motivated reactionary outbursts which led to long-term changes in how the genre engages with issues of race. The first of these was widely known as RaceFail 09, a 2009 series of discussions and controversies across multiple online blogs, involving multiple prominent authors and countless readers and fans of fantasy, about issues of race, representation, identity, and cultural appropriation in speculative fiction genres (Young, 2016: 171). While some of these discussions were respectful, and many provided opportunities for authors or fans of color to air their grievances with the genre's overwhelming whiteness, the whole affair briefly became dominated by the abusive backlash aimed at these voices. After the dust cleared, however, it seemed that the genre-culture of fantasy had been changed for the better – N.K. Jemisin, one of the authors of color directly involved, wrote just a few months after *RaceFail* wound down about the positive changes she observed in the

genre's general attitudes towards race: "I've seen a number of conventions dedicate panels and programming tracks [...] to discussing race, and trying to attract more fans of color. People are quicker to raise objections now when anthologies and awards purporting to survey the field underrepresent women and people of color; and the usual silly defenses (e.g., 'Maybe there just aren't any [insert group] writing good SFF!') don't fly as far. Writers are *thinking* more about what they write, and the unexamined assumptions that might be in their work. Readers are *thinking* more about why their bookshelves might contain an overabundance of white male authors and protagonists" (Jemisin, 2010). In essence, criticisms of the dominant genre-culture that fans and writers of color had been raising for decades were forced into the light and became mainstream in large portions of the fantasy genre.

The other event within the sphere of speculative fiction that pushed forward discussion about, and awareness of, race was the "Sad Puppies" affair, technically running from 2013 to 2017, but primarily occurring in 2015 and 2016. This was an organized campaign to alter the outcomes of the Hugo Awards, one of the most prestigious fantasy and sci-fi awards, due to what the campaign's (white) organizers felt was a tendency for recent Hugo events to reward works that were "niche, academic, overtly to the left in ideology and flavour" (Barnett, 2016). The "Sad Puppies", and the parallel but officially unrelated, more explicitly right-wing and racist "Rabid Puppies" movements tried to dominate the Hugo awards through organized bloc voting, and succeeded in nominating many of their chosen works, and excluding some works by writers of color or works dealing critically with issues of race or gender. The campaigns got a lot of media attention and made a lot of noise, but ultimately the whole affair ended in a massive public repudiation of the campaign and a renewed and more explicit commitment from the Hugo Awards to reward work that engages in nuanced and necessary social critique – the Puppies' nominations

were rejected, with multiple award categories going to "No Award" rather than their nominees (ibid.), and the *Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin, one of the authors specifically targeted for racist harassment, ended up getting a record-setting three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel. After this, both "Puppies" movements seemed to die out, and the value of what they derided as "niche, academic and overtly left-wing" writing, far from being challenged, was actually reinforced.

At around the same time, video games as a medium were undergoing their own growing pains. Beginning in 2014, what is now widely known by the moniker "Gamergate" was a coordinated campaign of harassment, threats, and online abuse directed at women, queer people, and people of color involved in game development, games journalism, and game fandoms, organized by various online far-right media figures in the name of protecting gaming from what was seen as the encroachment of "social justice" ideology. While the primary targets of the harassment were mostly (though not exclusively) targeted on the basis of gender rather than race, over time the discourse shifted towards equally deriding racial, gender, and sexual diversity in video games – anything that moved gaming away from being a strictly straight, white, and male sphere. Unlike RaceFail 09 and the Sad Puppies affair, Gamergate was never neatly wrapped up, its villains consigned to oblivion and its ideas soundly rejected. Instead, as many have written about, the Gamergate movement ended up becoming absorbed into, and bolstering, the nascent online "alt-right" of the 2010s – what we now more accurately recognize as a white supremacist, fascist political movement that would go on to catapult Donald Trump to the White House (twice) and essentially take over in its entirety one of the two major political parties in the US (Romano, 2021.). Some ascribed Gamergate more importance than it was due, treating it as directly responsible for the rise of the alt-right, when in reality it was one of many symptoms of the

movement (ibid.), but most articles I've seen analyzing Gamergate from the left seem to agree: Gamergate was very bad, it never really ended, and we are still dealing with its consequences (for an example, see MacDonald, 2024).

In some respects, this is true – certainly its impact on mainstream politics was bad, as is the vocal portion of the gaming audience that seems to have become permanently entrenched in its far-right rhetoric. But I have also noticed a positive shift in the medium of games itself in the post-Gamergate world; if some part of the gaming audience seems to have embraced Gamergate's ideals, the same cannot be said of the journalistic and development sides of video gaming. The upheaval and violence of the harassment campaign probably silenced many marginalized voices, but it also elevated many and seemingly changed the perception of the target audience for video games from "mostly straight white males" to "everyone," and I have observed a marked shift towards greater and more visible efforts at diversity from games released in the past decade, as well as a much more vocal contingent of video game fans belonging to various marginalized groups engaging in open critique of the medium and its thorny history with race, gender, and sexuality. A great illustration of this effect – the lukewarm success of Gamergate at converting some *gamers* to its racist and misogynistic ideology, but its overwhelming failure to do the same to *games* as a medium and as an industry – can be seen in the case of Warhorse Studios, developers of the two games in the *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* series. Some of the key figures in the studio were notoriously supportive of the Gamergate movement around the launch of their first game, and specifically cited the movement as motivating some of their creative decisions, for which they received a lot of backlash at the time – but fast forward almost a decade, to the release of the game's sequel, and the same developers are now championing diversity as a feature of their game, while the backlash is now coming from a portion of the audience that remains ideologically aligned

with Gamergate (Brown, 2025) – a backlash that is seemingly non-representative of the gaming public as a whole, considering the game has been a critical and commercial success (Litchfield, 2025). The cultural shift within mainstream gaming towards more awareness and sensitivity when it comes to issues of both race and gender seems, then, to be so strong that even erstwhile vocal supporters of Gamergate now espouse these ideals – a parallel to what happened to literary fantasy in the aftermath of RaceFail 09 and the Sad Puppies, leading to more active critical engagement, from both the mediums in question and their audiences, with pertinent social issues. It is also worth noting that there is a significant overlap between communities and fandoms associated with video games and fantasy as a genre, and as such events such as Gamergate have ripple effects beyond merely the medium they directly intervene in. Therefore, even though it is quite distinct from the previously cited events in that it did not directly concern the fantasy genre, I argue that Gamergate and its attendant cultural changes also affected the genre-culture of fantasy and other popular genres with significant overlaps of interest and audience demographics.

I do not credit any of these individual events with single-handedly creating a seismic shift in how the genre-culture of fantasy (or, for that matter, the medium of video games) engages with questions of race – as seen in chapter 1, authors and readers of color have been fighting the good fight and "writing back" basically since the genre's inception. Rather, they were particularly noteworthy and memorable flashpoints in a process that has been ongoing for decades as the communities centered on these works of fiction struggle to overcome the entrenched habits of years of systemic racism. The overall trajectory for the past several decades has been one of ever greater awareness of the problematic conventions and tropes that have become normalized in the genre, which has manifested in many different ways. Audiences have become more diverse – or at least, the public perception of them has, with neither fantasy nor gaming being seen as primarily

a white boys' club anymore. The diversity of characters within the texts has grown, as has the diversity of authors, directors, and game developers who get mainstream acclaim and attention. More interesting for my work has been the increased attention paid to certain narrative conventions and tropes within fantasy that have historically often unwittingly reproduced pernicious racial ideologies, such as the use of essentially evil races and species, or the insistence on clearly delineated kinds of sapient life with different and unchanging physical, mental, and moral attributes. While some works still utilize these tropes, they are also often subverted, critiqued, and challenged.

It is at the intersection of both of these conversations – in fantasy video games, beholden to the shifts in genre-culture from both ends – that we can most easily trace this evolution. For the purposes of this paper, I will be looking at a single franchise of fantasy video games, the *Warcraft* franchise, which has at this point spanned across four decades, and demonstrated some of the most profound changes in its approach to race that I have seen in a single franchise. There are several factors that make *Warcraft* an excellent sample for tracing the most obvious and prominent shifts in the fantasy genre. First, it is a very popular, mainstream franchise targeting a broad, general audience – as such, it has a strong incentive to track, respond to, and reproduce current trends in the genre-culture it is a part of, and its continued mass success seems indicative of its having done so. Second, the franchise does not have a reputation for being particularly politically opinionated or polarized in any way, and its broad target demographic means that overt sociopolitical messaging that goes against current trends is discouraged – this means that the motives behind any changes in the racial politics of the series are unlikely to be motivated *solely* by any kind of activist impulse on the part of the game developers (although it is certainly not discounted as one of the factors). Third, the franchise is steeped in very common, standard fantasy genre tropes

(Tolkienesque species, apocalyptic battles between forces of pure light and darkness, prophesied chosen ones, etc.) and most of its storytelling is rooted in such tropes. Thus, by tracing the evolution of *Warcraft*'s narrative, I am also tracing the recent history of changes in popular genre tropes and conventions.

Phase 1 – *Warcraft* in the 90s and Racial Manichaeism

The Warcraft franchise began with 1994's *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans* (referred to as "*Warcraft I*" from here on, to match the later-established naming convention for future entries in the series, and to differentiate from merely *Warcraft*, which I will be using when referring to the franchise as a whole), a real-time strategy game in which the player could control an entire army made up of individual units, as well as build settlements for the purposes of upgrading and growing their army. The nature of real-time strategy gameplay, focused on controlling an entire "side" in a military conflict as opposed to a single character or group of characters, obviously has implications on the kinds of narratives that such games end up telling – ones in which the player is expected to identify not with any specific character's viewpoint, but with the viewpoint of an entire faction or civilization[24]. In the case of *Warcraft I*, there were two such factions that the player could choose to embody – humans and orcs. The game centered its identity almost entirely on this binary choice: the game's subtitle, *Orcs & Humans*, emphasized it, as did the cover art (fig. 1), depicting not any specific named characters, but merely generic representations of an orc and a human glaring at

[24] Technically the player does have a "character" in *Warcraft I*, but that character is a nameless commander who is given no personality or backstory, and only serves as a stand-in for the player when receiving mission briefings from the chosen faction's leadership.

each other. The game features two "campaigns" that can be played in any order and which represent mutually exclusive versions of events – one in which the player controls the humans and defeats the orcs, and one in which the opposite occurs. Even the game's user manual, which explains not only how to play the game but also provides narrative context for the game's events, is split into two, a human manual and an orc manual, providing essentially the same information from different perspectives through backstories written in first person by in-universe characters. There is little moral nuance to these parallel perspectives, with the human side portrayed uncritically as the "good" side, and the orcs as the "evil" side; the events of the campaigns match this, with the orc campaign featuring missions such as destroying helpless towns and slaughtering everyone within (Blizzard Entertainment, 1994: Orc campaign missions 3 and 6) or executing the orc war chief's disobedient daughter (ibid., Orc campaign mission 4), while the human campaign involves tasks such as rescuing and healing wounded soldiers, defending a besieged monastery, or freeing enslaved humans (ibid., Human campaign missions 4, 6, and 7).

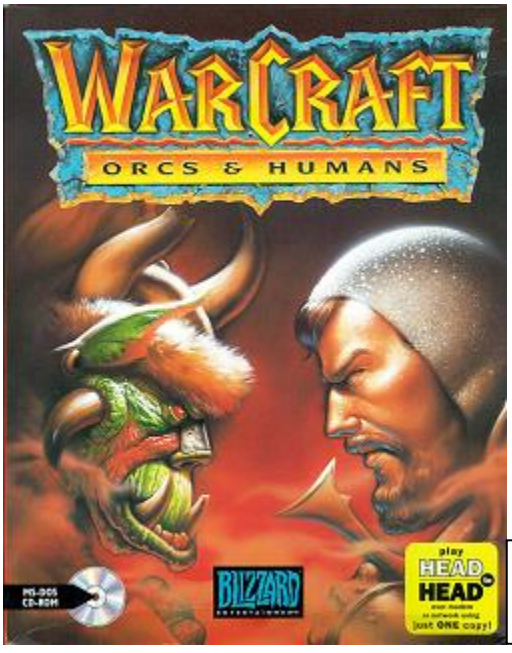

Figure 1 – Box art for *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, source:

The fundamentally different nature of the two species is also clearly established through their origins: the humans are the rightful inhabitants of Azeroth, the land in which the game takes place, having a prosperous kingdom that is portrayed as lacking any real faults, while the orcs are literal aliens, invaders from another world, "gross deformities, a cruel reflection of humanity" (*Warcraft I* human manual, page 19), "disciples of chaos" (ibid., 20). The orcs' own perspective does not stray far from this depiction – indeed, the narrative section of the orc manual, an account of violence and conquest with no justification given besides the orcs' natural propensity towards conflict, is written by a half-orc, half-human (how this hybrid came to exist is not explained anywhere in *Warcraft I*), because pure orcs are depicted as too stupid to write. The orc manual provides an example of writing from an orc chieftain: "Thok go through shiny hole. Then me fall down, but me good. Me find many good things to eat. We find village. We mash them and eat their food. Thok stop now. Head hurt from write" (Warcraft I orc manual, page 17). The very idea of an orc writing is portrayed as absurd, a source of humor at the orc's expense, with exaggerated poor grammar and simple vocabulary – contrasted with the half-orc Garona, who writes in proper, complex sentences like a human. Their social structure is also primitive, with leadership belonging to "war chiefs" who attain the position through strength in battle and killing their rivals (the orc player's nameless character, who stands in for the player and commands the orc forces in the orc campaign, eventually becomes war chief by betraying and killing the previous war chief, who is deemed too weak). The military units the player can create and command when playing as the orcs reflect this primitive social structure, with names like "peon," "grunt," and "raider" in contrast with the humans' "peasants," "footmen," and "knights". Likewise, where the humans have an organized religion (never named, but very obviously Christian in form and content), with churches

and abbeys and monasteries, the orcs worship "daemons" from "Hades", and are led in that worship by "warlocks."

This portrayal of orcs is merely a continuation of the way they have been portrayed in fantasy fiction since the word "orc" was first coined by Tolkien. The ways in which this portrayal reflects deeply racist real-world ideologies were best (and first) articulated by Charles W. Mills, in his critique of Tolkien's racial ontology, *The Wretched of Middle-Earth* (Mills, 2022). Pretty much everything Mills writes about Tolkien's orcs is true of *Warcraft I*'s orcs, from the "denial of history and geographical rootedness" (ibid., 24) – the orcs come from another, nameless and ineffable, realm of existence, alien invaders with no roots anywhere in the "natural" world of Azeroth – to the lack of "moral concern" that killing the orcs presents. They are "depersonized, [...] rendered as ontological zeros" (ibid.), and *Warcraft I*'s human campaign appropriately ends with the total genocide of the orcs being celebrated as a victory for goodness and righteousness, similar to the climax of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* – although in contrast to the supernatural, instant genocide that happens following the defeat of the Dark Lord in Tolkien's work, the one in *Warcraft I* is a more hands-on, traditional affair. In addition to not being legitimate moral objects, orcs are also not portrayed as true moral *subjects* – Mills notes that what sets Tolkien's "good" races apart from the orcs is their "racially-ordained moral standing: all are capable of both good and evil" (ibid., 10), while the orcs are not given the capacity to make such decisions, being evil by birthright. The same holds true in *Warcraft I* – there are evil humans, and indeed the orcish invasion is precipitated by one such human, the sorcerer Medivh who opens the portal the orcs emerge from; but there are no good, or even neutral, orcs. While there is internal conflict in the orc campaign, it is only ever in the form of different factions struggling for power, prioritizing their own advancement over the larger orcish cause, and never in the form of individuals or groups

who are morally opposed to the war chief's evil. Even the half-orc Garona, who is allowed into the human king's confidence, ultimately turns out to be a spy and assassinates him (Blizzard Entertainment, 1994: Human campaign mission 10). The orcs are not a people in their own right, with their own culture and individual complexity; they exist only to contrast them with the civilized, (implicitly) European and (literally) white humans.

And *Warcraft I*'s humans are definitely white and European – no human is depicted as anything but white in any *Warcraft* game prior to 2004's *World of Warcraft*, and their architecture, clothing, and culture is a very straightforward pastiche of pop-cultural ideas about medieval Europe, with a hereditary monarchy that rules side-by-side with an organized church, mounted knights in plate armor, stone castles, etc. *Warcraft I*'s orcs, however, are a bit harder to directly connect with any specific race. Unlike Tolkien's dark-skinned orcs, *Warcraft*'s orcs are bright green, putting them at a further remove from real-life racial groups than their genre predecessors. What cultural and racial referents they do have are an eclectic mixture – the orc on the game's box art, above, seems to be wearing a horned version of a traditional Mongolian fur hat, which seems in line with the way in which the orcs' role in the game parallels European narratives about the invasions of the Mongol "Golden Horde" (the orcish army is referred to as "The Horde" in-game, and the orcs attack the human nation from the East). This also seems to line up with Tolkien's now-infamous off-the-record description of the orcs as resembling "degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types" (quoted in Mills, 2022: 18). However, the physical appearance of *Warcraft I*'s orcs seems to more closely resemble the most racist depictions of Africans, with exaggerated lips and noses, jutting upper and lower jaws, and thick, low brows. Compare fig. 1 above with the following image from Samuel George Morton's *Crania*

Americana, an infamous work of 19th century racial pseudoscience using phrenology to claim that Black people were more closely related to primates than white people (fig.2).

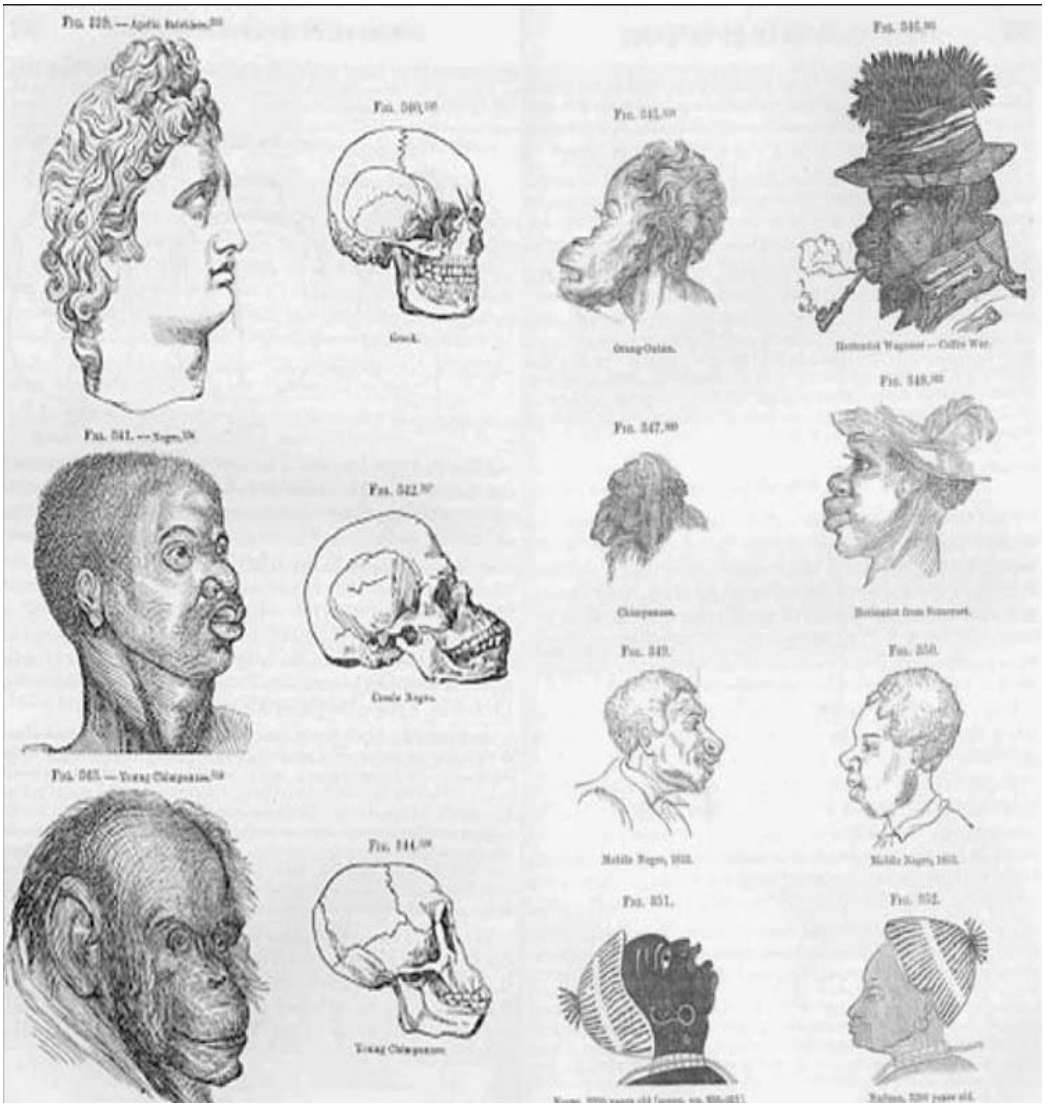

Figure 2 – image from Crania Americana showing the supposed differences between the skulls of different races. Source: https://pages.vassar.edu/realarchaeology/2017/03/05/phrenology-and-scientific-

There are clear similarities between the two images – not only in the way they directly contrast the head shapes of their subjects, but in the actual head shapes themselves. I should note

here that I am not necessarily claiming this to have been any intentional reference to 19th century phrenology – indeed I would be quite shocked if I found out that it was. Instead, what this points to is the uncritical reproduction, common in 20th century fantasy and lingering longer in the young and at the time still not artistically established genre of video games, of racist tropes that had become normalized as part of Western (white) culture. These signifiers, so reminiscent of the most virulent racial caricature, are often uncritically used to signify "primitivism", without necessarily intending any racial implication. The degraded grammar and speech patterns of *Warcraft I*'s orcs similarly seem to echo racist stereotypes. Thus, *Warcraft I*'s orcs aren't necessarily coded as Black *or* Asian, but rather as a pastiche of racial *Otherness*, signifying *difference from* European norms in both culture and physiognomy without necessarily signifying *similarity to* any one thing in particular.

1995's *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness*, a direct sequel to *Warcraft I*, did little to change this racial status quo. The cast of races / species was expanded with the addition of elves, dwarves, and gnomes to the human army, and ogres and trolls to the orcish one, but these races were merely different flavors of the same good and evil binary, and were given little depth. The orcs' homeworld was given a name – Draenor – and was fleshed out and even visited by players in the game's expansion pack, *Beyond the Dark Portal*, which ended with the planet's destruction. The first game's orcish campaign was made canonical, while the human campaign was rendered apocryphal, presumably because the genocidal ending of the human campaign would have made a sequel still centered on conflict with the orcs impossible. The second game, in contrast, makes both its orc and human campaigns canonical, by making them sequential rather than parallel and mutually exclusive events – the orc campaign represents the first half of the story, and the human campaign, ending in the orcs' defeat, is the second half. The game's box art is heavily derivative

of the first, with another scowling generic orc and human staring at each other, this time dressed in naval garb (the human wearing a naval admiral's hat, and the orc dressed as a stereotypical pirate, see fig. 3).

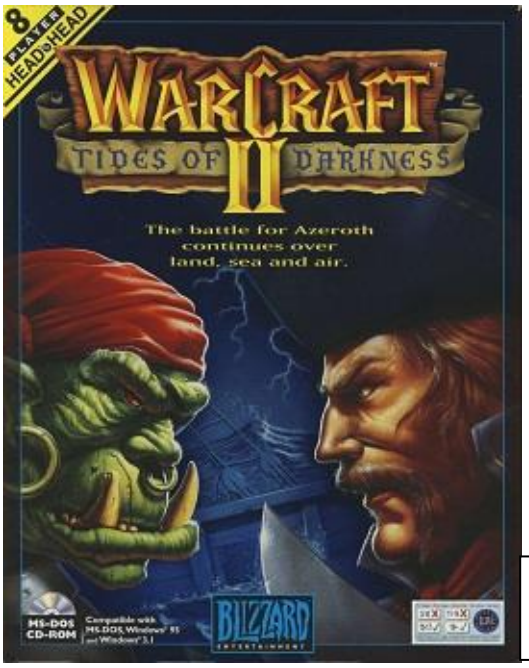

Figure 2 – Box art for *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness*, source:

As *Warcraft II* was more an elaboration and continuation of the exact same binary narrative about race that was present in the first game, I will forego a detailed breakdown of it here. For the purposes of this analysis, *Warcraft I* and *II* can be seen as a single chapter in the evolution of the franchise and its relationship with race – a chapter in which the racial narratives of classic fantasy, themselves just adaptations of older racist myths created to justify colonialism and slavery, are reproduced uncritically, as is the unquestioned default whiteness of heroic characters in the genre. This was, by the 90s, already no longer the universal norm in literary fantasy, the genre having had a minor reckoning around race in the previous decade (see Attebery, 2014: 149). Video games, however, always seemed to lag behind more established mediums – something which remains true today, with many game developers denying that their games have any moral or political messaging

whatsoever, while the literary side of the fantasy genre seems to have left that particular idea behind after the Sad Puppies affair. As such, what we see in fantasy games of the 90s is generally what the fantasy genre was like before *any* of its myriad periods of self-critique, a pastiche of derivative Tolkienesque racial conflicts and biological essentialism. As the third millennium began, however, and video games became more established as a medium and acquired serious aspirations to the status of an artform equal to novels or films, the narratives they told became more complex – and that brought major changes to *Warcraft*'s racial cosmology.

Phase 2 – *Lord of the Clans* and the Flipping of the Narrative

After the success of *Warcraft II*, there was a plan to expand the franchise beyond real-time strategy games. This first took the form of a point-and-click adventure game (at the time, a much more popular video game genre than today) titled *Lord of the Clans*, which would have been a much more narrative-focused take on the *Warcraft* setting. Due to various financial and other factors, the game was never released, and instead development started on *Warcraft III*. However, *Warcraft III*'s narrative, itself a much more prominent part of the game than *I*'s or *II*'s had been, had been written to follow *Lord of the Clans* and shared the unreleased game's protagonist. As such, fantasy and science-fiction novelist Christie Golden was hired by Blizzard Entertainment to write an official *Warcraft* novel, titled *Lord of the Clans* (*LotC* from here on), which told the story that would have been the cancelled eponymous adventure game. This would turn out to be a pivotal moment in the franchise's history, as the novel not only gained *Warcraft* a reputation for compelling and complex narratives (something that had never been its strength or focus

previously), but also represented a fundamental shift in the kind of story the franchise was telling – especially about race.

The narrative up to this point had always been a very black-and-white, good vs. evil story, with an understanding of race closer to what Brian Attebery calls "theological" (Attebery, 2010: 335) than biological; the orcs were, for all intents and purposes, demons from hell, even if they and their homeworld had different names, and the humans' war against them was not merely a war, but an eschatological conflict for the salvation of the world. *LotC* radically shifts that narrative to one about a messy conflict in which the moral high ground is not determined by race but by individual circumstances, and in which everything that the first two games established as essential truths about the orcs is instead reframed as a deviation. The novel immediately opens with what is known in most fandom spaces as a *retcon* (short for retroactive continuity, used when a story inserts new information about past events that implicitly or explicitly contradicts what had previously been established), revealing that the orcs were not naturally violent conquerors and marauders, but rather a race that lived in harmony with their surroundings and the natural world, a race with "inherent nobility" (Golden, 2001: 7). They were led not by warlocks and war chiefs, but by shamans, "deeply spiritual beings [who] studied the natural world and the orcs' place in it; [learned] from the beasts of forest and field, the birds of the air, the fish of the rivers and oceans. And they had been a part of that cycle, no more, no less" (ibid.). They were then tricked by a few among their number – the warlocks – who communed with "demonic, supernatural powers" (ibid., 103) and corrupted their entire race. This demonic corruption turned the orcs' eyes the demonic red that can be seen on the box art of both of the previous games, and instilled them with supernatural bloodlust and love of violence. Their assault on the human world had been a plot by

greater powers (specifically, *literal* demons) in which they were merely pawns. Even so, some orcs remained uncorrupted, and continue to resist the corruption of the rest of their people.

As for the human / orc conflict, the novel also bucks the franchise's established conventions by placing the reader firmly in an orcish perspective – and not in the way the games' "Orc campaigns" had done, letting the player "play as the bad guys," but by actually framing the orcish characters as heroic and morally righteous, especially in contrast with the humans. Set a few decades after the second game, *LotC* depicts an Azeroth where humans have soundly and utterly beaten the orcs – and proceeded to enslave them and place them in "internment camps." The human in charge of the entire internment camp system, Lord Blackmoore, is the novel's principal antagonist, a cruel racist who views orcs as inherently inferior and plans to train them into his own personal slave army. The protagonist, the titular Lord of the Clans, is a young orc who was taken in by Blackmoore as an infant and raised as his personal slave, given the name "Thrall" specifically to remind him that he is property, and not a person (ibid., 25). Over the course of the novel, Thrall escapes from Blackmoore (with the aid of a young human woman who considers him her brother, having been raised together in Blackmoore's keep), finds those among the orcish clans who remain free, learns about the true, uncorrupted orcish culture and history, and eventually leads his people in a revolution that liberates them from both human internment camps and the remnants of demonic influence, re-establishing the orcs' old shamanistic religion and becoming the warchief of the united orcish clans. He keeps the name "Thrall" as a reminder to himself of the evil done to him by Blackmoore and the humans (ibid., 100). He also rejects vengeance against humanity in general, insisting that killing Blackmoore and his ilk is "justice" (ibid., 195), but intending to lead his people to freedom, not renewed conquest.

This sets the stage for Thrall's future role as one of *Warcraft III*'s main protagonists, but it also establishes a new standard for how *Warcraft* would treat its inter-racial conflicts going forward: not as theological battles between essential forces of good and evil, but as more complex conflicts between peoples, nations, and cultures who all have their own perspectives worth considering. This does not mean the franchise does away with essential evil forces, but those forces mostly shed their racial character, instead taking the forms of supernatural demons, undead monsters, and eldritch gods rather than simply different categories of people marked as evil by their very birth – maintaining the theological conflicts that the fantasy genre is so fond of, but divorcing them from the troubling overlap with race that has been haunting such narratives since Tolkien's day. This shift marked a broader trend in both literary fantasy and video games of moving away from "evil races" as the primary causes of narrative conflict – at least in games that aspired to tell complex narratives. There are plenty of games still coming out today which center on slaughtering endless hordes of various "evil" creatures, be they goblins, orcs, or some original creation derived from these classic fantasy villains, but these are not games that get praised for their narratives, nor that aspire to. Narrative-driven games, as fantasy and sci-fi of other mediums before them, largely outgrew such simplistic narratives as they moved into the new millennium. As for what replaced them – for that, we return to the *Warcraft* series proper.

Phase 3 – *Warcraft III* and Overcoming Difference

2002's *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* was a significant departure from the previous games. While still a real-time strategy game, it was also a heavily narrative-focused one – where the first

two games told their stories almost entirely through short mission briefings at the beginning and end of every gameplay section, *Warcraft III* featured constant in-game cutscenes and cinematics, with fully voiced dialogue, either using the in-game animations of the characters to represent narrative action, or fully pre-rendered digital animations for important moments in the story. This allowed the game to tell a more complex narrative, and it did so, eschewing the binary structure of the human vs. orc campaigns, and instead dividing its story into four sequential campaigns, each one centering on a different faction: humans, undead, orcs, and night elves. Rather than all being directly opposed to one another and only focused on defeating the other factions, each faction has its own distinct role in the story, sometimes allying with and sometimes fighting against the other three. This is reflected in the game's box art, which replaces the scowling orc and human clashing with each other with four different box arts, one for each faction, featuring a character from that faction looking directly at the audience (fig. 4) – the message is clear: this is no longer a story just about the conflict between these factions, but about each of them having a narrative in their own right, from their own perspective, not solely defined by their conflict with other groups. Some of the faction names are also misleading, as the "orc" and "human" factions are actually not racially defined – the playable "orc" faction consists of orcs, trolls, and tauren, a new, original race created for *Warcraft III*, while the human faction also features dwarf and high elf characters and units. Unlike *Warcraft II*, where this racial diversity was mostly an aesthetic and gameplay flourish, the races that make up *Warcraft III*'s factions all have their own distinct cultures and roles in the story, with conflict breaking out *within* a given faction just as often as between them.

Figure 4 – Box art for *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, source: warcraft.wiki.gg

The various playable races are also never depicted with essential moral alignments – over the course of *Warcraft III*'s four campaigns, and the four additional campaigns added by the *Frozen Throne* expansion, various humans, orcs, trolls, and elves all play both heroic and villainous roles. There are no evil, or even morally dubious, tauren or dwarves in the game, but this is because those races play relatively minor narrative roles and are mostly there as supportive allies to the heroic characters of other races, not because they are in any way naturally predisposed towards a certain moral alignment. The undead are portrayed as consistently evil throughout the base game, but they don't really count for the purposes of this analysis as they aren't a "race" so

much as members of all other races raised from the dead and lacking free will – but in the *Frozen Throne* expansion, even this is subverted, with a faction of the undead gaining free will and rejecting their former evil master.

This moral complexity is established right from the start of the game. The story begins soon after *Lord of the Clans* ends, with the player placed in the role of Thrall and his orcish forces as he liberates the final internment camps and receives a supernatural vision in which a prophet tells him to lead his people across the ocean to the west (Blizzard Entertainment, 2002: Prologue Campaign chapters 1 and 2), setting him up as a Moses-like figure following visions to free his people and found a new homeland. This continues *LotC*'s reframing of the orcs as heroic protagonists, this time further reinforcing that by literally placing them in a position analogous to the Hebrews in the Bible.

The player then switches to following the human prince Arthas in the human campaign, which tells the story of Arthas's descent into evil as a mysterious plague of undeath ravages his kingdom and he goes to ever more extreme and morally compromising lengths to contain it, ultimately being corrupted by demonic forces and becoming a leader of the undead faction himself. The undead campaign continues following Arthas as he, now at the head of an army of the dead, commits a genocide against his own nation, and then against the elven nation of Quel'thalas (ibid., Undead Campaign chapters 3-5) and the human wizards' city-state of Dalaran (ibid., Undead Campaign chapters 7-8). While this may seem at first to be a simple swapping of roles, with orcs now portrayed as heroic and humans as villainous, there is a bit more nuance to it – the story primarily follows a heroic orc and a villainous human, yes, but both of them end up primarily being opposed not by each other, but by members of their own species who do not share those moral proclivities.

After spending the first half of the game cataloguing Arthas's fall from grace, the narrative then shifts back to Thrall, who has landed on a new continent, Kalimdor, previously unknown to both humans and orcs. Here the orcs meet several new species – the minotaur-like tauren and mysterious night elves in particular. At the same time, a group of humans led by a young sorceress named Jaina also land on Kalimdor, Jaina having received the same prophetic vision as Thrall. This faction of humans are among the only survivors of the nation of Lordaeron after Arthas's genocide, meaning that both the orcs and humans arrive on Kalimdor as the last refugees of their respective peoples. Thrall quickly allies with the tauren and recruits them into his faction, but his forces constantly clash with Jaina's, both sides assuming that the other – being of the species that they have fought for decades – is hostile. Both humans and orcs are also constantly attacked by the night elves, who seem to possess both magical powers and a knowledge of the wilderness of Kalimdor that far outstrips the other races and allows them to ambush and kill them with impunity. Each of these three factions and their actions are represented as valid and understandable from their own perspective, and each faction once again contains individuals who take on both heroic and villainous roles. Ultimately, the night elves, orcs, and humans all come together, guided by the mysterious prophet who sent Thrall and Jaina to Kalimdor in the first place, and present a united front against the demonic invasion triggered by Arthas, saving the world from ruin with their alliance.

The Frozen Throne expansion continues the story, but doesn't feature much that is relevant to an analysis of the portrayal of race. Two things are worth singling out, however: first, the expansion establishes that elves are just as susceptible as orcs to demonic corruption, and indeed have historically proven to be even more so, once almost destroying the entire world by making a pact with a demon lord in exchange for power. Second, the expansion's "bonus" orc campaign,

separate from the main story which doesn't actually feature many orcs *or* humans, tells the story of the orcs, trolls, and tauren establishing a new nation for themselves on Kalimdor, and defending this nascent state from invasion by violent humans motivated entirely by racial hatred. In the end, Jaina sides with Thrall and the orcs and helps them kill her own father, who was unwilling to give up on his genocidal campaign to kill every last orc. The game ends on a note of hope and racial unity on Kalimdor, while the old human continent of Azeroth is in ruins, divvied up between rival factions of the undead – its final downfall largely attributable to the new human leader's unwillingness to work with other species.

As far as direct racial coding is concerned, *Warcraft III* maintains the absolute whiteness of the human race, and indeed of all races that have human skin tones – there are no humans, dwarves, or high elves who can be interpreted as anything other than white, and the majority of major characters from these races are also blonde and blue-eyed. Human architecture, culture, and aesthetics remain firmly rooted in fantasy's typical pastiche of medieval Europe. The orcs shed some of their past racial coding, their features somewhat less exaggerated and their armor, outfits, and architecture no longer having Mongolian and African influences, instead opting for an eclectic mix of stereotypical Viking horned helmets, spiked plate armor, and leather gladiator-style skirts. Writing about 2004's *World of Warcraft*, the next game in the series, Christopher Jonas Ritter identifies the orcs with stereotypical depictions of Spartans more than anything else (Ritter, 2010: 85), and I believe this association began with the way they are depicted in *Warcraft III*, as did most of the racial coding that Ritter finds in *WoW*. They still have some cultural coding tying them to various stereotypes of non-white groups, such as their religion centered on shamanism, and they still have broad noses and prominent lips (see fig. 4, above), but overall I would say that this depiction of orcs successfully avoids being overtly tied to any real-life ethnicity in an offensive or

harmful way. The night elves, too, avoid such direct associations by being an eclectic combination of disparate inspirations – their architecture has elements of East Asian (pagodas and Shinto-inspired arches) and Ancient Greek culture (Doric columns) (ibid., 69), they are narratively positioned as somewhat akin to Native Americans (being the indigenous population of a newly-discovered western continent, and having to deal with alien settlers from the east), while also being the only explicitly monotheistic culture, worshipping the moon goddess Elune. Ritter concludes that their racial coding, such as it is, is "inscrutable" (ibid., 68), and I'm inclined to agree.

The less narratively prominent races, in particular the trolls and tauren, do not so deftly avoid reductive coding and stereotypes. The tauren are blatant and explicit stereotypes of Native Americans of the "Noble Savage" variety, with strong ties to the natural world, carved wooden totem poles, a nomadic hunter lifestyle, and teepee-style tents (ibid., 98-99). This depiction is problematic for a variety of reasons – it reduces the variety of Native American cultures to a single group, it associates Natives with the most physically animalistic race (the tauren being literal humanoid buffalo), and it reproduces the racist Noble Savage narrative by having the tauren all be wise, spiritual pacifists in tune with nature. The trolls are arguably worse – they are directly coded as stereotypes of Caribbean people, speaking with thick Jamaican accents, living in grass huts, constantly invoking "Voodoo" and worshipping "Loa", with troll "witch doctors" wearing robes bedecked with skulls and shrunken heads. They are savage, primitive, and superstitious, although not inherently evil or stupid (ibid., 92-95). As I have already argued, and will now continue to do so, *Warcraft III* is, in many ways, a major step forward in terms of the franchise's treatment of race, but it is worth noting that it did not shed all of its racist baggage, and still has at least some deeply troubling racial coding.

So, what is *Warcraft III*'s narrative actually saying about race? Well, first of all, it is clear that it *is* talking *about race*. The previous games' "races" were of the traditional fantasy "theological" variety, stand-ins for eschatological forces that were loaded with racial coding due to the racist conventions and tropes of the genre, but which weren't necessarily intended by the authors to be read as analogous to the real-life concept of race or ethnicity. *Warcraft I* and *II* were not written as stories of interracial conflict, but of a primordial battle between good and evil, order and chaos, that were articulated through the language of racial difference. *Warcraft III*, by contrast, was clearly written as a narrative about interracial conflict. It constantly invokes concepts that are inextricably tied with racism and racial conflict in the public imagination – racial internment camps, blind hatred and prejudice, discourse around the racial other being bestial or inhuman (humans constantly refer to orcs as beasts and savages, and night elves in turn view both humans and orcs in the same way), mass exoduses to a promised land, the founding of new racial homelands, a sense of collective responsibility for the past sins of the race, etc. The species of *Warcraft III* are not stand-ins for eschatological forces, but fully fleshed-out peoples in their own right, each with their own culture, history, and complex relationships to the other species, and individuals are always capable of acting in ways that are oppositional to the majority of their species. In general, the non-human species are all depicted as fundamentally *human* in the metaphorical sense, just with different physical characteristics. Racial prejudice is depicted as common, and often exhibited even by heroic characters, but it is also always a negative trait, one that is either overcome or narratively punished. Problems are solved through interracial unity and alliance, and actions that go against such unity are often directly associated with supernatural evil in the form of demons.

While *Warcraft III* is undeniably a story about race and racism, however, what it is decidedly *not* is a story about *systemic* racism. Its understanding of racism is one primarily rooted in *ideology*, not systems, social structures, and material interests. It interprets "actors' racial views as *individual psychological* dispositions" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 8), assigning the blame for interracial conflict to individuals' misguided, mistaken beliefs that other races are their enemies, rather than their material interests in maintaining a system of racial supremacy and oppression.

It is also not a story about racial *oppression*, necessarily – while there are elements such as the human enslavement of the orcs and their placement in internment camps, the positions of the different racial groups in the overarching narrative are symmetrical. In real-world racial structures, there are dominant and subordinated groups (ibid., xviii), and these are not positions that can easily be switched, or that historically have been. In *Warcraft*, however, every race has a complex and ever-evolving web of relationships with other races, sometimes being dominant and sometimes subordinate – the orcs, for instance, go from being violent invaders and colonizers of the human lands in the first two games, to being an oppressed and enslaved racial underclass *beneath* the humans in *Lord of the Clans* to being equal with the humans as fellow settler-colonizers of the night elves' lands in *Warcraft III*, while simultaneously being the victims of the night elves' own racial intolerance and violence – and then, in the *Frozen Throne* expansion, they are once again presented as the victims of human racism. In a way, this reflects Molina et al's account of race as *relational* – a product of complex relationships between different groups within a power structure, rather than merely a binary subordinate-dominant dynamic (Molina et al, 2019: 1-2). However, while Molina et al reject the notion of subordinate racial groups being defined solely through their relationship to whiteness and their placement in white supremacist social structures, they are speaking primarily of the relationships *between* various races articulated as subordinate under

whiteness. Whiteness itself does still stand apart as a uniquely dominant position, one whose relationships with other races are not that nuanced or complicated, but generally boil down to ones of domination and oppression. And even though *Warcraft III*'s humans are white in the literal sense, I would argue that they are not white in a structural sense – they are equal co-actors with other races in creating the tapestry of racial alliances and conflicts that make up the world of Azeroth, rather than a colonial power imposing their dominion over all other groups. This is the element of real-life racial dynamics that is absent from *Warcraft*'s depiction – no race actually holds the structural position of whiteness.

This is not necessarily a criticism. After all, while *Warcraft III* obviously wants to tell a story about race, its goal is not necessarily for that story to be directly applicable to the real world. There is potentially value in exploring racial systems structured entirely differently from ours, something that fantasy and science-fiction are uniquely able to do. But in this case, I think it is more likely that this is a reflection of a wider societal perception about the nature of racism – plenty of media from around the turn of the millennium, and especially plenty of popular fantasy media, seem to share this color-blind understanding of racism, in which racial prejudice exists entirely in the minds of individuals, and more importantly, *equally* in the minds of individuals of *all* races, as opposed to being reflective of their different placements in a complex racial structure.

Indeed, while *Warcraft III* may have done more interesting things with the topic than most of its contemporaries, its overall approach to race – a very liberal moral condemnation of racism as an ideology, but an unwillingness to confront it as a systemic and asymmetrical phenomenon ingrained in every facet of society – is actually similar to many works of popular entertainment from the same time period. Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* adaptation similarly chose to emphasize the elements of the original work about the different races (as well as different human

nations) overcoming their mutual distrust and prejudice to come together against a larger threat, as did the final *Harry Potter* book in 2007. Even 2009's *Dragon Age: Origins*, a game which actually did quite heavily feature a one-sided, systemic structure of racial domination much more akin to real life, still ultimately insisted on the necessity of overcoming prejudice on "both sides" (in this case, humans and the elves they subjugate). This seemed to be the story about race that was being told by every popular work of fantasy in the 2000s and early 2010s, and I often see it still being replicated now, years later. But while it is far from a true critical engagement with the complexities of race, it is still leagues ahead of the genre's previous approach of directly translating history's most pernicious racial mythologies into fantastical settings. And by forcing players to directly embody different positionalities and perspectives in a racial power structure, even a skewed and unrealistic one, massively popular video games like *Warcraft III* were potentially the most rhetorically effective of all the fantasy works of this era in actually moving the needle in the right direction when it comes to general societal views on race.

Phase 4 – *World of Warcraft* and Where We Are Now

Since 2004, the Warcraft franchise has only had a single new game: *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) which has received 10 large expansion packs and many dozens of smaller updates, continuing the narrative of the original trilogy of games. The nature of *WoW* as an ever-evolving, online experience, as opposed to a single product that exists forever in its initial state, means that doing the kind of detailed analysis I did above would be all but impossible. Vast swaths of content are no longer available, and the content

that is available is decontextualized, often making it difficult to place in a clear chronology. In addition, the nature of an MMO is that its narrative is at least in part driven by the players, of whom *WoW* has literal millions. So instead of a full summary, or even a detailed list, I will single out three specific changes relating to race that *World of Warcraft* has made to the world of *Warcraft*[25]. These changes are fairly new, only occurring in the last 5 or so years, as the racial status quo of *WoW* largely matched that of *Warcraft III* for most of its history.

First, there has been a massive increase in the variety of fantastical races, and a blurring of the lines between "race" and "species" that goes even further than the genre-typical terminological confusion. As of this writing (February 2025), there are 25 playable races players can choose when creating a character. At least 9 of these are not in fact separate fantastical species, but different ethnicities of the existing species – humans from a specific nation with distinct body types, dwarves from a specific clan who have different skin tones, or a different tribe of tauren who have moose antlers instead of buffalo horns. Races in the real-world sense, but within fantastical species. This is particularly noteworthy because the game presents all 24 of these groups as "races" during character creation, with the same categorical distance between them. For example, "regular" trolls and "Zandalari" trolls are, in terms of the game's racial categories, just as distinct from each other as trolls are from dwarves. This suggests a conceptual blurring of the lines – even further than was already the case – between the fantasy meaning of "race" and the more conventional, real-world meaning. The game continues to not acknowledge real-life racial categories – white, Black, and Asian humans all exist but no distinction between them is ever drawn in gameplay or narrative terms – but it instead introduces its own, fictional racial categories that *are* acknowledged, such as Kul Tiran humans or Mag'har orcs. As the following chapters show, this is part of a larger trend

[25] See what I did there? ;-)

in contemporary fantasy of authors taking the implications of calling fictional species "races" to their obvious conclusion, and actually treating them more *as* races.

Second, there has been an effort to make the world of *Warcraft* more diverse in terms of real-life human races. While the game launched with the ability for players to give their human, elven, and dwarven avatars dark skin, the facial features and hair textures available were limited to ones typically thought of as "white," and NPCs of these races (non-player characters, the various characters placed in the world by the developers to populate it) were almost exclusively white, implying that even if a player did create a dark-skinned character, that character was an aberration, and not a natural part of the world of Azeroth. It wasn't until 2019's *Shadowlands* expansion that a host of new character customization options were introduced into the game, allowing the creation of characters that looked non-white in more ways than just skin color (Brown, 2019), and it wasn't until 2020 that a number of existing NPCs (although not narratively important ones) had their appearance changed to reflect non-white races – something which caused the expected racist backlash from some fans of the game (Winslow, 2021). The newer expansion pack storylines also feature more characters of color in major narrative roles. For instance, the animated CGI cinematic trailer for the upcoming expansion *The War Within* marks the first time a Black character has appeared in such a cinematic in *WoW*'s 20-year run. This, again, reflects a general trend of more and more games, but also mainstream works of fantasy, making an active effort to have racially diverse casts (see, for instance, the recent spate of racially diverse screen adaptations of literary fantasy mentioned in the Introduction). I attribute this both to an increased awareness of systemic racism and an increased number of people of color working in these industries – but also, more cynically, to an awareness among authors, especially game developers and publishers, that the

media they produce and the general cultural space around that media might be under increased (and justified) social scrutiny in a post-Gamergate world.

Third, interracial conflict has been almost entirely de-emphasized as a central narrative device. *WoW* initially focused on a grand conflict between two factions, the Alliance and the Horde, each of which contained exactly half of the game's playable races. Many of the game's expansions (essentially new entries in the game's narrative, equivalent to a whole new game in terms of content) had entirely different narratives for players playing members of different factions, and the constant outbursts of inter-faction violence were major plot points. Multiple entire expansion packs, for instance, were largely about one faction's war crimes against the other, and dealing with their aftermath. This has recently changed, however. The past two expansions – *Shadowlands* (2020) and *Dragonflight* (2022) – as well as the upcoming *War Within* (2024), all have identical storylines for Horde and Alliance players, with the two factions at peace for an extended period for the first time in over a decade, and with no indication that this will change in the foreseeable future. This is certainly a trend in fantasy MMORPGs, with the most successful ones on the market right now either entirely avoiding race-based player factions (e.g. *Guild Wars 2*, *Final Fantasy XIV*), or de-emphasizing their importance (e.g. *WoW*, *Elder Scrolls Online*). My impression is that it is also a trend in fantasy video games broadly, with racial conflict fading as a common narrative trope (for a good example of this, see the *Witcher* (2007 – 2015) and *Dragon Age* (2009 – 2014) trilogies of games, both of which had first and second entries which heavily featured interracial conflict as a theme, and third entries that almost entirely ignored it, arguably to the point of being incoherent as sequels to the previous games). While the first two trends discussed above are straightforwardly positive, advancing conversations about race in fantasy and increasing racial diversity and representation, this one is a little more complicated. On the one

hand, it avoids reproducing dangerous narratives about racial conflict like *Warcraft I* and *II* do, but it also prevents the telling of more critical stories about race. *The Witcher 3* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (the third game in the *Dragon Age* series, released around the same time), for instance, both feel thematically hollow compared to their predecessors which featured very nuanced and compelling portrayals (and critiques) of systemic racism. It seems that there is simultaneously a greater level of care taken when writing race to avoid reproducing harmful narratives, *and* a greater hesitance to tell *any* narratives about race at all, leading to a gaming landscape that is more diverse, less overtly racist, but also less willing to critically engage with race.

This third trend is one that seems to be specific to fantasy *video games*, rather than the genre as a whole – as the following chapters show, there is no dearth of mainstream literary fantasy authors eager to tell stories about race, whether ambitiously thoughtful ones or clumsily undercooked ones. I would attribute this shift unique to gaming at least in part to the same awareness of increased scrutiny post-Gamergate mentioned previously, in this case manifesting as a "better safe than sorry" approach of avoiding narratives that could be interpreted as saying the "wrong thing" about sensitive topics such as race. Other mediums, especially ones like literary fantasy which handled their own recent internal conflicts (i.e. the Sad Puppies affair) more gracefully and with less enduring harm to their reputations, are probably less likely to be walking on eggshells when it comes to topics like race. Of course, there is also the economics of the different mediums to consider – being both enormously expensive to produce, and potentially enormously profitable if successful, major big-budget video games (and films and television series, such as the exorbitantly expensive *Rings of Power*) might be inherently more risk-averse than books.

The other two shifts present in *Warcraft* over the past two decades however – more exploration of the nuance between fantasy's "species" and real-life "races", and more attention to representing racial diversity in the real-world sense – can quite easily be mapped onto the wider fantasy genre as a whole, regardless of medium. The same is true of the shifts represented by *Warcraft III* previously. As such, the franchise serves as a microcosm of the journey the fantasy genre as a whole has undergone in terms of its relationship to race and the way ideas about race are articulated through the lens of fantastical species (although, again, other mediums usually got there before video games, over a longer period of time): starting out with species as a stand-in for conflicting *theological* forces, albeit in ways that reproduced some truly disturbing racist ideas thanks to the cultural context of real-world white supremacy in which the genre was steeped from its inception; followed by a shift towards using species as an allegorical stand-in for real-world race, and using it as a tool to tell stories intentionally and explicitly *about* race; and finally, in the most recent phase of the genre's evolution, using the tools unique to the fantasy genre to explore what race even means by playing with audience expectations and perceptions of the race/species dichotomy. In the next chapter, I look at this last (current) phase in greater detail, provide a more thorough theoretical basis for understanding it, and analyze some prominent examples of it in literary fantasy.

CHAPTER 3:

Between Race and Species

Navigating the Line Between Genre Conventions and Racial Commentary

Thus far, I have been exploring the myriad factors that potentially shape the idea-space within which the writer or writers of a given fantasy text work – the established tropes and habits of the genre itself which form their own mental map of what a work of fantasy should look like; the expectations that wider culture might place on the genre that influence the potential financial and critical success of a work; and the changes in political and cultural climate, both within the genre-culture of fantasy and within the broader sociopolitical context, which determine to an extent the range of 'acceptable' writing on topics such as race. These are all important factors to keep in mind when analyzing the narratives the fantasy genre has historically told, and continues to tell, about race, and the ways in which race and species are articulated in these narratives. But just as important are the choices authors make in relation to those limitations, both working within them and purposefully stepping outside them. In this chapter, I analyze two particular ways in which some contemporary fantasy authors use the unique qualities and capacities of the genre to tell

stories that aim to challenge or contradict the reigning narratives on race, both within the genre itself and in society at large.

The first of these is by challenging the preconceived notions of audiences relating to the ideas of race and species. Of course, it is impossible to know what a given reader, viewer, player, or other audience member of a given work of fantasy might believe about race, what ideas they bring to the work and therefore which ideas the work itself is able to influence. However, it is possible to make an educated guess about the *average* audience member, based on the sociocultural context they live in and on the established knowledge of the fantasy genre itself they might have prior to engaging with a given work. It is safe to assume the average audience member of a work of popular, mainstream fantasy is familiar with the basics of the genre, and their expectations going into the work are shaped by that familiarity. What those expectations are, in particular in regards to race, is informed by the genre's overwhelmingly white racial habitus and long history of racial exclusion – the "Habits of Whiteness" established by Young (Young, 2016), which include an expectation of whiteness as default for the characters of fantasy worlds, and an expectation of the kind of Tolkienesque race/species structure that was criticized by Mills (see Chapter 1). Likewise, it is safe to assume the average audience member of a work of English-language, Western fantasy produced and marketed to an American, British, or otherwise Anglophone audience, has been influenced by the dominant cultural ideas of Western anglophone society. When it comes to race, this ultimately comes down to some variation of Michael Hardimon's "ordinary" concept of race (Hardimon, 2003): that race is a real, material category that can be easily observed and identified, and that different races are distinguished from each other by visible bodily features (ibid., 442), common ancestry (ibid., 445), and common geographic origin (ibid., 447).

These two groups of audience expectations don't have perfect overlap of course. There will be die-hard fantasy fans who have all the preconceived notions associated with the genre-culture, but who either come from a different sociocultural background or have already deconstructed the ideas about race that their upbringing may have instilled in them; likewise, there will be those who belong to what might be termed a 'general' audience, as opposed to specifically a fantasy one, who will come to some of these works without much idea of what the genre is and what to expect from it, while being just as susceptible as anyone else to the ideas articulated by Hardimon's ordinary concept of race. As such, these two sets of expectations can and should be viewed both separately from each other *and* in synthesis, and the ways in which a work engages with both of them is important in order to understand how the work might influence various audience members' views of race.

Racial Schemas and Literature

In order to properly understand both of these potential positionalities from which audience members might respond to a text, a unified theoretical framework of subconscious and conscious audience expectations is required. In *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism* (2016), Paula L. Moya introduces the social psychological concept of *schemas* into literary criticism. A schema, in the context of psychology, is "the organization of past experiences (physical and emotional) and past reactions (sensory-motor and cognitive-affective) through which a person apprehends and interacts with incoming stimuli. As

structures that have been built up through a person's past behavior and experiences in specific domains, schemas serve "as patterns for one's current and future behavior" in those and perceptually-related domains" (Moya, 2016: 15). Essentially, schemas represent models, formed through prior experience, for how one engages with contexts that are perceived as relevant to the schema. They are "cognitive-affective structures that help us to deal more effectively with new situations" (ibid., 19) by relating them to familiar situations and applying the appropriate schema to them. Moya gives the example of her own schema for recognizing cars, and how before she had the experience of buying a car for herself she would simply look at a car and perceive only its color; but after building a schema for cars, she now reads a lot of additional information into cars she sees, because she interprets them through the lens of her knowledge about car makes and models (ibid., 20). What is important to note here is that a schema is different than merely accumulated knowledge on a subject – it is not enough to know about cars, one needs to be able to identify that a given situation (i.e. seeing a new car) needs to be interpreted through the lens of that knowledge. If Moya saw a car but, for some reason, did not realize that she was looking at a car, her knowledge of cars would not come into play, because the appropriate schema would not be activated. Likewise, if she mistook a non-car for a car, and interpreted it through the schema for cars, she would likely reach some very incorrect conclusions.

What does all this have to do with interpreting a literary text? Moya applies schemas to literature in two ways; the first of these relates to analyzing the textual motives and internal lives of literary characters by identifying their own schemas (ibid., 23), an application that is not immediately relevant to my analysis of audience reception. The second, however, is vital. In it, Moya uses the concept of schema to understand how different readers might read very different things into a text, depending on the schemas they themselves bring to the reading (ibid.). This

means that one reader might see the exact subtext to a scene that the author intended, while another might miss it entirely, and a third might read something entirely different and unintended into the scenes due to their prior experiences that shaped their schemas.

To bring this back around to our topic, if we imagine a theoretical audience member reading, playing, or viewing a work of fantasy fiction that in some way deals with race, we can think of the schemas through which they might interpret the text. They might have a schema for reading fantasy that features various non-human "races," such as elves, dwarves, or orcs, and thus assume, because they are reading a fantasy novel, that such non-human species will be present, and be more likely to interpret any that appear through the lens of their accumulated experience with other similar texts. Frameworks such as the set of conventions formed around the "standard" fantasy species (i.e. mostly ones popularized by Tolkien and his imitators), such as mystical, immortal elves with close ties to nature and superior physical and mental attributes, or stout, stubborn and greedy dwarves with ties to the earth and Chthonic spaces, or violent, primitive, and ontologically evil orcs, can all be interpreted as schemas that come into play when a reader encounters these species in fiction – or even species that the reader interprets as resembling them, intentionally or not.

At the same time, if it is indicated to the reader, by something about or in the text, that the schemas they have developed for interpreting human racial difference are relevant, then they will interpret the text through the lens of whatever their own conceptions about race might be – here Hardimon's "ordinary concept" becomes the relevant schema, as well as any views a given reader might individually have about race. For instance, a text might frame a conflict between dwarves and elves as a fantastical, metaphysical conflict between different aspects of the natural and social world that these species are commonly associated with (i.e. elves = magic and plants/animals,

dwarves = industry and the earth/minerals), or it might frame the same conflict as more analogous to a conflict between two human ethnic or racial groups – in the former case, genre-specific schemas are more relevant for interpretation, and in the latter, ones tied to race. It is therefore vital for my project to identify which schemas a hypothetical average reader might be expected to have at their disposal, as well as the ways in which my primary case texts signal to a potential reader which schemas might be relevant for interpreting the elements of the text concerning race. This is where the prior analyses of Hardimon's "ordinary concept of race" on the one hand, and the genre-culture of fantasy as relating to race on the other, come into play – they both represent schemas that most readers of these texts are likely to have and use as lenses for interpreting fantasy texts dealing with race.

It is relatively straightforward to picture how a text might utilize the assumed presence of one or the other of these schemas in its audience to tell a more complex subtextual story than the bare text itself might indicate. For instance, plenty of fantasy texts rely on the audience's familiarity with the tropes and conventions of the genre to inform how readers will respond to specific narrative elements and what their expectations will be – expectations that can then be played with or subverted for dramatic or comedic effect in ways that might be lost on a reader without the proper schema. To return to the example of the *Warcraft* franchise from the previous chapter, when *Lord of the Clans* or *Warcraft 3* place orcish characters in the role of heroic protagonist, they almost certainly expect the audience to have certain preconceived notions of what an orc is, both in fantasy in general and in the *Warcraft* franchise in particular, and by presenting orcish characters who go against these notions the text is not only telling its own story, but also engaging in a critical conversation with other works in the genre and in its own franchise, as well as with its own audience's expectations. And while it is rare for pure fantasy texts to *only* engage

with the audience's schemas relating to the real-world concept of race, plenty of texts outside the strict confines of the fantasy genre do – Colson Whitehead's debut speculative fiction novel, *The Intuitionist* (Whitehead, 1999) for instance, does not feel the need to explain the racial dynamics of 20th century America to its readers, and instead assumes a certain level of familiarity with the topic and *requires* said familiarity in order for a reader to fully understand the events of the novel.

What is a lot more complex, and has thus far gone largely unexamined within literature on fantasy, is the way certain texts and authors are able to utilize both of these different types of race-related schemas, and the messy relationship between them, to tell more nuanced stories about race and communicate very complex ideas to their audience. After all, as elaborated on in chapter 1, the fantasy concept of species and the attendant genre tropes and audience expectations are by no means divorced from real-life conversations about race, nor from the structures of systemic racism that informed the formation of the fantasy genre. The fact that these concepts are so entangled means that there is a lot of potential for confusion between the respective mental schemas associated with both, and an author who is aware of that potential can leverage that confusion for purposeful effect. What follows is an analysis of several specific examples of this in action, all of which use different approaches to doing so.

Case 1 – *Soldier Son* and Deconstructing Race

Robin Hobb's *Soldier Son*, published as a trilogy of novels (*Shaman's Crossing* in 2005, *Forest Mage* in 2006, and *Renegade's Magic* in 2007) but ultimately best read as a single story in three acts, is a fantasy story deeply immersed in colonial imagery. It is set in the nation of Gernia,

not explicitly based on any specific real-world nation but clearly representative of a mélange of European colonial powers, with a religion that is Christian in all but name. At the time of the novel's plot, Gernia has recently massively expanded its territory to the East, conquering vast swathes of land inhabited by a variety of different cultures that Gernians collectively refer to as "Plainspeople". The Plainspeople are a fairly direct analogue to Native Americans, being a collection of individual tribes and nations with vastly different lifestyles and cultures, but all flattened into a single, simplified category by colonial powers. The relationship between the Gernians and the Plainspeople is very explicitly patterned off that between European settler-colonists and Native Americans, and this is established immediately, in the very first chapter. In this chapter, the young protagonist, Nevare, goes with his father into a town and sees some of the local Plainspeople (a tribe called the Bejawi) living in the Gernian town. Nevare's father, the newly appointed lord of this territory, which has only recently been incorporated into Gernia through conquest, explains the relationship between the two peoples thusly:

> "They [the Bejawi] did not make towns for themselves as we do, or devise a central government, or provide for the common good of their people. And that was why they remained a poor, wandering folk […]. Now that we have settled the Bejawi and begun to teach them how to maintain villages and schools and stores, they will learn to prosper. […] Sometimes it takes a while for people to adapt to civilization. The learning process can be hard. But in the end, it will be of great benefit to them. The Gernian people have a duty to lift the Bejawi folk and help them learn civilized ways" (Hobb, 2012: 12-13).

This paternalistic attitude, reminiscent of the "White Man's Burden" narrative made infamous by Rudyard Kipling's eponymous poem, is clearly rooted in actual historical discourse

among white settlers in the Americas; see, for instance, the following quote from James Nye, first Governor of Nevada, as cited by Ned Blackhawk (Blackhawk, 2008):

> "I congratulate the country upon the success of the peaceful policy adopted for our tribes in this Territory ... It will open up to them a new existence, and will make them not only a peaceful but useful class of inhabitants; the younger ones will be educated in all the useful branches of common education and ordinary agriculture, and transform them from savages to men and women adapted to all the employments necessary to self-subsistence ... This great humanizing undertaking ... will stand forth as one of the proudest achievements of the department, and will be looked at with wonder by nations and coming generations, that a nation, while struggling for its existence against a mighty rebellion, with one hand ... stretches out the other with kindness over the long-neglected savage for his redemption" (Blackhawk, 2008: 269).

The parallels are clear – the explicit claims to cultural and racial superiority, the contrasting of "civilized" settlers with "uncivilized" or "savage" Natives, the insistence that no matter depravities the colonized are subjected to, it will all be for their own good in the long run, because the settler has a moral imperative to "redeem" or "uplift" the Native. Even the positions of the two men are almost identical – Nye was also speaking as the first governor of a freshly-incorporated new territory. As in real history, this fictional claim of benevolence is contrasted with the abject poverty and misery the surviving Plainspeople live in under Gernian rule (Hobb, 2012: 12), giving the lie to the settler-colonial narrative. Such narratives about "civilizing" indigenous populations were used, in American history, to justify atrocities ranging from family separation and forced re-education such as occurred at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School and other residential schools (Blackhawk, 2023: 336), to the forced removal of Native populations from their lands and the

claiming of those lands for colonial expansion in the name of "uplifting" the "Noble Savages" (ibid., 223).

Another element established in the first chapter of Hobb's work is the horrible treatment of anyone of mixed Gernian and Plainspeople blood – "the products of cross-unions were abominations before the good god" (Hobb, 2012: 17), according to Gernian religious doctrine. This, too, of course echoes historical discourses around miscegenation, especially those rooted in religion. Through these elements of world-building, Hobb "engages with the history of race theory, aligning Gernian ideologies with historical Western approaches that created hierarchies of worth based on biologically-based racial constructs" (Young, 2014: 36) – historical approaches that anyone with more than a passing knowledge of colonial history should be able to recognize.

These early parallels with real history quite effectively establish to Hobb's reader, from the very first chapter of the book, that the schemas they have for understanding racial relations, and in particular those between settler-colonial societies and the indigenous cultures they colonized (and even more specifically, European settlers in North America and Native Americans), are a relevant lens for understanding the narrative of the novel. As such the reader is primed to mentally picture the Plainspeople, both in terms of physical appearance and cultural objects such as clothing and architecture, as resembling whatever their idea of Native Americans might be, accurate or not. My own experience with the novel definitely led me to do so, and it wasn't until analyzing the novel in greater detail after finishing it that I realized no physical descriptors of the Plainspeople's appearance are ever used.

The other major ethnic group present in the narrative, whose war with Gernia forms the crux of the novel's plot, is a group pejoratively referred to as "Specks" by the Gernians because of

the strange, mottled patterns that cover their skin. Their name for themselves is simply "The People," but this name is rarely used in the trilogy and revealed only in the final act, so for the sake of avoiding confusion with the Plainspeople I will be using the Gernian term for them. The Specks live in a vast forest further East than the Plainspeople, and have not yet been conquered by the Gernians, although the conquest is ongoing at the time of the novel. If the Plainspeople are an approximation of the reality of Native Americans, then the Specks are initially presented as the white colonial stereotype of Native Americans, "noble savages" who live in the wild forests and are one with nature, who do not wear clothes and practice strange magics. They are also presented in ways that prime the reader to read them as decidedly non-human – they "are marked from the first as physically, and thus implicitly biologically distinct from Gernians" (Young, 2014: 36). They have skin patterns that no human ethnic group has ever had, they possess magical powers that seem tied to the land they live on, they go through dramatic cycles of weight loss and gain that do not correlate to either exercise or food intake (Hobb, 2012: 546, 821), they are unable to stand direct exposure to sunlight, and upon death, they become one with great trees of a specific species, their bodies absorbed into the trunks and their consciousness persisting for centuries as long as the tree yet lives.

For a reader with some experience with popular fantasy tropes, the schema that is likely activated by these narrative and worldbuilding elements is one for elves – elves in fantasy often being a more mystical, magical race than humans, living in forests and having close connections with the natural world and especially with plantlife, and also often depicted as functionally immortal. While they are also usually depicted as thin, agile, and with pointed ears, which the Specks are decidedly not, there are enough clear elf-related tropes at play to lead a reader well-

versed in fantasy to the conclusion that they are, for all intents and purposes, Hobb's original, somewhat altered take on classic fantasy elves.

With the average reader now almost guaranteed to have assigned these two schemas to these fictional groups – Native Americans for the Plainspeople, fantasy elves for the Specks – Hobb quickly begins to subvert the typical narrative of race (both in the sense of the human categories, and in the sense of fantastical species) as biological or essential. As the novel goes on, the Gernian protagonist, Nevare, slowly becomes one of the People, not just culturally but physically, and it is gradually revealed that there is actually no biological difference at all between Gernians and the Specks. The latter's strange skin markings are in fact merely tattoos (ibid., 1180), their cycles of weight gain and loss and their posthumous life as trees both a symptom of their use of magic, and that magic itself in no way exclusively available to them on a genetic basis, but rather something anyone can choose to give themselves to, as Nevare unwittingly does early in his life (ibid., 95). Thus what at first seems like a fundamental difference between different species turns out to be largely a cultural difference, albeit one mediated through supernatural means, and the assumptions of both the Gernians and the reader are challenged.

The Plainspeople likewise are revealed to have not even a surface-level difference with the Gernians, only being visually distinguishable by cultural markers rather than racial ones. In fact, a close reading of the text seems to heavily suggest that all three ethnic groups – Gernian, Plainspeople, and Speck – would simply be read as "white" in the context of our contemporary racial taxonomy, and Nevare ultimately ends up able to choose which culture to adopt as his own, without fear that he would physically stand out in any of them. This is actually hinted at in the very first chapter of the book, where Nevare sees a girl and instantly recognizes her as being a "mixed-blood" (i.e. half-Gernian, half-Plainsperson, the product of cultural proscribed

miscegenation), and the basis for his conclusion is described thus: “She rode astraddle as no proper Gernian girl would, and by that as much as by her garb, I knew her for a mixed-blood” (ibid., 21). Note the absence of any phenotypical traits that might form the basis for this conclusion, and the focus entirely on cultural traits such as behavior and clothing. As the novel goes on, there are instances both of Nevare being able to “pass” as a Plainsperson, and Plainspeople successfully “passing” as Gernian, and no mention of skin color or facial features is ever made. Additionally, when Nevare eventually meets a person with a decidedly different skin tone from his own (a traveler from a distant continent), it is made clear that this is his first time seeing someone who looks different from him in this way (ibid., 1256).

This is simultaneously a subversion both of the expectations set up by the novel itself – that these were at the very least distinct human races, and at most possibly entirely divergent species – and of the real-life myth of racial difference. In particular, if we take Hardimon’s ordinary concept of race as the racial schema most likely internalized by the novel’s readers, the gradual reveals about the true nature of the ethnic groups in *Soldier Son* seem pointedly targeted at countering two of the three core theses that make up the ordinary concept: that different races are distinguishable from each other at a glance by visibly different bodily features, and that they represent groups with a common genetic ancestry (Hardimon, 2003: 442, 445). After all, if Nevare can simply become a Speck by getting some tattoos and embracing the relevant cultural and magical practices, then clearly genetics is not a relevant part of the understanding of race exhibited by the characters in the novel.

By taking the exact patterns of prejudice, oppression, subjugation, and colonization that were historically justified through an ideology of racial superiority, and even having characters within the text echo that ideology (through condemning miscegenation, or claiming that Gernians

are inherently more intelligent and civilized), Hobb implicitly connects in the reader's mind the novels' narrative about these ethnic groups with whatever schema the reader has for interpreting real-world racial groups. By then revealing that the racial categories within this fictional world are completely arbitrary and artificial, arguably even more so than in the real world, Hobb is able to make both her characters and the reader question their own assumptions about the "biological" nature of race. There is even an explicit articulation of this conclusion in the text, in the scene mentioned above where Nevare meets a person with a different skin tone for the first time. This occurs shortly after he learns that the Specks' skin patterns are merely tattoos, and is given those tattoos himself, leading him to question what he until that moment assumed was a fundamental biological difference between himself and the Specks. Upon seeing the dark-skinned traveler from another continent, he wonders "if the woman's skin coloring was natural or a cosmetic. I looked at the backs of my now-dappled hands and wondered why that should matter. I myself was now buried deeply within dapples and fat and overshadowed by my other self. How could I ever again expect to tell anything about another person by looking at her body?" (ibid., 1256). In the text, it is an idle thought about a largely irrelevant encounter, one easily forgotten; but it is also a direct demonstration of what *Soldier Son*'s subversion of racial mythology might be able to engender in its readership – a destabilization of the category of "race" as biological, visually readable, and clearly delineated.

There is also a second layer on which *Soldier Son*'s narrative operates – in addition to the external conflict between the Gernians, Plainspeople, and Specks which Nevare has to navigate, he is also constantly dealing with an internal conflict between the Gernian identity that he was born into, and the Speck identity that has been magically implanted into his subconscious by the very mystical forces that give the Specks their powers and virtual immortality, a second personality

sharing his body and calling itself "Soldier Boy". While Nevare initially views Soldier Boy as an external, parasitic influence, the two eventually effectively combine into a single entity, at peace with himself. At the very end of the final book, after the external conflict has been resolved, the two are forcibly torn apart again, not just spiritually but now physically, with Soldier Boy ascending to the Specks' eternal afterlife inside the trees, and Nevare going back to his (relatively) normal Gernian life.

In her excellent analysis of the post-colonial themes of Hobb's work, Young interprets this ending as a clever subversion on Hobb's part, "resisting" a "glib reading" of Nevare's hybrid identity as a "flattened and ahistorical celebration of a predictable pluralism" (Young, 2014: 45) – effectively refusing to put a neat bow on a story about colonial violence, avoiding the implication that colonizer and colonized can and should live together in harmony. This is a legitimate reading, but I think when read through the lens of racial ontology rather than colonial dynamics, it leaves room for a different interpretation. That this stark division of Nevare/Soldier Boy along what appear to be racial lines comes after the novel goes out of its way to demonstrate those lines as ephemeral and rooted entirely in cultural practice seems almost like a betrayal of the hard work the story has put into deconstructing race; but a more charitable reading might be a reinforcement of *cultural* difference as real and important, even when physical difference is not. Either way, this ending seems to reveal a contradiction at the heart of the novel's narrative about race, presenting the category as both entirely arbitrary and artificial, *and* ultimately an insurmountable barrier. The tangle of meanings is too complex to tease out any definitive answer, but I believe that as much as the rest of the novel serves as a shining example of fantasy's unique *potential* to challenge racial narratives using the tangle of literal and allegorical categories it has at its disposal (race/species/culture), the confusion introduced into that reading by the story's climax also serves

to demonstrate the *limitations* of this approach – namely, how easy it can be to muddy the message and confuse the narrative when the lines between these categories are as blurry as they often are in fantasy.

Case 2 – *The Goblin Emperor*: Bridging the Gap Between Race and Species

Hobb's approach represents only one way in which an author can use the tools at fantasy's disposal to critically engage with the audience's concepts of race and species. A different approach can be seen in Katherine Addison's 2014 fantasy novel *The Goblin Emperor*. Where *Soldier Son* ultimately resolves all of its world's seeming racial and species distinctions with the revelation that all of the characters are not only human, but phenotypically indistinguishable humans at that, *The Goblin Emperor* does away with humans entirely – instead, the two groups of sapient beings of human-like intellect and civilization levels that are featured in the narrative are elves and goblins, old fantasy and mythological classics predating even Tolkien's work. The elves and goblins in the novel are undeniably phenotypically non-human – their ears are long and partially mobile, changing orientation to reflect emotional states, and the goblins additionally have eyes of unnatural colors (orange-red (Addison, 2014: 199) or colorless grey (ibid., 78)), larger, protruding bones in their jaws (ibid., 78) and hands (ibid., 61), and "almost perfect[ly] black" skin (ibid., 78). However, they are also *more* phenotypically human than either species is in Tolkien's (or any other popular fantasy) depiction, having normal human lifespans (as opposed to the often long-lived elves of other texts), and normal human height and posture (as opposed to the short and hunched-

over bodies typically associated with the term 'goblin') In addition, both have societies with roughly the same level of technological, political, and cultural development and complexity as each other (as opposed to the usual contrast between the "high" civilization of elves and the "low" civilization of goblins, see earlier discussion of Mills's *Wretched of Middle-Earth* (Mills 2022) for the ways in which Tolkienian fantasy denies all markers of civilization and society to orcs, goblins, and similar beings while elevating elves as a proverbial 'master race').

What makes Addison's decision to use the names, if not all the traits, of these "standard" fantasy species so fascinating is that the novel itself goes out of its way to emphasize that these are not species at all, but in fact *races* in the real-world sense. Despite the phenotypical differences between them, no actual difference in any trait that goes deeper than the skin is ever established, and indeed interracial marriages and children, while stigmatized, are quite common. The pale, white-skinned elves and dark, black-skinned goblins are quite direct parallels of real racial groups, especially considering the dynamics playing out between them in the narrative: elves think of themselves as superior, look down on and denigrate goblins, use them as servants and domestic laborers, refer to them using slurs ("moon-witted," "hobgoblin" (Addison, 2014: 25)), and the elven upper classes at least seem to treat mixed-race children with disdain, as evidenced by the novel's protagonist, the half-goblin son of the elven emperor who unexpectedly ascends to the throne after the deaths of his father and full-blooded elven half-brothers and spends the entire novel grappling with the elven court plotting against him and underestimating him because of his mixed heritage.

The anti-goblin racism of the elves is "overt and systemic" and "clear from the start" (Reid, 2022: 5), and the novel explores at length not only the social and political effects of this racism, but also the psychological. The protagonist, Maia, has essentially been raised to hate his own body,

or at least all those parts of it that are goblin in nature – he repeatedly mentally refers to his skin (Addison, 2014: 70), hands, and bone structure (ibid.: 61) as "ugly" – and when he finally finds himself surrounded by goblins and sees himself in them he has to fight not to "faint or hyperventilate or burst into tears," showing the severe psychological toll exacted by internalized racism.

Between all of these blatant parallels to real-world racism, and the fact that the two races are quite literally black and white in terms of skin tone, it's fair to say that almost any reader will soon start reading *The Goblin Emperor* through a racial schema. By the same token, however, the use of two of the most well-known stock fantasy species for this purpose, the book also explicitly seems to want to be read through the lens of fantasy species. In fact, I would argue that *The Goblin Emperor* is more blatant and direct by far than *Soldier Son* in terms of actively trying to trigger both of the relevant schemas, and thereby cementing the link between them in the reader's mind – on the one hand invoking Tolkien and his racial mythos with the names and surface-level traits of the races, but on the other reducing the different between them to just the three core theses of Hardimon's ordinary concept of race, doing away with all of the typical fantasy racial mythology and "theological" explanations for racial difference (Attebery, 2010: 335).

By thus framing elves and goblins as races in the true sense of the word, Addison's novel cuts through the obfuscation of this relationship common to many other fantasy works, directly calling out the subtext of many of the genre's most famous texts. After all, if goblins are a racial underclass unfairly maligned and mistreated by a white hegemonic class – if they are not just black, but *Black* – then critical readings of other fantasy texts, and of the genre itself, such as Mills's unflinching challenge to the reproduction of the "Aryan myth" in Tolkien's work (Mills, 2022), become much clearer and more obvious. Addison's novel effectively does some of the same work

as Mills's paper, but in a form much likelier to reach a wider audience, if one with less of a theoretically developed and articulated critique. In Robin A. Reid's 2022 paper (Reid, 2022), to date the only published work on race in *The Goblin Emperor*, she identifies all of these individual elements of racial worldbuilding, but does not connect them with the larger context of race in the fantasy genre, and in so doing seems to miss the most potent elements of Addison's writing on race. Reid concludes that there was probably no "conscious focused decision, or intent" on Addison's part to "write back" to Tolkien and other fantasy classics on the topic of race (ibid.: 1), and of course there is no way to know for certain either way short of asking Addison herself; but I argue that the way in which the novel's worldbuilding seems laser-targeted at specifically unmasking the racial subtext of the genre's classics indicates at least as much thought and intentionality behind *The Goblin Emperor*'s racial metanarrative as there is in Hobb's work.

Intentional or not, however, a racial reading of *The Goblin Emperor* is not without its problems. While most of the novel takes place in the elven court, and within that specific context the parallels with real-life racism are clear and explicit, what little the reader learns about the rest of Addison's fictional world seems less in line with this reading. In particular, the larger geopolitical dynamics between the two races place them on a much more even footing than any two real groups that have a comparable structure of racial domination between them – rather than being the targets of historical and current colonial violence, extraction, and exploitation, the primary goblin nation of Barizhan engages with the elven empire as an equal geopolitical power, making trade deals and diplomatic unions; indeed, the elves are described as being "desperate" enough to maintain "cordial relations with Barizhan" (Addison, 2014: 57) that the elven emperor agreed to take a goblin wife, which led to Maia's birth. Compared to the kind of unequal power structure implied by the treatment of goblins in elven society, this seems somewhat unrealistic.

Maia's own ascension to the elven throne, while not without controversy, ends up being accepted relatively easily by the end of the novel, again indicating a less intense racial animus than is constantly reinforced by countless personal interactions throughout the novel. I posit that this confusing and seemingly contradictory worldbuilding is a symptom of the clashing race/species schemas at play not just for the reader, but also the author of a work which plays with both, such as *The Goblin Emperor* – it is a fairly common trope in works of fantasy for different species to be on roughly equal footing in terms of military, economic, and political power, probably because this makes for more interesting conflict with higher stakes (see earlier discussion on the lack of a "structurally white" race in *Warcraft*, in the previous chapter). If this is indeed what happened with *The Goblin Emperor*, it serves as another example of the potential limitations arising from the genre-culture of fantasy when it comes to telling stories about race.

Case 3 – *Stormlight Archive*: Embracing Difference and Challenging History

Both *Soldier Son* and *The Goblin Emperor* are examples of works that tackle the subject of race (as a sociopolitical and cultural construct) and species (as a fundamental biological difference) by presenting the latter as merely a manifestation of the former; their worlds feature groups that in truth always turn out to have less actual meaningful difference between them than the prevailing cultural beliefs of those groups' members would claim, from the "species" that turn out to be merely "races" of Addison's work, to the denial of phenotypical difference along both axes in Hobb's. My third example of contemporary fantasy handling race in a novel way instead does the opposite, emphasizing the physical, biological differences between groups even more

than many works of fantasy do, but then depicting a world in which those difference by and large do not lead to the formation of sociopolitical categories along racial lines.

Brandon Sanderson's extremely ambitious *Stormlight Archive* series of novels, currently five massive novels into a planned 10-book series, is distinct from the other examples given so far in several key ways outside of the actual content of the text, and those ways are worth acknowledging before moving onto textual analysis. First of all, while Addison and Hobb are both fairly popular authors whose works generally fall into the mainstream of literary fantasy, Sanderson exists even further in that direction, being one of the most well-known and popular contemporary fantasy authors. The success of his work, both the *Stormlight Archive* and other series and standalone books, is such that he has been able to leverage his cultural cache within fantasy into unprecedented financial success, with a fund-raising campaign for some of his novels on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter raising over $40 million in 2022, more than doubling the previous record[26], as well as being hand-picked to finish the famous *Wheel of Time* series of fantasy novels after the original author's death. I point this out because it indicates that his work is extremely well-regarded by both fantasy fans and fantasy publishers, and is therefore representative of the most mainstream forms of contemporary literary adult fantasy. This is also related, I believe, to the second distinction between Sanderson and the other authors discussed previously – where Hobb and Addison both clearly set out to write, at least to some extent, works of activist fiction, with intentional and carefully crafted political messaging, my impression is that Sanderson's work is first and foremost written for entertainment, with little direct engagement with social or political theory. Much like my reasoning for picking *Warcraft* as a representative

[26] See: Whitten, Sarah. 2022. *Fantasy author's record-breaking Kickstarter campaign closes at $41.7 million*. CNBC. https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/31/authors-record-breaking-kickstarter-campaign-closes-at-41point7-million.html (last accessed: 4/6/2025).

franchise for mainstream fantasy in the previous chapter, this makes *Stormlight Archive* a good weathervane for changes in the genre-culture at large, and not just the things particularly progressive-minded authors are able to do in their individual works, sometimes *in spite* of that genre-culture. Finally, unlike *Soldier Son*, which is a completed trilogy, and *The Goblin Emperor*, which has received some indirect sequels but was very much written as a standalone narrative, *Stormlight Archive* is explicitly incomplete. There are five more novels planned, and the first five have each expanded and sometimes fundamentally changed the series' narrative about race and species (for instance, an early version of this section was written years ago after only reading the first three books, and most of the conclusions I made at the time needed to be revised extensively, which is why I am rewriting it from scratch). As such, I do not have access to the full scope of what this series will ultimately have to say about race, and my analysis must by necessity be clearly marked as occurring in 2025, after the release of the fifth *Stormlight Archive* novel, *Winds and Truth*. Given the sheer scope of the series, and each individual entry in it, I fully expect to have to return to this analysis in several years and revisit the topic.

With those caveats in mind, *Stormlight Archive*'s approach to the question of race/species stands out in three ways: First, albeit probably most subtle, the human characters of the world in which the series takes place (Roshar) are almost all phenotypically non-white. They possess the full range of human skin tones, hair colors and textures (and some beyond that range, more on that later), but the one feature they all have in common are epicanthic folds (the upper eyelid shape phenotypically strongly associated with East Asian people in the real world). As this feature is simply the standard, or default, way for a human to look in the eyes of the novels' characters, this is only revealed subtly through the way characters react to the single prominent character who is phenotypically white, often referring to his "too round, slightly too large" eyes, "similar to the

eyes of a child" (Sanderson, 2011: 487). The vast majority of the novels' characters are also marked as explicitly non-white in other ways, with most having varying shades of dark skin.

The decision to cast a fantasy world as almost entirely non-white is relatively rare in mainstream fantasy, and obviously goes against the established racial habitus of the genre (with the opposite, i.e. all-white worlds like that of the earlier Warcraft games, being far more common), but it is certainly not unique. Obviously many authors of color have done similar things (see the works of R.F. Kuang and Evan Winter for some prominent contemporary examples), and even among white authors the practice goes back at least as far as Ursula Le Guin's 1968 classic *A Wizard of Earthsea*. What sets Sanderson's world apart is that it is not just white phenotypes that are missing from the ranks of his human characters, but almost all real-world racial categories lack clear Rosharan analogues. This is because *Stormlight Archive* makes its "humans" every bit as fantastical as other works of fantasy make non-human species, with a range of phenotypical differences within the human species that dwarfs anything found in our world – this is the second key difference between its approach to race and those of most other fantasy texts. There are human races with long white eyebrows that hang down past their chin (Sanderson, 2010: 47), with nails made of solid stone (ibid., 408), with blue skin (ibid., 578), hair that naturally comes in multi-colored strands reflecting both parents' hair colors (ibid., 834), and even metallic gold skin and hair (ibid., 295), all in addition to the full range of regular human skin tones, facial features, and hair textures. The largest ethnic group on Roshar, the Makabaki, lack any of these extranatural elements, and are merely very dark-skinned with epicanthic folds, a rare combination in the real world. All of these groups are presented as uncontroversially belonging to the same species, and moreover, characters on Roshar refer to these only as different "nations," rather than "races," with

what little discrimination exists between them being more like the mutual stereotypes that form between neighboring nations of equal power and influence.

This can be read as doing essentially the same thing as *Soldier Son*, but by presenting the opposite scenario – revealing the absurdities of human racial categorization by portraying groups with drastically greater phenotypical differences *without* putting them in separate racial categories, where *Soldier Son* portrays groups with no such differences being rigidly sorted along racial lines regardless. Both serve to sever the link between phenotype and race, one by questioning the existence of difference in the first place, the other by questioning whether difference, no matter how large, actually justifies racial classification.

The third way in which *Stormlight Archive* stands out from other mainstream fantasy concerns its depiction of non-human species. There is only one prominent group[27] of beings on Roshar that is explicitly excluded from the category of "human" by both the text and the characters within it – a species called "The Singers" (or "Parshmen," as humans call them, and as they are exclusively known to the reader until the third book where their name for themselves is revealed). The Singers are decidedly biologically non-human, far more so than even any of Tolkien's species, or most species in mainstream fantasy for that matter – but they are also not really reminiscent of any of the species commonly featured in fantasy works, instead being an entirely new and original creation. Their bodies are covered in multicolored swirls of red, black, and white in varying combinations, they have bits of insect-like carapace, and in place of hearts they have large precious gems in their chests called "gemhearts." Their natural lifecycle includes adopting entirely different

[27] There are actually several other species that one might categorize as sapient life, but they are either so few in number as to be narratively and socio-politically irrelevant, or are explicitly supernatural spirit-like beings that don't really have a place in a discussion about race and species.

physical forms for different roles, such as *mateform*, the only form with pronounced sexual dimorphism and the only form capable of reproduction, or *warform*, a form with a rigid exoskeleton serving as natural "armor" and with significantly enhanced physical power. The different forms, of which there are an uncertain number but well over a dozen at this point in the series, even alter an individual Singer's personality, desires, and cognitive abilities – *dullform*, for instance, makes them dim-witted and slow, while *artform* enhances creativity. The Singers are intimately connected with the "spren" – essentially nature spirits of Roshar – and they change forms through symbiosis with different types of spren. They also think and speak in sync with the natural "Rhythms" of the world, a sort of omnipresent music that only they can hear, "attuning" to different Rhythms depending on their emotions (Sanderson, 2014: 163). They are presented as utterly alien and profoundly different to humans in almost every way, and the humans (at least at the start of the series) all treat them as such.

What makes the Singers especially interesting, however, are the conflicting narratives about their relationship to humans. After finishing the first book in the series, which contains only human perspectives, and not even a single Singer speaking role, the reader is left with a very black-and-white, Tolkienesque conflict of theological powers of good and evil reified in the form of conflict between races/species: the humans worship the God of Honor, who is good and just, and in an eternal conflict with the God of Odium, who is evil and hateful; the Singers (or, as they are called by humans at this point in the story, "Parshmen") are the former servants of Odium, the demonic "Voidbringers" of human scripture who hail from "Damnation", a pretty clear equivalent to the Christian vision of Hell. The "Voidbringers" were defeated by the humans and their god long ago, stripped of their powers and free will and enslaved as punishment. Those powers, and the Singers' evil god, are now returning, once again threatening peace on Roshar. A fairly standard

fantasy narrative, with an added dose of seeming justification for racial slavery that would be right at home in Mills's reading of Tolkien's racial worldbuilding.

Over the course of the following books, however, Singer perspective characters are introduced and a very different narrative is gradually revealed: humans are alien to Roshar, which is the Singers' home planet. Odium is real, but he is the god of humans, who they brought with them when they arrived as refugees after destroying their own home world millennia ago. The Singers welcomed them and gave them succor, but the humans eventually conquered them and supplanted them as the major species on Roshar. Even the word "Voidbringers" is revealed to have been coined by Singers during this initial war, to describe humans (Sanderson, 2017: chapters 111 and 113). This complete inversion of the typical fantasy narrative, casting humans as the violent invaders from another world in service to a supernatural force of evil, and the seemingly "monstruous" non-human species as the party with the moral high ground in the conflict, allows Sanderson to also invert the reader's perspective, as multiple Singer characters enter the main cast at around the same time, placing the reader in their figurative shoes and forcing them to view the conflict from the "other side". In chapter 1, I introduced Attebery's assertion that fantasy is uniquely able to engage with Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge*, telling narratives not just about characters and events, but about the nature of narrative itself (Attebery, 2014: 196-198). By taking two books to establish a very classical fantasy narrative and then shattering it completely with the revelations in the third book, *Stormlight Archive* is simultaneously a rejection of the specific kinds of racial narrative that have been the genre's bread and butter since Tolkien, and a warning against trusting hegemonic narratives of history in general. If Mills's reading of Tolkien casts the primary characters of *Lord of the Rings* (humans, elves, dwarves, and hobbits) in the position of whiteness within a white supremacist myth of racial superiority, then *Stormlight*

Archive casts its human characters (who remain the majority of perspective characters and audience surrogates) in the position of whiteness in the real world – an imperialist, colonizing force profiting from the violently expropriated labor and land of others, all justified through completely ahistorical racial mythmaking.

Case 4 – *The Broken Earth*: Race and Mythmaking

My final example goes even further into a deconstruction and critique of the mythological aspects of race. *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin (consisting of three volumes: *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*), published between 2015 and 2017, is, much like *Soldier Son*, a book explicitly about imperialism, colonialism, and racial supremacy. Where *Soldier Son* mostly uses real world history as its basis and simply places familiar historical narratives in a fantastical setting that allows Hobb to push the narrative, and the messages it communicates about race, a bit further than simple historical fiction would allow, Jemisin roots her story in an expansive and entirely fictional history that has some structural similarities with the real world, but is mostly distinct. This difference is important, because it means that while *Soldier Son* is suited for telling stories about the dynamics of colonialism as they play out in the moment, it is not really interested in exploring how the mythological narratives that justify it are created, and how oppressive structures are always rooted in a long legacy of historical causality. *The Broken Earth* uses fantasy to do exactly that.

The trilogy is set in a fantasy world called the Stillness, which is constantly undergoing a dramatic and potentially apocalyptic series of seismic and volcanic events. The world does not have distinct nations, all parts of the planet having been unified into a single empire long ago in order to better organize a response to the constant "Seasons" of seismic catastrophe. What it does have are races, in the real-world sense of the word – and the fact that racial distinction is both omnipresent and socially important is established and reinforced constantly right from the start of the first book. Whenever a new character is introduced, the point-of-view character mentally analyzes their phenotype and attempts to immediately place them in a complex racial hierarchy:

> "Her skin is unpleasantly ocher-brown by some standards and unpleasantly olive-pale by others. Mongrel midlatters, Yumenescenes call (called) people like her – enough Sanzed in them to show, not enough to tell" (Jemisin, 2015: 18).

> "He has long flat hair, which together with the skin might mark him as an Arctic, though the color of it – a deep heavy black, like the soil near an old blow – doesn't fit. Eastern Coasters' hair is black like that, except fluffy and not flat, but people from the east have black skin to match. […] Nothing about him makes racial sense" (ibid., 37).

> "But then, he's obviously not well-bred, either: that hair, and skin so black it's almost blue, and he's small. […] If his ancestors include any Sanzeds, they're far back, and they gave him nothing of their physical superiority" (ibid., 74).

> "Those are just Sanzed: the expected pouf of slate-gray hair and the expected deep brown skin and the expected size and visible strength of build" (ibid., 250).

These racial classifications – Sanzed, midlatter, Arctic, Eastern Coaster – do not quite align with any real-world phenotypes, all seemingly having eclectic mixes of physical traits associated with a variety of real racial groups. So, while most of the human races of *The Broken Earth* do not possess traits that go beyond real human traits like the races in *Stormlight Archive* do, they do still explicitly distance themselves from any direct comparison to any particular group in real life. It is also clear that there is a racial hierarchy in place in the Stillness, with the Sanzed race on top and the others all viewed as inferior. One's place in this hierarchy is important for understanding their social role, as evidenced by the confusion experienced by others when a character's appearance doesn't "make racial sense" (ibid., 37). The exact relations between most races are not made explicit beyond the absolute fact of Sanzed supremacy over all others – they run the global empire and exact tribute from other races, they live in the largest metropolis with the most resources for surviving Seasons, their laws and norms are enforced across the Stillness. The Sanzed refer to everyone else as "lesser races" (ibid., 387) and there is even evidence of them historically using other races as food in times of famine (ibid.). There is no *legal* discrimination against "lesser" races at the time of the novels' plot, with everyone being *de jure* equal citizens of the empire, but the legacy of systemic racism has clearly left its mark on the cultural mores and interpersonal relations of the people.

However, the systemic racism that takes the form of Sanzed supremacy is not central to the plot of *The Broken Earth* – instead, it is the systemic violence and oppression perpetrated by *all* races, led by Sanzed cultural values, against a different group that the story largely revolves around. This group are the so-called *orogenes*, individuals of all races born with a rare ability (orogeny) that allows them to predict and, to an extent, influence seismic forces, in addition to a variety of other abilities. Orogenes are taken from their families as children and forced into a

system of training that teaches them to think of themselves as dangerous, inhuman creatures who must be carefully controlled, and who can find themselves executed for stepping out of line in any way. As one orogene puts it, "a rogga is not any man. Roggas have no right to get angry, to want justice, to protect what their love" (ibid., 387) - "rogga" being a slur for orogenes, "a dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing" (ibid., 136). And these orogenes, indoctrinated to hate themselves and under constant threat of execution, are the lucky ones – many families that discover their child has orogenic powers will simply kill the child on the spot, and if not, then the broader community might. Fear and hatred of orogenes is all but universal across geography, race, culture, and class in the Stillness. They are the only group that is legally denied the same rights as everyone else, to the extent that some orogene children, if they prove to be disobedient, are surgically lobotomized and strapped into machines that utilize their bodies' natural abilities to control earthquakes, and even sold as sexual slaves to wealthy individuals (ibid., 136-138).

In this way, the orogenes are reduced to moral non-entities, the "ontological zeroes" of Mills's critique (Mills, 2022: 24) – or, perhaps even more directly applicable, Agamben's *homo sacer*, the figure of the human being who can be killed without incurring the penalty for murder, excluded from the category of "human" and relegated to "bare" life (Weheliye, 2014: 33). Agamben "imagines the field of bare life as eradicating divisions among humans along the lines of race, religion, nationality, or gender, because it creates a substance that, albeit in its debasement, transcends traditional social and political markers" (ibid.: 34). This, at first glance, seems to be precisely the role that orogenes play in the Stillness – they transcend the boundaries of the systems of racial hierarchy that otherwise govern the lives of the inhabitants of the world, uniting all races in the shared, collective ritual of their exclusion through violence and dehumanization. While divisions along racial lines clearly still exist in the Stillness – see the comment about "lesser races"

above – they are mostly sublimated into hostility against orogenes; and when a Season comes, all other divisions become less important than usual in the face of the impending environmental danger – but the division between orogenes and "normal" humans is instead intensified, with all orogenes, even the ones deemed "safer" due to their re-education and strict government control, being summarily executed at the start of a Season – or even expected to kill themselves in order to "remove themselves from the competition for resources – so that normal, healthy people have a chance to survive" (Jemisin, 2016: location no. 3201).

That this is the group on which *The Broken Earth* focuses might make the trilogy seem an odd choice for inclusion in this dissertation. After all, orogenes are not a *race*, either in the real sense or in the conventional fantasy sense; it is a rare condition that children of all different groups are born with, and their oppression transcends racial boundaries, with people of all races treating them the same. As such, if one were to draw a rough analogy to a real-world oppressed category of people, sexual and gender minorities, or people with congenital disabilities, might be a better fit. But Weheliye (2014) takes issue with Agamben's assertion that the existence of the *homo sacer* transcends racial division, instead arguing that it is an extension of it – that the violence of colonialism and racial slavery, enacted explicitly along racial lines (and indeed serving as the justification for the drawing of those lines in the first place), represent the defining example of *bare life*, the "nomoi of modern hierarchical governance" (Weheliye, 2014: 38). In essence, Weheliye's argument is that the state of exclusion applied to all groups rendered as *homo sacer*, whether they are defined along explicitly racial lines or not, has its roots in the ideological, moral, and structural logics of racial domination.

And Jemisin, it seems, understands this extremely well. As *The Broken Earth* approaches its conclusion in the third book, the true history of the world, to some extent forgotten and to some

extent purposefully hidden by the very structures of power and control that enact state violence on orogenes in the present version of the Stillness, is revealed through flashback chapters interspersed throughout the novel. In very basic terms, this secret history goes as follows: thousands of years ago, before the advent of the Seasons and before there were orogenes, an empire called Syl Anagist ruled the world. They were racial supremacists and subjugated all others and subsumed them into their empire until all other cultures were wiped out. One of these groups was a race called the Niess, who were known to have strange powers and looked more starkly different than other races (most notably, having completely white irises in their eyes). This made them "not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all" (Jemisin, 2017: 198). Thus rendered as *homo sacer*, the Niess were rounded up, experimented on, and ultimately exterminated – and in the process, the scientists of Syl Anagist discovered that the Niess had no special abilities, and were just as human as everyone else – the scholars "had plenty of prisoners to study, but try as they might, no discernible variance from ordinary people could be found. This was intolerable; more than intolerable. After all, if the Niess were just ordinary human beings, then on what basis had military appropriations, pedagogical reinterpretation, and entire disciplines of study been formed? […] if the Niess were merely human, the world built on their inhumanity would fall apart" (ibid.). And so the scientists of Syl Anagist, through genetic engineering and magical experiments, created people known as *tuners*, who truly did have the abilities the Niess only allegedly had, and harnessed them as slaves for the glory of the empire, creating out of whole cloth a new people to oppress, a new *homo sacer* through which to sublimate all the violence of empire. In their lust for power and wealth, the rulers of Syl Anagist would eventually use the tuners' powers to trigger the chain of events that would begin the cycle of Seasons and thus doom the world to constant disaster for millennia; and it was the tuners who,

through their eventual offspring, would pass on the gene for their artificially created abilities into the general population, resulting in the occasional births of orogenes.

Indeed, almost every aspect of the oppressive system faced by orogenes in the modern Stillness is shown to have its origins in this initial, explicitly racial and colonial, form of oppression – the way that undesirable orogenes are lobotomized and hooked up to machines as power sources matches the way the still-living Niess had their very bodies and souls magically harnessed to provide power for Syl Anagist (ibid., 246); the cruel system of training and education orogenes go through is a direct parallel to the training the tuners went through as soon as they were created; even the Guardians, the stern and emotionless wardens who hunt down orogenes and torture them into accepting their place in Sanzed society, are revealed to literally be the same individuals as the scientists who initially created the tuners, magically made immortal and committed to reproducing their violence across the millennia (ibid., 314)[28]. The Sanzed empire is not Syl Anagist, and the Sanze themselves are not the same race that initially ruled the world – several successive civilizations have risen and fallen in the meantime, with their own racial hierarchies, as the Seasons make continuity of cultural or political entities all but impossible – but both Sanze and all its predecessors modeled their empires, and especially their oppression of orogenes, on Syl Anagist. Indeed, each empire has, at some point, uncovered the true history of the world, and actively censored it and rewritten it to serve its own purposes and erase the continuity with the racial domination of the first empire (ibid., 293). "No one really wants to face the fact that the world is

[28] Note: the connection between Guardians and their ancient counterparts is never stated explicitly in the book, merely so heavily hinted that it is all but impossible to come to any other conclusion. The page cited here is where the most explicit piece of evidence is provided, but it doesn't really mean anything without the context of dozens of other implied connections and parallels throughout the final book. I consider the implication to be undeniable enough that I am treating it as explicit fact, and clearly the interpretation that the reader is meant to come to, but it is worth noting that it technically isn't stated outright. The other connections listed are all explicit, though.

the way it is because some arrogant, self-absorbed people tried to put a leash on the rusting planet. And no one was ready to accept that the solution to the whole mess was simply to let orogenes live and thrive and do what they were born to do" (ibid.).

The orogenes have the capacity to undo what the tuners' powers did and fix the world for everyone, but for them to do so they must be totally free to use their powers without being leashed to Guardians and without having their confidence and self-respect broken by decades of abusive training and education. In the end, the narrative of the trilogy is resolved by an orogene who discovered all this – discovered that "*the world as he knew it could not function without forcing someone into servitude*" (ibid.) – and chose to end that world instead. Using his powers, he destroyed the Sanzed empire and triggered the worst Season yet, in the process giving other orogenes the chance to seek their freedom. And it is two of these orogenes, now free to use their powers as they wish, that ultimately put an end to the Seasons and, hopefully, create a better world for the future.

With the revelations and denouement of the third book, Jemisin reframes the entire trilogy. *The Broken Earth* had, up until this point, been a story about a seemingly natural apocalypse first, about the systemic abuse and oppression of a distinctly non-racial group second, and set against the distant and not very important backdrop of systemic racism. Now it turns out that that backdrop had in fact been the most important element of the story, the source of both the logics and structures of oppression faced by the orogenes, and of the geological disasters threatening the entire world. As Weheliye noted, it is racial domination that is at the root of other forms of dehumanization, that pioneers the methods and models later employed against other classes deemed *homo sacer* (Weheliye, 2014: 38). Likewise, as many scholars have noted, and as Iles (2019) has explicitly connected to Jemisin's work, environmental collapse is intricately connected to racial oppression

and colonial exploitation in the real world as well, in both directions – "the same political, institutional, and economic conditions that beget social subjugation can also create or worsen ecological harm. Similarly, environmental degradation can spark or deepen class and ethnic conflict" (Iles, 2019).

By taking the time to painstakingly paint a picture of her fictional world *as it is*, before revealing the exact nature of *how it got there*, Jemisin is able to engage with both of these ideas and subtly introduce them to her audience in the approachable form of popular speculative fiction. To what extent her work has had an impact is, of course, hard to gauge, but it is worth noting that she, and these books in particular, were specifically singled out as targets of the racially charged right-wing "Sad Puppies" campaign mentioned in the previous chapter, so at the very least the clear political thrust of her work has been identified by its detractors. As for the matter of authorial intent, I believe Jemisin's history of very actively participating on the side of racial justice in conflicts within the genre-culture of fantasy such as RaceFail and Sad Puppies shows that she is, at the very least, conscious of how her work is perceived, and likely quite intentional in her use of fantasy to challenge and deconstruct hegemonic racial narratives.

CONCLUSION:

“It Doesn’t Have to Be the Way It Is”

The Past, Present, and Future of Race in Fantasy

“It doesn’t have to be the way it is. That is what fantasy says. It doesn’t say, “Anything goes”—that’s irresponsibility, when two and one make five, or forty-seven, or whuddevva, and the story doesn’t “add up,” as we say. Fantasy doesn’t say, “Nothing is”—that’s nihilism. And it doesn’t say, “It ought to be this way”—that’s utopianism, a different enterprise. Fantasy isn’t meliorative. The happy ending, however enjoyable to the reader, applies to the characters only; this is fiction, not prediction and not prescription.

It doesn’t have to be the way it is is a playful statement, made in the context of fiction, with no claim to “being real.” Yet it is a subversive statement.

Subversion doesn’t suit people who, feeling their adjustment to life has been successful, want things to go on just as they are, or people who need support from authority assuring them that things are as they have to be. Fantasy not only asks “What if things didn’t go on just as they do?” but demonstrates what they might be like if they went otherwise—thus gnawing at the very foundation of the belief that things have to be the way they are” (Le Guin, 2011).

The legendary fantasy and science-fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin posted these words as part of a blog post on her personal website in 2011. In this post she lays out her theory of the unique capacity of fantasy as a genre to inspire its readers to think in new ways about the world, and also about the threat the genre poses to established structures as a result of this capacity. Over the course of this dissertation, and especially in the third chapter, I have endeavored to demonstrate some of the ways in which this capacity can manifest when applied to the question of race in particular, as well as to establish those elements of the fantasy genre beyond just the core subversive thread that Le Guin identifies which contribute to its unique position in discussions about race in narrative fiction, most notably the genre conventions surrounding non-human sapient species. Many of these conventions are, at best, in a state of friction with the progressive promise Le Guin sees in the genre – from the long history of pernicious racial coding that has been baked into the very DNA of the genre-culture, to the fundamental ontological claims about the nature of race that are implicitly (and, one hopes, unintentionally) written into the racial cosmologies of the genre's most famous works (as per Mills 2022), to the problems inherent in any attempt to write about a real-world sociopolitical category, such as race, through the lens of an explicitly biological category, such as species. Yet an awareness of these points of friction, and a skillful weaponization of that very friction in order to create the desired impact on the audience, offers potential avenues for telling radical new kinds of stories about race that are unmatched by other genres.

Having dedicated the previous chapter to a detailed analysis of what four very different fantasy narratives do with the question of race, and the varied ways in which, and degrees to which, they engage with this friction, it is worth now taking the time to examine the ways in which these things could only have been accomplished within the specific genre-context of fantasy.

The subversion of mainstream understandings of race (such as that represented by Hardimon's "ordinary" concept) that *Soldier Son* undertakes relies on a very specific element of the novel's worldbuilding – the fact that the groups that fill sociopolitical niches analogous to real-life races, and have relationship dynamics of power, supremacy, violence, and control analogous to those historically and currently seen between races, utterly lack any of the visible, genetically determined phenotypical differences that are so core to the ordinary concept of race. There are, of course, some groups in the real world that have found and continue to find themselves situated in ways similar to racialized subaltern groups despite not being strictly defined by phenotype – the most obvious example probably being Jewish people – but a story trying to do what *Soldier Son* does using a real example would have difficulty actually communicating to the audience that it is about *race*, as these other groups already have their own attendant mental schemas in the minds of the average reader[29]. The freedom afforded by an entirely fictional world allows Hobb to combine elements in such a way to precisely target and activate exactly those schemas relevant to communicating a message about the meaninglessness and absurdity of race as a category, and unerringly connecting that message *to* race. Likewise, the ability to introduce what at first seems like an entirely non-human species into the equation allows the text to expand its negation of the importance of racial categorization even further, by also applying it to much more significantly different (at first glance) beings.

Most of the same also applies to *The Goblin Emperor*, but Addison uses not just the actual tools that fantasy makes available, but also the wider real-world context of the history and habitus

[29] This is not to say that these categories are not, in fact, connected with race – quite the opposite, they are intimately entangled. But that does not mean that they are necessarily as closely connected in the public consciousness, and establishing such a link would require additional work for a work of fiction to accomplish.

of the fantasy genre itself in order to shore up the narrative she is telling about race. By focusing a narrative that is so explicitly racial in nature on two of the most commonly used (and most problematically used, as per Mills) non-human species in the fantasy canon, *The Goblin Emperor* is able not just to critique racism in general (something that is, on its own, just as suited to other genres), but also to provide a meta-textual critique of a kind of racism specific to the fantasy genre. By simply referencing the genre-culture in this way, the question of the white racial habitus of fantasy is brought to the forefront of the narrative without the novel ever veering into explicit meta-commentary.

If the core of fantasy's engagement with the status quo can be summed up as *it doesn't have to be the way it is*, then one of the easiest ways to communicate that message in a work is to say: *here is another way it could be*. With just the basic facts of their respective fictional worlds, *Soldier Son* and *Stormlight Archive* both do this in seemingly opposite ways, to similar results: the former posits a world in which the sociopolitical category of race exists without physical difference to seemingly 'justify' it, while the latter posits a world of extreme physical difference that nonetheless foregoes the sociopolitical category of race – at least between its *human* characters. In this sense everything written above about the former applies just as well to the latter, but *Stormlight Archive* also uses the freedom provided by its fictional world to create a history that is more straightforwardly narrative in nature, one which makes explicit and clear the stories of colonialism, violence, and dehumanization that hide behind real history as well, but are obfuscated by both centuries of deliberate propaganda and by the messiness and lack of clean-cut narrative inherent to a system as complex as the real world. In the same breath, through its depiction of flawed and biased historiography within the fictional world itself, the series also primes its audience to question similarly simplistic historical narratives that prop up the status quo in the real world.

The Broken Earth similarly engages with the history of racial power structures using the freedom provided by fantasy, but goes one step further by using fantastical elements to turn the metaphorical into the literal. Any scholar of race worth their salt will agree that "race is the product of racism, racism is not the product of race" (Roberts, 2011: 25), that the sociopolitical category distinction was created to justify the system of oppression rather than the system of oppression stemming from a pre-existing distinction; but this claim always comes with the caveat that what is meant by "race" is merely the specific system of classification and categorization that articulates the racial categories we divide our society into, rather than the actual phenotypical differences that represent the lines along which that classification occurs. By introducing the fantastical elements present in the ancient history of her fictional world, Jemisin is able to tell this same story with a viscerally literal twist, showing the physical creation of a distinct new kind of person for the sole purpose of having racialized subjects to dominate in the name of continued extractive imperial accumulation of wealth and resources. In the Stillness, it is not merely *race*, the social category, that is created in the minds of the signatories of the racial contract, but *a specific race* of people that is brought into physical existence to perpetuate that contract. This kind of vivid imagery that brings the metaphorical narratives of our world into tangible form, reminiscent of Le Guin's own work in *Buffalo Gals* (see chapter 1 of this dissertation for more on this idea), allows the kind of radical critique both writers aim at systems of colonial and racial violence to be much sharper and more impactful than other genres are able to deliver. If most fantasy (and indeed, most other elements of *The Broken Earth*) engages in the thought experiment of *it doesn't have to be the way it is*, it is in moments like this one that the very best works in the genre take the time to remind the audience of what *the way it is* truly looks like, and why a better alternative is *necessary*, as well as possible.

The Weight of History: *Rings of Power* and Bad Habits

All of these represent examples of fantasy's unique capacity for social critique being utilized, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to question and deconstruct racist narratives; however, as I alluded to in my individual analyses of each of these works, many of them also fall into the trap of implicitly reinforcing other problematic ideas at the same time. *Soldier Son*'s ending seems to suggest that the barriers between racial categories are absolute and ultimately insurmountable, even as it clearly seeks to question the very existence of those categories; *The Goblin Emperor* fails to depict the geopolitical power dynamics inherent in racial supremacy, implicitly suggesting that racism is more a matter of individual and group prejudice rather than systemic subjugation, violence, and control; and *Stormlight Archive*, for all its attempts to depict history from the perspective of the marginalized and maligned, remains firmly rooted in the perspective of the characters filling the equivalent of the structural position of whiteness when it comes to its ongoing "present" plot. And while a lot of these works' subversive potential relies on the freedom provided by the fantasy genre, I believe many of these more troubling implications are also tied to the works' nature as fantasy texts.

To illustrate what I mean, perhaps the best example is the one with which this dissertation began – Amazon Studios' *Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power*, a serialized adaptation of, and prequel to, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which has released two full seasons at the time of this writing. As mentioned earlier, Rings of Power is clearly very actively engaging with a lot of the criticism levied against Tolkien's work over the decades, especially when it comes to race and

gender; where the main casts of Tolkien's major works (both *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*) are made up exclusively of white men (of various human and non-human species), *Rings of Power* goes out of its way to fill its main cast with male and female characters belonging to a wide variety of races[30]. In particular, there are prominent heroic characters of color belonging to each of Middle-Earth's "good" species, and in fact holding positions of power and respect within them – the elven ranger Arondir, the dwarven princess Disa, the halfling tribal elders Sadoc and Gundabale, and the human queen Míriel. In addition, the cast of minor characters, as well as crowd shots, establish that a similar level of racial diversity is present holistically across the breadth of the show's version of Middle-Earth. These changes feel organic and natural, fully recasting Tolkien's world as one not dominated by whiteness, and represent perhaps the show's most resounding creative success as an adaptation – this is evidenced, if nothing else, by the intensity of the racist backlash the show received from those who are invested in preserving that whiteness (see Introduction for details).

But this is not the only way the show attempts to correct for some of the racism baked into Tolkien's work. Going back to Mills's critique, the lack of visibly non-white characters is only a small (albeit important) part of the problems with the fantasy genre that *Lord of the Rings* both exemplifies and, to some extent, represents the origin of. Rather, it is the "*racially-constructed* character of Tolkien's universe" (Mills, 2022: 3), with a vertical hierarchy of races that ranks them in terms of metaphysical worth and inherent moral character and places elves at the top and orcs at the bottom (ibid., 6), that represents the most pernicious – and most long-lasting, in terms of its impact on the entire rest of the fantasy genre – legacy of *Lord of the Rings*. And to its credit, Rings of Power seems aware of this issue, and goes to some lengths to fix it. Humans, dwarves, and

[30] Although it is worth pointing out that this level of diversity across so many different ethnic and racial groups makes the total absence of any East Asian actors in the main cast more noticeable.

halflings, what Mills describes as the "middle" tier of the racial hierarchy (ibid.) are depicted largely as they are in the original material, as flawed, corruptible races that are capable of great good or great evil, but are not necessarily inherently given to either. But when it comes to the "top" and "bottom" tiers (i.e. elves and orcs), the differences between *Rings of Power* and *Lord of the Rings* (both the novels and the Peter Jackson film adaptations) are quite noticeable. The elves are depicted as often deeply flawed and just as susceptible to corruption as all other races (each of the two seasons released thus far centers on an elven character being corrupted by the Dark Lord Sauron taking advantage of their own vices and ego), and they are also often racially supremacist in their attitude towards other species – the very first episode of the show, for instance, shows that elves view all humans as morally suspect, and in need of constant surveillance and paternalistic guidance (Payne et all, 2022: Season 1, Episode 1, 00:43), and later episode continue this trend as well as showing a similar prejudice against dwarves. Individual elven characters are often depicted as egotistical or self-centered: the arguable central protagonist of the series, Galadriel, is characterized by her irrational hatred and murderous vendetta against Sauron and his servants, and her mirror image, Adar, the leader of the orcs and the main antagonist of the first season, is an elf who has been corrupted through torture and magical experimentation into a servant of the Dark Lord (ibid., Season 1, Episode 6, 00:46). This kind of moral nuance is almost entirely absent from the depiction of elves in previous *Lord of the Rings* media, and it is safe to say that *Rings of Power* firmly knocks the elves down to the same "tier" of Tolkien's racial metaphysics as humans or dwarves.

But it is with its depiction of the orcs that cracks really start to show in *Rings of Power*'s ability to meaningfully challenge the racial cosmology of its source material. Shortly after the end of the show's first season, Rohitha Naraharisetty, writing for The Swaddle, was the first to zero in

on what the show seemed to be attempting, pointing out that the show adds nuance to the discussion about the inherent moral character of Tolkien's orcs, portraying them as a "vilified race socially constructed as evil" as opposed to a metaphysically evil race by birth (Naraharisetty, 2022). And indeed, the show clearly wants its audience to constantly question the idea of orcs as a mindless horde of evil minions who can be slaughtered in their thousands without moral quandary – they are depicted rebelling against rulers such as Sauron who treats them as mere cannon fodder for his armies, they rally around Adar's banner when he calls on them to fight "not as unnamed slaves in far-away lands, but as brothers – brothers and sisters in our home!" (Payne et al., 2022: Season 1, Episode 6: 00:03), they have families and raise children that they seem to care for (ibid., Season 2, Episode 3: 00:19)[31], they have a language of their own and a name for themselves ("Uruk") that they use instead of the "orc" used by others. Season 2 even introduces a minor recurring character in the form of Adar's second-in-command who repeatedly expresses concern for the number of orcish lives lost in the various battles Adar leads them into. Galadriel's lowest moment in season 1, which forces her to finally snap out of her crusade against darkness and realize that she has lost her way in it, comes when she gleefully declares her desire to enact a genocide against the orcs to Adar: "Your kind was a mistake, made in mockery. Even if it takes me all of this Age, I vow to eradicate every last one of you. But you shall be kept alive so that one day before I drive my dagger into your poisoned heart I will whisper in your piked ear that all your offspring are dead and the scourge of your kind ends with you" (ibid., Season 1, Episode 6: 00:51) – and Adar responding only by correcting her on the proper terminology ("Uruk") is clearly framed as a moral victory for

[31] It is worth noting that this treatment of the orcs also invited backlash from self-appointed protector's of the "purity" of Tolkien's legacy, who argued that depicting the orcs as anything other than mindless killing machines was an example of "forced diversity" (see: Di Placido, Dani. 2024. *Amazon's 'Rings of Power' – The Orc Family Controversy, Explained*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2024/08/31/amazons-rings-of-power-the-orc-family-controversy-explained/ (last accessed: 4/18/2025)).

him, as she is visibly shaken by the realization of how thoroughly she has dehumanized a sapient species.

So far, so good – if one only looks at these scenes in isolation, one could be forgiven for thinking that *Rings of Power* is engaging in the same project as *The Goblin Emperor*, taking a classic "evil" fantasy race and humanizing them by depicting them as an unjustly hated and marginalized minority. But outside of these brief moments of humanity, *Rings of Powers* depicts orcs the same as prior versions of Tolkien's epic – it "dehumanizes – and demonizes – orcs as subhuman creatures in servitude to a higher being – being in his debt for deigning to treat them with compassion" (Naraharisetty, 2022). With only the context of the first season, Naraharisetty did not seem to view this particular contradiction as fatal for the show's message, and was overall positive about *Rings of Power*'s project of orcish humanization. I was skeptical at the time, and now, with the added context of the show's second season, I see that the show's every attempt to humanize the orcs is deeply and irreparably compromised by its loyalty to the source material and the conventions of genre. Indeed, outside of the handful of scenes cited above, the orcs seldom speak, and when they do it is always to express gleeful cruelty and malice; even in the scenes where Adar gives grand speeches about their marginalization and fight for liberation, the gathered orcs only respond with "snarls" and "growls" (those are not my characterizations, but rather the way the subtitles describe the sounds!). Season 2 gives us several scenes of orcs engaging in cartoonishly evil behavior with no motive beyond evil itself, such as taunting and torturing a horse they find in the woods (Payne et al, 2022: Season 2, Episode 3, 00:05), or making captured elves watch in horror as they destroy historical records and irreplaceable works of art while cackling evilly (ibid., Season 2, Episode 8: 00:43). No orc is ever allowed to speak for his people, with Adar (who considers himself their "father", but who is an elf) acting as their mouthpiece in every scene

where their humanity is asserted; perhaps the most striking example of this is the word "Uruk", which Adar constantly uses and correct others when they say "orc" – and yet no actual orc ever gets to express a preference, one way or the other. Even at their best, they exist in the story to humanize Adar, not themselves. And in the end, they turn on him and all collectively – willingly and enthusiastically – embrace serving the Dark Lord Sauron (ibid., Season 2, Episode 8, 00:39).

Whether intentional or not (and I firmly believe it to be unintentional, given humanizing moments like the orcish family with their baby, and the plethora of other ways in which *Rings of Power* is clearly aware of and actively trying to counter the more pernicious racial elements of Tolkien's oeuvre), the overall effect seems to be a narrative about a delusional elf who foolishly sees humanity and moral depth in a race of inhuman monsters, deceives himself and others into believing there is something in them worth saving and caring about, and is brutally murdered by them for his trouble. Not only are the orcs firmly and undeniably re-inscribed as *homo sacer*, unworthy of moral consideration, beings that heroic characters can slaughter not only without guilt but with moral righteousness, but the very impulse to want them to be anything more than that is mocked and derided as foolish at best, and suicidal at worst.

My point here is not to single out *Rings of Power* – quite the opposite. The point is that I could have predicted this from the very start of season 1, because contrary to Le Guin's optimistic articulation of the ethos of fantasy, it was the show's very relationship to the fantasy genre that ensured this *had to be the way it is*. *Rings of Power* is an adaptation of, and prequel to, *Lord of the Rings*, and while it takes significant creative liberties in many respects, it ultimately cannot break free of its own source material – with its marketing firmly trying it to Jackson's film trilogy, and its title just as firmly to the original books, there is an expectation from everyone watching this series that it will end in a way that functions as a coherent prequel to those two stories. This

necessitates that the orcs *must* all serve Sauron in the end, they *must* be evil and bestial and devoid of moral weight, because that is what they are in *Lord of the Rings*, and by extension in the literally uncountable fantasy works that followed it and used it as inspiration. In this respect, the reactionary critics of *Rings of Power* and other modern, so-called "woke" (i.e. politically progressive and sensitive to social injustices) fantasy adaptations have a point – changing the racial politics of these narratives *is* often fundamentally incompatible with loyalty to the original texts, because those texts sprung from a genre-culture steeped in habits of whiteness and white supremacy, and loyalty to them implies loyalty to that genre-culture. I merely disagree with them on whether that is a good thing.

Epilogue: A Way It Could Be

Looking at all of the examples analyzed so far, a pattern emerges. Contemporary mainstream fantasy is both capable of, and clearly increasingly interested in, engaging in meaningful critique of both the genre's own established habits and of the unjust systems that permeate our society, largely due to the possibility space that is opened up by the genre's core conceit – that of different worlds, different histories, different ways of being. Due to the specific history of the fantasy genre with race, and due to the genre convention of non-human species and the particular ways in which these species have historically been used (and by extent, the ways in which audiences have been trained to read them), it is *especially* capable of engaging in this kind of critique when it comes to questions of race. However, works of modern fantasy are only capable of doing so insofar as they are willing to break from genre convention and not hold the "greats" of

the genre as sacred and inviolate. It is specifically when these works choose to stick to the established traditions of the genre – such as the geopolitical dynamics between races in *The Goblin Emperor*, or the human-centric perspectives of *Stormlight Archive*, or the focus on individual heroism and villainy as opposed to larger social forces in *Warcraft III* – that any kind of social critique that they might otherwise be engaged in becomes muddled and confusing. *Rings of Power* is the most obvious offender in this respect, if only because its loyalty is not to the vague genre-culture of fantasy but to a specific text, but it is by no means unique in fumbling its racial critique before the finish line.

At the same time, all of the texts analyzed in previous chapters also provide a blueprint for the ways in which fantasy can provide incisive critiques and deliver them successfully – by breaking away from the confines of the genre's (white) habitus and habits, and instead embracing the liberatory ethos articulated by Le Guin. For one cannot say *it doesn't have to be the way it is* in one breath, then chain one's own work to conformity to established genre conventions with the next. *Warcraft* is at its best when it either leaves behind the conventions it once championed (such as with the introduction of new kinds of species and races that do not have the cultural baggage that, say, orcs do) or when it acknowledges the flaws in those conventions and confronts them head-on (such as with the proactive push, starting with *Lord of the Clans*, to portray orcs in ways that go directly against their traditional portrayals). *Soldier Son*'s critique of real-world colonialism and race science works best when it is inextricably tied to its direct rejection of the taxonomical logics of race and species that fantasy is known for. *The Goblin Emperor*'s use of established, well-known fantasy species manages to be both politically radical and artistically interesting only when Addison is engaging with the tropes associated with those species and choosing to play them against type, rather than merely reproducing those tropes. *Stormlight Archive*, at its best, reads like

an open repudiation of the kind of racial mythmaking that accompanies classic fantasy's theological approach to race. And it is no accident that *Broken Earth*, out of all my examples the one I consider the most flawless in its execution of racial critique, is also the examples that veers the furthers from *any* established fantasy tropes, instead telling a completely new kind of story that is all but impossible to directly compare to any famous fantasy text of the past. Its world-building, characters, supernatural elements, narrative structure all reject conformity to any model presented by prior works within the genre, and as such it is unburdened by the genre's habits.

I would be remiss to end without mentioning the other way in which *Broken Earth* stands out from the other examples above – it is the only one of these narratives solely[32] crafted by an author of color. I do not believe this to be an accident, but rather reflective of the fact that N.K. Jemisin's own experiences as a Black woman, both in contemporary American society at large and in the trenches of the fantasy genre's own internal conflicts over race (remember, Jemisin was a prominent figure in both the Sad Puppies affair and RaceFail 09), allow her to more clearly see the rot at the heart of the genre-culture and more readily excise it from her own work. The overwhelming whiteness of the habitus in which most fantasy texts are produced, less extreme now but undeniably still a problem, is itself one of the genre conventions holding fantasy back, if for no other reason than because it narrows the range of possible perspectives, both on the genre and on society as a whole. If fantasy wants to move forward, leave behind its deeply problematic past in regards to race (and gender, but that's a topic for another dissertation), and achieve its potential both as a serious artistic medium and a potentially potent vehicle for social critique and

[32] I emphasize "solely" because *Warcraft* and *Rings of Power*, by their nature as huge collaborative projects, and given the complex nature of responsibilities and labor in game and film studios, do not have easily identifiable "primary" authors, and their narratives have certainly been crafted to some degree by myriad individuals of varying genders, races, and backgrounds.

change – goals which I consider both admirable and eminently possible – then it must be willing to change and stop clinging onto elements of that very past. Whether that be the genre-culture's understanding of what a fantasy author, fantasy fan, or fantasy protagonist looks like, or its entrenched ideas about the metaphysics of race and species, these elements are actively holding back both the genre as a whole and individual texts within it. There are, of course, plenty of novels, games, films, and television series that have none of these problems – and plenty of authors of color creating incredible, insightful works within the genre (these two categories overlap more than they don't) – but because the overall genre-culture has yet to shed some of its harmful habits, these authors and works seldom achieve the kind of mainstream success and prominence necessary to enter the permanent canon of fantasy, instead leaving those positions to still be held by the same general group of texts that Attebery described as definitional to early fantasy, or at best texts that are in direct lineage with them. Only those texts willing to ignore or actively challenge this canon, to part ways with what is and was, are truly able to embrace the most optimistic version of the genre's ethos and say to their audience – *it doesn't have to be the way it is. Here is a way it could be.*

CODA: What Comes Next

While I am proud of the research work done in this dissertation, I acknowledge that there are certain limitations on what I was able to accomplish due to time constraints. As such, I want to end with an accounting of what still needs to be done before I would consider this project complete – all things I intend to do in the coming months as I work to turn the dissertation into a publishable manuscript.

First, and most urgently, the list of primary cases needs to be broadened, in particular in order to include more works by non-white authors. The list of primary sources as it stands now is a relic of an earlier, slightly different version of the thesis, which focused specifically and intentionally on white authors. As that is no longer the case due to the natural evolution of the project, the current scope of primary sources leaves much to be desired.

Second, due to time constraints, my initial plan for the dissertation – which included 4 substantive chapters – had to be abandoned, and the original chapters 3 and 4 ended up being folded into the current chapter 3 in severely truncated form. This resulted in the loss of several important sections that still need to be expanded on – most notably a section on racial coding, and a section on the theorization of "human" as a political category. These theoretical sections are intimately connected to the existing primary cases and would be interwoven with the analysis of those cases that has already been done, but they would also necessitate the introduction of several further primary cases. As such, a high priority for me is the restoration of the originally planned chapters 3 and 4.

Finally, if time and other obligations allow, I would like to expand my methodology to incorporate more medium-specific analytical approaches – in particular ludonarratology in my analysis of video games, and film theory in my analysis of film and television series. This would require me to go quite a bit outside my disciplinary comfort zone, so it remains an aspirational goal that might not be realized in the course of this particular project.

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