

## Speculative Fiction: Race, Ethnicity, and Difference

CC Alumni Reading Group Syllabus

Spring 2012

Peter Jackson's 2002 film *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* opens with several scenes showing the Uruk-Hai running toward Isengard with the hobbits Merry and Pippin. For those of you who have seen the film, you will remember that the Uruk-Hai are, as Sue Kim so concisely states, "tall, black, and muscular with long coarse hair that resembles dreadlocks" (877)—in other words, an image that evokes stereotypical portrayals of black men. At one point, Legolas the elf comments on how quickly the Uruk-Hai are traveling, saying, "They run as if the very whips of their masters were behind them" (P. Jackson).

This moment is a very provocative one, particularly for those interested in the ways in which works of speculative fiction (the umbrella term for fantasy and science fiction) address questions of race. Certainly, this moment in the film adds to the racial subtext of the Uruk-Hai's physical portrayal through the use of the language of slavery, but there is more going on in this scene than Peter Jackson simply mirroring the language and imagery he saw in Tolkien's novel. Tolkien's original language was actually much more neutral: "The Orcs have run before us, as if the very whips of Sauron were behind them" (Tolkien 35).

This observation is not meant to suggest that either J.R.R. Tolkien or Peter Jackson is racist, but rather, to demonstrate how works of fiction set in fantasy worlds reflect the racial imagery and utilize the racial expectations that are part of our own society. One of the primary goals of this reading will be to consider these sorts of questions:

- How are real-world racial tensions and concerns reflected in works of speculative fiction?
- How do authors utilize our understanding of race and difference when constructing their fantasy worlds?
- What can be gained by using a fantasy setting to consider questions of race and difference?

Considering how race and difference appear in speculative fiction, however, is not the only goal of this syllabus. The inverse consideration also affords many possibilities for discussion, particularly along these lines:

- How do appearances of the supernatural function in works of ethnic literature?
- What differences do we see between the function of fantastic elements in ethnic literature and their function in speculative fiction?
- How can reading these groups of literature in conversation with each other help us think about questions of genre and literary classification?

While many of the texts that you will read have been published in the last 10 years, I would encourage you to bring the questions from this syllabus and from your discussions to your own favorite works of fantasy and science fiction, both new and old. I think you will find that not only are questions of race and ethnicity a key component of much speculative fiction, but that these speculative genres provide a unique opportunity for challenging some of our most basic understandings of difference.

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## Unit One: Depictions of Race in Epic Fantasy Literature

**Read:** *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* by N.K. Jemisin

A wide variety of races appear in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, including orcs, dwarves, elves, and hobbits. Racial categories and distinctions such as these are often a hallmark of works of epic fantasy, including George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, which was made into a TV series this past summer on HBO entitled *Game of Thrones*. Watching *Game of Thrones* made one blogger comment that "fantasy writing is inherently racist."

This blogger explains that in works such as Martin's, or Tolkien's, or any number of other authors of epic fantasy, characters of a certain race always act a certain way. Elves are always good at moving stealthily through forests. Dwarves are always miners. And orcs are always, always bad. When this understanding of race is read as an allegory for race in the real world, it becomes very problematic, as it suggests that race is a fixed category, and that it also determines identity without regard for the individual.

N.K. (Nora) Jemisin's 2010 novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* challenges this fixed kind of allegorical understanding of race in epic fantasy literature. Winner of the 2011 Locus Award for Best First Novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* depicts the complex interconnections between different races. In a provocative move, Jemisin also links the relationship between gods and humans to relationships between different races, creating a fantasy world that has the potential to break out of the model that Belknap identifies.

### Questions for discussion:

1. As in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the imagery of light and darkness appears throughout Jemisin's novel, perhaps most notably in the association of Nahadoth with nighttime, darkness, and shadows, as well as in the phrase "Bright Itempas." In Tolkien's trilogy, this binary is associated with good and evil—light is good, darkness is evil. Does this same association exist in Jemisin's novel? Does she do anything to complicate this binary configuration? What might this say about the way race is portrayed in the novel?
2. Discuss the race of Yeine, the protagonist. Do you understand her race to be connected to a certain race in the world as we know it? Why or why not? Do you find yourself making assumptions about Yeine's race? What motivates these assumptions?
3. How does Jemisin portray racial categories? Are they static entities, or are they somehow portrayed as more fluid? Do you see this portrayal as somehow reflecting, or challenging, your experience with racial difference in the real world?
4. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois introduces his famous concept of double consciousness, which he defines as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (11).

How do you see this concept represented in Jemisin's novel? Does she offer any hope for resolution and unity, or is this two-ness portrayed as something to be embraced?

5. One of the most innovative elements of Jemisin's novel is the way in which the gods are both extremely powerful, but also enslaved to the Arameri. How does this facet of the novel, particularly conversations about slavery, complicate other racial depictions in the novel? How does it complicate *our* understanding of race and difference?

## Unit Two: Racial Re-imaginings

**Read:** “Rachel” by Larissa Lai  
“Riding the Red” by Nalo Hopkinson  
“Toot Sweet Matricia” by Suzette Mayr

One key element of postcolonial literature is the impulse to give a voice and a space to tell stories to those who have had their stories told for them is one that is shared by many recent writers of science fiction and fantasy. *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* is one anthology that challenges narratives of colonization by telling the other side of the story, and it is from that anthology that two of this unit’s stories come. Although you are only reading two stories from the anthology, I would highly recommend the entire collection—it contains a remarkable variety of stories and images.

The first of these stories, “Rachel,” retells the events of the classic science fiction film *Blade Runner*, but told from the perspective of an alternate character. If you are not familiar with the film, I would encourage you to look up a plot summary of it—but not before you think about how it feels to be reading a story that leaves you out in the cold.

The second and third stories—“Riding the Red” and “Toot Sweet Matricia”—are both retellings of classic folk and fairy tales. “Riding the Red” is Nalo Hopkinson’s retelling of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, but with the characters, setting, cultural context, and even language of Jamaica. “Toot Sweet Matricia” belongs to the tradition of mermaid folklore, as also seen in works such as Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid.”

### Questions for discussion:

1. “Toot Sweet Matricia” is part of the larger tradition of stories about mermaids, selkies, and water spirits—a tradition that includes Disney’s film *The Little Mermaid*. Similarly, “Riding the Red” is a retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood.” What effect does it have on you to read traditional fairy tales retold in a different context? Are there changes that these authors have made that you find particularly provocative? How does reading these stories cause you to reconsider the familiar versions of these fairy tales? (How) does reading these stories call attention to the presence or absence of discussions of race and ethnicity in discussions of traditional European fairy tales?
2. In her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, Hopkinson describes how a friend asked her, regarding her story “Riding the Red,” “What do you think of [the] comment that massa’s tools will never dismantle massa’s house?” In other words, is it possible to challenge the Western literary tradition with the tools of that tradition?

How do we see that dynamic at work in Hopkinson’s story “Riding the Red”? What do you make of her eventual conclusion: “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house—and, in fact, I don’t want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations—they build me a house of my own”?

3. In addition to addressing the theme of racial difference, “Toot Sweet Matricia” also depicts sexual difference as well. How do we see these themes interweaving throughout the story? Does Mayr’s narrative structure somehow contribute to the way in which we understand these

themes? How does Mayr's story compare to Jemisin's *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, particularly in terms of narrative structure and themes of racial and sexual difference?

4. "Rachel" is a retelling of Ridley Scott's classic 1982 film *Blade Runner* from the perspective of Rachel, the replicant who initially believes herself to be human. For those of you who have not seen the film, what was your experience like when reading this story? In what ways does Lai's narrative strategy directly speak to the project of postcolonial literature?

For those of you who *have* seen the film, were you surprised to find a retelling of *Blade Runner* in this collection of postcolonial stories? Does this story provide a helpful lens for reconsidering what the original film might have to say about race? What subtle changes and/or additions does Lai make to the narrative of the film that help to underscore (and complicate) questions of difference?

5. Other than in works of fiction such as these, where are places where you see the existence of an alternate version of events? How might the postcolonial lens provide a way to think through some of the power dynamics at play in these situations?

### Unit Three: Fantasy and Science Fiction as Racial Allegory

**View:** *District 9*, directed by Neill Blomkamp

Many alien invasion movies depict the point of initial contact—*Independence Day*, *War of the Worlds*, *Men in Black*, and *Signs*, for example, are all films that show the first encounter with an alien life form and then humanity's often violent struggle for survival.

Neill Blomkamp's 2009 film *District 9* changes this model. Rather than portraying a deadly struggle upon first contact with alien life, this film begins *in medias res*—that is, after first contact with the aliens has been made, and the aliens are already settled into life on Earth. In addition to the viral marketing campaign for the film and the mock-documentary style of cinematography, this unusual approach to an alien invasion film captured the public's interest, leading *District 9*, which took only \$30 million to produce, to make over \$200 million in the box office and to earn an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture.

The response to the movie, however, was not all positive. Shortly after the film was released, the Wikipedia entry for Neill Blomkamp was changed to read this: "Neill Blomkamp is a racist South African born, Vancouver, BC-based director of feature-length and short films and advertisements." (The entry has since been changed back.) Although it would be easy to see *District 9* as a completely made-up account of contact with extra-terrestrials, the "racist" charge against Blomkamp suggests that more is at stake. As with works of epic fantasy discussed in the first unit, an allegorical reading of Blomkamp's film is possible. Clearly, the person who edited Blomkamp's Wikipedia page believes that *District 9* contains problematic portrayals of race. Regardless of whether we agree with such charges against Blomkamp, their very existence demonstrates how important science fiction films like *District 9* can be for better understanding the state of race relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Questions for discussion:

1. Discuss the opening sequence of the film. What effect does the documentary-style camerawork have on your interpretation of the events of the novel? Who is interviewed in this sequence? What frame of reference does this opening sequence establish for interpreting the rest of the film?
2. What do we make of the character of Wikus van de Merwe? Is he the character that you feel like you most identify with (or are supposed to identify with) in the film? Why or why not? How does his development and transformation over the course of the film affect the way that you feel about him? Are there other characters that you identify with over the course of the film? How do these identifications complicate the portrayal of racial conflict in *District 9*?
3. Consider the film context of *District 9*. Many other alien invasion films start before the aliens arrive, and end with the glorious defeat of the alien invaders. *District 9* begins with the aliens already here, and ends with the aliens still on Earth. How does *District 9* cause us to rethink what is meant by an alien invasion? Given the double meaning of the word "alien"—"foreigner" and "extra-terrestrial life form"—how does the film both reflect and speak to current debates about immigration in places such as the United States and the European Union?

4. Clearly, it is significant that the film is set in South Africa. Given the history of racial segregation and apartheid in that country, can the events in *District 9* be read allegorically? How does our knowledge and understanding of South African race relations affect the way we see the events of the film? Do the events in the film challenge our assumptions and understanding of apartheid and current South African race relations?
5. One blogger expressed her frustration with some aspects of *District 9*, particularly as they pertained to the portrayal of the Nigerians in the film. Discuss how the Nigerians were portrayed in the film. Are there aspects of their portrayal that you found to be problematic? Does the portrayal of the Nigerians in the film affect the overall understanding of race that you get from the film?

Also, consider this cartoon:



How does this cartoon reflect some of the complicated racial and political issues present in *District 9*?



## Unit Four: Race and the Fantastic

**Read:** *The Indian in the Cupboard* by Lynne Reid Banks  
*Flight* by Sherman Alexie

Most of what we have read and seen so far has looked at how race and difference are portrayed in works of speculative fiction. But the inverse question can also be considered: how do elements of the supernatural appear in multicultural fiction?

Tzvetan Todorov's idea of the fantastic can be particularly helpful when considering this question. He defines the fantastic as something that exists in between rational thought ("the uncanny") and the supernatural ("the marvelous"). He writes, "[The fantastic] seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre" (Todorov 41). The fantastic only exists as long as we remain undecided about whether an event has a natural or a supernatural explanation. As Todorov explains, "The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature" (Todorov 25). For Todorov, the fantastic is the moment of hesitation that exists in the border space between the uncanny and marvelous, the transitional moment of uncertainty and unknowing.

Given the way in which issues of race are often depicted in terms of boundaries—black versus white, for example—Todorov's idea of the fantastic seems like a useful way to complicate some of these boundaries. This is what we see happening in Sherman Alexie's novel *Flight*—a novel about Native Americans whose portrayal of race is a long way from the other novel in this unit, the children's book *The Indian in the Cupboard*.

### Questions for discussion:

1. How is race depicted in Banks' novel? Are there images that seem particularly stereotypical or problematic? When it was published in 1980, *The Indian in the Cupboard* was highly praised, with the *New York Times* even calling it "the best novel of the year." Does this praise hold up after thirty years? If not, what does that suggest about how our understanding of the world has changed?
2. How do we see Todorov's idea of the fantastic at play in Alexie's novel? Is this paradigm helpful in highlighting the ways in which Alexie complicates questions of Native American identity throughout the novel? Is it significant that, at the end of the novel, Zits tells Mary that his real name is Michael? What might Alexie be saying about the nature of Native American identity?
3. Children are the main characters in both *Flight* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*, and *The Indian in the Cupboard* is written for younger readers as well. Who would you say is the expected audience for Alexie's novel? How does each novel portray the relationship between adults and children? Does each novel's portrayal of this dynamic—one that is defined by an inequality in power—somehow inform each novel's respective portrayal of race?
4. Both *Flight* and *The Indian in the Cupboard* portray characters who inhabit bodies that are not their own. How do Zits' experiences compare to Omri's? How do the differences between their experiences reflect their respective novel's attitude toward race?



5. One particularly provocative section in Alexie's novel involves a flight instructor and his Muslim student who becomes a terrorist. What do you make of this section? How does it fit into a novel that is otherwise about Native American identity? How does this section speak to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudices that have come to the fore since the attacks of September 11, 2001? How does this section reflect some of the more complicated aspects of a multicultural society?

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