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Volume 4

Article 26

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2023

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## Recommended Citation

Eaton, Paige (2023). "Fascism and Fantasy: How the Reaction to Diversity in *Rings of Power* Exposed Virulent White Nationalism in Tolkien's Audiences." *The Macksey Journal: Volume 4*, Article 26.

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# Fascism and Fantasy: How the Reaction to Diversity in *Rings of Power* Exposed Virulent White Nationalism in Tolkien's Audiences

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## Abstract

Despite the beautiful scenes and rich worldbuilding of high fantasy, the genre has long been intertwined with racism and misogyny within its audiences. On February 3, 2022, the first promotional posters for the *Rings of Power* (2022), a new Amazon TV show based on J.R.R. Tolkien's universe, were posted online. The posters were simple, focusing on hands in different settings, and there were a few who were people of color. Yet, within minutes, the posts were flooded with racist comments, overwhelming the comments section even as Amazon began to hide them. Tolkien's audience has been long filled with white nationalists, with many groups requiring his stories to be read. In this paper, I will show how the disproportionate social media reaction to Disa's promotional poster for *Rings of Power* called forth histories of white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and misogyny in high fantasy through the use of racial slurs, minstrel posters, and mockery of women in fantasy. This reaction was unique because of the use of Twitter, a public forum, to communicate such beliefs, which were previously expressed in private websites and white nationalist groups.

I define high fantasy as a genre including epics, grand stories, and fantastic beasts and legends. This genre is often attributed to Tolkien's work. My focus is different because most secondary research on this topic is focused on Tolkien himself, or on white nationalist reactions on private websites, or even off the internet entirely. Before the new show, there were no major characters of color in Tolkien's work, so this reaction is unprecedented. I take this a step further to say that now these racist groups are targeting fantasy characters of color in public forums, using a variety of mediums to do so. I looked at several memes and pictures created by users on Twitter and analyzed how their rhetoric invoked racial stereotypes. These posts were a clear indicator that not only is racism alive in the audiences of high fantasy, it is becoming more public and targeted.

**Keywords:** fantasy, *Rings of Power*, racism, Tolkien, white nationalism

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On February 3, 2022, the Amazon *Prime Lord of the Rings* Twitter and Instagram posted several photos depicting the hands of characters in their upcoming show *The Rings of Power*. Several posters featured people of color, including one which depicted a woman's hands clasped and dusted in gold in front of a highly intricate background. Thousands of fans flocked to the posts to catch a glimpse of Amazon's new show, particularly because they had been so tightlipped about the production. To the shock and horror of many fans, the comments below the posters featuring people of color were quickly filled with racist and bigoted comments. The poster of the women's hands, later revealed to be Princess Disa, received even more hatred than the other characters of color. Amazon began to hide them, but the damage had already been done. Despite the claims of some that the attacks were primarily perpetrated by trolls, a long history of fascism and racism in Tolkien's fanbase, including the open endorsement of his works by Italian fascists and the now-defunct British National Party.

The disproportionate social media reaction to Princess Disa and Sadoc Burrow's promotional posters for *Rings of Power* was driven by white nationalism in J. R. R. Tolkien's audience, which in turn was encouraged by the way his works depict a majority white space. This has allowed white nationalists to translate his works into a racist manifesto.

One of the main reasons racists and white nationalists are able to identify so strongly with Tolkien's work is because he depicts a majority white space. White spaces, according to Elijah Anderson, an American sociologist, are "neighborhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, workplaces, churches and other associations, courthouses, and cemeteries, . . . settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present."<sup>1</sup> Tolkien's world is an overwhelmingly white space as well, as Black people and people of color are typically not seen on the side of good, and when they are depicted, it is in a stereotypical and evil way. Dimitria Fimi, a Scottish Tolkien scholar, wrote in an essay that "despite Tolkien's overall message of friendship and co-operation, and despite his raging against the Nazis, the face of evil in Middle-earth is invariably non-white/non-European."<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to Helen Young, another prominent Tolkien scholar, in Tolkien's world "race and all that stems from it is fundamentally a matter of biological descent and is a strong predictor, even if it does not always entirely determine an individual character's physical, mental, and moral capacities, as well as culture."<sup>3</sup>

Even looking at Tolkien's words verbatim presents troubling rhetoric. For example, in one of his many letters, Tolkien describes orcs as "corruptions of the 'human' forms seen in Elves and Men. They are (or were) squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the [to Europeans] least lovely

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<sup>1</sup>Elijah Anderson, "The White Space," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2015, Vol. 1(1) 10–21 (2014), Accessed June 16, 2022, doi: 10.1177/2332649214561306, [https://sociology.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pages\\_from\\_sre-11\\_rev5\\_printer\\_files.pdf](https://sociology.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pages_from_sre-11_rev5_printer_files.pdf), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Dimitria Fimi and Mariana Rios Maldonado, "Lord of the Rings: Debunking the Backlash against Non-White Actors in Amazon's New Adaption," *The Conversation*, March 14, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/lord-of-the-rings-debunking-the-backlash-against-non-white-actors-in-amazons-new-adaption-177791>.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Hines, "Fantasies of Race and Place: White Nationalist and Alt-Right Undercurrents in Fantasy Roleplaying Games," *Theses and Dissertations--English*, 143, (2022), [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english\\_etds/143](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english_etds/143).

Mongol-types.”<sup>4</sup> Such orientalism is dangerous rhetoric to be feeding one’s fans. With such ideas coming from Tolkien himself, white nationalist fans felt supported in their interpretation of the text as a race war between the white men of the west and the Black and brown men of the east.

However, it is not only the evil characters who are racially coded. Elves are often coded as white, “portrayed as exceptionally light-skinned and straight-haired . . . better embodying an image of Northern European Whiteness than Humans in the same texts.”<sup>5</sup> This uplifting of European and white perspectives in Tolkien’s work are what creates an overwhelmingly white fandom and invites racist perspectives. When it comes to racialism in Tolkien, John Yatts, in his essay in *The Guardian* titled “Wraiths and race,” put it best: “White men are good, ‘dark’ men are bad, orcs are worst of all.”<sup>6</sup> This attitude has burned its way into the fandom in pernicious ways, with racist fans targeting Black fans for their existence in the fandom and a deep suspicion of any character of color introduced into a prominent, morally good role in Tolkien’s universe.

Evidence of how racialism has affected Black fans can be found in fan testimony across the internet. In an essay written on *The Public Medievalist*, Black Tolkien fan Christina Warmbrunn wrote an essay titled “Dear Tolkien Fans: Black People Exist” where she explores the challenges she and other fans of color have experienced within the fandom. According to Warmbrunn, *Lord of the Rings Online*, an online Tolkien game, lacked any dark skin tones for their characters. She recounts that “When I brought up a lack of darker skin tones for the elves in the game, I was told by other fans that the game creators were ‘following an accurate depiction of the book.’ . . . This choice, made by the developers and reinforced by the fans, clearly relayed to me that I, and my skin, was not really welcome.” By not allowing for darker skin in this fantasy game, fans of color are ostracized and unable to see themselves represented. On the other hand, white nationalists use this as an example that elves are white. Warmbrunn wrote about comments she has received, such as fans claiming they are not racist, but that a certain character is and must be white.<sup>7</sup> These viewpoints are collaborated by the lack of diversity in the online game.

Warmbrunn’s comments may seem like hearsay, anecdotal evidence that is not a representation of a larger issue within Tolkien’s world and fanbase. However, that is not the case. In a highly racist and inflammatory paper responding to posters of people of color in *Rings of Power* (2022) on *The Federalist*, a fake news, alt-right platform, John Daniel Davidson wrote that “it should go without saying (although it clearly doesn’t) that most of the characters in

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<sup>4</sup> Farrell, Eliza. “Race, Language, And Morality: Does Tolkien’s Middle-Earth Promote A Racial Myth?” *University of Pittsburgh*, (2009). [http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/7806/1/Farrell\\_thesis2009.pdf](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/7806/1/Farrell_thesis2009.pdf), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Kostrzewa, Alex Ogilvie, “Racial Essentialism in High Fantasy,” *Bowling Green State University* (2022), [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_etd/send\\_file/send?accession=bgsu1648836976448254&disposition=inlin](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=bgsu1648836976448254&disposition=inlin)e, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Yatt, John, “Wraiths and Race,” *The Guardian*, (December 2, 2002), Accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/dec/02/jrrtolkien.lordoftherings>.

<sup>7</sup> Warmbrunn, Christina, “Dear Tolkien Fans: Black People Exist,” *The Public Medievalist, Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages* no. pt 45 (September 24, 2020), Accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/tolkien-fans-black-people/>.

Tolkien's legendarium are white." He attempted to back up this claim with the disproven statement that Tolkien's purpose for creating the world of Middle Earth "was to provide a legendarium for Britain."<sup>8</sup> He was not the only fan who responded angrily to the presence of Black people and people of color in Tolkien's world who were not evil. In an essay on another alt-right fake news site *Bounding into Comics*, John F. Trent wrote similar comments, quoting a YouTuber as saying "The actors can be non-white and if they can pass as European with or without makeup, they can play those characters. They just need to look the part." This is a deeply racist comment whose existence can be owed to the whiteness that exists within Tolkien's writing and the normalization of skin color as a moral determiner in fantasy. Trent claims that such arguments are not racist because his issue is that "the characters don't match up to how Tolkien depicted them in his works."<sup>9</sup> This comment is particularly troubling because it indicates how Tolkien's writing is drawing such ideas. However, this claim is weakened considerably by the fact that he centers his complaints on characters created for the show. As of season one, the only character directly from Tolkien's writing who is played by a person of color is Miriel, daughter of Tar-Palantir. Trent's arguments therefore are highly flawed and cannot be explained as anything but racist intentions.

A claim often passed for truth in these circles is that Tolkien created his legendarium because he wanted to create a national myth for Britain. This, too, has created a topic of heated debate as racist Tolkien fans react negatively to seeing faces they deem as un-British in adaptations of Tolkien's works. To white nationalists, particularly in Britain, the face of a British person is white. They do not recognize people of color as part of British history. In a Reddit thread created on r/lotr (Lord of the Rings), one user created a long post about their issues with the casting in the new Amazon TV show *Rings of Power*, in which there are four main characters of color. The user asserted that "Tolkien specifically designed almost all of his fictional cultures to be based off of Anglo-Saxon, Western/Northern European, English, and Christian inspiration," which they explained meant that Tolkien's world would then be entirely white. They expressed that they were fine with Black actors if they "come from backgrounds where black skin color is prevalent; such as Harad or Far-Harad." This is an example of how some in Tolkien's audience can accept Black and non-white characters in the story as long as they are marginalized and regulated to stereotypical roles of submission or wickedness. In this case, the Haradrim, or people of Harad, are depicted as evil, Sauron-worshipping humans, further marginalizing Black actors to the position of villains. Perhaps the most succinct statement of their views came in a reply to another user who had called them out for racism where they wrote that "since Anglo-Saxon culture and/or English mythology is predominantly white,

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<sup>8</sup>John Daniel Davidson, "Amazon's 'Lord of the Rings' Has Already Betrayed Tolkien's Vision," *The Federalist*, April 27, 2022. <https://thefederalist.com/2022/02/16/amazons-lord-of-the-rings-series-has-already-betrayed-tolkiens-vision/>.

<sup>9</sup>John F Trent. "After Calling the Lord of the Rings Fans Racist, Woke the Lord of the Rings Fan Site Claims to be Safe Haven for Debate." *Bounding into Comics* (February 18, 2022). Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://boundingintocomics.com/2022/02/18/after-implying-the-lord-of-the-rings-fans-are-racist-woke-the-lord-of-the-rings-fan-site-claims-to-be-safe-haven-for-debate/>.

anything inspired off of it would be implied to have white skin tones as well.”<sup>10</sup> Again, racist Tolkien fans confronted criticism rightly accusing them of racist prejudice with an appeal to textual accuracy. However, Tolkien never explicitly specified that there could *not* be elves, dwarves, and men of different races in his fantasy world. Therefore, an appeal to textual accuracy is weak and ironically, not textually supported.

However, this view is not just held by fans in online spaces. Peter Jackson’s movies, both the original films and the *Hobbit*, suffered from extreme levels of racialism. *The Lord of the Rings* movies in particular had troublesome ideas about race, especially in their depiction of orcs. According to Mark Hines, in Jackson’s adaptations, they are portrayed as “‘nameless, anonymous, animalistic monsters,’ harvested from mud and set upon the strongholds of men like insects or rodents.”<sup>11</sup> However, racism came to a head during the filming of *The Hobbit* movies, when a racist scandal involving casting arose. In 2010, “the casting director of ‘The Hobbit’ was [fired](#) for turning away a woman of Pakistani descent for being too dark to play a hobbit. The agent also placed an advertisement in a New Zealand newspaper seeking extras with ‘light skin tones.’” The casting director’s rationale for such a decision was that they were “looking for light-skinned people. . . You’ve got to look like a Hobbit.”<sup>12</sup> Tolkien never specified that Hobbits are white, but because of all his racial coding, such as using the word ‘fair’ to describe people, the casting director seemingly assumed that only white actors could play hobbits, even if they were only an extra. This mindset is particularly troubling, considering the racism in the depiction of orcs and the casual racism Tolkien fans have engaged with in the name of textual accuracy.

A little under ten years after the *Hobbit* movies, the racism in Tolkien’s fanbase was about to come to a head when Amazon announced a series of promotional posters depicting characters in their upcoming show, *The Rings of Power*. On February 3, 2022, Amazon’s *The Rings of Power* Twitter and Instagram accounts posted several posters showing the hands of many of the characters in the show. Two of the posters in particular, posters that would later be revealed to be the dwarf princess Disa (played by Sofia Nomvete), and the Harfoot leader Sadoc Burrows (played by Sir Lenny Henry), sparked virulent racist backlash. Many messages mirrored the rhetoric seen above in the essays by Davidson and Trent, but some went even further. In a since deleted post, one user commented under Disa’s poster on Instagram saying “Black dwarf? Elf, hobbit... its supposed to be Europe, but why not...”<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, on Twitter, comments surged in with such ferocity that Amazon began hiding the worst of them. Commenters angrily posted that “they’re just tired of seeing everything produced by whites

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<sup>10</sup> Helafinwe, “I’ve been seeing lately quite a bit of outcry revolving around the casting choices for Rings of Power,” *Reddit*, February 7, 2022, [https://www.reddit.com/r/lotr/comments/sn0ayk/opinions\\_on\\_rings\\_of\\_power\\_casting/](https://www.reddit.com/r/lotr/comments/sn0ayk/opinions_on_rings_of_power_casting/).

<sup>11</sup> Hines, 38

<sup>12</sup> Hudson, John. “In Middle Earth, must all Hobbits be White?” *The Atlantic* (November 30, 2010). Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2010/11/in-middle-earth-must-all-hobbits-be-white/343239/>.

<sup>13</sup> Lord of the Rings on Prime (@LOTRonPrime), “Sophia Nomvete is Princess Disa. #LOTRRO” Instagram Photo, 3 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/lotronprime/>.

being replaced...if you want a 'we wuz kang's' fantasy book...go write your own,"<sup>14</sup> their shock that there were "blackman in middle earth? F—in joke of this century" and "What is this s—, there are no black dwarves or elves wtf Dwarves can't be black."<sup>15</sup> Some commenters expressed their anger at the show's producers for including people of color, writing in all caps that "WE DON'T WANT BLACK!!!!!!!!!"<sup>16</sup> Perhaps one of the worst comments expressing anger at this previously all-white world being challenged was a comment reading "Tolkiens work is based on European folklore. . .Europe is white and WILL always be."<sup>17</sup> This rhetoric was sparked by the fury of racist white fans who were unused to having to share their space with Black people and characters.

Since Tolkien's work was written with ingrained and assumed whiteness and racial hierarchy, the existence of Black characters in positions of power exposed the reading of Tolkien that legitimizes those unconscious aspects of his work. This reaction was explained by Elijah Anderson, who wrote that "when encountering blacks in the white space, some whites experience cognitive dissonance and . . . become confused or disturbed, or even outraged at what they see."<sup>18</sup> It seems that some Tolkien fans experienced this outrage. The difference, however, between this and previous perceived encroachments on white space in Tolkien's fandom, is that this was expressed online to a new degree. Yes, fans had had access to the internet for the Peter Jackson films, but since those generally followed the racial expectations of whiteness for Tolkien's work, white supremacists didn't have as much to squabble about.

Some commenters also wrote that whilst they didn't mind Black actors, they didn't like the prominent roles they were getting, writing that "they," people of color, "were not nobility nor Emperors. They served as servants or entertainers. The majority of the Moors weren't black either and used black people as slaves, concubines, and eunuchs."<sup>19</sup> This pattern is also something Anderson mentions in his paper on white space. There, he wrote that "the most easily tolerated black person in the white space is often one who is 'in his place'—that is, one who is working as a janitor or a service person or one who has been vouched for by white people in good standing."<sup>20</sup> Since Disa and Sadoc were leaders in their respective communities, not faceless evil, commenters expressed discomfort and outrage that their white space had been violated.

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<sup>14</sup> CatotheMiddleAged (@CatotheRoman), 2022, "No, they're just tired of seeing everything produced by whites being replaced...if you want a "we wuz kang's" fantasy book...go write your own," Twitter.

<sup>15</sup> Robandium (@robin20981), "What is this shit, there are no black dwarves or elves wtf Dwarves can't be black," Twitter.

<sup>16</sup> Ozan (@Jokerinsagkolu), 2022, "stupid TV show producers. Elves are white WE DON'T WANT BLACK!!!!!!!!!! no one watches!" Twitter, 12 February 2022, 11:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Jokerinsagkolu/status/1492543799897305093>.

<sup>17</sup> Ball-sunner (@BugmanBlues), 2022, "Tolkiens work is based on European folklore ya dimwitted [expletive]. Europe is white and WILL always be," Twitter.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, 14

<sup>19</sup> The Uranian (@Oscuridaros), 2022, "While black people did inhabit the HRE during the Middle Ages, they were not nobility nor Emperors. They served as servants or entertainers. The majority of the Moors weren't black either and used black people as slaves, concubines, and eunuchs," Twitter, 12 February 2022, 4:47 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Oscuridaros/status/1492435140223455233>

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, 13

Tolkien's fanbase has long been filled with white nationalists as a result of his racial coding. According to David Iбата, in an opinion piece in the *Chicago Tribune* he wrote responding to Jackson's film adaptations, "for years, Tolkien scholars have waged a fight on two fronts: against an academic establishment that for the most part refused to take the author's work seriously, and against white supremacists who have tried to claim the professor as one of their own."<sup>21</sup> Dallas John Baker, a noted writer and academic, explained why Tolkien's work has drawn in so many white nationalists, writing that "the privileged reading of Tolkien is arguably one that places white skin as superior to black skin, men as superior to women."<sup>22</sup> This is shown to be true through Tolkien's treatment of different races in his universe, and also the fact that the only women shown are elves, light-skinned, and/or pure. Some notable examples of this include Galadriel, Eowen, and Arwen, arguably the most prominent women in the franchise.

Many major white nationalist groups have publicly attached themselves to Tolkien's work, including Italian fascists, the neo-Nazi British National party (BNP), and the Aryan Nation.<sup>23</sup> In fact, according to Dallas John Baker, "Tolkien's books are required reading for a number of racist and fascist organisations, such as the youth wing of the British National Party."<sup>24</sup> The impact of this has radiated outside of fan circles. On September 21, 2022, the *New York Times* published an article detailing how Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister, was "a youth activist in the post-Fascist Italian Social Movement," and that "she and her fellowship of militants, with nicknames like Frodo and Hobbit, revered 'The Lord of the Rings' and other works by the British writer J.R.R. Tolkien." She even went as far as to say that "I think that Tolkien could say better than us what conservatives believe in, . . . I don't consider 'The Lord of the Rings' fantasy." This rhetoric is concerning coming from a world leader. However, she is not alone. As the article points out, "in Italy, 'The Lord of the Rings' has for a half-century been a central pillar upon which descendants of post-Fascism reconstructed a hard-right identity, looking to a traditionalist mythic age for symbols."<sup>25</sup> This history is paramount to understand when considering the issues actors of color are experiencing with regards to *Rings of Power*. This is not an isolated incident, nor are these all false fans as some have claimed. The roots of the white nationalist obsession with Tolkien run deep.

An essay written in 1998 on the website flawlesslogic.com, a site filled with racist, white nationalist propaganda, recommends Tolkien as prime reading material for up-and-

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<sup>21</sup> David Iбата, "'Lord' of Racism? Critics View Trilogy as Discriminatory," *Chicago Tribune* (January 12, 2003), Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/chi-030112epringsrace-story.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Dallas John Baker, "Writing Back to Tolkien: Gender, Sexuality and Race in High Fantasy," In *Recovering History Through Fact And Fiction: Forgotten Lives*, 123-143, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, [https://eprints.usq.edu.au/33493/14/Baker\\_Ch11\\_AV.pdf](https://eprints.usq.edu.au/33493/14/Baker_Ch11_AV.pdf), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Farrell, 2

<sup>24</sup> Baker, 3

<sup>25</sup> Jason Horowitz, "Hobbits and the Hard Right: How Fantasy Inspires Italy's Potential New Leader," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2022, [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/21/world/europe/giorgia-meloni-lord-of-the-rings.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces-time-cutoff-30\\_impression\\_cut\\_3\\_filter\\_new\\_arm\\_5\\_1&alpha=0.05&block=more\\_in\\_recirc&fallback=false&imp\\_id=201342863&impression\\_id=eadee6c0-39d4-11ed-ad60-6d4ba2632127&index=5&pgtype=Article&pool=more\\_in\\_pools%2Feurope&region=footer&req\\_id=295018783&surface=eos-more-in&variant=0\\_bandit-all-surfaces-time-cutoff-30\\_impression\\_cut\\_3\\_filter\\_new\\_arm\\_5\\_1](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/21/world/europe/giorgia-meloni-lord-of-the-rings.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces-time-cutoff-30_impression_cut_3_filter_new_arm_5_1&alpha=0.05&block=more_in_recirc&fallback=false&imp_id=201342863&impression_id=eadee6c0-39d4-11ed-ad60-6d4ba2632127&index=5&pgtype=Article&pool=more_in_pools%2Feurope&region=footer&req_id=295018783&surface=eos-more-in&variant=0_bandit-all-surfaces-time-cutoff-30_impression_cut_3_filter_new_arm_5_1).



coming white nationalists. The anonymous author begins by lambasting a previous adaptation of Tolkien's work, saying that the creator had torn the "story to ribbons and totally lost the plot" in large part because "Tolkien's white Elvish tribes" were portrayed "as Mexicans with Oriental features." They continued by describing the society of Numenor. In the books, Numenor was the paradise island of Tolkien's world. There, men who fought on the side of the Valar (or gods) were gifted with great stature, long life, good health, plentiful resources, and the island itself. However, towards the end of its existence, the kings of Numenor became obsessed with their own mortality and sought to prevent death by any means possible. This drove them to enslave the other men of Middle Earth and invite Sauron onto their island, leading to their downfall. Despite Tolkien making it clear that it was this inner corruption and greed that destroyed Numenor, and that their supremacist rhetoric was a disaster in later ages as the Dunlandings and Haradrim, formerly enslaved by Numenor, became powerful enemies of Gondor, Numenor's successor, this white nationalist author had a very different view. According to them, "three great evils endangered the Numenoreans: plague; invasions by hordes of alien Wainriders from the lands of the East; and racial intermixture."<sup>26</sup> These ideas match up perfectly with the concerns of white nationalists who fear "invasion" by outsiders, who they view as dirty and who may mix with their perceived white nation.

The author identifies with the white-coded characters in Tolkien, bringing to the forefront their seeming whiteness. They identify the Dunedain and call them "comparable to the advanced, highly gifted and intelligent European peoples in our own world."<sup>27</sup> If one needed any more evidence to see the damage Tolkien's racial coding has done, the racism and white nationalism it has allowed in the fandom, this essay embodies it.

In the essay's conclusion, the author continues to list reasons Tolkien makes good reading for white nationalists. According to them, "The 'evil of mixing'. . . is a major theme of his writing and is naturally of much interest to those who wish to see the various racial groups of humanity preserved, rather than being destroyed forever through the intermingling of blood." This deeply racist rhetoric that they identify with leads them to declare that "there is much with which nationalists can identify in J. R. R. Tolkien's writings" and that "*The Lord of the Rings* in particular continues to touch a nerve deep in our racial psyche, which clearly worries the twisted champions of genocide through integration."<sup>28</sup> Even over twenty years later, this rhetoric bled into Twitter, leading to tweets arguing that "Tolkien described Easterlings and those of Harad as brown or black, and the Westensse as white. Of course it's east vs west."<sup>29</sup> It is troubling how the white nationalism in Tolkien's fandom has persisted twenty years after the original essay was written and that it has become more public.

However, Tolkien's link to white nationalism can be found directly in his writings as well. Although he was staunchly against the Nazis, his writing echoes Nazi rhetoric and scientific racism in places. In their master's thesis, Alex Ogilvie Kostrzewa compared Tolkien's writing to

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<sup>26</sup> "Tolkien: Master of Middle Earth," Racial Nationalist Library, 1998, <http://library.flawlesslogic.com/tolkien.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> "Tolkien: Master of Middle Earth"

<sup>28</sup> "Tolkien: Master of Middle Earth"

<sup>29</sup> Crusader (@CrusaderDD), 2022, "Oh of course, how could I be so wrong? It's not like Tolkien described Easterlings and those of Harad as brown or black, and the Westensse as white. Of course it's east vs west," Twitter, 23 June 2022.

Arthur de Gobineau, a French writer who legitimized scientific racism and was an inspiration for Nazism. Side by side, the comparison is striking. Tolkien calls his elves “stronger and greater than they have since become; . . .the beauty of the Quendi [Eldar] in the days of their youth was beyond all other beauty that Iluvatar [Creator] has caused to be, it has not perished, but lives in the West.” Meanwhile, Gobineau describes white people as having “originally possessed the monopoly of beauty, intelligence, and strength.”<sup>30</sup> This overlap in rhetoric explains why white nationalists claim *Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien for their own, leading to the racist vitriol surrounding *Rings of Power* in response to Black people existing within his world.

However, Tolkien himself was an ardent critic of Nazis, even refusing to publish *The Hobbit* in Nazi Germany during the late 1930s. According to Kostrezewa, this simply gives fans excuses to ignore the arguments of scholars and the complaints of people of color who have experienced the racism in Tolkien’s fanbase firsthand. Quoting Helen Young, “[Tolkien’s] statements against antisemitism and Hitler give “cover.” . . .People think that one can’t be racist except deliberately, consciously, intentionally. *Lord of the Rings* and Middle Earth are structurally racist, but because Tolkien doesn’t appear to have been personally an extremist, that racism is denied, ignored, and dismissed.”<sup>31</sup> Again and again, when fans of color brought up the racism both of Tolkien’s work and the fandom, they were told that Tolkien was against the Nazis and therefore his work is not racist and that those making bigoted comments were not real fans. One prominent Tolkien account with over 34,000 followers named the Tolkien Professor even replied to a fan who called out racism in the fandom and denounced its place there by writing “as soon as we start saying ‘there is no room for’ certain people, we become ourselves a part of the intolerance problem.”<sup>32</sup> Because he was creating a safe space for racists and bigots at the expense of the wellbeing of people of color, fans of color and anti-racist fans reacted negatively to his tweet. In response, instead of listening to Black fans and fans of color who informed him of their experience of racism in the fandom, he doubled down, writing “too many people yelling at bigoted trolls are acting exactly like bigoted trolls.”<sup>33</sup> By tone-policing and asking for a space in the fandom for racist and bigoted fans, he was ignoring the harm comments such as “blacks have no culture besides selling their own to slavery, cannibalism, hitting sticks and rap music,” have on communities of color. By comparing the white nationalism in the fandom to the reactions of people of color to such attacks, he dismissed the issue and perpetuated more harm to fans of color.

This whole fiasco was made worse by many other large Tolkien accounts liking and retweeting the Tolkien Professor’s tweets. It was clear that many large white creators were either unable or unwilling to listen to the experiences of fans of color because it shattered the

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<sup>30</sup> Kostrezewa, 83-84

<sup>31</sup> Kostrezewa, 117

<sup>32</sup> Tolkien Professor (@tolkienprof), 2022, “I hear you, and this is important, but be careful. As soon as we start saying “there is no room for” certain people, we become ourselves a part of the intolerance problem. Let’s keep Tolkien fandom a positive and loving place by talking these out with patience and kindness,” Twitter, 4 September 2022, 5:45 p.m., <https://twitter.com/tolkienprof/status/1566543116189982720>.

<sup>33</sup> Tolkien Professor (@tolkienprof), 2022, Here’s my only challenge to you: By all means oppose bigotry and hatred, but do it without becoming yourself guilty of the same things. That’s all. Too many people yelling at bigoted trolls are acting exactly like bigoted trolls. You cannot defeat hatred by hating people,” Twitter, 5 September 2022, 10:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/tolkienprof/status/1566973409808064512>.

illusion that Tolkien did not engage in stereotyping, that his works do not engage in racism and racialism, and that fans who are racist or white supremacist are not true fans. Despite all of this, several people responded differently, calling out the racism either they or other members of the fandom experienced. In an essay on *The Gamer*, Ben Sledge, who also writes for *IGN*, wrote that “I don’t care if [they] made their racist account 12 days ago, they’re still a part of this fandom and they’re a problem with it. Relegating them to ‘not real fans’ dismisses the problem within our fanbase without dealing with it. There are racist Lord of the Rings fans, we just need to make sure they’re unwelcome in our communities.”<sup>34</sup> He was echoed by an anonymous administrator on the popular Tolkien fan site *TheOneRing.net*, who, in their essay “‘Rings of Power’ and the Issue of Race,” wrote that they had “witnessed the attacks of racists, bigots, and trolls on TORn’s many social platforms, and being a person of colour and [have found] myself at the receiving end occasionally.” However, even having been a fan for twenty years, this administrator found that “the avalanche of unveiled, blatant, shameless racism that hit our social platforms like a massive wave. . .shook me.”<sup>35</sup> The prevalence of Twitter and other social media platforms has given a megaphone to these white supremacist voices in Tolkien’s fandom, allowing them to overwhelm any news of diverse casting for fans who would like to see a multiracial interpretation of Tolkien’s works.

One of the most common racist messages that were commented on Twitter were those comparing the Black actors to orcs. This is troubling, especially because of the way orcs have been portrayed in previous adaptations, particularly in Jackson’s trilogy. In his films, Jackson portrayed the orcs as “‘nameless, anonymous, animalistic monsters,’ harvested from mud and set upon the strongholds of men like insects or rodents.”<sup>36</sup> Jackson was the first to portray them as black-skinned, although several earlier depictions had shown orcs with “mold green” or “ghost white” skin.<sup>37</sup> David Yatts was put off by the depiction of Jackson’s orcs and how clearly they were meant to emulate Black people. He wrote that “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 in the state of Middle Earth.” This is exactly the description of the most prominent orc of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Lurtz. Lurtz is arguably the main villain of the movie, and he is the orc that Aragorn faces at the end, the orc that kills Boromir. He was played by Lawrence Makoare, a Māori actor from New Zealand. He is the only prominent actor of color in the entire series and his character design reads like a stereotypical Black man from a Klu Klux Klan horror film. He has long dreadlocks and a flat, broad nose, complete with Black skin and an unhealthy love of pain. Lurtz is born into violence, bursting of a mud bubble (an invention of the Peter Jackson films) and strangling his handler. Later, when he fights Aragorn, his arm is cut off and Aragorn stabs him in the gut. Instead of acting in pain or falling to the ground, he pulls Aragorn’s sword in deeper with an inhuman snarl on his face. Many of these characteristics have been pushed onto Black men by

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<sup>34</sup> Ben Sledge, “The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power Has People of Colour, Get over It,” *The Gamer*, February 12, 2022, <https://www.thegamer.com/the-lord-of-the-rings-the-rings-of-power-has-people-of-colour-get-over-it/>.

<sup>35</sup> admin, “‘The Rings of Power’ and the Issue of Race,” *theonering.net*, February 17, 2022, Accessed June 14, 2022, <https://www.theonering.net/torwp/2022/02/17/112125-the-rings-of-power-and-the-issue-of-race/>.

<sup>36</sup> Hines, 38

<sup>37</sup> Farrell, 46

white supremacists, including the image of the dangerous, pain-loving, inhuman Black man who is coming after white women. Yatts points out this resemblance too, writing “the races that Tolkien has put on the side of evil are then given a rag-bag of non-white characteristics that could have been copied straight from a BNP leaflet. Dark, slant-eyed, swarthy, broad-faced - it's amazing he doesn't go the whole hog and give them a natural sense of rhythm.”<sup>38</sup> BNP stands for The British National Party, a white supremacist, fascist group who originated in Britain and spread nativist sentiment. With this troubling image of orcs in mind, the reaction to Black characters in nontraditional roles becomes much clearer.

This rhetoric surrounding orcs explains why many comments under both Sadoc and Disa's posters read: “You are a racist if you not acknowledge the uruk-hais as members of the poc community”<sup>39</sup> and “You playing Uruk-hai queen? Nice actor choice.”<sup>40</sup> It is no surprise that white nationalists would see people of color and Black people as orcs because they are so heavily coded that way in the text. However, that does not excuse such beliefs.

Mordor itself and the men who live near there are also characterized as people of color. In fact, both the text and film engage in the metaphor of “Blackness” for Mordor, “for both its unknown qualities, dark architecture, and the evil of its lord, Sauron.”<sup>41</sup> Tolkien described the men of the Haradrim through the perspective of Gollum as “fierce. They have black eyes, and long black hair, and gold rings in their ears ...Not nice; very cruel wicked Men they look. Almost as bad as Orcs, and much bigger.”<sup>42</sup> This was also seen online in tweets that mentioned a willingness to support people of color in the role of these men and of orcs, but no other way. However, this behavior was also called out. As Sledge wrote, “If you're only okay with actors of colour appearing as Orcs or Easterlings, you're also perpetuating the stereotypes that appear in the text of *The Lord of the Rings*.”<sup>43</sup>

This pattern of racist abuse online and feigned ignorance by prominent Tolkien fans has been ongoing since the first adaptations of Tolkien's work. Though many fandoms have issues with racist fans, Tolkien's are larger in number. This is in large part because they arise from the racist stereotypes Tolkien engaged with in his works, especially when considering the place of the Easterlings, Haradrim, and Orcs. It's irrelevant to this issue whether or not Tolkien was actively racist in his personal life and if he knowingly engaged in racism because his work attracts white supremacists, whose vitriol have now been turned on to actors of color who try to break into Middle Earth through *Rings of Power*. As Christina Warmbrunn put it, the portrayal of orcs and other creatures “was **a choice made by the author**, and the result is that the reader is encouraged to view the Orcs as an undifferentiated mass of specifically *black*

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<sup>38</sup> Yatts

<sup>39</sup> Lebowski (@amakoieyep), 2022, “You are a racist if you not acknowledge the uruk-hais as members of the poc community,” Twitter.

<sup>40</sup> Lord of the Rings on Prime (@LOTRonPrime), “Sophia Nomvete is Princess Disa. #LOTRRO” Instagram Photo, 3 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/lotronprime/>.

<sup>41</sup> Hines, 38

<sup>42</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings. Fiftieth Anniversary One Volume Edition*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, (1954) 2005, 646.

<sup>43</sup> Sledge

evil.”<sup>44</sup> With that in mind, it’s no surprise that Tolkien’s works have cultivated such an audience, one that lashed out at the existence of Disa and Sadoc, the first Black hobbit and first Black female dwarf depicted in Middle Earth. Bringing attention to this issue and believing the fans of color who experience this racism online will go a long way into starting the process of solving these systemic issues. An antiracist reader can and should enjoy Tolkien’s writing, but there should be more awareness for the racism that it propagates. There is plenty of space for people of color in Middle Earth no matter where one is, Lothlorien, Lindon, or Numenor. Where this fandom goes now depends entirely on every fan, especially white fans, to call out and recognize these issues, bringing to light the pernicious history of white nationalists enamored with Tolkien’s work. Perhaps, if this is all done, the world of high fantasy can become open to all people of color, giving no ground to those who would see them destroyed.

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<sup>44</sup> Warmbrunn.

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