Original Article

Whiteness, medievalism, immigration: rethinking Tolkien through Stuart Hall

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Abstract   This essay rethinks Tolkien's scholarship and fiction in light of his rejection at Oxford of Stuart Hall, who approached him regarding graduate work on William Langland. I argue that Tolkien's white medievalism contains his most deeply felt racist formations, which both shaped his fiction and informed his life in a university town populated by West Indian immigrants. After examining Tolkien's essentialist approach to medieval study, I examine how Tolkien believed that his innate knowledge about his ancestors' language and myths enabled him to create a national mythology, and how his fiction depicts its heroes' inheritance of their ancestral tongue and temperament. I then consider how Tolkien's supposed memory of an Atlantis-like disaster befalling his ancestors may have intersected with his rejection of immigrants like Hall. I conclude by discussing how, while Tolkien's epic fantasies may be appropriated successfully for various ends, they present unique challenges for a significant component of Tolkien's readership, medievalists.

The literary and cultural legacy of medievalist and epic fantasy founder J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) is decidedly mixed. Famously, many counter-cultural, marginalized and left-leaning readers have embraced his fiction.[1] While hardly all disenfranchised readers are drawn to Tolkien, at least since the 1960s hippie

1 On Tolkien's fan base during the 1960s, when at one point in the US sales of *The Lord of the Rings* outstripped that of the Bible, see Ripp (2005) and Foster (2006).

rallying cry 'Frodo Lives!,' certain outsiders have felt his allure, and for varying reasons. For some of those readers, the agrarian and pastoral dimensions of *The Hobbit* and other works by Tolkien offer primary appeal (Hall, 1969, 179). Others have been drawn to the alterity of Tolkien's protagonists. Like the mutant comic heroes analyzed by Ramzi Fawaz, Tolkien's elves, dwarves, and hobbits are heroic freaks with whom alienated readers can identify (Fawaz, 2016; Schulenberg, 2016; Sundem, 2009, 98–99). In particular, the hobbits at the core of Tolkien's fiction prove inspiring due to their unusual size. In the words of novelist Marlon James, 'I want to find what Tolkien found, when he knew that the smallest people can make the biggest difference. Because if there was one thing I knew growing up, [it] is a sense of insignificance' (James, 2019). As James indicates, because the diminutive can often serve as a metaphor for powerlessness, some disenfranchised readers find Tolkien's capable hobbits attractive.

But this is hardly the whole story of Tolkien's legacy. Indeed, among the heterogeneous fans of his fiction are members of the far-right, such as the neo-fascist Italian youths who attended *Campi Hobbit* summer festivals during the 1970s and 80s. Participants gathered at various rural locations in the southern Italian region of Abruzzo, where they lived in tents and engaged in far-right versions of hippie festivals, including performances by the band *Compagnia dell'Anello* or 'Fellowship of the Ring.'[2] More recently, Stormfront, the first white supremacist website of its kind, contains a forum devoted to *The Lord of the Rings* (Norako, 2018, 9; Young, 2014).[3] In a thread about a study guide for home schoolers, one contributor claims that 'LOTR would be a great way to teach our children what is truly ARYAN' (http://www.stormfront.or/forum/t47250-6). The basis for such right extremist love of Tolkien's epic fantasies varies, and includes some of the same elements embraced by left-leaning readers, such as Tolkien's depiction of an impossible quest and a back-to-basics communal life (Ignazi, 2002, 40). At the same time, Tolkien's fascist fan base responds to some of the most problematic aspects of his fiction, especially its racial elevation of white Northern Europeans (Chism, 2007b). To be sure, assessing a work in terms of its reception is always a tricky matter; however, Leila Norako is correct when she states that one can 'see in Middle-Earth a space in which an "inherent" white superiority is assumed and eventually realized' (Norako, 2018, 9).

Thanks partly to Tolkien's embrace by white supremacists, race figures prominently in Tolkien scholarship, as the presence of entries on 'Race and Ethnicity in Tolkien's Writings' and 'Racism, Charges of' in the *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia* attests (Chism, 2007a and 2007b). Indeed, so many publications have addressed race and Tolkien that Robin Reid could devote over forty pages to them in a recent bibliographic essay (Reid, 2017). But writing on Tolkien, even by academics, often is itself problematic. With few exceptions, it tends to be devotee-driven, to position Tolkien as untouchable and to assume an evasive

2 On the *Campi Hobbit* see Ignazi (2002) and Tarchi (2010).

3 The website first appeared online in 1996.

or defensive stance toward charges of racism with respect to Tolkien and his epic fantasies.[4] I advocate a more critical approach to Tolkien, one that takes as its starting point a veiled reference to him in the memoir of Stuart Hall (1932–2014), the Jamaican-British scholar who was one of the first critics to call for a critical analysis of whiteness and race (Kuchta, 1998, fn 1; Julien and Mercer, 1996, 458). Published posthumously in 2017, Hall's volume, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands*, concerns the period before his acclaimed left 'birth.' In a chapter on his life at Oxford in the early to mid-1950s, Hall describes how, while earning his BA in English as a Rhodes Scholar at Merton College, he became interested in medieval texts. Not only did he come to love such early English works as *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but he also 'planned to do graduate work on Langland's *Piers Plowman*' (Hall, 2017a, 156). But Hall's intentions regarding Middle English texts were quelled by none other than Tolkien. As Hall relates, 'when I tried to apply contemporary literary criticism to [medieval] texts, my ascetic South African language professor told me in a pained tone that this was not the point of the exercise' (Hall, 2017a, 156). Chastened, Hall abandoned his plan to work on *Piers*, leaving medievalists to opine what might have happened to Langland scholarship had the brilliant thinker been encouraged to pursue his graduate course of study. Hall shared the anecdote with his friend and amanuensis Bill Schwarz, who did not press for more information, but it is easy enough to identify Hall's advisor as Tolkien (Schwarz, 2019, personal communication). Of the three early English professors at Merton during that period, only Tolkien hailed from South Africa (Lee and Reid, 2018, personal communication), having been born in Bloemfontein, capital of the Boer-controlled Orange Free State (Carpenter, 1977, 7–15).

With its unexpected yoking of the future critic Hall and the medievalist-cum-fantasist Tolkien, this autobiographical anecdote provides a valuable hermeneutic for the role of race in Tolkien's life and work. For one thing, the clash expands the scope of our analysis beyond Tolkien's fiction to the white privilege he enjoyed as a result of his professional affiliations. Evincing the real-world stakes and systemic entanglements of institutional racism, Tolkien created for Hall a version of what Sara Ahmed describes, in her reading of Fanon, as the 'blockages' persons of color experience due to whiteness (Ahmed, 2007, 161). No defender of the underdog, Tolkien was a don possessed of ample authority at Oxford. Both Tolkien and his colleague C.S. Lewis 'were major political forces in the English School until the 1950s' (Cecire, 2019, 105). Indeed, insofar as Oxford was 'the summit of the higher education system' in England, as Hall observes elsewhere in his memoir, Tolkien occupied its pinnacle, thanks to the Merton Chair he held at the time of their confrontation (Hall, 2017a, 157).[5] Tolkien famously self-identified with Frodo, but that diminutive alter ego, at least in certain respects, was a scrim masking the white privilege wielded by Tolkien.

4 I engage further with publications on Tolkien and race in the discussion of whiteness that immediately follows the introduction.

5 'It is no accident,' as Ahmed points out, that academic power is 'symbolically given through an item of furniture' like Tolkien's Merton chair; whiteness concerns a privileged orientation to space and 'to take up space is to be given an object, which allows the body to be occupied in a certain way' (Ahmed, 2007, 152).

Moreover, the anecdote, with its alignment of Tolkien and Hall, shores up the latter figure's important critical legacy, which offers invaluable tools for analyzing and de-centering the white identity cherished by Tolkien. The very terms in which Hall characterizes his encounter with Tolkien offers an incisive critique of the white beliefs underwriting the medievalist's gatekeeping. Namely, Hall's anecdote performs the crucial analytical work of dislodging Tolkien's whiteness 'from its centrality' and 'putting into question its universalist character' (Dyer, 1997, 10; Hall, 1996, 446). That is, by referring to Tolkien not by name but in terms of his South African roots, Hall exposes the medievalist's white particularity, e.g., the immigrant status that he shared with Hall. Tolkien, not altogether unlike Hall, had travelled from the periphery of the British Empire to its English center.

Taking its cues from Hall's stress in *Familiar Stranger* on Tolkien's academic identity and ethno-nationalist positioning, this essay clarifies the depth and contours of the Oxford don's relationship to race and whiteness. I contend that Tolkien's racial formation reached both inward to his biography and deeply cherished beliefs about himself, and outward to his family, his academic work at Oxford, his imagined English community and the greater world. I begin by explaining my methodology and terms, and responding to some of the major arguments of Tolkien's defenders. I then examine Tolkien's 'pained' rebuff of Hall in the context of what were, for the Oxford don, closely held essentialist beliefs about the relationship of medieval study to English identity. Building upon Maria Sachiko Cecire, Dimitra Fimi, Michael Saler, Helen Young, and others, I explore the medievalism embraced by Tolkien and consider its relation to both his institutional power and writings.[6] First, I examine how Tolkien based his idea of proper medievalist practice on a white essentialist 'tongue and soil' celebration of medieval literature and language (Tolkien, 1981, 144). As we shall see, Tolkien—drawing upon the comparative philology that had shaped English medieval scholarship since the nineteenth century—believed that only those enjoying a racial relationship to their national or even regional object of study could properly apprehend it (Tolkien, 1981, 144). I then turn to how Tolkien encoded his white medievalism in his fiction, which depicts Frodo and other protagonists inheriting memories of their ancestors' languages and myths. I also consider how one element of Tolkien's white fantasies regarding his own relation to the past—his supposed recall of an Atlantis-like disaster befalling his ancestors—may have intersected with his rejection of immigrants of color, like Hall, making a home in England. This essay will end where it began, with the topic of Tolkien's reception by various readers. I argue that while Tolkien's epic fantasies—like any literary text—may be appropriated successfully by different groups for various ends, those works present unique challenges for a significant component of Tolkien's readership, medievalists who use both his scholarship and his fiction as a touchstone for their intellectual work.

6 I am particularly grateful for the important analyses of Tolkien by Mary Rambaran-Olm and Dorothy Kim that have emerged since I first shared my findings about Tolkien and Hall in 2018 at the Celebrating Belle da Costa Greene Conference (Rambaran-Olm, 2020; Kim, 2019).

Whiteness and Tolkien's epic fantasies

For many readers and critics, the clearest sign of racism at work in *The Lord of the Rings* has often been its morally charged color binaries. Criticism of Tolkien's black and white dualisms was immediate, if a 1955 review by Tolkien's colleague, friend, and rival Lewis is any indication. In his assessment of the final two books of the trilogy, Lewis refers to 'the complaint,' made after the publication of the first book, 'that the characters are all either black or white,' and surmises that such 'readers, seeing (and disliking) demarcations of black and white,' will identify 'a rigid demarcation between black and white people' in the novel (Lewis, 2013, 104-5; cf. Young, 2016, 30). Lewis himself rejected the idea that Tolkien's writings are racist. But at least as early as Catherine Stimpson's 1969 essay, and continuing up to recent works by Fimi, Young and others, scholars have highlighted how, in Young's words, 'racialized taxonomies shape the cultures of Middle Earth,' where 'the Good peoples' are 'marked White' and Sauron's troops 'are effectively undifferentiated under the one—tellingly black—banner of evil' (Young, 2016, 23; see also Stimpson, 1969, 44–5; Fimi, 2009, 145–47). Novelists of color also have pointed to the offensive color coding of the medievalist's epic fantasies. Saladin Ahmed, for example, points to an 'irreducible ugliness' at work in the fact that 'to be dark-skinned in Middle Earth is to be part of a savage horde—whether orcish or human—rather than to be a true individual' (Ahmed, 2012). Similarly, N.K. Jemisin rejects logics such as: 'The Dark Lord is really bad, we know this. Because he's dark. Well, did you do something to him? Doesn't matter, he's dark. That's why he's bad and that's why you've got to go kill him' (Miller, 2011). And Marlon James, in his Pembroke Lecture, describes his effort to invert the dark-light imagery presented by Tolkien and other western Anglophone writers in his own fiction (James, 2019).

The essentializing binary oppositions in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are crucial factors in any attempt to understand their author's relation to racism. But a full analysis of race and Tolkien's fiction requires analyzing the white western discourse of which they are a part, and to which they contribute. Hall himself laid the groundwork for such an analysis. In his influential writings on identity, race and ethnicity (e.g., Hall, 1996, 1980), Hall called for 'a real shift in the point of contestation' from debates over the nature of a particular group of people to analyzing the discursive construction of all identities (Hall, 1996, 447).[7] Hall stresses the utility of a discursive approach because

> hateful as racism may be as a historical fact, it is nevertheless also a system of meaning, a way of organizing and meaningfully classifying the world. Thus, any attempt to contest racism or to diminish its human and social effects depends on understanding how exactly this system of meaning works, and why the classificatory order it represents has so powerful a hold on the human imagination (Hall, 2017b, 32).

7 Hall rehabilitates the term 'ethnicity' to denote the constructed, contingent and shifting nature of identity, and specifically identifies in 1980s Black British cinema a contestation '*inside* the notion of ethnicity itself,' that splits between racist and nationalist understandings of ethnicity and a more productive idea of ethnicity based on difference (Hall, 1996, 447).

Western European culture posits race as a 'major or master' trope that embeds signs within a discursive 'world of Manichean opposites—them and us, primitive and civilized, light and dark.' (Hall, 2017b, 32, 70). As Hall puts it, 'what precisely tends to fix race in its obviousness and visibility—in physical characteristics of "color, hair and bone"—are themselves nothing but the signifiers of an invisible code that writes difference upon the black body' (Hall, 2017b, 63). In other words, the seemingly unchanging racial identities generated by western European discourse are themselves semantic effects, tropes that radically misrepresent the actual messiness and 'fluctuating contingency' of life even as they enable and sustain real asymmetries of power (Mercer, 2017, 15; cf. Gates, 1986, 5).

Rejecting 'the "centred" discourses of the West,' and querying the West's 'transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere,' Hall embraces identities 'predicated on difference and diversity,' and situated specifically in space and time (Hall, 1996, 446-7). Such a critical reorientation by Hall helped make possible important and ongoing critiques of whiteness as an ethnicity. Offering what amounts to a 'paradigmatic shift' in the analysis of identity (Julien and Mercer, 1996, 458), scholars including Richard Dyer and Ahmed have demonstrated how critical attention to whiteness takes us beyond the racist opposition of superior whites to inferior nonwhites, to the assumptions and claims made by western discourses about the identity of whites (especially abled, heterosexual, male, Christian and upper-class whites) as arbiters of the human, normative, universal, infinite, given, transcendent and omnipresent. Whiteness in such scholarship refers to how western culture, in all of its nuances, contradictions and twists, serves white privilege and empowerment in social, political and cultural life.

Discerning whiteness as an ethnicity has its challenges. Precisely due to the claims of western discourse regarding the omnipresence, normativity and centrality of whiteness (claims that mask the epistemic violence performed by western discourse on alternate meaning systems), whiteness is difficult to locate and analyze (Julien and Mercer, 1996, 458). As Dyer puts it, the 'invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in White (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity' (Dyer, 1997, 3). Whiteness disappears into western discourse when it becomes, in Hazel Carby's words, 'the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference' or, to put it another way, when the 'whole world' is produced discursively by and for whites (Carby, 1999, 249-50). If western discourse is constituted by many particulars—and especially charged and offensive racist dichotomies of color—it produces whiteness as both the basis for those particulars and the unrecognized location from which they are identified and manipulated.

As Young contends in her 2016 monograph, attention to whiteness is crucial to any comprehensive assessment of Tolkien's epic fantasies.[8] Consider, for example, how fantasies of whiteness receive support from those seemingly other

8 This essay is indebted to Young, who, drawing on Ahmed, analyzes how Tolkien helped lay the foundation for 'habits of whiteness' in fantasy fiction that 'simultaneously influence who can be present, and what is seen, thought, and done, by creating patterns of bodies and spaces alike' (Young, 2016, 11).

and freakish figures, the hobbits—and especially Frodo, Tolkien's alter ego. It is the hobbits' home, England's double, the Shire, which enjoys a privileged orientation in Tolkien's elaborate secondary world. The hobbits' cozy, little Englander domesticity affirms the 'comfort' that Ahmed links to a privileged white orientation (Ahmed, 2007, 158).[9] Upon leaving the Shire, Frodo and his cohort continue to live in a world oriented around them and through which they travel with the pluck and initiative that bespeak white privilege. Consider, for instance, the many passages detailing both the expansive views captured by a hobbit's point of view, as well as the multiple lengthy passages detailing Frodo, Merry and Sam's extensive movements over land.[10] A version of the white Victorian adventure story, Tolkien's fiction centers on the hobbits' initiative, courage, and daring, virtues that evince their possession of the white ennobling human spirit analyzed by Richard Dyer, that ineffable enterprising quality which transcends the body and allows the hobbits to rise up and persevere despite their physical size and the many obstacles that lie in their path (Dyer, 1997, 14–18). Insofar as, in Ahmed's words, 'whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach,' nearly everything, ultimately, is 'in reach' of those can-do explorers, the hobbits (Ahmed, 152).

Examining the relationship of Tolkien's fiction to race helps demonstrate how not only its stark color-coded patterns, but also its complexity and contradictions contribute to a western discourse of white privilege. For example, the failings of Tolkien's white heroes—that is, their possession of negative traits aligned with 'darkness'—don't so much problematize his color dualisms but denote how, as Dyer explains, 'the presence of the dark within the white man … enables him to assume the position as the universal signifier for humanity. He encompasses all the possibilities for human existence, the darkness and the light' (Dyer, 1997, 29). Conversely, the few seemingly human dark figures in Tolkien's epic fantasies function as referents to his and his reader's white 'knowledge' and 'mastery' of a world where exceptions to the racist rule exist.[11] And finally, what Tolkien's readers have identified as multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in his epic fantasies often participate—as Tolkien himself pointed out—in his white project of using an array of seemingly different creatures like elves and hobbits to portray 'certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires,' that is, the richness, depth and complexity of an ostensibly universal but, upon closer examination, distinctly white, English, and masculine subjectivity (Tolkien, 1981, 189; see also Tolkien, 1981, 158).[12]

'the point of the exercise'

Some may contend that, however much his fiction bespeaks white privilege, Tolkien's relation to Hall was different, and concerned not race, but methodology. That is, Tolkien didn't so much reject the idea of a Black West Indian

9 As Adams observes, such 'a kindly vision of a … pre-Norman' England, which masks over 'the earlier obliteration of Roman Briton,' looks back to 'the combination of lurking genocidal thought and openly progressive, well-nigh utopian longing' witnessed in Victorian historians including Kemble (Adams, 2014, 423).

10 Early examples include Tolkien, 1994, 81, 85-6; 98–102.

11 Critical whiteness studies thus clarifies how the counter-examples to the light-dark binaries in *The Lord of the Rings* cited by Curry and other readers do not undermine but contribute to the racist elements of Tolkien's fiction (Curry, 2005, 87-90).

12 Straubhaar (2004), Curry (2004), Chance (2005) and others stress Tolkien's

multiculturalism. Defenders of Tolkien who view him as 'a man of his time' support the 'routine normativeness of whiteness' by defining his historical moment in terms of whiteness, when an array of perspectives on identity actually existed, including that of Hall (Ware and Back, 2002, 5).

13 Hall also was influenced by New Criticism in the U.S. generated by figures such as 'Cleanth Brooks, Alan Tate, Yvor Wintors, and Lionel Trilling' (Hall, 2017a, 222).

becoming a medievalist, but rather queried Hall's particular approach to Middle English texts. To be sure, Hall's approach indeed did conflict with that of Tolkien. The young student subscribed not to the methods of his highly traditional home institution, Oxford, but to the more contemporary literary critical practices associated with Cambridge. As Hall has explained, the 'contemporary literary criticism' he embraced in the 1950s was the theory of its day, and involved the new critical and 'socially oriented' interpretations, which were performed by such Cambridge scholars as Denys Thompson, I.A. Richards, John Spiers, Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis, and which often appeared in the Leavisite journal *Scrutiny* (Hall, 2017b, 160, 222–223).[13] Oxford English had, for decades, diverged radically from the Cambridge-centered, Leavisite approach embraced by Hall. In a 2011 interview, Hall describes the deep resistance he encountered there, stating that 'the Leavisite tradition, *Scrutiny*, and all those influences, New Criticism, I.A. Richards, words on the page—all that was the counter tradition. So those of us who were in literature and literary criticism were embattled' (Hall and Vincent, 2011, 757).

However, for Tolkien, methodology was inseparable from identity. In keeping with the racial politics of his fiction, he posited in his scholarship an innate English identity that was present in early English languages and texts. And Oxford English—a medieval-intensive program over which Tolkien, along with fellow medievalist Lewis, would enjoy considerable power—was similarly grounded in a racial understanding of Englishness (Cecire, 2019, 90-92). Tolkien understood his aims and methods as a medievalist largely in terms of comparative philology, a discipline that married the racial orientation of German Romanticism (espoused by figures like Johann Herder [1744–1803]) to positivist analysis of the grammatical laws of different languages (Aarsleff, 1960; Burrow, 1967). Such a yoking of ideology and 'science' supported the idea that literature, to cite Stephen Harris, 'if properly interpreted … reveal[ed] transhistorical racial or cultural characteristics,' rendering comparative philology, in Geoffrey Harpham's words, 'a kind of master discipline for theorizing about human origins in general and human races in particular' (Harris, 2012, 166; Harpham, 2009, 44). Embracing and modifying this discipline that concerned both linguistic and human descent, Tolkien viewed medieval scholarship as an act of recovery that was the province of a select group of people bound by language, blood and soil to their literary-historical object of study.

Tolkien's primary racial attachment wasn't so much to the medieval past per se, but rather what preceded it. He valued the medieval period insofar as it served as a gateway into an older, pagan white Northern identity. Tolkien believed that the English were at their prime during ancient times, when Northern European men supposedly resembled the heroes of Scandinavian myths. Such an affirmation of pagan Icelandic culture and language harkened back to scholarship by Danish language historians Grímur Thorkelin

(1752–1829) and N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) that predated the advent of comparative philology in the nineteenth century. Grundtvig, for example, studied *Beowulf* and other early English texts for their capacity to exhibit a white heroic *Nordens Aand* or 'Spirit of the North' (Grundtvig, 1841, 524; Shippey and Haarder, 1998, 244; cf. Davies, 2019, 141). Subsequent German and Danish comparative philologists would continue that privileging of ancient Scandinavia. The brothers Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859) edited poems taken from the Norse *Edda,* and Danish comparative philologist Erasmus Rask (1787–1832) refers to the 'intrinsic excellence, … interest and importance' of ancient Scandinavian language and literature 'to the inhabitants of the North' in the preface to his *Angelsalesisle Sprogleere* or *Anglo-Saxon Grammar* (Rask, 1830, iii). As these citations suggest, the study of Old Norse was of a piece with European philology's general project of yoking linguistic history to the racial origins of European peoples.

Tolkien's more immediate predecessors, founding figures of 'Anglo-Saxon' Studies, looked to those Danish and German scholars for academic inspiration: Benjamin Thorpe (1781/2–1870) studied in Copenhagen with Rask and translated his *Anglo-Saxon Grammar* into English; and John Mitchell Kemble (1807–1857) studied in Germany with Jacob Grimm and dedicated his 1833 edition of *Beowulf* to him (Ellard, 2019, 59).[14] In their publications, Thorpe and Kemble celebrated the shared Northern identity of ancient England and other locales such as Iceland (cf. Young, 2016, 21).[15] Thus, in *The Saxons in England* (1849), Kemble celebrates 'the identity of our own heroic story and that of Scandinavia and the continent' and links both groups to a pagan Germanic people whom he celebrates in terms that conjure a flamboyantly racial image of white dominance and power: 'first, dimly through the twilight in which the sun of Rome was to set for ever, loomed the Colossus of the German race, gigantic, terrible, inexplicable' (Kemble, 1849, 427, 5; cf. Banton, 1977, 23). Versions of that racist attitude persisted in the writings of Tolkien's Scottish tutor, Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, William Craigie (1867–1957), and Tolkien's collaborator, Canadian philologist E.V. Gordon (1896–1938). For example, in the preface to his *Introduction to Old Norse* (1927)—which Oxford University Press maintained at least through to their 1981 edition—Gordon writes, '[in] Old Norse literature the tastes and ideals of the Germanic race found their most vital expression and … the tastes and ideals embodied in it are still part of our [English] racial heritage. We have still, fortunately, some part of the cool rationalism and heroic obstinancy which the sagas prove to be characteristic of our Germanic forefathers' (Gordon, 1927, v). Reflecting how the white hero, as Dyer has observed, 'encompasses all the possibilities for human existence,' Gordon's Germanic man is a contradictory and unstable figure, at once thoughtful and stubborn (Dyer 1997, 30).

In works like his 1936 lecture 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' and an unfinished 1920s piece on the Old Norse *Edda*, Tolkien celebrates Icelandic

14 Important recent work on the racist and nationalist ideological investments of Anglo-Saxonists includes Ellard (2019) and Davies (2019).

15 Other nineteenth-century English medievalists resisted 'linking Germans, Saxons, Danes and Normans as one great race,' instead viewing the English 'as the supremely successful group within the Germanic tradition' (Horsman, 1976, 38).

heroes in a German Romantic vein, where the whiteness of the hero resides in their fierce individualism in the face of insuperable limitations. For Tolkien, all humans are 'mortal[s] hemmed in a hostile world' where 'man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die' (Tolkien, 1984, 22–23). But the mythic white masculinity of the Nordic hero entails resisting that 'final' and inevitable 'defeat of the humane,' through an 'almost demonic' and godless 'reliance upon self and upon indomable will' (Tolkien, 2009, 17, 24). Tolkien argued that precisely because it is 'without hope,' the 'absolute resistance,' of the Norse gods is 'perfect' (Tolkien, 1984, 21). Tolkien's sentiments mirror Gordon's celebration of the 'heroic obstinancy' of Scandinavian protagonists and resonate with those of Craigie in works such as his *The Icelandic Sagas* (1913), which refers to a Viking 'spirit of independence' (Craigie, 1913, 2). Both men, like their academic predecessors, celebrated the pagan English and their fellow northerners' shared possession of a fierce individualism rendered all the more heroic—all the more 'perfect,' all the more white—due to its doomed and tragic nature.

Crucial to Tolkien's embrace of Norse heroes was his belief—again, echoing the influence of German Romanticism on comparative philology—in the interdependence of language, myth and identity. For Tolkien, myths and related literary texts that represented the white masculinity he cherished weren't fictions but 'were essentially True' and indeed even more revelatory and significant than historical information (Saler, 2012, 163; Frantzen, 1990, 175). Tolkien articulated that theory in his *Beowulf* lecture, where he describes how 'in places' he finds its 'poetry so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content' (Tolkien, 1984, 7). Similarly, in *The Notion Club Papers*, an unfinished novel about a fictionalized version of the Inklings, English professor Wilfrid Jeremy states 'I have a queer feeling that, if one could go back [in time], one would find not myth dissolving into history, but rather the reverse: real history becoming more mythical' (Tolkien, 1992, 227).

Tolkien's linguistic essentialism centered on old Scandinavian texts also because, according to him, England lacked a mythology. As Tolkien laments in a c. 1951 letter, 'I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had not stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands' (Tolkien, 1981, 144). But for Tolkien, while the English lacked their own myths, they could nevertheless recover their white heroic identity, thanks to the links between medieval English literary texts and the ancient Scandinavian heroism affirmed by critics ranging from Thorkelin to Tolkien's teacher Craigie and his colleague Gordon.[16] As Tolkien puts it in his piece on the *Edda*, any arguments about how 'the spirit of' those Scandinavian myths is 'a branch of a common "Germanic spirit"' have 'some truth: Byrhtwold at Maldon would do well enough in Edda or Saga' (Tolkien, 2009, 23). His most detailed account of a white pagan Northern essence within early English literature is his *Beowulf*

16 Craigie for example refers to the 'knowledge of early Scandinavian history and legend which is so clearly manifested in the *Beowulf*' (Craigie, 1933, 95).

lecture, where he celebrates the poem's depiction of a 'fusion' or 'contact between old and new,' whose 'most potent elements' include

> the theory of courage which is the great contribution of early Northern literature … I refer … to the central position the creed of unyielding will holds in the North. With due reserve we may turn to the tradition of pagan imagination as it survived in Icelandic. Of English pre-Christian mythology we know practically nothing. But the fundamentally similar heroic temper of ancient England and Scandinavia cannot have been founded on (or perhaps rather, cannot have generated) mythologies divergent on this essential point. (Tolkien, 1984, 20–21)

The greatness of *Beowulf,* Tolkien argues, lies in its author's ability to tap into the past and create a 'supreme expression' of ancient English courage and 'unyielding will' (Tolkien, 1984, 7; cf. Kim, 2019). And this was the basis for medieval studies as well: rather than interpret texts in a Leavisite vein, 'the point' of English medieval studies was to recover and appreciate the ancient pagan English valor evinced in early English texts like *Beowulf.*

For Tolkien, the only persons equipped to undertake such a recovery were the English, since medievalism was, literally, in their blood. Tolkien posited a reciprocal and essentialist relation between white Northern Europeans and their myths (Saler, 2012, 175–179; Flieger, 1997, 73-4). He not only believed that a people live on through their literature, but also maintained that ancient language and myths live on in a people. In his 1955 lecture 'English and Welsh,' composed around the time of his encounter with Hall, Tolkien posits two kinds of language acquisition, the language(s) a person learns (which he called a 'cradle tongue') and a 'native language,' which involves 'inherent linguist predilections' that travel over 'indefinite generations,' and are 'never wholly extinguished' (Tolkien, 1984, 190, 197). 'English and Welsh,' in which Tolkien repeatedly refers to (as Saler observes) '"blood," sometimes with sanitizing quotation marks and sometimes without,' evinces Tolkien's white essentialist understanding of a 'native language' (Saler, 2012, 178).

Tolkien thus claimed that early English works testify to their writers' innate linguistic acumen. A 1934 article on the *Reeve's Tale* celebrates Chaucer's 'instinctive appreciation of the linguistic situation of his day' and his *Beowulf* lecture states that the poet's 'historical sense' about ancient English poetry is 'instinctive' (Tolkien, 1934, 6; Tolkien, 1984, 33-34). That same inborn propensity for language, Tolkien believed, enabled contemporary readers to appreciate early English texts. Addressing himself to an intended English audience in his *Beowulf* lecture, Tolkien states that the Old English poem 'is in fact, written in a language that after many centuries has still essential kinship with our own, it was made in this land, and moves in our northern world beneath our northern sky, and for those who are native to that tongue and land, it must ever call with a profound appeal' (Tolkien, 1984, 33-4; cf. Kim, 2019).

The implications of such a theory are clear: Northern Europeans alone possessed an innate ability to apprehend fully their white heroic past in medieval texts.

Tolkien often referred to his own inborn knowledge about his 'native tongue' and English myth. In a 1955 letter he states 'it is, I believe, as much due to descent as to opportunity that Anglo-Saxon and Western Middle English and alliterative verse have been both a childhood attraction and my main professional sphere' (Tolkien, 1981, 218); and in 'English and Welsh' he describes his 'predilections' for 'old Germanic languages' (Tolkien, 1984, 191). Tolkien directly linked his white medievalist 'predilections' to his fiction, through which he sought to provide England with its own white Northern mythology (Tolkien, 1981, 144).[17] In works like *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien felt that he, like the *Beowulf*-author, drew on innate linguistic knowledge to create a mythology that 'was imbued with an essential Englishness' so that 'individual words, no less than themes and symbols, conveyed a national outlook' (Saler, 2012, 176). He wrote in 1938 that his fictions about Middle-Earth 'arose in [his] mind as 'given' things' and that any echo of *Beowulf* in *The Hobbit* 'arose naturally (and almost inevitably)'; in a 1951 letter, he described how, while writing, he 'always … had the sense of recording what was already "there," somewhere: not of "inventing"' (Tolkien, 1981, 31, 145).

In part, Tolkien's embrace of a version of comparative philology and its white nationalisms can be understood as a response to the failures of modernity, or what he called in 'On Fairy Stories,' an essay he wrote in 1939 and revised in 1947, a 'Robot Age' of 'improved means to deteriorated ends' (Tolkien, 1984, 148, 151; Saler, 2012, 165–7). Like many of his contemporaries, Tolkien expressed his disenchantment with modernity by turning to a golden and mythic past. Tolkien's alignment of the new with decline helps account for his rejection of Hall's desire to use contemporary criticism. As Tolkien puts it in a 1953 essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, why should 'plots, motives, symbols,' be 'handled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time,' when that period is inferior and a medieval text is a repository of ancient greatness? (Tolkien, 1984, 72).

Tolkien's medievalism likely responded to more personal issues as well, namely his contingent identity. His father died when Tolkien was four, and his mother passed away eight years later. Not only did Tolkien lose his parents at a young age, but he also bore a fraught relationship to his 'mother' country (Carpenter, 1977, 16, 30). The Tolkien family emigrated from Germany about a century before his birth and, as Hall highlights in his anecdote, Tolkien was an immigrant from Africa. Of his birthplace, Tolkien wrote, 'my earliest memories are of a hot country' and that 'stories of Africa … always move me deeply' (Tolkien, 1981, 219, 82). Yet Tolkien always stressed his Englishness, calling his South African and German origins 'fallacious fact[s],' asserting that he was a Suffield (his mother's maiden name) 'by tastes, talents, and upbringing,' and claiming that 'any corner of that county (Worcestershire) (however fair or

17 Many critics, above all, Shippey (2014), acknowledge what Young describes as the 'tremendously important role philology and language played in the creation of Middle Earth and its inhabitants' (Young, 2016, 21).

squalid) is in an indefinable way "home" to me, as no other part of the world is' (Tolkien, 1981, 219, 54). Ostensible proof of Tolkien's Englishness emerged in his supposedly inherited propensity for English myths and languages, through which he imaginatively triumphed over the colonial dislocation and familial losses that marked his life. The fervency of Tolkien's magical thinking about his innate relation to an ancient and heroic Englishness emerges in the hallowed tone of such moments in *The Lord of The Rings* as when Frodo, early on his quest, experiences his literary inheritance. Standing with Sam before an endless road, 'suddenly, [Frodo] spoke aloud but as if to himself, saying slowly' a poem that, as he explains later to Sam, 'came to me' as he recited it 'as if I was making it up; but I may have heard it long ago' (Tolkien, 1994, 82). Such charged, mysterious and hushed moments signal the intensity of Tolkien's wish to possess an innate Englishness that eclipsed his African birthplace and orphan status.

'A Great Dark Wave': insularity, Atlantis and post-Windrush migration

Epitomizing the magical thinking that informed Tolkien's raced historicism is his 'Atlantis complex': his claim that he remembered a tragic event in his noble ancestors' history (Tolkien, 1981, 213). The episode marks the end of the 'Second Age' of Tolkien's unfinished English cosmography and involves the 'westernmost of all mortals,' an exalted people who inhabit an island named Númenor (Tolkien, 1981, 156, 150–1).[18] The Númenoreans exemplify Tolkien's idea of a doomed 'creed of unyielding will.' For their overweening ambition, they suffer a 'major catastrophe' that mirrors the fate of Plato's Atlantis: 'a chasm is opened in the sea and … Númenor… vanishes forever with all its glory in the abyss' (Tolkien, 1981, 156; cf. Tolkien, 1981, 197-98; Fimi, 2009, 147-48).[19] Tolkien believed he experienced Númenor's demise through a 'terrible recurrent dream' of 'the Great Wave, towering up, and coming ineluctably over the trees and green fields,' and he portrayed this genetic memory in *The Lord of the Rings*, in the dreams of Faramir and Frodo (Tolkien, 1981, 213, 347; Tolkien, 1973, 259; Tolkien, 1994, 122, 261, 408). Tolkien surmised that the memory was 'possibly inherited' from his parents and passed on to his son (Tolkien, 1981, 213, 232). But he also, in two unfinished novels, pondered the memory's relation to reincarnation. In *The Notion Club Papers* and another unfinished novel, *The Lost Road*, he explored 'the occurrence time and again of a father and son' who re-experience Númenor's downfall and are 'called by names' inspired by his philological research (Tolkien, 1981, 347; cf. Flieger, 1997). The patriarchal thrust of his 'Atlantis complex' suggests that Tolkien's unstable identity—compounded possibly by the fact that his English

18 Fimi (2009, 1-5) provides an overview of Tolkien's unfinished cosmography.

19 Texts like Olaus Rudbeck's *Atlantica* (1702), Ignatius Donnelly's *Atlantis* (1882) and Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) popularized Atlantis and generated claims including speculations about a Nordic Atlantis.

connections were matrilineal—required an even stronger relation to male ancestors than that provided by his white English linguistic essentialism.[20]

It is striking to consider Tolkien's Atlantis fantasy alongside his clash with Hall. Atlantis was a finite and vulnerable island under threat. With its stress on a bounded land mass engulfed by water, Tolkien's memory resonated with white accounts of the immigration pattern of which Hall was a part. Starting in 1948, when the enactment of universal British subjecthood prompted 492 Jamaicans onboard the Empire Windrush to move to England, members of former and current British imperial holdings moved to the 'motherland.' Most West Indians settled in London, but during the mid-1950s many began travelling to Oxford for jobs, particularly with a local bus company (Griffith and Henderson, 1960, 42). The percentage of colonial immigrants of color in England, who hailed from not only the West Indies but also South Asia, was small. But outlets including Parliament and the press construed them as a threatening mass via, as Andy Brown puts it, an 'anti-diluvian imagery of flood and disaster' (Brown, 1999, 131). English fears about a cataclysmic 'flood' of immigrants transformed individuals with particular colonial contingencies into a single and unstoppable natural disaster. For example, a 1955 *Times* editorial stated that the 'present West Indian and West African invasion is a mere trickle of what we must expect,' and cited statistics giving 'some idea of the pressure of population and poverty that may soon result in a flood we may well find to be uncontrollable' ('Immigration,' 1955). That hydrospheric rhetoric would persist for decades, most notoriously in Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in April 1968 and Margaret Thatcher's reference to being 'swamped' with immigrants on television in 1978 (Utley, 1968, 179-90; Burns, 1978).

As part of a West Indian immigrant wave 'flooding' England, Hall may have recalled for Tolkien the image of a 'great dark wave' and 'darkness unescapable' engulfing his mythic ancestors on their island in the west (Tolkien, 1973, 259). More precisely, the representation of immigrants via flood imagery may have reminded Tolkien of a related sentiment, his little Englander nationalism. Tolkien's insularity emerges in a 1943 letter where he gushes: 'I love England (not Great Britain and certainly not the British Commonwealth (grr!)!,' laments how global forces may not leave 'any niche …for reactionary back numbers like me,' and worries that the 'bigger things get the smaller and duller or flatter the globe gets' (Tolkien, 1981, 65). That little Englander nationalism, and its concomitant animosity toward outsiders, can be readily seen to inform Tolkien's white nativist approach to *The Lord of the Rings*, which thematizes the problem of incursions from without threatening Hobbit enclaves (Saler, 2012; Duncan, 2008; Gehl, 2007, 254-5). Its preface recounts how law officers 'beat the bounds' of the Shire to 'see that Outsiders of any kind, great or small, did not make themselves a nuisance' and relates how, '[a]t the time when this story begins,' the number of Bounders 'greatly increased' due to reports of 'strange persons and creatures prowling about the borders, or over them' (Tolkien, 1994,

12). Later, the Hobbits of Bree encounter people escaping 'trouble away in the South' who are 'looking for lands where they could find some peace':

> The Bree-folk were sympathetic, but plainly not very ready to take a large number of strangers into their little land. One of the travelers, a squint-eyed ill-favoured fellow, was foretelling that more and more people would be coming north in the near future. 'If room isn't found for them, they'll find it for themselves. They've a right to live, same as other folk,' he said loudly. The local inhabitants did not look pleased at the prospect. (Tolkien, 1994, 176-7)

'[S]quint-eyed' strangers from the south with suspicious looks (and a criminal nature; the speaker is a thief), heading north for a better life: this narrative element suggests racialized undesirables of color immigrating into England's avatar, the Shire. Near the end of the series, it is members of this group—described not just as 'quint-eyed' but also 'sallow-faced'—whom the Hobbits 'scour' from the Shire, reestablishing its white insularity (Tolkien, 1973, 307).

The white insularity and xenophobia in Tolkien's fiction intersected with his own academic practice, as his rebuff of Hall highlights.[21] When Tolkien denigrated Hall's effort to use contemporary criticism to unpack medieval texts, claiming 'in a pained tone that this was not the point of the exercise,' we might speculate that the don perceived Hall not only as a trespasser into his Shire but also as a figure who aimed to go further, taking and misusing its books and stories. According to Tolkien's essentialist thinking, Hall not only adopted the wrong—e.g., Leavisite and Cambridge-centered—approach to England's literary heritage, but also lacked the inborn skills necessary for a more philological approach, were he to attempt it.[22] According to Tolkien's racial theories, while the Jamaican Hall—part Scottish and thus Northern, but also part African, Sephardic Jew and East Indian—could learn certain languages, he lacked the 'inherent linguist predilections' involved in the 'native tongue' that the medievalist describes in 'English and Welsh' (Akomfrah, 2014). Resisting Hall's medieval incursions, Tolkien 'beat the bounds' of Oxford, barring from it 'strangers' practicing different methodologies.[23]

In his memoir, immediately prior to his account of his abandoned Langland dissertation, Hall refers to the racist 'blockages' (to return to Ahmed's formulation) that stood in the way of his medieval studies at Oxford:

> Oxford was my first close encounter with the British governing classes 'at home,' and with the institutions by which a hegemonic culture is manufactured. Merton, founded in the fourteenth century, is one of the oldest Oxford colleges, resplendent in its classic Oxford architecture, a place of medieval seriousness, solidity and gloom. I read Chaucer in the Old Library sitting beside books still chained to the wooden desks. College was a plunge into the icy depths and arcane complexities of Englishness,

21 The resistance of the white dominant culture at Oxford to decolonizing students is ongoing (Henriques and Abushouk, 2018). See also Cecire (2019) on empire, colonization and the origins of English as a discipline at Oxford and Rajendran (2019) on colonization and language.

22 Moreover, Hall's primary text, *Piers Plowman*, hardly conformed to Tolkien's essentialist and mythic program. Far from engaging pagan Northern myths, Langland responded profoundly to his contemporary moment. Small wonder, then, that Tolkien never published on *Piers*, given its social and historical urgency.

23 Tolkien's rigid gatekeeping, in turn, may have offered the don a comforting

unexpected even by someone who thought they knew England well. A quarter of my course was in languages like Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, which I couldn't understand. High German and Old Norse, other early roots of the English language, seemed impossibly foreign. Actually, I loved some of the poetry—*Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*—and at one point I planned to do graduate work on Langland's *Piers Plowman*. But when I tried to apply contemporary literary criticism to these texts, my ascetic South African language professor told me in a pained tone that this was not the point of the exercise. (Hall, 2017a, 156)[24]

Hall's account in this passage of his relation to medieval texts may appear contradictory. He states that he 'couldn't understand' early English languages, and yet he obviously did: he had mastered Old English and Middle English well enough not just to arrive at a 'love' for 'some of the poetry' but also to do graduate work on *Piers*. Crucial to understanding this seeming contradiction is Hall's linkage of medievalism to Oxford and, more broadly, ideologies of white Englishness. Oxford was a key site for the production of an English 'hegemonic culture' to which the medieval was closely tied. The medieval thrust of its English curriculum spoke to Oxford's overall identity as a medieval university, a relation literalized in its material culture through the chains binding the books Hall read to 'wooden desks' in the library, itself a piece of medieval architecture. Hall addresses the offensive discourse of belonging and estrangement that attended such a binding of the medieval to white Englishness when he writes that the 'early roots of the English language … seemed impossibly foreign,' a passage that clarifies how the challenge or blockage Hall faced wasn't a matter of his learning ability but of the white insular production of the medieval as 'foreign' to him.[25]

While Tolkien may have swayed Hall from becoming a medievalist, the work Hall went on to do offers an incisive, if inadvertent, critique of Tolkien's white medievalism. In his account of postwar immigration, Hall has pointed out that he and his fellow West Indians in Oxford and other locales were merely making visible a long-standing if repressed colonial presence (Hall, 1971, 77-78). And that colonial relation exposed the fallacy of any belief in a singular and homogeneous Englishness. For centuries, much of the 'English' lifestyle that Tolkien cherished—versions of white homey Hobbit comforts such as tobacco and sugary treats—relied on the colonies.[26] As Hall searingly puts it with respect to the white racial formation of which Tolkien was a part, 'Little Englander nationalism could hardly survive if people understood whose sugar flowed through English blood and rotted English teeth' (Adams, 2007).[27]

Hall's critique extends from global contradictions to internal inconsistencies. The English never possessed, in Hall's words, a 'condensed, homogenous, unitary' identity in relation not only 'to those societies with which it was deeply connected, both as a commercial and global political power overseas' but also—in 'one of the best-kept secrets of the world—to its own territory either' (Hall, 1997, 20). In a succinct account of both the essentializing national claims underwriting practices like Tolkien's white English philology and the actual workings of that discourse, Hall writes that what 'the nation means is essentialized,' and

> appears to have emerged at the very moment of its origin—a moment always lost in the myths, as well as the mists, of time—and then successively embodied as a distilled essence in the various arts and artefacts of the nation for which the Heritage provides the archive. In fact, what the nation 'means' is an on-going project, under constant reconstruction. We come to know its meaning partly through the objects and artefacts which have been made to stand for and symbolise its essential values. Its meaning is constructed within, not above or outside representation. (Hall, 2005, 25; cf. Davies, 2019, 146-47)

Hall's structuralist stress on the situation of identity 'within, not above or outside representation' in certain respects echoes Tolkien's emphasis on language as the source of English identity. Both figures emphasize the prime importance of representation and language. But crucially, while Tolkien uses language to posit an unchanging white English essence, Hall does the opposite, stressing representation in order to expose identity as an ever changing and historically contingent construction.

Multiplicity, contingency and dynamism always defined 'England,' as attested by both the multiplicity of the British Isles (referenced by Hall) and Tolkien's immigrant background. Thus, the power wielded by Tolkien as a gatekeeper hardly confirms an identity that he shared with generations of Northern Europeans hailing back to pagan times. Rather, it exemplifies his contingent positioning in a western discourse that allotted him 'wealth, resources and knowledge' (Hall, 2017b, 43; Young, 2016, 15). Far from anything 'real,' Tolkien's concept of a white heroic Northern essence is a defensive construct offering discursive legitimation for actual discrepancies of power, inequities that structured everything from global patterns of colonization and migration to the dissertation topics approved or dismissed at Oxford.

27 Cf. the rationale for Hall's unfinished dissertation on James, whose 'works,' Hall explains, 'early and late, are framed around this contrast between Europe and America, between one place and another: Europe and somewhere else… that is a kind diasporic way of seeing the world, a diasporic question. James' is a kind of diasporic imagination …' (Hall and Back, 2009, 666).

The limits of appropriation: Tolkien's medievalist readers

When I first presented my findings about Hall's 'ascetic South African' tutor at a medieval conference in 2018, the news that Tolkien rejected the future godfather of multiculturalism was greeted by a collective groan of shock and disappointment. That response reflects the fact that many medievalists love Tolkien's epic fantasies. Of course, not all medievalists are drawn to *The Lord of the Rings*. But of Tolkien's many categories of fans, medievalists comprise an important group. The bulk of the major academic books and articles on Tolkien—most of which are celebratory—are penned by medievalists. Indeed, medievalists are so interested in Tolkien that one of the largest international medieval conferences, held annually in Leeds in the U.K, offers multiple sessions dedicated to his epic fantasies. The U.S. counterpart to the Leeds meeting, held every year in Kalamazoo, Michigan, similarly includes Tolkien sessions. The Tolkien at Kalamazoo group has a Facebook page with 150 followers and it also hosts a day-long Tolkien symposium before the start of the medieval conference, which culminates in a performance or film screening.

Medievalists' love of Tolkien should come as no surprise. Tolkien was, after all, one of us. And, as scholars such as Tom Shippey (2014) and Jane Chance (2003) have demonstrated, Tolkien's fiction contains a wealth of medieval lore that medievalists are best positioned to identify and uncover. Perhaps most importantly, Tolkien's epic fantasies exalt being a medievalist. Nearly all of the key figures in his fiction are versions of the Oxford don: they are, with rare exceptions, old male writers, translators and researchers who have studied languages, legends, and the deep past. For example, the Hobbit Merry has published a treatise on herblore, words and names in the Shire; Bilbo is a 'mighty book-learned' Hobbit who wrote a lay which he translated 'from its original ancient tongue'; and Aragorn is an expert philologist who 'was learned in old lore' and 'knew many histories and legends of long ago' (Tolkien, 1994, 17, 210, 218, 209, 216). All of the wizards—Gandalf, Sauron and Saruman—are aged white men learned in linguistics, folklore and history. And our hero, the 'youthful' Frodo, is a fifty-year old 'scholar in the Ancient Tongue' who can speak 'high-elven speech' when the occasion arises (Tolkien, 1994, 90). *The Lord of the Rings*, in effect, offers the medievalist a fantasy world where, alongside magic and warfare, a bookish historicism proves essential to the rescue of Middle Earth itself. Rendering Tolkien's fictional celebration of medievalism all the more attractive is its consumption by masses of lay readers, a popularity that contrasts with the usual marginalization of medieval scholars within academia, let alone the greater world.

But the empowering of the medieval in Tolkien's fiction is far from a salutary phenomenon. As we have seen, Tolkien's racism went beyond color binaries of

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dark orcs and pale elves to figure centrally in his medieval methodology, whose essentialism and relation to white privilege helped deter the would-be Langlandian Hall. How can a medievalist embrace Tolkien, when medievalism lies at the heart of his insularity and racism? As we have seen, other groups have successfully appropriated Tolkien in ways that exceed his essentialist and fantastical beliefs. The appropriation of his fiction by hippies, in what Tolkien denounced as 'the horrors of the American scene' (Tolkien, 1981, 412), is just one example of how *The Lord of the Rings*, despite its author's conscious intentions, has lent itself to productive engagements. But the embrace of Tolkien by medievalists is another matter. Unlike the discrete elements of *The Lord of the Rings* that have been reimagined by progressive readers—elements such as its agrarian dimensions or its portrayal of forests or its celebration of diminutive figures—medievalism is so fundamental to Tolkien's ideological mission as to resist appropriation and refiguration. For medievalists, the appealing manner in which Tolkien's epic fantasies give the field an unprecedented or 'precious' place in the contemporary world might be best perceived as a literary version of the Ring, a temptation we might do well to resist.

Acknowledgments

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