

Mother of Dragons: White Feminist Imperialism in HBO's "Game of Thrones"

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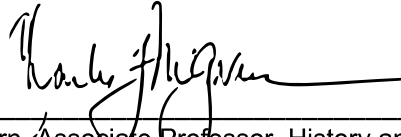


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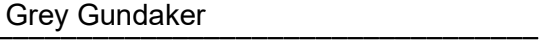
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ABSTRACT

In 2019, *Game of Thrones* aired its final episode, *The Iron Throne*. This episode enjoyed enormous viewership, and culminated in the death of Daenerys Targaryen, a fan favorite, whose storyline saw her conquer diverse cultures and declare rulership over the continents of Essos and Westeros. Her character is unique for being one of the most famous female protagonists in the fantasy genre, as well as a builder of empires. As evidenced by the hundreds of children named both 'Khaleesi' and 'Daenerys' after her, she was a hero to many. However, much of her storyline was occupied with the subjugation of black and brown people- sometimes in the name of liberation, but always with the goal of validating Daenerys's claim to rulership.

This thesis aims to uncover the developments in the fantasy genre that led to the depiction of Daenerys Targaryen as a white conqueror of non-white subjects, and the ways that *Game of Thrones* valorized her attempts at leadership. Primarily using the work of Helen Young and Jamie Williamson, I will demonstrate the longstanding tradition of white imperialism established in the fantasy genre, and incorporate Anne McClintock's framework of race and gender from her seminal work *Imperial Leather* to examine how Daenerys both subverts and upholds the expectations of imperialism as a matriarchal conqueror in *Game of Thrones*.

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Abby Kahler

Mother of Dragons: White Feminist Imperialism in HBO's *Game of Thrones*

"Why should anyone follow me?"

"You're a Targaryen, mother of dragons."

"I need to be more than that. I will not let those I have freed slide back into chains. I will not sail for Westeros. I will do what queens do. I will rule."

Game of Thrones, Season 4 Episode 5, "First of His Name"

In 2019, *Game of Thrones* aired its final episode, *The Iron Throne*. The title of this episode refers to the throne of the king of Westeros. The question of who would ultimately take said throne was an object of speculation from the very beginning of the show's run and was almost certainly a reason for the enormous viewership the episode enjoyed.¹ As it turned out, two of the final contenders for the throne held it in the same episode- the throne was won by Daenerys Targaryen, lost when she was murdered by her nephew Jon Snow, and then ultimately taken by Bran Stark, a dark horse in the race for the throne. The twist of Daenerys' murder was especially compelling because she had intended to take the iron throne as her birthright for almost the full duration of the series. Her storyline consisted almost entirely of consolidating her power and

¹ In an article for CNN Business, Frank Pallotta found that the finale brought in 19.3 million viewers, making it the most-watched telecast in HBO's history and giving it higher viewership than the finale of the popular sitcom "The Big Bang Theory," which brought in 18 million viewers the same week. (Pallotta, Frank. "'GOT' finale sets new viewership record." 20 May 2019. *CNN Business*. 12 April 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/20/media/game-of-thrones-finale-ratings/index.html>)

gaining influence over various kingdoms and peoples, so she looked to be a strong contender until the penultimate episode of the series, when she suddenly went mad and destroyed an entire city without mercy, losing the loyalty of most of her followers. I have chosen to write about Daenerys in this thesis for her role in *Game of Thrones*, not only as a powerful female protagonist in a prestige television show, for she is not alone in that regard, but as a powerful female protagonist in a fantasy television show, which is both novel and significant. The fantasy genre has grown in popularity in American culture throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and has recently reached a zenith with the success of *Game of Thrones*, as well as the publication of countless fantasy video games and book series. Daenerys is possibly the most visible fantasy heroine of all time, and her role as a conqueror is worth examining in some depth. Specifically, the aspect of her character that is often overlooked in analyses of the show is something that is often overlooked in the fantasy genre at large: her relationship to non-white characters.

By the time Daenerys was killed in the *Game of Thrones* finale, she had alienated almost everyone loyal to her by becoming quickly and unpredictably ruthless. Before this, she had won widespread loyalty in two ways: by demonstrating her legitimacy and power as a mother of dragons, and also by demonstrating her ethical idealism, a rarity in the cutthroat game of thrones. Though controversial at times, she was a fan favorite, with Time Magazine calling her “one of the few unambiguously heroic figures in the series,”² and 560 babies in the United States being

² Dockterman, Eliana. *Game of Thrones Had an Opportunity with Daenerys Targaryen. The Show Squandered It.* 19 May 2019. 2 10 2020. <https://time.com/5590729/game-of-thrones-finale-daenerys/>

named “Khaleesi” after one of the character’s titles in the show (163 were named Daenerys)³. Fan disappointment in Daenerys’ storyline was well-documented,⁴ but what about her fictional supporters? The two armies in the show that followed her to the iron throne, the Dothraki and the Unsullied, were each won by separate strategies; the Dothraki by force, when she murdered their leaders, and the Unsullied by liberation, when she helped them destroy their masters. Both armies are from Essos, a continent to the east of Westeros, where she had spent the majority of the show building a following. Neither army had ever been to Westeros, or been ruled by a Targaryen before, but by the time Daenerys was killed, they were the only people (or dragons) willing to die for her. It is possible that if she had succeeded in keeping the throne, they would have been given land and wealth in Westeros, but there is no way to know. After her death, we still don’t know much; the leader of the Unsullied declares that he, and possibly his army, will sail to an island that was the birthplace of his recently deceased lover, and the Dothraki’s fate is never addressed. What can we glean from these neglected storylines?

In this thesis, I would like to analyze Daenerys’s rise to power as a leader of non-white people and suggest that her story represents a pernicious and oft-overlooked aspect of the fantasy genre: its persistent Orientalism, and the white patriarchal imperialism that goes hand in hand with it. Daenerys’s status as a female ruler plays a unique role in this Orientalism. Despite her claims to be a “breaker of chains,” her place within the narrative of *Game of Thrones* emphasizes

³ Aggeler, Madeleine. *How It Feels to Have Named Your Kid 'Khaleesi,' After Last Night's GoT Episode*. 13 May 2019. 2 10 2020. <https://www.thecut.com/2019/05/game-of-thrones-mom-who-named-her-baby-khaleesi.html>

⁴ See Aggeler in previous footnote; Dockterman, Eliana. *Game of Thrones Had an Opportunity with Daenerys Targaryen. The Show Squandered It*. 19 May 2019. 2 10 2020. <https://time.com/5590729/game-of-thrones-finale-daenerys/>; McGovern, Kyle. *So You Named Your Kid Daenerys. How's That Feel Now?* 13 May 2019. 2 10 2020. <https://www.vulture.com/2019/05/game-of-thrones-parents-daenerys-name.html>

repeatedly that rulership is her birthright and that her destiny is to become a more effective ruler of those that need her moral guidance. The people that she rules as she travels throughout Essos are not only portrayed as incapable of ethical self-rule, but also merely as stepping-stones to her greater rulership over Westeros. Additionally, her status as a mother is emphasized repeatedly, motherhood not only of her powerful dragons but of the people she rules. Ultimately, those people are left without a mother because of Daenerys' descent into madness, suggesting that even her more emotional, maternalistic approach to imperialism is insufficient. Though no patriarchal alternative to Daenerys' imperial vision is portrayed in the show, the question of whether non-white characters in the show are capable of ethical self-rule is left unanswered. By contrast, Westerosi characters like the Starks are portrayed as capable of self-rule and innovation. This contrast is also demonstrated in the character of Sansa Stark, who is the only surviving female ruler in the show—successful because of her ability to blend into existing gender roles and use her sexuality to regain her father's kingdom, rather than “breaking the wheel” as Daenerys intended to do.

I would like to use the framework of Anne McClintock's influential work *Imperial Leather* to examine the ways that Daenerys' feminism and whiteness intersect to perpetuate a harmful myth of white cultural superiority and justification of white patriarchal imperialism. To contextualize my argument about race, gender and fantasy, I will first offer a history of the fantasy genre, synthesizing a number of works and approaches. I will then focus on two works, *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* by Jamie Williamson, and *Habits of Whiteness: Race in Popular Fantasy* by Helen Young to discuss the role of race and imperialism within the history of the genre. I will then turn my focus to *Game of Thrones* more specifically, first, to briefly introduce existing approaches to race in the show, and then to demonstrate how Daenerys'

storyline elaborates on previous fantasy traditions with the portrayal of non-white cultures in Essos. After introducing these non-white cultures and characters, I will compare Daenerys' relationship with them to that of Olive Schreiner, a South African writer and activist discussed in McClintock's *Imperial Leather*, and the non-white people that she knew and attempted to represent. I will then conclude by briefly relating the status of all non-white characters at the conclusion of *Game of Thrones*, and contrasting their marginality with Daenerys' dramatic sendoff and the consequent struggle to determine the true ruler of Westeros. All these aspects of Daenerys' story contrast her failed attempt at enlightening her subjects with the brutal realism of characters like Sansa Stark, and emphasize the centrality of white patriarchal imperialism in fantasy worldbuilding. These elements demonstrate that popular fantasy still has a long way to go in its deconstruction of its racist patriarchal origins.

A Brief History of the Popular Fantasy Genre

Many chroniclers of the fantasy genre agree that something like modern popular fantasy was created, at the turn of the century, by British and American writers who were inspired by ancient European literary and folk traditions to create tales of impossibly noble Anglo-Saxon heroes traversing vast and ancient (usually European) worlds to complete epic quests.⁵ This was primarily a movement in the elite circles of the arts, and was more Medievalist than fairy-tale

⁵ Williamson defines the canon of what came to be known as "popular fantasy" as "narrative drawing on, and in certain respects emulating, the various premodern modes of romance, saga, epic, and fairy tale" and beginning in the first half of the twentieth century in *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy*, 127. Other notable historians of the genre date the birth of the fantasy genre to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, emphasizing the influence of folk and fairy tales on the genre, include Brian Atteberry in *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, Ann Swinfen in *In Defence of Fantasy*, and C.N. Manlove in *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*. All employ a broader definition of the genre than Williamson's.

based, with the creation of imaginary, fantastic “worlds” a secondary concern to the preservation of ancient archetypes and literary forms.⁶ However, eventually the concept surfaced in America in pulp magazines. These magazines, written for a lower-class audience than the earlier, more Medievalist works, highlighted its more violent, masculinist qualities, as well as heightening the fantastic element, and a fandom arose for the genre later termed “sword & sorcery.”⁷ This genre, marginalized for most of its existence, was then revived with the arrival in America of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series. *Lord of the Rings* essentially created the idea of a fully materialized, magical and yet familiar, secondary fantasy world, with cultural influences from our own world. The world of Middle-Earth, thanks to the publishing industry as well as the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which replicated Middle-Earth in its setting, became the template for the fantasy genre.⁸ The mainstays of the genre, usually present in “high fantasy” and “epic fantasy,” rather than the more peripheral genres such as “urban fantasy” I have taken from the definitions of “genre fantasy” and “heroic fantasy,” from the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* by John Clute, who states that genre fantasy itself is “almost always High Fantasy, Heroic Fantasy, or Sword and Sorcery.”⁹ The only requirement listed for High Fantasy stories is that they take place in a secondary world and concern the destiny of that world; for Heroic Fantasy stories, that they feature a hero; and for Sword and Sorcery, a meatier definition: “the fantasy subgenre featuring muscular Heroes in violent conflict with a variety of Villains, chiefly Wizards, Witches, evil Spirits and other creatures whose powers are – unlike the hero’s – supernatural in origin.”¹⁰

⁶ Williamson, 31

⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁸ Mackay, Daniel. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2001), 17-20.

⁹ Clute, “Genre Fantasy”

¹⁰ Clute, “Sword and Sorcery”

Though Clute does not consider Tolkien to belong to the Sword & Sorcery subgenre, the first successful Tolkien imitation, the *Sword of Shannara*, displayed a stronger S&S influence and determined fantasy's path with its financial success. Additionally, the growing fanbase of *Dungeons & Dragons* meant that fantasy war gaming became an essential flip side of the literary genre,¹¹ while at the same time fantasy began to be more an American than a British genre. There are many reasons that fantasy became this chimera of gaming and genre literature, including the nature of American subculture in the 70s and 80s, but I would like to suggest that one of those reasons is fantasy's adventure story lineage, which came to overshadow Tolkien's more sprawling, saga approach. Fantasy essentially became a landscape as well as a predictable linear narrative, and because of the prominence of Eurocentric worldviews in places like Middle Earth and Hyboria the result was, as Helen Young puts it, to make "race the conventional framework around which difference is built in the genre."¹² As fantasy gaming became even more profitable than fantasy literature, its way of representing a world defined by quantifiable racial distinctions became normalized.¹³ With varying degrees of emphasis, the idea of basing

¹¹ Hartwell, David G. "Dollars and Dragons: The Truth About Fantasy." *The New York Times* 29 April 1990: 40.

¹² Young, 35

¹³ In *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, Daniel Mackay, referring mainly to the enormous success of the *Dragonlance* novels in the 1980s, that "D&D maintains a reciprocal relationship with fantasy literature. Not only is it influenced by the genre's works, but it influences the development and direction of new fantasy novels" 18. Additionally, "The degree of media dissemination that *Dungeons & Dragons* received during the late 1970s and early 1980s through newspapers, weekly magazines, television news and films established a *Dungeons & Dragons*' brand of fantasy. *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy is characterized by a certain ahistorical, piecemeal conflation of courtly romance literature, supernatural and gothic literature, folklore, mythology, contemporary politics, social mores, morals, and ethics, and as Eurasian history, all within the popular imagination of Americans" 22. This definition corresponds well with Young and Williamson's description of the genre, and Young's focus on fantasy gaming as a major component of modern fantasy suggests that though the precise impact of *Dungeons & Dragons* has not yet been widely acknowledged, fantasy gaming is integral to understanding the contemporary genre.

different races on real-world cultures continued, with the result of countless raced “others” being turned into default villains. All the while, from the moment the *Lord of the Rings* made its initial impact, many writers from Ursula K. Le Guin to Terry Pratchett have used fantasy to explore culture and create narratively driven worlds that do not endorse a western imperialist worldview. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* books depict an archipelago rather than East/West continental dichotomy, and center non-white characters whose quests are often as philosophical as they are physical, while Pratchett’s Discworld uses satire to undermine the depiction of world history as an inevitable upward climb of Westerners toward progress and enlightenment. Despite their individual successes, however, these stories have not managed to spawn thriving sub genres. Fantasy as a broad category of imaginative and impossible literature is, of course, still vital, but no other imaginative mode has ever gained a foothold as a genre the way that Tolkienian imitation has.

Turning to scholars who can help elucidate the role of race and imperialism within fantasy, we meet some limitations. In terms of monographs, most histories of the genre are quite broad, and may address “fantastic literature” like the works of Haruki Murakami rather than the genre directly inspired by Tolkien. For my purposes I will be looking exclusively at the origins and current state of popular genre fantasy as defined by Jamie Williamson in *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* as a genre based largely on Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and dominated by “narratives set in worlds in which the supernatural or magical are part of the fabric of reality and that center on the themes of quest, war, and adventure.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, much scholarship and popular history of the fantasy genre that works off this definition pays little attention to race. I

¹⁴ Williamson, Jamie. *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 12

believe this is because of the conflicting purposes of fantasy “world-building.” For one thing, the word “fantasy” implies the importance of imagination and creativity in the construction of unreal worlds. However, there is still a degree of familiarity that must be maintained in order for writers like Tolkien to offer an effective escape from the mundanities of the real world. The fact that this familiarity is often constituted by historical Western European settings is overlooked by many accounts of the genre.¹⁵ Because of this lack of attention to cultural specificity within the fantasy genre, there is not much interest in depictions of race either. For instance, Tolkien’s depiction of Evil within *The Lord of the Rings* has been widely discussed, but his depiction of orcs and Easterlings as racialized beings is less common. In the works of Tolkien this is perhaps less surprising, since the culture of orcs and Easterlings is not a major theme in the novels. However, some works that certainly belong to the fantasy genre, such as Robert E. Howard’s tales of Conan the Barbarian and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the source material for *Game of Thrones*, depict cultural and racial conflicts quite often, and go into detail to describe a variety of ethnic groups. These depictions vary as to how recognizably they borrow from real-world cultures or, often, stereotypes of real-world cultures. When one combines this attention to race with the quantified abilities and traits of racial groups in the popular *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing games, it seems strange how little attention has been paid to race in analyses of fantasy. Thankfully, Helen Young addresses this concept extensively in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, offering multiple approaches to the concept of race through fantasy video games, early serial works like Conan the Barbarian, and epic fantasy literature. In addition to this, while it does not often

¹⁵ Though there are still not many histories of the genre, among three major literary histories of fantasy (*The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* by Brian Atteberry, *In Defence of Fantasy* by Ann Swinfen, and *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature* by C.N. Manlove) none mention the historicism or Eurocentrism of fantasy works.

address race directly, Williamson's *Evolution of Modern Fantasy* gives a fascinating account of the codifying of pre-existing traditions of Medievalism and Antiquarianism in imaginative literature into what we now recognize as Popular Fantasy. These accounts, examined together, help us better understand the exact way that race was depicted in *Game of Thrones*. To be sure, *Game of Thrones* has specific ideas about race. The concept is addressed explicitly in the series several times, but what is most fascinating is the continuities that the show portrays from earlier fantasy works- the parts of fantasy race-building that went unchanged. Young and Williamson help us understand these continuities for our reading of Daenerys Targaryen's storyline.

The reason it is helpful to combine these writers is that while Young does an excellent job at exposing the racial underpinnings of fantasy, it is not largely in the context of the historical development of the genre. Young focuses specifically on Robert E. Howard and J. R. R. Tolkien as founding authors of the genre, both of whom did have enormous influence on the direction of popular fantasy. However, this makes it difficult to understand exactly what fantasy authors like George R. R. Martin mean when they discuss "historical realism" or "authenticity" while dealing in racial stereotypes. Williamson's history of the genre gives more insight into the connection between fantasy's historicity and its racializing, and I would like to use his history of the genre to locate the antecedents of *Game of Thrones'* particular brand of racial thought.

Jamie Williamson's *Evolution of Modern Fantasy* traces the history of the fantasy genre from its roots in an 18th century Antiquarian tradition to its codification in the 1960s with the publication of the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series. Unlike many historians of the genre, Williamson draws a distinct line between "pregenre" fantasy and what was created in the wake of the Ballantine series. For example, Tolkien himself is often considered the father of the genre, but he did not work within a "fantasy" tradition— he called his own work "fairy-stories" and was

deeply inspired by ancient Scandinavian poetry in a way that his followers were not.¹⁶ More obviously, according to Williamson, there were antecedents to the fantasy genre that seem distant from what we now consider fantasy, like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. However, Williamson points out, these works provided a basis for the mode of much of modern fantasy, with its depictions of ancient kingdoms, dying customs, and living myths. He adds that the work he considers in *Evolution* "all draws to a substantial degree on themes and subject matter ultimately derived from what might be termed nonmodern, or traditional, narrative forms: myth, legend, epic, saga, romance, and fairy-story."¹⁷ At the same time, Williamson suggests a divergence in the lineage of fantasy, emphasizing that popular fiction had its own impact on the genre, perhaps more powerfully than the more literary tradition represented by *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Castle of Otranto*. This popular fiction "developed in close proximity to other forms of popular genre fiction— popular forms of romance narrative in fact— most notably horror, science fiction, and action adventure fiction."¹⁸ Though literary and popular pregenre fantasy share a connection with the romantic mode, they were published in different venues and with different preoccupations. This strain in fantasy's lineage is represented by works like *She* by H. Rider Haggard, *John Carter of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and most directly, Robert E. Howard's tales of Hyboria, which gave us Conan the Barbarian. The influence that these works had on the modern fantasy genre is evidenced in the rough-riding, plain-spoken heroes of stories by Michael Moorcock, Terry Brooks, and George R. R. Martin. Though many works of modern fantasy derive their quest structure from *The Lord of the Rings*, they rarely carry on the tradition of frequent poetry recitation, antiquated speech, and sense of tragedy evoked in literary fantasy

¹⁶ Williamson, 197-8

¹⁷ Ibid, 23

¹⁸ Ibid, 34

from the works of Lord Dunsany to Tolkien. There is also, in these more adventure-fiction works, a stronger emphasis on masculinity versus femininity, violent conflict, and the exploration of hostile lands— an emphasis shared with other popular genres of the era like science fiction and “lost world” stories. With this in mind, let us examine the role that white patriarchal imperialism played in the history of the fantasy genre.

Williamson does not actually address race or even empire directly in his study. However, because of the thoroughness of his history, it is possible to see where more antiquated visions of race may have arisen in the history of the fantasy genre. For this, I turn to his discussions of quasi-Oriental fiction and popular Fantasy fiction in the twentieth century respectively. In the case of the quasi-Oriental fiction of the eighteenth century, it is obvious that the influx of translated works inspired by Arabic poetry from French into English had some impact on the imagined worlds of the following centuries. Williamson even suggests that “it is arguably here that one finds the first substantial body of modern English narrative fantasy in prose” even though it is often overlooked by historians of fantasy.¹⁹ As he points out, quasi-Oriental tales like *Vathek* were usually considered in retrospect to belong to the Gothic mode, which several authors have recognized as a predecessor to fantasy. However, modern high fantasy retains less of the Gothic mode compared with literary pregenre fantasy.²⁰ The place it is most evident is in Orientalist settings that still seem to represent doom, tragedy, sexual potency, and mysteries of a forgotten age, in works as diverse as H. Rider Haggard’s *She*, much of H.P. Lovecraft’s oeuvre, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *ASOIAF (A Song of Ice and Fire)*. As Williamson notes, the qualities

¹⁹ Ibid, 32.

²⁰ According to John Clute in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, “dark fantasy” is considered “an ‘up-market’ term for Horror” in contrast to Heroic Fantasy or High Fantasy—it has its own place in the market but is not considered to be typical genre fantasy (Clute, John. *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. 1997. 29 September 2020. <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php> “Heroic Fantasy”)

that *Vathek* itself shares with the Gothic mode include a “luxurious decadence” and “sensational horror.”²¹ As Edward Said points out in *Orientalism*, this mindset was by no means unique to imaginative literature. Rather, it benefited the agents of white patriarchal imperialism to perpetuate this myth of a disordered and primal Orient, an Orient which needed the discerning eye of a European to lay bare. Though Williamson does not highlight this aspect of fantasy, it appears that the tradition of depicting versions of “The Orient” in fantasy literature has remained fairly consistent throughout its centuries of development, and it seems to have first appeared with the birth of the quasi-Oriental tale, and resurged in popularity around the turn of the century with popular adventure fiction. While I do not believe these popular fiction writers were deliberately drawing on a tradition of quasi-Oriental literature, I think their reasons for depicting the “Orient” in such a way were similar, motivated by the desire to titillate and provide an antithesis to Western values.²² The main difference lies in the way that popular fiction usually had white heroes, set in violent conflict against these “Oriental” characters. While *ASOIAF* and *Game of Thrones* are less committed to swashbuckling heroes who make their way through Eastern lands, the stories nonetheless have their own racialized problematics, which is why I will turn to Helen Young’s exploration of “gritty Fantasy” to discuss the role of white patriarchal imperialism in the era in which GOT’s was written.

In Young’s words, “Gritty Fantasy, a sub-genre created in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is marked by low-levels of magic, high-levels of violence, in-depth

²¹ Williamson, 53.

²² For comparison, Richard Mathews describes the lands of Conan the Barbarian’s Hyboria as “oddly familiar, yet unfamiliar and untamed geography appropriate for bringing an American frontier mentality into fantasy.” (Mathews, Richard. *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. Routledge, 2002, 119)

character development, and medievalist worlds that are ‘if not realistic, at least have pretentious to realism’ in their depictions of rain, blood, and mud.”²³ Young then goes on to explore *why* the idea of “realism” is so important to readers and authors of this sub-genre, considering the unreality inherent to the fantasy genre itself. She suggests that these works belong to the world of neomedievalism, intertwining the concepts of history and fantasy, and described by David Marshall as “a self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic imagining or reuse of the historical Middle Ages that selectively appropriates iconic images... to construct a presentist space that disrupts traditional depictions of the medieval.”²⁴ Unfortunately, it is difficult to understand recent fantasy depictions of race as “disrupting” anything— rather, they seem continuous with a tradition of Orientalism in the genre. In Martin’s case, Young helps to explain his particular brand of neomedievalism with a quote from Martin himself:

“The contrast between that [historical fiction] and a lot of the fantasy at the time was dramatic because a lot of the fantasy of Tolkien imitators has a quasi-medieval setting... they don’t really seem to grasp what it was like in the Middle Ages. And then you’d read the historical fiction which was much grittier and more realistic... I said what I want to do is combine some of the realism of historical fiction with some of the appeal of fantasy.”²⁵

As I will discuss later in the section on Daenerys, Martin certainly does take specific inspiration from historical personages and events for his stories. However, he suggests here that a general *sense* of historicity sets him apart from Tolkien and Tolkien imitators and is more important to him than methodical historical accuracy. After all, he is still an author of fantasy. Young explains that based on the deployment of arguments about historical accuracy among fans of *ASOIAF*, “there is a very strong desire amongst Fantasy audiences for the imagined worlds

²³ Young, 63.

²⁴ Ibid, 65.

²⁵ Ibid, 68.

they encounter to resonate with their existing assumptions about the Middle Ages.”²⁶ Due to centuries of Medievalism being intertwined with celebrations of European heritage, it is not hard to see why assumptions about the Middle Ages include its whiteness. This corresponds with the title of Young’s book and her thesis: that contemporary fantasy is dominated by *habits* of whiteness. Rather than explicitly defending white patriarchal imperialist values, as pregenre fantasy may have done, many works of contemporary fantasy have remained comfortable with offensive racial stereotypes because of their familiarity, resulting in an *implicit* defense of the same values. Young even points out the emotional force that strengthens defenses of fantasy, saying that “political correctness in debates around race in Fantasy is strongly aligned with the constructed-ness of modern consumer culture and contrasted with the supposed honesty and authenticity of the historical medieval world and the imagined medievalist world... Affective attachment to that vision of the Middle Ages, which is understood as both historically and artistically authentic, valorises both individual and communal fan identities.”²⁷ She also mentions that fandom itself has “traditionally been the domain of young White men, who often assume their own normativity in those communities.” Connecting the notion of personal defensiveness with a larger political climate, Young highlights a quote by Maureen T. Redding that in the US “the current political climate is powerfully influenced by a fantasy... of white loss of privilege” and that many are now in a state of questioning of the normativity of white identity in Western society.²⁸ Unfortunately, as bell hooks demonstrates in an account of her experience in graduate school, even in supposedly progressive settings, challenges to white centrality are

²⁶ Ibid, 72.

²⁷ Ibid, 79.

²⁸ Ibid, 79.

often felt to be a personal threat to white “victims.”²⁹ With all this in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that fantasy, as a genre marked by its escapism and adherence to ancient Western traditions, is on the defensive about questions of race. In fact, as I would like to argue, *Game of Thrones* in particular represents an entrenchment of not only racial stereotypes, but a particular brand of white patriarchal imperialism that seems reactionary and regressive in the twenty-first century. Martin unintentionally did bring greater realism into his fantasy: the adaptation of *ASOIAF* into a successful television show presents a world even more saturated by visions and beliefs about the importance of white patriarchal imperialism than decades of fantasy preceding it.

Treatments of *Game of Thrones* and its Depiction of Race

Game of Thrones has been the subject of academic study for almost a decade now. Over the years, scholars have presented ways of contextualizing the series: a work of “gritty” fantasy, part of the larger landscape of dark prestige dramas popular in the 2010s;³⁰ a “historical” fantasy, similar to shows like *The Borgias*, *Vikings*, or *Deadwood* for its interest in challenging “sanitized” versions of history through the depiction of sexuality and gray moralities;³¹ even as a

²⁹ After relating a letter from a white classmate “acknowledging her anger and expressing regret for her attacks” on hooks in class, hooks related that “Often in situations where white feminists aggressively attacked individual black women, they saw themselves as the ones who were under attack, who were the victims.”² After another discussion she was told that she had “‘wiped out’ people in the feminist theory class,” and that her classmate “was afraid of being ‘wiped out’ too” (hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press: Boston, 1984, 13)

³⁰ Young, Helen. *Habits of Whiteness: Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 63.

³¹ Facchini, Riccardo. “‘I watch it for historic reason.’ Representation and reception of the Middle Ages in *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*.” *Práticas da História* (2017): 43-73.

“feminist” show, in its frequent depictions of women in positions of power.³² One side of the show that has been explored less often is its depiction of race. This could be due to the fact that *Game of Thrones* is in a unique position in terms of its depiction of race; none of the ethnicities in the series are “real.” However, they are very much derived from “real” cultures, and there are certainly discussions to be held about the way race is handled in the series.

Of the scholars who are most helpful in understanding the role of worldbuilding and imperialism in *Game of Thrones*, a few stand out. Ryan Vu, for example, helps explain why *Game of Thrones* is so provocative in its presentation yet ultimately so conservative in its worldbuilding- it has no interest in undermining the foundations of the fantasy genre. In “Fantasy After Representation,” he uses *Game of Thrones* as an example of how the fantasy genre can no longer be defined in terms of traditional theories of the fantastic, and instead, “epistemological concerns, distinctions between fantastic genres, and individual authorship are de-emphasized in favor of established formal conventions, a shift which encourages a participatory model of consumption and ease of transmission across diverse media.”³³ He also addresses the “gritty” aspect of the show, saying that “the show’s counterintuitive sense of ‘realism’ has nothing to do with verisimilitude or allegory, but rather with mastery of its adopted generic codes.”³⁴ Ultimately, “GOT marks a key point where mass and elite audience tastes intersect, and where it is most apparent that the HBO treatment doesn’t ‘critique’ its host genre, but rejuvenates and legitimizes it.”³⁵ . Additionally, in “Godless Savages and Lockstep Legions:

³² McKay, Hattie. "The Feminists are Coming: A Critical Analysis of Melisandre and Feminism in Game of Thrones." *Relics, Remnants, and Religion: an Undergraduate Journal in Religious Studies* (2018).

³³ Vu, Ryan. "Fantasy After Representation: D&D, Game of Thrones, and Postmodern World-Building." *Extrapolation* (2017): 273.

³⁴ Ibid, 274.

³⁵ Ibid, 295

Examining Military Orientalism in *GOT*,” Mat Hardy explores the depictions of warfare in Essos in an Orientalist context. He emphasizes the West’s “romantic fixation on the ‘decisive battle,’ a chimerical notion where, just as in *GOT*, fate hangs in the balance and winner takes all.”³⁶ He also offers the insight that, for Martin, “As the Eastern continent really serves only as a temporary quarantine zone for Daenerys to develop her character and military strength, window-dressing this environment with a range of clichés and horrors keeps it exotic yet familiar in the context of Western cultural assumptions.”³⁷ The piece is a thorough exploration of the many depictions of military exploits in Essos, one of few academic articles addressing race in the show. Lastly, Helen Young is significant for her contribution to not only *Game of Thrones* scholarship, but the history of the fantasy genre more generally, and I will go into more detail on her contributions to understand race within *Game of Thrones*. I believe studying *Game of Thrones* as a product of the fantasy genre, not only as a prestige television show, is critical to understanding its depiction of race.

Race and Gender in the Fantasy Genre

While Young’s approach focuses on the centrality of white ethnic identities in the fantasy genre, I would like to also explore the gendered nature of whiteness in fantasy. In *GOT*, there are two white imperialist frameworks in play: one maternal and one patriarchal. The patriarchal model of imperialism is only implied, never depicted; it is something Daenerys stands against, as she tries to transcend her father’s madness and her brother’s cruelty. This maternalism may be what causes the show to be seen as “feminist” or progressive in the eyes of some audiences, even

³⁶ Hardy, Mat. "Godless Savages and Lockstep Legions: Examining Military Orientalism in *Game of Thrones*." *Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture* 4.2 (2019): 195.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 205.

when it is ultimately sublimated to a more patriarchal model when Daenerys goes tragically mad and is unable to claim her destiny. However, even as it is sublimated, this putative feminist message represents a regressive maternalist imperialism predicated on white supremacy—the idea that any of the Targaryens could be seen as “breakers of chains” rather than conquerors.

The Orientalist Worldbuilding of *Game of Thrones*

Having examined the existing scholarship around white patriarchal imperialism as it relates to the fantasy genre, I will now turn to analysis of Daenerys’ narrative within *Game of Thrones*. The fantastically successful HBO series that debuted in 2012 and ended in 2019 with an unprecedented viewership for its series finale. *Game of Thrones* is based on the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin and follows a large number of characters as they navigate the contentious politics of the two continents of Westeros and Essos. The focus of both the show and the books is decidedly on Westeros, the culture of which was inspired by high medieval France and England, with the occasional nod to Viking culture, Moorish Spain, and other Medieval European peoples.³⁸ Essos is a continent slightly larger in size, which largely serves as a stage for Daenerys Targaryen to practice her statesmanship and diplomacy. There are no perspective characters native to Essos, and the main plot of the series revolves around the high throne of Westeros, so even though a good deal of action takes place there, it remains peripheral.

³⁸ In a response to a fan, Martin explains that “Most of my borrowings... come from English and French medieval history, simply because I am more familiar with those than with the heroes, legends, and traditions of other countries. The Wars of the Roses, the Crusades, and the Hundred Years War have been my biggest influences... oh, and some Scottish history as well, such as the infamous Black Dinner that inspired my own Red Wedding.” As for other countries, “I don’t have any other language besides English, and there’s a paucity of good popular English language histories about medieval Spain, medieval Germany, and the like.” (*Historical Influences*. 20 June 2001. 29 September 2020. https://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/Historical_Influences)

In contrast to Westeros, Essos is made up of a wide variety of cultures and climates, and despite being similar in size to Westeros, it contains deserts, forests, grasslands, and people groups inspired by real world cultures from across the globe. While Martin was clearly deeply inspired by the Wars of the Roses when he plotted the main conflict of *ASOIAF* and the real-world analogues of Westeros are restricted to a very small temporal and geographic region,³⁹ Essos is peopled by groups inspired by ancient China, imperial Rome, plains Indians, the Golden Horde, the north coast of Africa, and more general Orientalist stereotypes. Martin states in a blog entry that “The Dothraki were actually fashioned as an amalgam of a number of steppe and plains cultures... Mongols and Huns, certainly, but also Alans, Sioux, Cheyenne, and various other Amerindian tribes... seasoned with a dash of pure fantasy.”⁴⁰ Nearly every culture that Daenerys encounters in her journey is defined by a familiar Orientalist stereotype, and her success with each group is defined by how much she is able to reform these stereotypes. When she is first traded to a Dothraki tribe, she is revolted by their sexual brutality and bloodlust, but she soon finds a way to draw romantic tenderness out of their leader and uses her position as *khaleesi* to convince them to stop raping the wives of the people they raid. Unfortunately for her, this act of kindness comes back to haunt her, when a woman who survives the raid poisons the *khal* to get revenge for the destruction of her people. This is the first of many lessons Daenerys must learn about the difficulty of imparting her own values to non-white cultures. The next culture she encounters is in Qarth, a nineteenth-century Orientalist wonderland of spices, naked children,

³⁹ In the FAQ section of his current blog, Martin lists some works that were most influential in the creation of *ASOIAF*, the majority of which concern the history of Medieval England and France with the exception of a book on Medieval warfare (concerning “Christian Europe and its neighbors”) and *Great Cities of the Ancient World* by the fantasy writer L. Sprague de Camp. (“FAQ.” n.d. George R. R. Martin. April 2020. <https://georgerrmartin.com/for-fans/faq/>)

⁴⁰ Martin, George R. R. “On Ethnicities.” 4 February 2012. *The Citadel: The Archive of 'A Song of Ice and Fire' Lore*. 18 April 2020. <<https://www.westeros.org/Citadel/SSM/Entry/6040/>>.

assassins, slaves, merchants, and magicians. Daenerys is unable to win over the wealthy Qartheen, who see no reason to invest in her voyage to gain the throne of Westeros. The Qartheen also possess magical wiles that outmatch Daenerys' idealism, even possessing the ability to double themselves, emphasizing how untrustworthy the wealthy merchants of Essos can be in contrast with the typically straightforward Westerosi who tend to solve their conflicts in open battle. Because of this, Daenerys is forced to rely on her dragons to rescue her, and she journeys with her *khalasar* to Slaver's Bay, where she encounters yet another ethically compromised culture in Astapor and Yunkai. These two cities are where she demonstrates her role of leader and savior most strongly. Here she frees the Unsullied, an army of eunuchs who are trained as young boys to become fearless warriors who feel almost no pain, and are named after various vermin to keep them in their place. She also frees the slaves of Yunkai, who promptly lift her on their shoulders and sing her praises, calling her "mhysa," or "mother." She soon liberates the inhabitants of Meereen as well, where she begins to face opposition to her rule. She is forced to realize, yet again, that her high ethical standards are not always quickly achievable, and she must make concessions to the violent and primitive traditions of the people she has conquered, such as reopening fighting pits and pardoning some of the brutal Masters. After spending quite a while in Meereen attempting to institute reforms, and finding little support in anyone but the Unsullied, Daenerys is forced to leave the city when a native terrorist group attacks her at a fighting pit. After being saved by her dragons yet again, she meets her final object of conquest in the desert when she encounters another tribe of Dothraki. She is taken prisoner for her crime of not joining other widowed *khaleesi* and living out her days in the temple of the Dothraki after the death of her husband. In return, she burns all of the gathered *khals* alive when they convene for her trial. This wins her the loyalty of the remaining Dothraki,

who then journey with her to Westeros, where she finally begins her campaign to retake the Iron Throne.

It should be evident from this summary that a large part of Daenerys' storyline revolves around her mistreatment by the cultures that she believes she should rule. If there were any perspective characters from these cultures, there would be a possibility that Daenerys' role as a rightful leader was being questioned, and that the act of freeing slaves was not enough to justify her rulership over people she had never met. However, no compelling counterargument to Daenerys' vision of world rulership is ever presented. The only morally defensible characters in Essos support Daenerys, and her enemies are perpetrators of indefensible crimes. Her naivete as a leader is unfortunate, but ultimately there is no reason to support anyone who would oppose her, as they are all portrayed to be selfish, violent, and incapable of ethical self-rule.

Daenerys and "Colonial Feminism"

There are few precedents for a character like Daenerys in American fiction, one so bent on subjugating and bettering the many cultures she encounters on her journey to world power. However, there is a long tradition of fiction that upholds her personal values of expansion and civilization. In particular, I would like to put Daenerys' belief in her birthright in dialogue with the works of Olive Schreiner, one of the subjects of Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather*. Olive Schreiner was raised in destitution in South Africa at the turn of the century, a place that was becoming a battleground between the colonized and the colonizer. She stands as a fascinating example of, as McClintock puts it in her chapter title, "The Limits of Colonial

Feminism.”⁴¹ For her time, Schreiner was a fearless advocate not only for the rights of white women of the landed class, which is where much feminist activism of the era began and ended, but for black men and women, and the impoverished.⁴² McClintock’s analysis of her fiction is particularly interesting, as Olive was deeply driven by a spiritual feminist view of the universe that began when she was young. Olive evolved in her worldview throughout her life, but her early fiction is most interesting to compare with the way that Daenerys is characterized in GOT. In particular, in ‘Prelude,’ *From Man to Man*, and *Undine*, Schreiner depicts a certain relationship between her white protagonists, their colonial landscape, and the non-white characters around them. According to McClintock, black servants in these books are often set up to react to white protagonists, and often even to limit them and their thoughts from expression. Though Schreiner fought for the rights of black women in South Africa, she had trouble, at least in her earlier fiction, attributing independent emotional states to them, and often characterized them as enforcers of the patriarchal order. In other words, though Schreiner could include black women in her quest for women’s freedom in a political sense, she was still preoccupied with the expression of white women as a default, perhaps owing to her upbringing in the presence of black servants, and the repression they represented in her childhood. There is a connection here to Daenerys’ storyline as well. In Schreiner’s semi-autobiographical work ‘Prelude,’ she writes about the character of the “little mother,” who has a series of allegorical encounters that recall Schreiner’s childhood awakening to the importance of nature and writing as an act of creation and liberation. In this story, the “little mother” comes across a sleeping child, and gives her several gifts which represent “the sacred elements stolen from women: writing, history, creative

⁴¹ McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 258.

⁴² *Ibid*, 295.

labor, political power and sensual pleasure.” But the figure of the black female servant comes in, as “Old Ayah,” and “berates her for her trespass” and shows her that the child is dead. The “little mother” is later able to bring the child back to life by communing with nature and the act of writing in the wilderness.⁴³ This encounter strangely recalls the story of Daenerys’ stillborn dragon-child, who was the result of a curse from an equally imposing native servant. Daenerys later reclaims her motherhood when she hatches her dragons, demonstrating her birthright and power in defiance against the witch who cursed her. What happens after that encounter also has resonance with McClintock’s characterization of Schreiner. Wandering in the desert without her *khal*, Daenerys is forced to take leadership of the Dothraki and search inside herself for the strength to escape the wilderness. When she first joined the Dothraki, it was as a political alliance between her family, from Westeros, and a powerful foreign tribe. However, her attempts to maintain her own culture alongside the Dothraki and other cultures of Essos prove futile. “Cut off from the metropolis and arrogantly ignorant of indigenous culture, estranged from all tradition, the colonial is marooned in a time bereft of history,” writes McClintock.⁴⁴ Schreiner’s tactic for coping with this isolation, according to McClintock, is perhaps more nuanced and powerful than Daenerys’, which is simply to repeatedly claim her worthiness as a ruler, but both work on a similar assumption. As McClintock says, “[Schreiner’s] imperial faith that a singular universal meaning animates the world, that the radiance of a ‘naked simplicity’ imbues the colonial landscape with intelligible form, also confirms the degree to which, despite herself, she was still a colonial writer.”⁴⁵ In other words, both Daenerys and Schreiner operate on a logic that it is possible, as a colonizer, to understand the fundamental truth of the world around her,

⁴³ Ibid, 273.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 281.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 281.

precluding the need to hear the voices of the colonized. Though *Game of Thrones* does question Daenerys' ability to truly understand the logic of the world around her by questioning the efficacy of her leadership, it puts this ability in dialogue with other white characters, rather than with the native people around her, who are depicted as self-absorbed and merely reacting to her rule. I will elaborate on this point later, but there are no characters in Essos who are able to compete with Daenerys' vision of rulership, because no characters from Essos are given motivations that are independent of Daenerys.

As McClintock says, Schreiner's black servants "are reflector figures, casting light or shadow on the white people, their imaginations wholly absorbed in the colonial drama, assisting the white's comings and goings, bearing witness to their scenes, but never acting in their own regard... Their genealogies are broken; their names, like their children, are stolen from them. They facilitate plot, but only as vehicles, not as agents."⁴⁶ A perfect example of this characterization of black figures, lies in the portrayal of Missandei and Grey Worm, two of Daenerys' most important companions. Though Missandei is capable of assisting Daenerys with complex issues, and could even be considered her friend, it is notable that she is also a character whose life on screen begins and ends with Daenerys. She is rescued from slavery by Daenerys and dies in order to further Daenerys' plot, her beheading motivating Daenerys, who was already single-mindedly pursuing her conquest of Westeros, to further extremes of violence. McClintock's observation about genealogies and names also applies here; Missandei and Grey Worm are both orphans, and Grey Worm's name was applied to him as an act of subjugation. In an act of intentional *self*-subjugation, Grey Worm chooses to keep his name because it was what he was called when Daenerys freed him from slavery. Missandei was taken from her people at a

⁴⁶ Ibid, 271.

young age, and dreams of returning to her island home, but instead of pursuing that dream, follows Daenerys, possibly because she has no reliable alternative. It is Grey Worm's last act in the story to set off to find that island. His only true friend in the series is Missandei, and when he loses her, he is unable even to articulate his grief without Daenerys' help. After Missandei's execution, Daenerys hands Grey Worm Missandei's slave collar, which Missandei had chosen to keep, and which Grey Worm then burns. These characters are much more emotionally intimate with Daenerys than the black servants of Olive Schreiner's 'Prelude' or *From Man to Man*. However, it is striking how similar the contours of Schreiner's depictions are to those in GOT, written a century later. Schreiner precedes the showrunners in proclaiming a politics of equality, but being unable to conceptualize the full intellectual and emotional independence of non-white people. Schreiner, who was uniquely vocal in defending the rights of black women at a time where they were almost entirely excluded from discussions of civil rights, still remains impressive, despite her limitations. However, GOT, as a show written in an entirely different political climate, is disappointingly similar in its prioritization of white female characters over their non-white companions.

GoT's Finale, Colonial Feminism, and Undiminished Masculinity

I would like to conclude my argument by comparing the status of a few relevant characters at the end of the *Game of Thrones* finale. As I have mentioned before, Daenerys Targaryen ultimately loses her throne. After a convoluted storyline which involves a romance between her and her own nephew, in which her legitimacy as an heir is questioned, Daenerys is ultimately betrayed by her nephew and lover, and stabbed to death in his embrace, in a rather Shakespearian sendoff. After this, her only surviving dragon, Drogon, appears as if he might take

revenge on his mother by killing Jon Snow, but instead burns the throne that drove his mother to madness, implying that the “game of thrones” was a mistake from the beginning. He then flies away, presumably never to be seen again.

It is interesting to compare Jon Snow and Drogon with Daenerys’ other followers. At the beginning of the finale, these consisted of: a foreign, Eastern-European-accented witch who died defending Winterfell against the Night King; Tyrion, whose sister held the Iron Throne before being killed by Daenerys, and who later withdraws his support after witnessing her brutal destruction of King’s Landing; Varys, who was killed earlier in the season for subterfuge against Daenerys; Missandei, who was captured and decapitated in order to provoke Daenerys; Grey Worm, who commands Daenerys’ forces throughout the entire season; and the rest of the Unsullied and the Dothraki, who still support Daenerys after her merciless rampage. Of all these characters, it is notable that only Grey Worm, the rest of the Unsullied, and the Dothraki army are unquestioningly loyal to Daenerys after seeing her burn thousands of innocents to death in a fit of rage. In fact, after the slaughter, she gives a speech, which Emilia Clarke (who portrayed Daenerys) stated in an interview was meant to be deliberately reminiscent of Adolf Hitler.⁴⁷ Exhorting these characters as liberators, she is met with raucous cheers. Specifically, she calls the Dothraki “blood of my blood,” which has strange implications given the link to Hitler.⁴⁸ She also links the Unsullied being raised in slavery to the inhabitants of King’s Landing being raised under the rule of “a tyrant.” She concludes the speech by announcing her plans to “liberate” the entire world, saying that “women, men, and children have suffered too long beneath the wheel.

⁴⁷ Otterson, Joe. *Why Emilia Clarke Felt ‘Numb’ While Watching the End of ‘Game of Thrones’*. 21 May 2019. 2 10 2020. <https://variety.com/2019/tv/features/game-of-thrones-finale-emilia-clarke-daenerys-1203222526/>

⁴⁸ Peterson, David J. "Conlang Dialogue: Game of Thrones, Episode 8o6." 20 May 2019. *Archive of Our Own*. April 2020. <https://archiveofourown.org/works/18893671>

Will you break the wheel with me?”⁴⁹ This speech, which is a clue to everyone except the non-white characters that Daenerys has become a tyrant herself, is brief, and has little to do with the circumstances of the audience- it is merely an exhortation to further violence. Daenerys acknowledges the background of the Unsullied as slaves, and identifies that as the source of their passion for “liberation” or world conquest. The Dothraki require less nuanced remarks, since their characterization has always been that of warriors who thirst for blood. Unlike with Hitler, there is no talk of birthrights or ancient heritage, since neither group has any heritage in Westeros. Daenerys has adopted these groups as her own, and can therefore say that they are blood of her blood, and their birthright will be whatever she declares it to be. Both groups had a heritage outside of Daenerys, but that heritage was found lacking and was destroyed. This is in obvious contrast to the characters who come from Westeros, who all have a homeland to defend, and are horrified at her disregard for history and human life. Putting Daenerys in dialogue with Hitler shows a profound misunderstanding of European history, implying that the real threat to peace and continuity in the modern world comes from easily manipulated foreigners, when more often, violence has stemmed from class and racial exploitation and rampant xenophobia. Any student of modern European history or the Middle Ages, the supposed inspiration of GOT, could tell you this, but the fantasy genre has become used to a vision of the Middle Ages that has little to do with history—it is a neomedievalism that uses history to hide behind a racist worldview.

In a skewed revision of medieval history, the show ends by instating a constitutional monarchy, where the lords of the seven kingdoms elect a king to the Iron Throne, rather than accepting a blood heir. This “democratic” maneuver is clearly a retort to the tyrannical speech of Daenerys to her followers, and completely disregards the presence of the Unsullied and

⁴⁹ Peterson

Dothraki. The choice of king, Bran Stark, is seemingly based on merit, but is also a nod to the worthiness of the Stark family, who have held their Northern lands for 8,000 years. Though the Dothraki and Unsullied are capable of defending the city against the seven kingdoms, without Daenerys they have no guide, and Grey Worm assents to the election. The finale still manages to end with a #girlboss in charge,⁵⁰ since Sansa Stark claims the North as an independent kingdom and is crowned Queen in the North. This ending fits well with bell hooks' description of Sandra Day O'Connor's appointment to the Supreme Court in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*: "Her appointment shows women, especially white women, that individual women can gain power and prestige in the existing structure if they support that structure... these women validate the concept of power as domination and control and exercise it, while assuring men that their 'masculinity' is in no way diminished."⁵¹ In other words, Daenerys could never have "broken the wheel" and remained an acceptable heroine. Westeros was a patriarchal, regional world, and Sansa understood that, while Daenerys tried to liberate marginalized people to support her. She may have proven convincing to her infantilized non-white followers, but to the democratic land-owners of Westeros, Daenerys would always be a threat. While none of the Westerosi characters in *Game of Thrones* ever attempt anything like an imperialist land grab, the imprint of imperialism is left on the lands of Essos and Westeros. Daenerys is a sympathetic figure while she attempts to impose Western values on her Eastern subjects, but once she attempts to impose anything on Westerners, she loses that sympathy and becomes a villain, while

⁵⁰ Sansa is included in the list by InStyle, originally titled "11 Times The Girl Bosses Totally Ruled the World" for enlisting the help of her brother, Jon Snow, to take revenge on her rapist, Ramsay Bolton (Simon, Samantha. *11 Times Girls Ran the World on Season 6 of Game of Thrones*. 27 June 2016. 2 10 2020. <https://www.instyle.com/reviews-coverage/tv-shows/game-thrones-season-6-girlboss-moments>)

⁵¹ hooks, 88.

her Eastern subjects remain ignorant and bloodthirsty. The future of Essos' and Westeros' relationship is an open question at the end of the series, but the depiction of their respective cultures leaves little to interpret about which continent is capable of justifiable violence.

To sum up, Daenerys' storyline supports a white imperialist feminism on several levels. First of all, she is shown entering a world of corrupt, untrustworthy non-white cultures, and gains power by reforming or destroying them. This is the philosophy of the British empire, boldly orientalist and patronizing. However, she also brings in an element of feminism into her interactions with non-white characters; her maternalism in spite of her frailty invokes sympathy for her character as she attempts to upend patriarchal rulers. This is the feminism found in the writings of Olive Schreiner, who in practice fought for the rights of women and minorities but in her writings struggled to give a voice to women of color and was preoccupied with her own hardships. Finally, Daenerys' bitter end demonstrates her inability to win over white followers, and her non-white followers are left virtually aimless after she is murdered for her brutality. While Sansa Stark is able to ascend to her own throne, Daenerys fails, revealing that in the world of *GoT*, feminism can only be valued if it is white and upholds the white patriarchal status quo. Though Khaleesi was successful for many seasons, and won a following with her charisma and idealism, she ultimately posed too significant of a threat to the institutions of Westeros, and had to be destroyed, while her non-white followers disappeared, sailing away into the background. Daenerys represented an interesting innovation for popular epic fantasy: a powerful heroine, who believed in the moral weight of her destiny just as much as any male hero from a fantasy saga. However, throughout her story, she proved yet again that fantasy is still burdened with its own orientalism, and ultimately *Game of Thrones* did little to change that status quo. With the rise in popularity of other fantasy sagas like the *Broken Earth* series, written by and featuring women of

color, there is hope that a new kind of worldbuilding could take root in fantasy, one that is not so concerned with the centrality of whiteness.

The Road Ahead

Though the last five years have offered a variety of exciting developments in the history of the fantasy genre, two stand out in light of the subject of this thesis. One is the author N.K. Jemisin's unprecedented consecutive wins for Best Novel for every entry in her high fantasy *Broken Earth* trilogy.⁵² Jemisin already made history for being the first black writer to ever win an award in that category in 2011, and the trilogy of novels published in 2015, 2016, and 2017, which centered on a grizzled heroine attempting to save her daughter and the entire world from cataclysmic natural disasters, were groundbreaking. Though the narrative resembles epic high fantasy by focusing on a protagonist with magical abilities traversing a vast landscape to save the entire world, and makes her protagonist's abilities a mark of monstrosity in the society she inhabits. Jemisin may not have been the first to subvert the genre in this way, but her immense success within the genre is significant.

The second and quite recent event is the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons'* new rulebook, *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything*, released November 17, 2020. The book contains many updates to the mechanics of the now extremely popular role-playing game, including a new way of decoupling a character's traits from their racial background. This new feature reflects a growing interest in the game's audience for a more nuanced depiction of race and culture, as exemplified in the popular zine *Ancestry and Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e*.⁵³

⁵² <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/sci-fi-fantasy/read-n-k-jemisins-historic-hugo-speech/>

⁵³ <https://www.polygon.com/2020/11/2/21538090/dungeons-dragons-tashas-cauldron-of-everything-race-monk-art>

The idea behind these new mechanics is that many players construct characters with highly complex backstories, and wish to have those backstories reflected in the statistics they choose. While the default racial archetypes of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* are still available, this represents a major shift in the game's mechanics, and one that was linked to a growing discomfort with biological determinism in its user base.⁵⁴

Both of these events, while representing a wise commercial strategy of diversifying the offerings of a popular genre, also represent significant changes in the way that the fantasy genre is consumed. Like any fiction, it may be comforting and escapist, but with growing possibilities for authors with a variety of ideas about the world, it also represents an exciting mode of experimentation. N.K. Jemisin's enormous success along with a reimagining of the most well-known fantasy RPG of all time means that while Western European High Middle Ages remain a viable imaginative setting, new options are increasingly available for interpretation, and that the Orientalist and imperialist traditions of the genre are no longer being accepted without question. While a conqueror like Daenerys may be one of the best-known fantasy heroines of our time, whether she will be surpassed in that role remains to be seen.

⁵⁴ <https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd>

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