Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness
Helen Victoria Young
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224 pages

In *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness*, Helen Young explores in depth the notion of race and its representation in Fantasy Literature, a constantly rising sort of narrative in the early 21st century according to the author, that yet maintains procedures of race-blinding or habits of whiteness. The author thus makes a case in favor of unifying prior investigations both within and outside of the academia. To do so, Young contrasts several bibliographical references to sustain her thesis, as well as including several science-fiction and fantasy narratives to illustrate the topic.

The goal of this book, as stated within, is to illuminate "the racialized nature of twenty-first century Western popular culture by exploring how discourses of race circulate in the Fantasy genre" (Young, 2016: i) emphasizing the genre of fantasy over science-fiction, since the scholar corpus of the former is significantly scarce if compared to the latter. The genre is furthermore chosen for its increasing in production ever since late twentieth century. Moreover, this objective is motivated because of an ongoing scholar debate that has pervaded the non-academic sphere and had an impact in both fantasy and science-fiction writing.

This book is divided into seven different chapters, an introduction and an afterword within which a vast array of examples is deployed. These chapters, of varied length, follow an academic structure that introduces the reader to the topic to move further on towards a revision of the fantasy corpus under the scope of the habits of whiteness. Thus, the first chapter starts with two the most significant work of fantasy of the twentieth century, these are, *The Lord of The Rings* and the *Conan* series of books. Within this chapter, Helen Young illuminates the reader on the topic that she further develops, making notes on these two storyworlds about the habits of whiteness not only of the creations themselves, but also of their fandom and the different transmedial adaptations of them. Chapter two states the main theoretical concepts that she uses to her analysis, mainly Derivation, Imitation and Adaptation. Note that the aim is not to imply that Fantasy incurs in habits of Whiteness, which would be more or less visible in the corpus this book explores, but rather how these habits have been constant within the genre, and why. In other words, this essay goes farther than it might seem at first sight and state that there are certain motivators as well as tools that had unambiguously made racial discourses and myths to prevail.

After these two first chapters, the next chapter three is where the theoretical background is set in motion. Chapter three explores "Gritty Fantasy," a subgenre that includes works such as George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where characters and violence overcome in importance the world and the magical aspects that characterize High Fantasy. However, it is not completely detached from it, since

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it retains "Hight Fantasy's medievalist eurocentric and problematic construction of race" (63). It is true, however, that some franchises, such as Bioware's *Dragon Age* series of Videogames (2009) tackle this very issue and confront the player/reader against racial prejudice, subverting the archetypical racial constructs. Despite the effort, some aspects of the discourse of whiteness still permeate these sagas, such as the conflict between Eastern and Western societies, where "Eastern" characters are still clichédly depicted.

Chapter four is, perhaps, one of the most interesting chapters of the book. Not because the topic, the Orc race and its representation throughout different elements of the Fantasy corpus, is original, since there are hundreds of essays on them, as well as on the figure of the "monster-as-the-other," but rather because of the methodology and the conclusions that are drawn from it. The power of this chapter relies on the habits of whiteness not among races, but *within* the Orc race. Moreover, she takes into account several multimedial storyworlds, such as the differences between *The Lord of the Rings* books versus the movies, the *Warcraft* different videogames and books, or the Role-Playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons* in its different editions. Both physical and psychological aspects from this race are dissected in this chapter, and the thorough analysis of the Orc race is refreshing and, at the same time, nurtures from prior analyses and maintain a symbiotic relationship with them.

Chapter five presents us the issue of postcolonialism and Fantasy that tries to fight against white prejudice. It is curious to note that the tone takes a slight tone of reprimand throughout the whole chapter. This chapter includes a corpus that has not been fully explored academically, as Young states (2016: 115), which is, mainly, Fantasy literature not written by western authors. This chapter, thus, engages with readers into a debate whose premises, if they are Western, might be unknown to them: "If imagining the future a *raison d'etre* for Science Fiction, the popular culture postcolonialism evinced in these and other Fantasy texts re-imagines the past not only to reflect on its violent injustices, but to gesture towards a more equitable future in the process" (2016: 135).

Chapter six explores the Fantasy sub-genre of Urban fantasy, which is perhaps the most produced in the last 15 years. These completely detach from the medievalist tone that permeates mostly any other Fantasy sub-genre. Nevertheless, it does not detach from the habits of whiteness insofar as the discourse that they defend does not include any firm statement for or against them.

The last chapter gives a non-academic perspective on this topic. It explores one of the biggest ongoing debates on race and literature, *RaceFail09* or *"The Great Cultural Appropriation Debate of Doom*". Its position in the book is significant, since the tendency towards interdisciplinary approaches is patent throughout the whole research. *RaceFail09* was significant because it made the habits of whiteness known to the popular sphere, and affected both the academic sphere and the writing process of Fantasy and Science Fiction. In short, it made patent all the issues that the text had tackled until now, and made blatantly clear that there had been, up to 2009 a significant misrepresentation of race by western Fantasy writers that

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included clichéd, stereotypical characters when it came to characters that were other than white. For instance, it made patent that it was almost compulsory in any Fantasy book that black characters must had some sort of "savage" connotation.

The Afterword includes two of the most recent productions that challenge pre-conceptions of normality in the genre. Moreover, it gives a plausible explanation on why "the myth of biological race has persisted so long:" The reason is that it has been constructed as a social and cultural discourse throughout different cultural creations.

The critical bibliography of this book includes texts whose dates range from 1963 onwards, and within them one could find sources as different as *The Cambridge Companion*, texts from Routledge's publishing house or as popular as Reddit or Wizards of the Coast. Stylistically, the text looks promising. It is deep and thorough, and, at the same time, perhaps because of the topic at hands, it reads easily and clearly. Moreover, the content appears as not biased, nor it states an opinion, but rather a supported argument that is reasonable.

One aspect that might be seen as problematic is that, perhaps, the text tackles with cautiousness the topic. This is visible throughout the whole book, which could be a problem to those who were looking for a harsh review of the habits of whiteness. The text maintains a neutral tone that for some could be seen as too scholar for their taste. It is not, in short, a book for everyone, but rather a discourse that may look craven to some, especially anthropologists or sociologists that were looking for a critic of the genre rather than a statement of facts. This does not mean, however, that the text does not imply said critic, but rather that it leaves it too subtle for some, or too academic. However, it should be stated that this is, in fact, an academic text, and therefore it would be unfair to measure it against a text more focused on the social sciences. This book tackles the effect that the habits of whiteness have *within* the genre, and how they linger *in* it. It is not a text on the cultural implications that it has on a psychosocial level.

All in all, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* offers a profound and deep insight on the habits of whiteness that live on the genre. Any reader interested in a different but connected perspective of the fantasy genre in terms of racial issues and from a deconstructionist perspective, this book is a must. In fact, any person that reads fantasy or wants to write it should at least take a look to this book and absorb as much as they can. The neutrality of the tone and the deep and precise analysis should appeal to any reader, whether previously able or not to see the racial inequality that many fantasy texts reproduce and maintains, even unconsciously.

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