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Just Right White:

The *Lord of the Rings* Franchise and Postmodern Race and Racism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Film and Media Studies from
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by

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You step through a lush green forest and out onto a winding path running alongside a softly gurgling stream. From the cozy cluster of little houses you approach, lazy swirls of smoke drift up from the chimneys. The gentle creaking of a mill’s wooden water mingles with the happy murmur of voices escaping from open pub windows. Enveloped in nature, this hamlet’s green grass surely rests on the proverbial “other side.”

“MAKE SURE TO TAKE ALL YOUR PICTURES, WE’RE MOVING ON TO THE NEXT TOUR STOP IN FIVE MINUTES. FIVE MINUTES EVERYBODY!” This is not Middle Earth. This is New Zealand. But is there really a difference?

If you’ve walked through any bookstore gift section, comic convention, or simply left your front porch light on for Halloween, you’re likely familiar with the Lord of the Rings franchise. From mugs with catch phrases, jewelry, fake parchment maps and books, costumes for kids and adults, to replicas of “the one ring,” each piece of merchandise joins a vast range of digital material that collectively contribute to “Lord of the Rings” as a broad “transmedia experience.” The term, coined by media studies scholar Henry Jenkins, often refers to stories built around fictional worlds that can be explored through multiple mediums and channels. For instance, the world of Middle Earth seen in the Lord of the Rings film trilogy adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novels, gets dispersed into playable (or livable) video games, board games, and wearable costumes. “Super fans” can even learn the invented languages of Middle Earth to linguistically immerse themselves in the fantasy world.

So, what makes Lord of the Rings so successful? In her book, The Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood, film scholar Kristin Thompson points to several reasons. For one, the film was guaranteed to have an already loyal and dedicated Tolkien fan base. The past two decades have also seen a dramatic uptick in the fantasy genre. Harry Potter,
Game of Thrones, and the Marvel cinematic universe (“MCU”) have dominated both theaters and home television screens. The deciding factor of success, Thompson argues, results from the nature of the franchise itself. Production for Lord of the Rings began during a time when studios were being bought by multinational, multimedia corporations driven by the need for an ever-improving bottom line. Franchises create a brand which in turn generates a proliferation of products for profit. With a world as obsessively detailed and expansive as Tolkien’s Middle Earth, the range of immersive potential is limitless. Though Tolkien had laid the groundwork decades before, the later franchise embraced modern technology and sometimes even pioneered its uses. “In almost every case,” Thompson points out, “whether it be the Internet campaign, the DVD supplements, or the video games, Rings was on the cutting edge” (10). It is not surprising then, that almost two decades later, the fan base remains active with Tolkien Society chapters operating out of college campuses, fan pilgrimages to New Zealand, and Amazon’s 2017 announcement of a Lord of the Rings streaming series slated for production over the next several years.

With films built around imagination, it is sometimes difficult to see Lord of the Rings as anything more than an amazingly detailed fantasy. As such, many find it difficult to see racial ideologies and structural racism in something that is “just” fantasy. Criticism of Tolkien’s fantasy world as racist is often met with stalemate arguments of defensive denialism. In Beyond the Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in “Lord of the Rings” Films, Sue Kim takes Tolkien’s defenders to task for what she calls their “selective applicability.” She points out how in his article “Defending Middle-Earth,” Patrick Curry “dismisses race/class analyses […] as ‘thoughtless,’ ‘fatuous,’ ‘miserably failed,’ ‘single-minded,’ ‘reductive,’ and ‘dated’ ad hominem attacks on Tolkien” only to then invoke Tolkien’s “notion of applicability” to argue that the Lord
of the Rings is “profoundly pluralist” and a “multicultural and multiracial book” (qtd in Kim 882). Jackson has followed suit asserting “that it is ‘inappropriate’ to apply modern political thinking to a fifty-year-old story” while then acknowledging that he used “Nuremberg as reference for the army shot at Isengard in Two Towers because ‘that sort of imagery is so potent’ […] and] effectively ‘press[es] buttons in people.” Kim calls out such selective applicability: “If such references are so potent, regardless of strict historical connections, then why are modern race and gender issues— ‘modern’ in the sense of the last two centuries—irrelevant?” (881-82).

These dismissals that Kim pushes back on often come as defensive proclamations of fans insisting that neither the books nor the films can be racist because neither Tolkien nor Jackson were or are racists. It is thus necessary to move beyond the overdetermination of authorial intent and instead focus on the ways in which the films exist and operate within systemic racism and within the context of postmodernity. Following in a classical Hollywood film tradition of stereotyped racial images, Lord of the Rings constructs a racial hierarchy with attributed moral values. Then, in a postmodern turn, it complicates this hierarchy through a simultaneous conflation and disassociation of color, race, and species. On the one hand, this enables the possibility of an explicitly progressive meaning, advocating for a multicultural cosmopolitanism defeating forces of pure evil. On the other hand, a postmodern bending of a modern racial hierarchy into a contradictory postmodern circle (or “one ring” to rule them all) forges hyper-whiteness and blackness together as coeval sources of evil. It is this film forged postmodern ring that allows for a new racialized version of whiteness in a recentered position of power: not “just” white, but just right at the opposite end of the circle’s diameter (and thus farthest away from) the conjoined evils of hyper-white and black. As such, the Lord of the Rings film trilogy leaves itself
amenable to fantasies of white supremacy and an ecofascist vision of ethno-states, a fantasy to allay fears of white genocide and racial annihilation.

The problem of the film’s all white casting of main characters (reflecting Hollywood’s broader “#OscarsSoWhite” problem) is only one part of the films’ real-world implications that run all the way from Hollywood franchise filmmaking to rural New Zealand as both fantasy landscape and site of exploitative cultural production. While the Lord of the Rings franchise—and other fantasy films like it—may seem to escape the shackles of real-world ideologies, economies, and institutions, it is precisely this fantasy claim of “just” being escapist entertainment that enables the construction of utopian worlds as racially pure ethno-states with the most pure and most powerful of all being a racialized white one.

CONTEXTUALIZING LORD OF THE RINGS

Adapting Middle Earth. Praise for Tolkien’s fantasy work derives from its intricacies, but, honestly, the man tends to ramble. To summarize the main plot of the story into roughly the length of a tweet: Frodo, a Hobbit of The Shire (think short person with hairy feet living in a beautiful English country village) must take the one ring across the dangerous lands of Middle Earth and destroy it, saving the world from a dark fate. The Lord of the Rings trilogy comprises three movies adapted from Tolkien’s novels published in the mid-1950s. The novels, and respectively the films are named as follows: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, and The Return of the King. Produced by the independent New Line Cinema, the trilogy was filmed all at once and released in quick succession, beginning in late 2001 and ending in 2003. Jackson directed the series with performances from Ian McKellen (Gandalf), Viggo Mortensen (Aragorn), Orlando Bloom (Legolas), Liv Tyler (Arwen), Cate Blanchett (Galadriel),
Christopher Lee (Saruman) and Elijah Wood (Frodo). Thompson describes the film trilogy’s success as a David and Goliath story. The relatively unknown director Jackson was charged with the overwhelming task of realizing the world of Middle Earth. His success in accomplishing this feat relied heavily on support from the New Zealand state. In speaking about Jackson’s decision to film in New Zealand, Thompson explains, “The director refuses to leave the little country, instead building a world-class filmmaking infrastructure in his neighborhood. He shoots three long features simultaneously and creates the biggest box office franchise in history” (17). Not only was the trilogy largely successful with audiences new to Middle Earth, but it was also popular among Tolkien cult followers who worried about the film’s adaption from his works written decades before. Tolkien fans need not have worried, for Jackson’s interpretation remained, overall, acceptable even to the most skeptical book fan. Thompson notes this difficult task of maintaining a balance between a film that everyone, not just Tolkien fans, would both love and understand. _Lord of the Rings_ accomplished this by combining other popular genre conventions and styles, like those from the horror genre (75). Success was immediate, with _Fellowship_ earning 13 Academy Award nominations and bringing in 887.8 million dollars worldwide. Some critics, however, argue against Thompson’s David and Goliath metaphor and contend that Jackson’s adaptation failed to overtake the Hollywood giant, or the task of adapting Tolkien’s work. “I do not remember _The Lord of the Rings_ as a loud or violent book” one critic opined, “The opening scenes, in Hobbiton, are tranquil enough, but once Frodo’s journey to Mordor begins, the pace is quick and the action rarely pauses” (Menand). Though the films were subjected to this kind of occasional complaint, the financial and cultural success of the _Lord of the Rings_ franchise remains clear. What remains unclear, however, is how such a modern film franchise managed to largely escape criticisms of its inherent racism.
The Tolkien “Problem” Goes Virtual. More recent critical debates concerning both the trilogy’s potential for white supremacism and those who adamantlly argue against it, have been largely confined to the internet. Given the popularity of the film, especially in “nerd” or “geek” culture, which is often synonymous with white culture, it is unsurprising that these conversations are taking place on sci-fi and fantasy enthusiast blogs. As in any debate, there are strong opinions on either side of this seldom discussed “Tolkien problem.” Those who question the hierarchy of Tolkien’s world face immediate backlash from his devoted fanbase. Posted on the blog “HealthyHappyNerdyMommy”, for example, is an entry from January of 2017 entitled “Are Orcs the Blacks of Middle Earth?” As an African American woman, the author of the blog states, “I find myself yearning for characters that ‘look like me’. So, my first time watching a ‘Lord of the Rings’ film I found myself asking ‘where are the black people?’” Her question not only points out the whiteness of the cast, but of Tolkien’s world. Multiple times throughout the trilogy Tolkien makes clear that Hobbits and The Shire are based on Victorian England. If we accept this connection between Earth and Middle Earth, then casting decisions reflect that either Tolkien’s utopia does not include persons of color (which is problematic), or that they must be found in the species who are not “man” and not visually portrayed by white actors. The films’ few non-white actors and extras were all transformed into prosthetic special effect creatures.

John Yatt’s 2002 article in The Guardian, seeks to address this problem. For Yatt, some of the film’s formal elements, including costuming and makeup, led him to proclaim, “Maybe it was the way that all the baddies were dressed in black, or maybe it was the way that the fighting uruk-hai had dreadlocks, but I began to suspect that there was something rotten… The Lord of the Rings is racist. It is soaked in the logic that race determines behaviour.” For many Tolkien scholars and fantasy fans, Yatt’s condemnation leads to the question of authorship and intent.
Was Tolkien racist? For many Tolkien scholars, the answer is no. A leading tactical defense points out that Tolkien never explicitly states the physical colors of his fantasy creatures. Unfortunately for Tolkien supporters, the descriptions that he does give reference morphology like slanted eyes, broad noses, and swarthy complexions (Fimi). For a man that loved to speak in code, it seems this may be an instance of “dog-whistle politics” in which the franchise enables opposing meanings of cosmopolitanism and re-centered racialized whiteness in power. A second defense points to the fact that Tolkien was widely known to not “be a racist.” In a letter to Hitler regarding the German publications of his books, Tolkien condemned the persecution of Jewish peoples. Though Tolkien fans use this as definitive proof of his anti-racism, in a contemporary context it supports the myth that proximity to people of color prevents racism. Furthermore, psychological studies have proven the existence of implicit biases, irrespective of explicit ideas one declares at family reunions or in a letter to a dictator. Implicit attitudes are defined as “actions or judgments that are under the control of automatically activated evaluation, without the performer's awareness of that causation” (Greenwald and Banaji 8). The nonsensical back-and-forth nature of this authorial intent issue confirms a need to move beyond ideas of a singular racist person, and instead address systemic racism.

As recently as 2018, an episode of Andrew Duncan’s podcast, “Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy”, brought up the question of racism in Tolkien’s fantasy world. Duncan rejects the idea that some races have intrinsic values greater than others and points out that such ideas have led (and will continue to lead) to “dire consequences for society.” Katherine Timpf, writing in the conservative magazine *The National Review*, responds with textbook fantasy denialism: “First of all, I think that it is important to point out that orcs are A) not people and B) not real, so starting some sort of social-justice movement over their treatment is probably the biggest, most
idiotic waste of time that I’ve ever seen.” Imagine if she were to read this honors thesis! Timpf goes on to offer a slippery slope logical fallacy suggesting that fantasy writers can no longer write enemies and that “We’re also going to have to have a Beauty and the Beast without the wolves, a Lion King without the hyenas, and a Jungle Book without the vultures.” Timpf’s response exemplifies the workings of selective applicability used to dismiss the possibility of racism in fantasy narratives. It seems unlikely, however, that Timpf would find the suggestion that Hobbits are based on English people to be an “idiotic waste of time” even though they are also “not real.” Films and books are not created in a cultural vacuum. By the very fact that they exist in society, they hold meaning beyond “just” being entertainment. The slippery slope Timpf employs is the same flawed logic used by those who argue against gay marriage because it will lead to “People marrying their dogs!”

Such arguments again lead to an important conclusion on authorship, as well as the importance of the visual aesthetics deployed in the Lord of the Rings films. Central to the racializing issues generated by Jackson’s adaption of Tolkien’s books is the filmic medium’s capacity for visualization. If Tolkien’s descriptions were or were not racist, the transition to film provides a clear demarcation between the imagination of a reader and the physical embodiment of actors and objects in profilmic space captured on film. As an integrated formal system of audiovisual narrative, the Lord of the Rings films contribute to systemic racism and white supremacist ideologies. The films must also be placed in a relative context with the racial history of classical Hollywood.

Race and Rings in Hollywood. The history of modern filmmaking has always included problematic depictions of black bodies on screen. In America’s filmmaking’s infancy, D.W.
Griffith drew together many burgeoning narrative techniques in his 1915 white supremacist Civil War epic, *Birth of a Nation*. Much like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy almost a century later, *Birth of a Nation*’s unprecedented scale of production achieved equally unprecedented box office and critical success. The film’s portrayal of Gus by Walter Long, a white actor in black face, depicts a former slave whose attempted rape leads to the suicide of a white woman and creates an embodied visualization of the stereotype of the “black bodied buck” (Kocić 88). This black bodied buck’s uncontrolled violent and sexual urges manifest in the threat of an overlarge, and thus menacing and physically dominant, muscular body. While white supremacist ideology had already marked African Americans as brutes, *Birth of a Nation* translates this to the film medium. This modern film stereotype undergoes a postmodern amplification in the *Lord of the Rings* films’ depiction of Tolkien’s Orcs and Uruk-hai as the monstrous “other.” This fantasy variation augments *Birth of a Nation*’s black face paint with elaborate facial prosthetics and medieval fantasy costuming in the creation of its version of a black embodiment of a nightmarish creature. *Lord of the Rings*’ thus constructs its Middle Earth black bodied buck with a key difference: the white panic it elicits is not motivated by a fear of miscegenation. With no apparent sexual interest in the few white women featured in Jackson’s largely homosocial cinematic *Lord of the Rings*, the menacing threat of the Uruk-hai and Orcs is one driven by a singular focus on total white genocide and annihilation through warfare, thus reflecting the postmodern right-wing geopolitical fantasy of an inevitable clash of civilizations. Despite *Lord of the Rings*’ desexualizing of *Birth of a Nation*’s rapacious black bodied buck, the solution to the nightmare that both films envision winds up being the same: the removal of the black bodied menace and the creation of a racially homogenous ethno-state. At the close of *Birth of a Nation*, and after the war, the newly married couple of confederate war hero Ben Cameron (Henry
Walthall) and northerner Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) sit together looking out to sea at ships carrying black bodies back to Africa thus eliminating the root cause of a divisive war and enabling the re-unification of North and South and the “birth” of a purely white nation. This signals one of many ways Hollywood representations of minorities both have and have not changed since the birth of modern national cinema as constructed in *The Birth of a Nation*.

In the almost two decades that have followed *Lord of the Rings*’ domination of box office receipts and Academy Award recognition, no awards ceremony has undergone such alternating media coverage. On the high point of one such wave, 2002 was celebrated as the “Black Oscars” with Halle Berry’s historic win as the first African American woman for Best Actress, Denzel Washington for Best Actor, and an honorary lifetime achievement Oscar for Sidney Poitier. Just two years later in 2004, this “Black Oscars” seemed like an orchestrated token fluke, as the final film of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Return of the King*—with its all white cast and crew—was nominated for 11 awards and won them all. Seven years later, 2009 once again saw movement towards representation, with the introduction of Disney’s first black princess and the film *Precious* garnering many award season nominations and wins (Dargis and Scott). As a 2011 *New York Times* article entitled “Hollywood’s Whiteout” notes, however, “the consolidation of a black presence in the movies and television did not signal the arrival of a postracial Hollywood any more than the election of Barack Obama in 2008 spelled the end of America’s 400-year-old racial drama” (Dargis and Scott). Change seemed to be coming, but later award seasons proved the previous few years to be outliers, sparking a renewed wave of criticism of Hollywood’s whiteness and whitewashing. Even the fantasy genre was not immune. In 2010, Jackson faced backlash on the whiteness of the trilogy’s upcoming prequel, *The Hobbit*, after a New Zealand woman was denied being an extra due to the color of her skin. The woman stated, “The casting
manager basically said they weren't having anybody who wasn't pale-skinned” (Cardy). Jackson initially reported that the casting requirement was a mistake, but then later remarked, “We only cast because of the story we're telling. We don't have a philosophy of the people we're casting. We cast once we've written the scripts. We look for the best actors to play those roles. The roles are well-defined because of Tolkien” (A. Thompson). Jackson’s assertion that the “best actors” get lead roles, inadvertently implies that the “best” is synonymous with white. Furthermore, two of the only non-white actors, Maori Lawrence Makaore and Samoan Sala Baker, were both cast as prosthetic black villains.

In the near decade since these complaints were launched, activism has now found its roots in social media. The power of social media lies in its “hashtag activism”, so that calls for change can spread globally in a matter of a few hours, rather than months or years. For film, hashtag’s such as #OscarsSoWhite, #MeToo, and #TimesUp call for radical change in the entertainment industry’s treatment and depiction of racial and gender minorities, as well as their policies regarding workplace sexual assault and harassment (Ugwu). The changes initiated from this public outcry hope, in part, to address Hollywood’s institutional racism, defined as “the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their race or ethnicity” (Syed). The Lord of the Rings trilogy was produced in the early 2000s, years before this most recent wave of social media activism. It is important to recognize where the industry is currently, however, in order to understand the flawed environment from which Lord of the Rings was produced and operated within. On the other hand, an account of the current film industry feels entirely justified, given the franchise’s devoted, widespread fanbase that remains profoundly active, and Amazon’s 2017 announcement for a television series adaptation, likely to be released in early 2021. The Lord of the Rings
franchise’s ability to remain culturally significant depends on its engagement with fans through the internet, in spaces like Facebook fan pages, Twitter accounts, and other social media platforms. This becomes especially important when considering the trilogy’s problematic depictions of white supremacist ideology and the recent rise of the alt-right through online subcultures.

*Rise of White Supremacy.* White supremacists are interacting with each other and gaining new followers with their rebranding away from the label “neo-nazis” and to the “alt-right.” The alt-right, or alternative right, is a label coined by white supremacist Richard Spencer in 2008 (“Alt-Right”). It seems that just as activism was growing on social media platforms, so too was white supremacy. Although going by a different name, like white supremacists, the alt-right argues for the creation of separate ethno-states while inciting fears of white genocide and the belief that, “whites are in imminent danger of cultural, political, economic, and even physical annihilation by some combination of Jews, immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, white liberals, feminists, and communists” (Atkinson 311). Both Tolkien’s and Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* create separate ethno-states for each of its species or races. By the end, though it may seem like a triumph of cosmopolitanism, each species has returned back to its homes with little possibility of racial mixing in the near future. *Lord of the Rings* predicates itself on a fear of white genocide in that the trilogy’s main conflict is with the black-bodied Orcs who are trying to “destroy the world of men” thus reinscribing an inevitable clash of civilizations for which the white race of man must prepare.

As the alt-right movement grew, the unique power of the internet came in the form of algorithms, so that search results confirmed already racist beliefs and allowed users to find a
virtual network of like-minded individuals (Daniels 62). While the alt-right continues to use popular social media platforms like Reddit, they must use signified images, like memes, so that their racist ideology is not overtly recognizable. In 2017, the alt-right broke out from cyberspace and into reality during the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which the movement’s potential for deadly violence erupted (Atkinson 309). This points out a similar concern with the widespread popularity of *Lord of the Rings* and its underlying white supremacist ideology. *Lord of the Rings* has potential to use its fantasy guise as further inspiration for alt-right members who see a gathering up of exclusively white Euro-traditions unified against the repelled blackness of the inferior species/races. It seemed farfetched that a meme of Pepe the Frog could lead to a woman’s death, but then it happened.

**THE FORMAL FILM CHOICES OF THE TRILOGY AND THE AUDIOVISUALIZATION OF RACIALIZED WHITENESS**

About one hour into the first film of the trilogy, *Fellowship of the Ring*, audiences witness the miracle (or horror) of motherless childbirth. Before they do, however, they are first taken on a fluid bird’s eye establishing shot carrying them up over a ridge to offer a swooping aerial survey of the dark, desolate, nighttime (computer generated) landscape of Isengard. Circling over a large crack in the earth illuminated by a glowing fire light, we see extensive ramshackle wooden scaffolding and a frenzied swarm of tiny figures looking like a cross between ant and mining colonies working overtime. The accompanying score consisting of an even rhythm of tinny metallic pounding and ominous brassy bass notes pushes the tone of the shot in the direction of sinister, secretive industrial extraction and/or production. Just in time, a white moth enters the shot and captures the camera’s attention as it follows the insect’s erratic
flying pattern to the top of a dark tower serving as Gandalf’s open-air prison. This new trajectory is accompanied by an abrupt change in the score. As the moth flies toward Gandalf, the wizard’s hand abruptly shoots up and gently clutches the moth. A cut into an extreme close-up of Gandalf’s reopened hand reveals the moth’s delicately elaborate antennae before he whispers indistinctly and releases it back into the air with a magician’s hand flourish (figure 1). Still following close behind in close-up, the camera suddenly overtakes the moth before plummeting, fast motion, down the side of the tower and further down into the very bottom of the cavern to a close-up of a glowing orange sword being hammered by two Orc workers. In quick succession we see close-ups of sweating laborers and a long shot of an entire tree falling into the pit. In a medium shot, Saruman strides past the Orcs, overseeing the work of his slaves and assessing their progress. Finally, we turn to the mud pits for the sequence’s culminating primal scene. From a close-up of the mud we see a creature emerge, breaking free from its embryonic sac and immediately strangling the first creature he sees (figure 2). This newborn fully grown Uruk-hai is brown-bodied, dreadlocked, and covered in slime (figure 3). His only impulse is violence and murder. He is anything but white. In one dramatic mobile shot, viewers are taken from the top of a white prison tower to the very bottom pit of hell to witness the aberrantly organic/industrialized production of hyper-blackness overseen and orchestrated by the film’s villainous representative of hyper-whiteness. Thus, we are introduced to the films’ postmodern racial remapping that forges together pure white and pure black evil.

In his 1997 book *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Richard Dyer systematized whiteness studies in film, based on his observation that whiteness is often overlooked, invisible, or the norm. “As long as race is something only applied to non-white people’s, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are
races, we are just people. There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human”, Dyer emphasizes (2). In Lord of the Rings, there is also a powerful position of being “just fantasy”, a rejection of any ideological comparison to contemporary society. As Stephanie Greco Larson points out in her book Media & Minorities, even when films are not intentionally crafted to favor the majority, they often still do (14). Dyer also notes that race, and particularly race imagery, is never not in play, in society, policies, and even- the movies (1). Dyer and other film race scholars attempt to make whiteness more visible in film, moving beyond the assumption of whiteness as a de-facto, raceless identity. Lord of the Rings, operating in the fantasy realm, makes whiteness both visible and invisible, establishing a racial hierarchy and then complicating it with claims gestures of cosmopolitan cooperation. It does this by conflating race with the physical color of costuming, setting, and lighting. Illuminating white light, glowing white costumes, and of course, white people, grace the landscape of Middle Earth, only to be replaced with a new version of racialized whiteness at the end of Return of the King. This hierarchical whiteness is very noticeable and centered as the racial standard, so that Lord of the Rings is “Saturated in racial metaphors and imagery that work to position whiteness as a universal ideal and otherness as a horrifying and destructive force that comes into being through monstrous reproduction” (Redmond 92). Though Frodo and the fellowship face human and non-human foes, each race is constructed only through their relationship to whiteness, and thus failure to achieve white standards of “humanity.” These identities are based not only on racist white stereotypes of minorities, but also play off the deepest fears and desires of white supremacist ideologies including white genocide. These images thus become not only stereotypes, but “controlling images”, shaping the way audiences view that race in society (Larson 14). With the success of Lord of the Rings, these destructive controlling images are seen countless times.
Defenders of the trilogy may argue in favor of its postmodern cosmopolitanism, so that the films’ devotion to the “fellowship” of a myriad of races, particularly the developing friendship of Gimli and Legolas, would instead argue for equality and cooperation. If we are to take the film at its explicit meaning, this example only further supports the film’s use of cultural essentialism, in contrast to the idea that white people are afforded individuality (Dyer 5). As Kim notes, this essentialism would argue that “to know Gimli would be to know all Dwarves” (882).

Furthermore, the friendship is only allowed based on the initial hierarchical structure, so that Elves and Dwarves may become friends, but Orcs, Goblins, and Uruk-hai cannot. In the many species of Middle Earth, this (non)racial hierarchy manifests itself both metaphorically, but also spatially, in the fluid cinematography, setting, editing, sound, makeup, and prosthetics. Elves, glowing white in their purity are the pinnacle of whiteness, followed by men, Hobbits, Dwarves, and Orcs. The further down the hierarchical ladder, the less human, and the less white these species/races become.

*Visualizing Class Hierarchy through Makeup & Costuming.* In building a fantasy world like Middle Earth, the costuming immerses audiences in the viewing experience. Costuming in the *Lord of the Rings* reinforces both a racial hierarchy as well as ethnic and gender stereotypes. According to Kim, in the “cringe-inducing” racial coding of *Lord of the Rings* “Goodness correlates to whiteness, both racially and as color scheme, and is associated with Europe, particularly England and the Scandinavian countries, the West, and the North. Evil is invariably black, savage, Southern (or ‘Southron’), and Eastern” (875). Starting at the top, Elves, as the exemplar of whiteness, are dressed almost exclusively in glowing, white robes and dresses (figure 4). The Elves’ costuming embodies white purity and cleanliness. In the grimy world of
Middle Earth, they seem to rise above such human inevitabilities as sweat or dirt. In *Two Towers*, for example, the Elves arrival at the battle of helms deep shows a visible contrast between the tired, dirty men and the polished blue and white glow of the new arrivals (figure 5). Men are visually coded as a new earthier form of whiteness, in contrast to the hyper-whiteness of Elves. Embodied in Aragorn, his tan skin and brown hair are less obtrusively white, though still firmly Caucasian through actor Viggo Mortensen’s Nordic features (figure 6). He does not dress in all white, but often in more muted blacks and browns. Orcs and Uruk-hai occupy the lowest space in this hierarchy. They are visibly black or brown bodied, dreadlocked, pierced, and wear the least amount of clothing. The Orcs are often shown in armor that only covers their torso, allowing their muscular arms and legs to be shown (figure 7). This relates to the stereotypic image of the “black bodied buck” or the savage. If whiteness is associated with purity and chastity, blackness is associated with sheer corporeality and impulsive urges. The lack of clothing enhances this primitivist media stereotype.

*From Anthropomorphic to Human Representations.* Using fantasy creatures like Elves and Orcs, which, nevertheless share anthropomorphic features with their human counterparts, is one of the ways in which *Lord of the Rings* “gets away with” its problematic racial ideology. For instance, in a 2003 Chicago Tribune film review, David Ibata states, “In ‘Fellowship,’ we saw non-human foes: Orcs, trolls, Uruk-hai, Ringwraiths and the like. No connection can be made between ordinary people and these malformed uglies. No problem here.” These anthropomorphic creatures, however, can be connected to races, especially through their costuming and mixed morphology. Ibata goes on to remark on the departure in character and costuming from *Fellowship* to *Two Towers*. In *Two Towers*, we are presented with enemies who are also “men”,
but from the general geographic “East.” Post-colonial and films studies have noted the apparent orientalist discourse built on an East/West divide. The East is formed in contrast to the West, so that the unique identities of countries are collapsed into a single obsession with “The Orient,” often based in ideas of perverse sexuality and decadently ancient cultures (Dirk). The introduction of the Easterlings and the Haradrim mark a transition away from anthropomorphic creatures, but still depict stereotyped images of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures. These scenes occur through the point of view of Frodo and Sam, reaffirming their whiteness by contrast.

*Easterlings.* As Frodo, Sam, and Gollum approach the black gates of Mordor we see a long shot of the approaching Easterling army below, minuscule in size due to the trio’s high vantage point. The sun glitters off the soldier’s shields, so that when they move together as one black mass, they appear beetle-like (figure 8). The film then cuts to a medium shot of Sam as he perches on a rock to get a clearer view. The film suddenly cuts back to a long shot as Sam’s ledge breaks, sending him careening down the side of the hill. Frodo chases after him, and the ensuing rockslide and dust plume captures the attention of a few soldiers, reframing them in a close-up and allowing the audience a first glimpse at these new human enemies. Their bodies are entirely covered in black and red turbans/robes (figure 9). Their armor has a clear Asian influence, as atop their heads they wear a pointed coolie-hat-turned-armor. The only skin we see is through tiny slits in their armor, revealing their eyes. They are darker skinned, and their eyes are black, enhanced with thick black eyeliner.

*Bringing the Middle East to Middle Earth.* The transition to human enemies in *Two Towers* represents a departure in the film’s use of non-human, though anthropomorphic, characters as
vehicles for promoting the film’s underlying messages of white supremacy and separate ethno-
states. Now, with the introduction of characters belonging to the species of “men,” though from
different geographic areas of Middle Earth, we see more typical film depictions of hyperbolic
racial stereotypes. The introduction of the Haradrim justifies the film’s own use of stereotypic
othering as a means of crafting the enemy, but also comments on the cultural and political
climate during the film’s initial release. The Haradrim are introduced midway through Two
Towers and evoke a conglomerate of Middle Eastern and African ethnicities.

Po-tay-toes! Utter this word to any Lord of the Rings fan and they will be sure to know
the exact scene. In a glorious display of British culinary sensibilities Sam gives Gollum a quick
cooking lesson on the “proper” way to cook rabbit. Sam then goes on an admittedly relatable
monologue on the beauty and diversity of potatoes, even saying how he longs for fish and chips.
If the film tries to deny the inherent racist imagery of the Orcs, here it playfully owns that the
Hobbits, and The Shire in general, are straight up transcriptions of Victorian England. By using
Gollum as a “fallen white character” in this brief interaction, the scene reminds viewers of the
Hobbit’s intelligence and taste in contrast to Gollum’s. It also harnesses the power of their
Anglo-Saxon roots. Now that white audiences have been reminded of their whiteness (and thus
goodness) against which all other characters must be judged, they introduce a trespassing enemy
force. As Frodo, Sam, and Gollum crouch on a mountain ledge in a close-up shot, the camera
comes from behind Frodo, and reframes into a long shot of the valley below and the black-
armored army tramping through the green landscape (figure 10). The high/low theme emerges
once more, so that the trio’s position of power makes them invisible to the invading enemy. The
film cuts back and forth between the army of Haradrim and the scared looks on Frodo, Sam, and
Gollum’s faces. A medium shot of the Haradrim’s costuming acknowledges a Middle
Eastern/African influence, as they appear in robes and turbans, accompanied by grossly enlarged version of elephants, called “oliphaunts” (figures 11-12). At first sight of the oliphaunts, Sam murmurs to Frodo, “No one at home will believe this.” The constant cutting back and forth between the encroaching enemy and Sam’s dialogue serves two purposes. First, Sam’s comment is reminiscent of a British imperialist traveling the world, this time collecting memories instead of colonies. But the statement, combined with the crosscutting on our crouched and scared trio also reminds the audience what is at stake in this war: the white homeland. It seems like such an obvious display of Middle Eastern/African ethnicities as the “evil force” would be condemned, but given the film’s initial release date, it makes sense why these characters are more blatantly stereotypical, but the portrayal of black people must be hidden beneath layers of anthropomorphic fantasy world building. *Two Towers* was released in December of 2002, just one year after 9/11 and the beginning of America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Islamophobia was rampant. Furthermore, an invading Middle Eastern force onto white territory was an image familiar in the collective conscious of post-9/11 America. Even the film’s name, *Two Towers*, could prime audiences to the devastation of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers.

*You Shall not Pass.* In *Lord of the Rings*, the appropriation of another species’ costuming only serves to deepen the racial coding. In “The Politics of Passing”, Elain Ginsberg traces the history of the concept of passing in America that first meant, “the assumption of a fraudulent white identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as “Negro” or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry” (2-3). The passing that occurs in *Lord of the Rings* thus flips this narrative, so that those from the cultural majority (white), temporarily access the physical space of the minority. More recently, passing has applied to multiple identities, such as race, sexuality,
gender, and class. It often challenges the essentialism or naturalism of those identities. For instance, if one can change their gender by wearing different clothes, makeup, and performing differently, then gender would not seem to be such an immutable fact. In contrast to this type of passing, *Lord of the Rings* adheres to a passing narrative that remains rigid in its essentialism by passing only through temporary costumes. In doing so, the film enables its white characters to perform costumed black face but reassures audiences that this racial mixing is only temporary. In fact, the film must let Frodo and Sam pass as Orcs (or black), in order to allow for the destruction of that same race.

At the end of *Return of the King*, Frodo and Sam must pass as Orcs in order to enter the land of Mordor. In this scene, Frodo and Sam put on the armor and helmets of the Orcs and attempt to cross Mordor in order access Mt. Doom. We see of the newly adorned pair is a long shot in which they stumble towards the camera. The armor is clunky, oversized, and the pair are struggling to move, generating slap-stick comic relief (figure 13). The turn toward humor make sure that the costumes are in no way indicative of the Hobbits’ true race or racial desires. They obviously do not fit in. The passing is only temporary, and not done well, as the Hobbits can never really shed their whiteness. As the film enters Mordor, we see the swarming of Orcs and their primitive dwellings: tents, pits, and fires for cooking. This reinforces their lack of modernity and bestial qualities. While walking, Frodo and Sam get caught in the warpath and must now actively pretend to be Orcs. It is telling that their first instinct is to grunt and start fighting, asserting that the language of the Orcs is a language of violence. After Frodo and Sam escape, the film dedicates an entire sequence of the pair removing the Orc helmets and armor. In an extreme low angle shot, we see the pair toss the armor into a pit, directly onto the camera
Within 5 minutes of wearing the Orc costumes, they have returned to their “English country boy” white shirts and pants.

Homes of the Races. Lord of the Rings’ racial hierarchy manifests itself formally in the set design, so that the races at the top reside in physically high places, and those races deemed less worthy delve deeper into the ground. The film reinforces this motif through the repetitive use of camera work, highlighting either the ascent into a purer version of whiteness, or the descent into the black ghettos. In Fellowship, we see the introduction of Lothlorien, the Elven Kingdom located on the outskirts of Moria. As the fellowship makes their way to speak with the lady Galadriel, they must first climb a series of intricate stairs, winding upward into the trees. The set design glows with white beauty. Archways and paths lead the group up, so that the journey seems as though an ascent to the stars (figure 15). The Elves are the most racially pure representations of whiteness, depicted as the most intelligent and elegant of the Middle Earth species. Their pale glowing skin, blue eyes, and long golden or brown hair marks their place atop the racially hierarchy, and consequently their homes have restricted access, allowing very few to enter their fortified borders.

Men have kingdoms also placed in physically high locations, but with easier access than that of the Elves. Where most of the trilogy’s plot unfolds includes the Kingdoms of Gondor and Rohan. Gondor’s city, Minas Tirith, appears as a white stone phallus, standing in stark contrast to the barren landscape and enhancing the overall homosocial nature of the film. Gandalf’s repeated ascents onto the winding staircase of the White City reinforces this spatial order. Rohan too, though less regal, is revealed in an expansive wide shot, where we see Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli once again ascending to the top of a keep.
While still white, the Hobbits offer a version of agrarian small-town whiteness, manifested in their simultaneously aboveground/underground structures. Hobbiton, located in the center of The Shire, is introduced at the beginning of Fellowship, at once reminding us of their peasant status while still painting an image of an idyllic pastoral existence. Bag End, Bilbo and Frodo’s home is embedded in the hillside, its roof covered in grass, while The Shire’s color palette consists of deep greens and browns. This symbolizes a return to nature, though not in the same way that blackness is made primitive. Pastoral existence requires the taming of nature, not its destruction.

As we descend lower in the racial hierarchy, we see the homes of Dwarves. Though not explored thoroughly in the trilogy, we are shown the Mines of Moria, seemingly representative of all Dwarves’ existence as underground miners. Though the mines of Moria have long been usurped by Goblins, we get a sense of the dank, dark dwelling, symbolic of the Dwarves’ working class.

Finally, the Orcs and Goblins must delve deeper into the earth, so that each time they are shown we are reminded of their connection to the deepest, most evil places in Middle Earth. Countless shots trace this descent into darkness, which is also connected to their abuse of nature and obsession with industry. They do not belong on the surface of this world. In the extended edition of Return of the King, the film depicts the Orcs of Mordor as primitivistic, residing in makeshift tents across the barren landscape. They too have returned to nature, though with their blackness, this evokes primitivism, rather the idyllic pastoral existence of The Shire.

Ethno-States. Beneath its ostensibly progressive multiculturalism, Lord of the Rings narratively aligns itself with the contemporary alt-right’s idea of separate ethno-states, reinforced by the
cinematic use of maps and the construction of Middle Earth’s geography, putting special emphasis on invaded borders. Ethno-states is the term used by white supremacists who argue for the separation of the races into different racial territories, motivated by fears of white genocide and miscegenation. The film upholds this idea through the repeated use of map imagery, emphasizing the geographic territories already separated into racialized spaces. Sam has “never stepped foot into the world past farmer Maggot’s crop” and that seems to be the norm. Besides the nomadic white male, Aragorn, or the cosmopolitan elite Gandalf, very few characters give the impression of wandering far past their racial borders. In this sense, Middle Earth represents a white supremacist utopia. The only mention of potential race mixing is in the Uruk-hai, which Saruman describes as ruined lifeforms, the product of crossbreeding Orcs and Goblins. The potential for this racist utopia is marred by the spreading of Orcs across white territories, much like the spreading of an infectious disease. *Lord of the Rings* as a postmodern text manages to simultaneously fantasize a post-racial white utopia and the potential for apocalyptic racial mixing. Through maps and the spreading darkness of the mise-en-scene, the film provides a geographic metaphor of what is at stake. The use of maps in cinema has a similar fascist history, gaining popularity during World War II, and in the German propaganda film “Victory in the West” (Caquard, Sebastien, and Taylor 5). Maps not only enhance the fear of losing these ethno-states and their fetishization of inherent racial differences, but also serve to lend realism to the fantasy world, leading to the dangerous possibility of the series being inspirational in any way to budding postmodern virtual white supremacist communities. The film goes to many lengths to ensure the audience that this is not just a war, but that the enemies are trying to destroy “the world of men.”
BREAKING FROM TRADITION

Willing Participants in Slavery. Saruman’s breeding of the Uruk-hai is a bastardized revision of the history of slavery and signals Lord of the Rings’ postmodern rejection of miscegenation. Towards the end of Fellowship, Saruman speaks with Lurtz, the Orc birthed from the mud-pits. Lurtz acts as the main Orc antagonist in the film and is played by Maori actor Lawrence Makoare. Lord of the Rings’ racism thus becomes augmented blackface, burying Makoare beneath pounds of prosthetics. The scene begins with a medium close-up of the pair, with Lurtz in the foreground and Saruman lurking behind. Lurtz drips dirt and grime, in stark contrast to Saruman’s pure white robes and perfectly brushed hair, reinforcing an idea of race as hygiene (figure 16). Saruman begins to tell the origin story of the Orcs, saying, “They were Elves once, taken by the dark powers, tortured and mutilated. A ruined and terrible form of life.” This history lesson, in conjunction with the mud scene, lessens anxieties surrounding the hypersexuality of the black bodied buck stereotype. The film and Saruman can use the Orc’s corporeality for violence but makes sure to steer clear of any implication that Orcs are sexual creatures. At the height of white anxiety is the fear of miscegenation, but Lord of the Rings adapts beyond films like Birth of a Nation to a sexless world, focusing instead on fears of white genocide by non-white others.

The Orcs’ history is likened to the experience of the transatlantic slave trade, heightened by Saruman’s next comment in which he declares ownership, forcing Lurtz to acknowledge his master. At this point, there is the danger of feeling sympathy for the Orcs, but the film makes sure that the next scene stamps out that threat. The act of placing “the white hand of Saruman” on the warriors serves as a physical reminder of their status as property, but the film portrays the
Uruk-hai as eager participants in the violence (figure 17). Furthermore, their drive for violence and murder ensures that they are being used to serve a greater purpose of white genocide.

By using Saruman as a symbol of whiteness, it may seem that the film offers a critique of white supremacism. Saruman, however, as a hyper-white character, embodies exaggerated characteristics of whiteness through his sleek white hair and white robes. Through this hyper-whiteness, the average white audience member can distance themselves from him, displacing any white guilt or anxiety. In Two Towers, we witness further evidence of the Orcs’ compliance with their slavery. The Orcs stop their cross-country crusade with Merry and Pippin held captive, stopping to take a rest. In a series of medium close-ups, we hear one of the few times the Orcs are able to talk amongst themselves. They begin to complain about their lack of food and poor working conditions. The film is quick to bring the Orcs back to their bestial nature, by instead having them turn against each other, and in a cannibalistic display, proclaim, “Meat’s back on the menu, boys!” as they tear into the flesh of one of their fallen soldiers. The narrative of non-white others as cannibalistic is not new, but in this context, further emphasizes their violent nature, and their potential for committing white genocide.

Saruman’s hyper-whiteness represents one of many ways in which the film painstakingly establishes a racial hierarchy, only to later complicate it in favor of multiculturism and newly racialized whiteness. An internet search reveals a racialized family tree of Middle Earth’s species, made to look “historic” by its brown crinkled paper background (figure 18). This diagram would instead suggest that the species occupying the bottom level are on equal footing, marking direct species relationships through the gray lines. Lord of the Rings thus makes deliberate attempts to confuse its own racial hierarchy, allowing progressive-minded liberal
optimists the chance to see past the morphological coding of creatures to a world that celebrates diversity.

*Transforming Acceptable Whiteness.* Costuming’s influence in this film is not limited to its ability to stigmatize non-white racial others. Costuming also acts as a signifier of the power of whiteness to create self-actualized individuals. In other words, increased whiteness leads to greater power and authority. Gandalf and Aragorn’s metamorphosis throughout the trilogy exemplifies this idea, but most distinctly in *Two Towers* and *Return of the King.*

In *Fellowship,* Gandalf is nicknamed Gandalf the Grey, indicative of both his characteristic costuming and makeup, as well as his status as one of five color-coded wizards roaming Middle Earth. Gandalf is portrayed in all grey robes, pointed grey wizard’s hat, and wild, scraggily grey hair, eyebrows, and beard (figure 19). He is powerful, but not as powerful as Saruman. Gandalf’s transformation is revealed in *Two Towers,* after his earthly body is destroyed in *Fellowship,* during the battle with the balrog. Gandalf’s reintroduction makes it look as though he has had an expensive day at the salon. His once wild hair has been tamed, turned pure white and flowing down past his shoulders. His facial hair is now white and has finally been groomed (figure 20). He is now a mirror image of Saruman, but the film makes it clear that Gandalf the White should not be considered a symbol of evil hyper-whiteness. Saruman embodies “whiteness run amok” or whiteness with a black heart, so that white audiences can point to Saruman and his status as creator of industrialized slavery and easily be able to say, “that’s not me.” Though visually identical, Gandalf’s previous status as grey, turned white, reads much more as a success story. Already considered racially white, Gandalf has access to a system where hard work and determination (his defense of the fellowship) is rewarded with a promotion in the hierarchy of
whiteness. This manifests visually through his makeup and costuming transformation and indicates a higher level of power and status in Middle Earth. Gandalf dies, goes to heaven, and comes back to earth with a unicorn, using the power of acceptable whiteness to save the race of men.

Aragon’s transition into middle whiteness occurs over the course of the entire trilogy and reflects a postmodern “just right whiteness” in this new cosmopolitan era. His costuming changes from beginning to end relate to Dyer’s notion of white individuality, in that everything a white person accomplishes is related to their own individual skill, intelligence, and ability, rather than a function of their race (5). If a white person succeeds or fails, it is because of who they are as an individual, not because they are white. Compare this to a black person’s failure, which is used to justify scientific racism, in that black people are inherently going to be different (i.e. worse) than white people. Aragorn achieves his individuality by “returning” to his noble roots, establishing a kingdom of newly racialized whiteness. For instance, in our first introduction of Aragorn in *Fellowship*, he appears at the Inn of the Prancing Pony, a black-hooded shadow who blends into the background and is known only as a ranger (figure 21). As Aragorn accepts the power of his whiteness, his outer appearance changes as well. By the end of *Return of the King* (named for Aragorn’s return to Gondor and thus the restoration of monarchy), gone is the dirty, hooded ranger. Instead, Aragorn has grown a full beard and has tanned skin, brown wavy hair, and wears the coat of arms of Gondor (figure 22). Aragorn has essentially become the King of Middle Earth, marking a conservative return to empowered whiteness and a social order as it should be, a multicultural, middle-brow, mixed-raced reflection of an inclusive democratic Kingdom of humanity at its tolerant, cosmopolitan best. Aragorn’s makeup and costuming place him in the middle of blackness and whiteness, replacing the extremeness of the hyper-white
Elves and wizards, but clearly whiter in comparison to the Orcs, whose fate seems miserable in this newly forged Kingdom (figures 23-24). With its happy ending, *Lord of the Rings* propagates cosmopolitan cooperation, but implicitly leaves out the non-white species, while simultaneously placing whiteness at the center of power. There is no doubt that Middle Earth has been left in the right (white) hands of men.

GENDER, SEX, AND THE RING

*Whiteness and Femininity.* In talking about representations of race, one must also address the issue of gender and sexuality. As Richard Dyer notes, “All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality” (10). A hallmark of whiteness is its purity, which must be upheld and replicated through racially pure procreation. There is a complication, however, in which the animalistic nature of sex poses a contrast to the depiction of white women as chaste and pure, like Mary and the virgin birth. This explains why often in white supremacist ideology, there is the idea of white genocide, or the whiteness of the population decreasing. These anxieties can be traced back in American history during the mid-1850’s, in which America’s conceptions of race drastically changed from visual features, to “one drop” blood rules. This change largely came about due to economic interests, in which a person who was visually white, but had slave ancestors, could be used for the free labor needed in the westward expansion of America (Raimon 4). But the change also marks a fear of miscegenation, or of the sexual mixing of the races. Often in fiction, we thus see the “tragic mulatto” character, the despised figure of interracial relations. Even at the start of the 20th century during the Eugenics movement, a legal push for the sterilization of minority women sought to boost the white population (Watkins). Discussion of white bodies must always then examine their relationship to sexuality. In the *Lord
of the Rings films, whiteness casts itself over the very few female characters present in the trilogy. As a postmodern text, Lord of the Rings in many ways moves beyond fears of miscegenation, creating a PG-13 sexless version of Middle Earth, maintaining white women’s purity, and also establishing a homosocial environment.

Arwen’s character, though superficially feminist, harkens back to the idea of white women being used as vessels for continuing the white population. Her introduction in Fellowship, in which we see her ability to ride better than Aragorn and lead Frodo to safety, teases audiences with a strong female character. But after one horse ride, Arwen spends the rest of the trilogy confined to Rivendell, too weak with fainting spells. Her usefulness lies in her ability to reproduce whiteness for the next generations, and help Aragorn reclaim the throne he is meant to have. In Return of the King, for instance, Arwen is leaving to the Undying Lands with the rest of her people, until she sees a vision of her future son. Her son, predictably dressed all in white, runs toward Aragorn for an embrace, as white light streams out from behind them (figure 25). It is this moment alone that furthers her plot (and purpose) for the remainder of the film. She is valuable for her white, and soon to be royal, uterus! The film shows Arwen as a mother without conception, in line with its other depictions of non-sexual reproduction, such as the Orcs’ birth from mud pits.

White women resign themselves to help white men realize their potential as empowered individuals. This relates to the notion that white men are led to believe that their successes or failures are products of their individualism, rather than of their race (Dyer 5). In Return of the King, it is Arwen who brings up the titular event, Aragorn’s transformation from an unknown ranger called “Strider”, to the next King of all men in the west. In this scene, we hear Arwen through voiceover after she tells her father, Lord Elrond, that he must “reforge the sword.” The
renewed blade textually symbolizes the return of men’s phallic power. In the theoretical framework laid out in this paper, however, a call for reforging the blade strengthens the bonds of white brotherhood, very similar to that seen in the alt right. It is noteworthy that Arwen plays such a pivotal role in this development, even though we do not see her in the reforging sequence, nor very much at all throughout the series, only in the dream sequences of Aragorn’s mind.

In a much more general sense, the role of women as a group, rather than a single character underscores the stakes of this war. Much like in actual wars, it is common to depict the enemy as subhuman beasts, or in the case of World War I, as ape-like (figure 26). Lord of the Rings makes clear the effect an invasion by the enemy (in this case, non-white others) will have in annihilating the white population, though now without miscegenation. Dyer states, “interracial unease is represented as bestiality storming the citadel of civilization” (14). In Two Towers at the battle of Helms Deep, this is illustrated by the hordes of Orcs trying to storm the citadel, enhanced by the repetitive cross-cutting to the women and children crying in the caves below. It is understood that a defeat in battle would not just mean the physical end to white men, but also perhaps an end to the white race, furthering the white supremacist fear of white genocide. With the overly primal heterosexuality of the racial other removed from the fantasy world, what threatens white identity is the capacity for overwhelming violent destruction. This justifies (and makes inevitable) the need for ever expanding militarism and martial rule. It also results in the fetishizing of the homosocial world of soldiers both on and off the battlefield.

Racial and Gendered Lighting. Lighting is another way in which the film upholds its racial hierarchy, working intersectionally on both race and gender. For the few female characters in the trilogy, bright white light and a fogging haze are used to underscore their stereotypically
feminine characteristics, inextricably linked as a function of their whiteness. We can see this in the introduction of both Arwen and Galadriel, two female Elves already atop the racial hierarchy. In *Fellowship*, Arwen arrives on white horseback, coming to the aid of Aragorn and the Hobbits. The key light and back light are so strong, combined with a shallow depth of field, that Arwen appears not as a human, but as a heavenly apparition (figure 27). The strong light softens her features, as is often seen in Hollywood glamour shots. As the light dims, and Arwen comes into view, it becomes apparent that the figure of her we just saw was not reflective of reality, but rather a vision through Frodo’s point of view. The film presents Arwen as a superficially feminist character, allowing her to outride both Aragorn and the black riders. The contrast between Arwen as she actually appears and the Arwen of the vision, however, demonstrates that women are valued for the purity of their whiteness as objects of a gaze. Galadriel, literally called the “Lady of the Light” has a strikingly similar entrance. Again, Galadriel glows from the power of her extreme backlight and subsequently her beauty is enhanced (figure 28). In the following scene, we see how the shift in lighting represents a link between beauty and goodness in women, and how Galadriel’s quest for power beyond her gender must be punished by degrading her appearance. This occurs when Frodo offers her the ring, so that the characteristic soft backlight is replaced by harsh green-blue light, throwing her features into ugly contrast (figure 29).

For the men of the trilogy, extreme white lighting manifests their power. Consider the battle of Helms Deep, in which Theoden is lit by an extreme back light (figure 30). The light beckons him to the ensuing battle, in which he will prove his masculinity as both a warrior and a king. In fact, the extreme white lighting takes on its own life, when Gandalf and the Riders of Rohan perch themselves atop the hill, saving the day when the prospect looks bleak for the
Rohirrim (figure 31). The light is mastered as a weapon, so that the Orcs below cannot see the approaching army. White lighting is thus used to defeat the non-white characters.

REAL WORLD CONSEQUENCES

Eco fascism + New Zealand landscape. Though the term had been coined several decades ago, ecofascism has recently found a renewed uptick in popularity with the alt-right white supremacists and the climate crisis. As recently as 2019, ecofascism was expressly stated in the Christchurch killer’s manifesto, as part of his reasoning and motivation for the mass shooting at a New Zealand mosque. For this “lone white male shooter” ecofascism joins white supremacist ideology with environmental conservation, so that concerns regarding climate change and population growth are to be mitigated with genocidal solutions against undesirable non-white populations (Wilson). The adoption of the term by those on the far-right contrasts with conservative right-wing climate change denialism, but it is in line with the history of environmental conservatism, and how science is often used to justify racism.

Beginning in the mid 1800’s, Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, uprooted the conventional wisdom of the scientific community. One outcome was the theory’s application to Social Darwinism, in which the same science was used as a tool for justifying many white people’s fears of generations of “imbeciles” (Lombardo 8). With this idea in mind, leading into the early 20th century, saw the renewal of both environmentalism and the eugenics movement. Many of the early 1900’s environmentalists saw a beauty and nobility in nature, mostly as a counterpart to the poverty seen while slumming in large cities. As Jedidiah Purdy, has recently pointed out, “environmentalist priorities and patterns of thought came from an argument among white people, some of them bigots and racial engineers, about the character and future of a
country that they were sure was theirs and [that they] expected to keep.” At the same time, the eugenics movement was gaining in popularity, often playing on those ideas of the white race disappearing, due to decreasing birth rates from white women. From this, came both the racialized use of birth control, and the state-sponsored use of forced sterilization against minority women, or those with mental handicaps (Lombardo 7-12). The U.S.’s involvement in forced sterilization even became the basis upon which Nazi Germany modeled their sterilization programs (Lombardo 237). The parallel rise of both environmentalism and eugenics becomes important when considering more recent adaptations of environmentalist models. Unfortunately, efforts by environmentalists such as Al Gore often proclaim to foremost female empowerment through the use of fertility management. These efforts, however, ignore the fact that reducing the population in order to curb the effects of climate change is only offered to certain populations, all of them non-white, or indigenous peoples (Dyett and Thomas 210-211). In many ways, these more recent efforts are only thinly veiled replications of the previous attempts to slow the spread of non-white populations. Current day ecofascists thus fantasize about saving the earth, but only for the white race.

Given the Lord of the Rings’ extreme popularity, it is concerning how the rise of ecofascism might interact with the actual New Zealand landscape. Stirred on by meme-generating fan groups, Lord of the Rings’ dedication to building a fantasy world through the New Zealand landscape means that there is a blurring between the world of reality and fiction. Unlike other blockbuster hits with elaborate, though largely inaccessible stage sets, for many fans, New Zealand is Middle Earth (figure 32). In large part due to the country’s own adjustments made for this lucrative tourism, many die-hard fans make visits similar to religious pilgrimages, in which they travel many hundreds of miles to see the various filming sites (Goh 269). The tourism
industry has been met with protests by the Māori, New Zealand’s indigenous population. Some of the sites used for filming, and thus which generate a lot of tourist attraction, are situated on Sacred Maori lands. Not only does the film support postmodern white supremacist ideology, but now the franchise is encroaching on minority groups in very tangible ways.

Throughout the films, ecofascist ideas are upheld through the repetitive imagery of the destruction of the natural landscape in favor of industry. It is noteworthy that this destruction of the landscape comes solely at the hands of the Orcs, so that their blackness comes to be associated with the destruction of the natural world. We see this through close-up sequences of axes on trees, as well as montages around Isengard in which the landscape dramatically changes from a wooded area to a barren wasteland. *Lord of the Rings* also invokes the anxieties underlying ecofascism in similar ways that link ethno-states. The film must first show the utopian version of peaceful interaction with the land, exemplified through the pastoral inhabitants of The Shire. The Shire’s introduction is not in the town, but with a static shot of Frodo leaning against a tree in a beautiful forest (figure 33). As he makes his way with Gandalf into town, special attention is paid to the way in which the Hobbits correctly interact with the environment, exemplified by their flourishing crops, and the vibrant green color-coding. Once the film has established this utopia, it shows the potentially catastrophic dangers of the invading Orcs. This occurs towards the end of *Fellowship*, in which Frodo has a vision of “things to come” should he not be successful in his destruction of the ring. The focus of these visions is the destruction of The Shire, Frodo’s home, but also the archetype for the beauty of nature. In the vision, we see The Shire as it has already been presented, and with the blink of an eye Frodo witnesses the burning of his town and the now barren landscape (figures 34-35). Furthermore, we see a brief image of Sam linked by the hands and feet to other Hobbits by chains, playing off the
paranoia of white slavery (figure 36). Through this vision, we see the importance placed on the physical landscape, and that the worse possible outcome would be not only an environmental future ruined by non-white invaders, but also the usurping of that land and displacement of its white owners. These ecofascist ideas thus call for the militaristic protection of land, divided by racial borders.

CONCLUSION

Through its audiovisualization, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of films reinscribes a hierarchically racialized sliding scale of humanity only to complicate it under the guise of cosmopolitan cooperation, centering racialized whiteness as not too white, not too black, but “just right” in the middle of Middle Earth. *Lord of the Rings* affirms white supremacist ideas of ethno-states as a necessary defense against the risk of white genocide. Furthermore, the MPPA PG-13 rating the franchise requires to achieve its massive box office receipts fosters the postmodern reworking of a new kind of “white panic lite” with the fear of miscegenation eliminated through the desexualization of the menacing black other and the dark fantasy of motherless reproduction. The films then fill that gap with a heightened fetishization of militarism and total wars of annihilation. As a fantasy franchise, *Lord of the Rings* can rely on selective applicability to avoid and deny critique of the film’s participation in discourses of contemporary white supremacists, while remaining a culturally significant and dangerous form of white fantasy.

So, where do we go from here? The *Lord of the Rings* franchise continues to churn out products and criticism while continuing to incite and contribute to ideological discourses across a range of transmedia platforms. A new Amazon series is slated for release in early 2021. With increased pressure on and attention to the diversity of casting choices, this new series may offer
more opportunities for minority representation as members of “the race of Man.” Early in
Fellowship, Bilbo states, “I thought up an ending for my book. ‘And he lives happily ever after,
till the end of his days.’” In searching for an ending to this thesis, I wish I could manage a simple,
happy closure like Bilbo. But that would be…. fantasy. And as such it, it would undoubtedly
serve as an attempt at masking unresolved contradictions and problems. I began this
investigation as a devoted longtime fan of the Lord of the Rings films, but I soon found myself
confronting the fact that the complex racism embedded in my beloved film trilogy could not be
wished away. Still, I will go ahead and paraphrase Sam's inspirational speech to Frodo: “There's
some good in this film, Mr. Frodo, and perhaps it's worth fighting for.” That goodness may not
rely on the film itself, but rather in the recognition that film is a powerful tool for both
influencing and changing society's viewpoints. If anything, identifying the trilogy's reflections of
and contributions to histories and ongoing systems of institutional racism, not to mention
participation in dangerous ideologies of racial hatred and intolerance, can be the first step in
changing the culture in which such systems and histories have been allowed to continue in the
first place.
Image Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3
Figure 26

Figure 27

Figure 28
Why I Want to Go to New Zealand

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34
Works Cited

“Alt-Right”. *Southern Poverty Law Center.*


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