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Whose Middle-Earth Is It?:
Reading *Lord of the Rings* and New Zealand's New Identity from a Globalized, Post-Colonial Perspective

By Daniel Smith-Rowsey

I remember reading, as a child, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and pausing to think about the evocative words "Middle-earth." Where was this place? Alice's Wonderland was down a rabbit hole. The Wizard's Oz was understood to be on the planet, hidden by surrounding deserts. Other "fantasy" novels seemed situated in the same mythical England that I associated with King Arthur. But Middle-earth seemed different. I pictured a whole world underground, much like our own, but where the skies, while looking blue enough to the world's inhabitants, were actually "ceilings" of an unusual sort. If the men there ever learned to fly, perhaps they could drill up through their own skies and come upon our world.

But I was wrong. Middle-earth has come to us through the cinema, and it turns out that it resembles nothing so much as rural New Zealand. The New Zealand tourist bureau, through ubiquitous advertisements, is proud to assign to their nation much of the meaning of Peter Jackson's recent films. In other words, our planet has a "middle" world, a barely-touched rural paradise, steeped in medieval folklore, and it is in New Zealand. I am not a child anymore, and this brought to my mind a new question. How do the actual "middle" nations of the world feel about these movies, and about New Zealand's new identity?

“Perception itself is embedded in history,” according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. “The same filmic images or sounds provoke distinct reverberations for different communities....Imported mass culture can also be indigenized, put to local use, given a local accent.”¹ Ulf Hedetoft agrees, and expands: “Two national contexts meet within the public communicative space of the movie theatre, producing a new national text framed by a more universalized ‘transnational imaginary’ of American origin.” This “hybrid third” text is not necessarily alienated or unconscious or pro- or anti-American. Instead,

at the level where a cognitive and emotional engagement with a film’s unfolding plot, represented characters, and cognitive themes takes place, national audiences will apply the optic of their history, identity and values in a process involving a decoding and reframing of the film’s content and “message.”²

It is the intention of this essay to try to understand how the people of underdeveloped nations apply their “history, identity and values” to Peter Jackson’s recent blockbuster film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, with the awareness that no audience ever reacts monolithically the same way.³ I wish to conclude by suggesting some implications for New Zealand identity as it positions itself as Jackson’s “Middle-earth.”

¹ Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. “From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary: Media Spectatorship in the Age of Globalization.” *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake, eds. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 149-163.

² Hedetoft, Ulf. “Cultural Globalisation, National Interpretation.” *Cinema and Nation*. Hjort, Mette and Scott MacKenzie, eds.. London: Routledge, 2000, p. 278-282.

³ For this essay, I spent a great deal of time researching English- and Spanish-language newspapers from underdeveloped countries. I found almost no reviews of *Lord of the Rings* at all – and the few I found, like in [The Manila Times](#), were brief and complimentary. I now believe that most Third World newspapers do not routinely run film reviews. I was not able to get what I hoped for from “the horse’s mouth,” and instead must rely on scholarly inference.

The *Lord of the Rings* films have acquired about as much (in Pierre Bourdieu's term) "cultural capital" as any film event might be expected to have. Taken together, they have earned about \$3 billion in worldwide box office alone, a figure that excludes video/DVD rentals and sales. All three were attended by the highest accolades from almost all of the world's film critics. All three films won Oscars, but the last of the trilogy earned the distinction of the largest sweep in Academy Awards history, winning eleven out of the eleven categories nominated. It is extremely rare for any film, or group of films, to be so welcomed by the public, the critics, and the award-granters. If any films are influential, these are they. If any films deserve as many "readings" as possible, it is the *Lord of the Rings* films.

What does it mean to "read" films in terms of post-colonialism and globalization? It means asking: is this film helpful or harmful for the actual oppressed and marginalized people of the world? Does the given film present images, situations, heroes, that globalization's victims rally behind, relate to, or experience as further domination? Does the film present a normative white European subject (or subjects) as the center of morality, and does the film present its antagonists as "otherized" or "Oriental"? In the case of the *Lord of the Rings* films, the answers are not quite black-and-white.

The *Lord of the Rings* films are not Third World cinema in the sense of an Ousmane Sembene film, or even a Bollywood film. New Zealand filmmaking, even at its most localized, cannot be said to articulate the trauma of mother-language invalidation and economic underdevelopment that characterizes indigenous cinema of Latin America and Africa. Even internationally embraced statements of native dissonance, like Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* and Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*,

are not typically categorized with Third World cinema. The *Lord of the Rings* films are not even that closely aligned with an actual historically marginalized group.

Plainly, the *Lord of the Rings* films are unthinkable without Hollywood's (in this case, the New Line studio's) money and participation. They are no more "Third World" than Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* or David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*. On an extra-textual level, despite their New Zealand constitutions, the *Lord of the Rings* films cannot help but be seen as the Next Big Western Thing, comparable to Levi's, MTV, Starbucks, and a hundred previously released Hollywood blockbusters. As texts like *Global Hollywood* have explained, such ostentatious symbols of "cultural imperialism" tend to be divisive before anyone has had a chance to examine their quality.⁴ If the citizens of the Third World actually watch the *Lord of the Rings*, one would expect them to do it with (at least in principle) arms folded. Only some will get more out of the films than spectacle. Only some will judge the film on artistic merits, bearing in mind that no film can feed a family, build a house, or incite a revolution. It is this select group to which the rest of this essay refers – with the caveat that no audience reacts homogeneously.

Each of the three *Lord of the Rings* films actually has two versions, the version released into theatres and the "special extended" version saved for the later video/DVD releases. I believe my analysis will hold up for the shorter and longer versions, but the distinction is worth mention.

The *Lord of the Rings* films are based, of course, on the trilogy of novels by the same name, written by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien began work on the books before the Second World War but did not finish them until a few years afterward. The meaning and moral of the books is not agreed upon by everyone, but it seems to have

⁴ Miller, Toby, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell. *Global Hollywood*. London: BFI Publishing, p. 28-34.

something to do with honoring principles of courage, duty, community, and the necessity of actively opposing evil.⁵ Some find Christian allegories, but I do not consider these obvious enough for a reader that is not looking for them.⁶

The film trilogy begins with the film *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which begins with narration (assigned to Galadriel). This expository sequence provides much of the explanation for the films' plot, characters, and themes. For my purposes, it seems worth quoting in full:

The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it.

It began with the forging of the great rings. Three were given to the elves – immortal, wisest and fairest of all beings. Seven to the dwarf lords – great miners and craftsmen of the mountain halls. And nine, nine rings were gifted to the race of men – who above all else, desire power. For within these rings was bound the strength and will to govern each race.

But they were all of them deceived. For another ring was made.

In the land of Mordor, in the fires of Mount Doom, the Dark Lord Sauron forged in secret a master ring to control all others, and into this ring he poured his cruelty, his malice, and his will to dominate all life. One ring to rule them all. One by one, free lands of Middle-earth fell to the power of the ring.

But there were some who resisted. A last alliance of men and elves marched against the armies of Mordor, and on the slopes of Mount Doom, they fought for the freedom of Middle-earth. Victory was near. But the power of the ring could not be undone.

It was in this moment, when all hope had faded, that Isildur, son of the king, took up his father's sword. Sauron, the enemy of the free peoples of Middle-earth, was defeated. The ring passed to Isildur, who had this one chance to destroy evil forever. But the hearts of men are easily corrupted, and the ring of power has a will of its own.

It betrayed Isildur, to his death. And some things that should have not been forgotten were lost. History became legend, legend became myth, and for two and a half thousand years, the ring passed out of all knowledge – until, when chance came, it ensnared a new bearer. The ring came to the creature Gollum, who took it deep into the tunnels of the misty mountains, and there it consumed him.

The ring brought to Gollum unnatural long life. For five hundred years, it poisoned his mind. And in the gloom of Gollum's cave, it waited.

⁵ Hal Colebatch gathers many of the extant readings of meanings in *Return of the Heroes: The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, Harry Potter, and Social Conflict* (Second Edition). Christchurch, New Zealand: Cybereditions Corporation, 2003. Tom Shippey, in *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, reprinted 2003), on p. 215 and elsewhere, claims that Tolkien has a Manichean view of good and evil, but Scott Davidson, in "Tolkien and the Nature of Evil" (from *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Bassham, Gregory and Eric Bronson, eds., Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2003, p. 99-108) specifically counters that claim.

⁶ Janet Menzies, in "Middle-Earth and the Adolescent," (from *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*, Robert Giddings, ed., London: Vision Press Limited, 1983, p. 56-72) claims that Gandalf is a very clear Christ figure; J.S. Ryan, in *Tolkien* (Armidaale, Australia: University of New England Press, 1969) on p. 202 and elsewhere), carefully weighs a great deal of criticism and decides against direct Christian metaphor.

Darkness crept back into the forests of the world. Rumor grew of a shadow in the east, whispers of a nameless fear, and the ring of power perceived its time had now come. It abandoned Gollum. But something happened then the ring did not intend. It was picked up by the most unlikely creature imaginable – a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, of the Shire. For the time will soon come when hobbits will shape the fortunes of all.

What to make of Tolkien's *mélange* of identity groups, lifted to the screen basically intact (though with far less attention to the dwarves) by Jackson? Critics have posited all manner of far-fetched readings. Among others, Peter Gilet and J.S. Ryan read the Shire as some part of England, Strider and his forces seem to represent the Maquis (the French resistance), while the forces of Mordor take on distinct German qualities.⁷

Clearly Tolkien and Jackson don't wish any allegory to be the definitive interpretation. "Middle-earth," by its very nature, is both of this world and beyond it. Tolkien and Jackson present a map of this unfamiliar world, and it is over-reaching for any critic to try to parse out geographical features to find out which area is "really," say, Europe.

Yet Tolkien and Jackson are not quite free of the burden of representation. Saying that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents an ambiguously defined sectionalism is not the same thing as saying that all audiences will react to the story in roughly the same way, or that any reading is as sensible as any other. It is entirely justified to try to understand the metaphors in the *Lord of the Rings* because the texts try to evoke our sympathy and pathos. To begin with, Mordor, the locus of evil, is often referred to as "the East," which could mean Germany, could mean Russia, but could just as well, in the more epistemological reading of "East," signify an Oriental land populated by people with darker skins.

⁷ Ryan and Gilet's imposition of metaphor can be found in J.S. Ryan's *Tolkien* (Armidale, Australia: University of New England Press, 1969) p. 79. A sizable collection of half-baked theories can be found at http://www.theonering.net/rumour_mill/readingroom/.

The problem with a nation-state reading is that neither Tolkien nor Jackson ever use the word “nation” or “national.”⁸ The equally anachronistic word that they do use is “race,” repeatedly. This is more of a break with “fantasy” tradition than it may appear at first – few if any novelists had previously grouped elves and dwarves (and trolls and goblins and fairies, for that matter) as “races.” The potentially contradictory (yet evocative) phrase “the race of men” may be a Tolkien original.

This leads me to the first of two key questions when it comes to “reading” the *Lord of the Rings* films in terms of post-colonial audiences.

The first is: can the hobbits be seen as (using Antonio Gramsci’s deathless term) a “subaltern” race?⁹ In the film narration quoted above, Galadriel says that the ultimate ring of power has come to “the most unlikely creature imaginable – a hobbit.” The films go to considerable effort – through effects and forced-perspective shots – to emphasize the hobbits’ smaller physical stature. At one point, Galadriel says to Frodo, “Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.” This seems like a step toward what Ranajit Guha called subaltern consciousness.¹⁰

After the prologue, the film takes us to the verdant Shire, which the hobbits call home. We learn that hobbits drink and eat too much, and are known for wanting little more out of life than merriment. Though the hobbits are bare of feet and crude of appetite, the story embraces them as repositories of virtue, very much warts and all. Abdul JanMohamed distinguishes between “imaginary” and “symbolic” stories, including in the former group a certain European tendency to make the (or a)

⁸ It’s a shame too, because if a nation-state reading were more plausible, there would be twice the amount of literature to support it, from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* to Roy Armes’ *Third World Film Making and the West*.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subaltern_%28post-colonialism%29. Accessed February 21, 2006.

¹⁰ Guha, Ranajit. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Triffin, eds. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 408.

character of the village “shamanic,” a repository of mystical wisdom by which the more privileged characters can reify their own claim on moral authority. The hobbits are not gurus, nor are they an “other” that will always corrode and destroy the privileged man if he gets too close (as in, say, Werner Herzog’s films). The hobbits are JanMohamed’s type of “symbolic” – they are more nuanced, and frankly more human.¹¹

Their home, the Shire, is a virtual Miltonian paradise, celebrated unironically. Though the Shire scenes form only the first hour and last fifteen minutes of what can be seen as a twelve-hour film, they are not only that film’s bookends but its emotional core. As Frodo says, they set out to save the Shire. (And in Jackson’s films, as opposed to Tolkien’s books, they succeed.) When all hope seems lost, they cling to their love of the Shire. It is with the Shire that the *Lord of the Rings* films make their best claim for the sympathies of the rural, of the “backward,” of the villages that know more than the cities. The portrayal of hobbits as bucolic and multi-faceted is, certainly by the standards of the mostly at-least upper-middle-class characters of Hollywood, a positive articulation of subaltern consciousness – to a point.

The main problem with seeing the hobbits as heroes of the subaltern class is their white skin and their other trappings of European medieval culture. No matter how much the condition of hobbits may allude to the state of a “noble savage” (as fraught with complications as that would be), they are still Caucasian, English-speaking, male-normative, and marked as Europeans in a hundred ways.

The *Lord of the Rings* films do not go out of their way to explain their European markings, and it is just this presumption of familiarity that a non-European-

¹¹ JanMohamed, Abdul. “The Economy of Manichean Allegory,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Triffin, eds. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 18.

descended audience may well find objectionable. Aime Cesaire famously declared, “Europe is indefensible.” Yet Cesaire is also careful to assign the rottenness of Europe to a time no earlier than widespread mercantilism; he notes that there was nothing hypocritical about the conquests of Cortez and Pizarro. The Shire is a Paradise, but in a material sense it is a microcosm of Middle-earth itself, a land that exists (and maintains itself for thousands of years) before European colonialism and globalization. This gives the hobbits, and the story, a bit more “license” with audiences from underdeveloped nations.¹²

At the council meeting in Rivendell, the elf leader Elrond announces that the Ring must be destroyed in the only way possible – casting it into the fires from which it was forged, into Mount Doom. He says, “One of you must do this.” Our subaltern hobbits are enlisted into service, forced to bear the ultimate burden of the destruction of the one Ring. Such positioning may remind some of Gayatri Spivak’s “native informant,” a subservient member of the oppressed race who does the dominant race’s “dirty work” while telling them what they want to hear.

At this point, motivation becomes the question. Throughout the films, Jackson emphasizes that the characters are fighting because of love for each other. Indeed, I know of no war film where brotherly love is mentioned even half as often (and this aspect has done nothing to allay near-homophobic readings in some less reputable quarters). Aragorn and Legolas and Gimli are motivated entirely out of love and brotherhood for Merry and Pippin for the first half of *The Two Towers* – they do not seek them for strategic gain. Give Peter Jackson some credit: the “race of men” consistently love subalterns, which is at least slightly progressive.

¹² Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972 (reprint).

Keith Akers writes, “What Tolkien does is to evoke the *social* context of a great crisis, and that is what makes LOTR ‘feel’ like the Second World War.”¹³ I would counter that Jackson makes the story feel like any war in which the subject is personally invested – where he and his friends will come to the front lines. The sense of proximate conflict and crisis is one that the dispossessed know all too well. Some Westerners fail to understand that the Third World’s ongoing beatification of Che Guevara has as much to do with ideology as it does with Che’s willingness to fight on the front lines for his beliefs. Globalization’s worst sufferers can relate, better than most complacent Westerners, to perhaps the cornerstone scene of *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

Frodo: *I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.*

Gandalf: *So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.*

The great achievement of the *Lord of the Rings* – the recovery of a legendary past through radical de-historicization and reconstruction of myths – is likely to seem negligible to those that did not share in this past. On the other hand, many of the world’s less fortunate, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, recognize swords, chain mail and other flourishes from their own past.

The second key question is: can the *Lord of the Rings* films be seen as an allegory of globalization?

Globalization is a complex process, and any attempt to summarize it here will inevitably be too coarse and over-simplified. Some aspects of globalization, like increased political agency and improved flow of information, seem felicitous to all concerned. Other aspects, like universal commodification and capitalism at the

¹³ Akers, Keith. <http://www.compassionatespirit.com/LOTR-Christian.htm>. Accessed January 20, 2006.

expense of human dignity, strike some as imperialism by more subtle means. How are the characters in Peter Jackson's film trilogy positioned in terms of globalization?

In the text of the films, the spread of evil is clearly something to which our heroes react. They are "playing defense" until the final hour of the third film. If we consider that globalization is an active process, one sort of liberal-sympathizing interpretation might position Saruman and his minions as environment-wrecking, gene-splicing, despotic forces of globalization, and the Fellowship as a sort of organic resisting force, with some parallels to the 1955 Bandung conferees, or the Organization of African Unity, or even the protestors of the World Trade Organization and G8 summits.

However, a counter-reading does not seem difficult to imagine, if we consider the racial and "other" coding of men and elves. Saruman and the Uruk-hai, who destroy all they see, are warriors. The process of globalization is more insidious, and may be closer to what the dawning "age of men" promises. Perhaps Sauron and Saruman are the forces opposing what seems to the world of men to be their quite "natural," even invisible, dominion over all that lives.

It is tricky to "map" a globalization allegory onto *Lord of the Rings*, because globalization is inevitably understood in terms of capitalist exploitation. No one in the *Lord of the Rings* story is ever turned away for lack of money; material possessions do not figure into the story. (This is not to suggest that such absence does not form its own disguised ideology – just that it is harder to tease out.)

It comes down to how one sees the Ring that forms the engine of the plot. The Ring is classically golden and connotes jewelry. The Ring might be seen as the first hint of a material resource, akin to a newly discovered diamond, that forms the crucial first step in a cycle of exploitation and dispossession that Third Worlders understand

all too well. Thus they may applaud Frodo's attempt to destroy it – even if Frodo is no more than staving off the inevitable, trying to put the toothpaste back into the tube. But this entire line of reasoning may be a bit of a stretch. The Ring may just as easily represent marriage or achievement – not an intuitively grasped parable for anything.¹⁴

(The Ring has at least two antecedents in Western high culture: Plato's Ring of Gyges,¹⁵ which turns its wearer invisible and corrupts his heart, and Wagner's epic cycle about a Ring that grants the power to rule the world.¹⁶ Tolkien always disavowed any direct allegories, but especially any regarding the Ring and the atomic bomb, because the books were mostly finished before August 1945. He said: "The book is not about anything but itself. It has no allegorical intentions, topical, moral, religious or political. It is not about modern wars or H-bombs, and my villain is not Hitler."¹⁷)

Still, it is clear that the Ring is a foreign element that invites selfishness and the worst excesses of temptation. Our heroes must resist its charms even as they work toward its obliteration. (Ideologically conveniently, Frodo and Sam are called to war as pacifists.) It is power, but it "cannot be wielded," as Aragorn puts it. It is power that knows no benevolent control, that can only be made to serve utter evil. This is a power that most victims of globalization understand. They may see Frodo's quest as quixotic, but his heart is right, and his voice is as honorable as it is representative of the subaltern.

¹⁴ Alison Milbank reviews Marxist and Freudian readings of the ring in her essay "My Precious': Tolkien's Fetishized Ring," in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Bascham, Gregory, and Eric Bronson, eds., Chicago: Open Court Press, p. 33-45. Patrick Curry also tackles much of the same ground in *Defending Middle-earth*, London: Harper Collins, especially in p. 106-108. One is left with the impression that the ring's greatest function, on an extra-textual level, is to provide an irrefutable evil for liberal audiences that would ordinarily equivocate about the possibility of true evil.

¹⁵ Katz, Eric. "The Rings of Tolkien and Plato: Lessons in Power, Choice, and Morality." *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, Bascham, Gregory and Eric Bronson, eds. Chicago: Open Court Press, 2003, p. 5-20. Katz covers Tolkien's debt to Plato and *The Republic* rather exhaustively

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Ring_des_Nibelungen. Accessed February 21, 2006.

¹⁷ Plimmer, Charlotte and Denis, "The Man Who Understands Hobbits," *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, Number 181, March 22, 1968, p. 32.

It would not have been difficult for Jackson to have cut Tolkien's subplot about the Ents much as he cut the character of Tom Bombadil. In *The Two Towers*, the Ents – mobile tree-like beings that speak for the trees – refuse to be prodded (by Merry and Pippin) into war, but then reverse course when they see that Saruman has decimated a forest (to power his Uruk-hai-making device). The Ents rise up and use nature (by unblocking a dam) to destroy Saruman's base in Isengard. This sequence can be expected to resonate with the anti-pacifists and environmentalists among the subaltern class – not a small percentage.

Lord of the Rings is on far shakier ground when it comes to its characterizations of evil. In Tolkien's novels, evil and dread seem to lurk around every corner. In Jackson's films, evil is quite localized, personified by Sauron, Saruman, and the Uruk-hai. Unlike some movie villains, their motivation is never comprehensively explained.

The Uruk-hai and the Ring-wraiths (a.k.a. Nazgûl) are notably dark. The Uruk-Hai and the villainous Harad also happen to constitute the only dark-skinned characters in the films. Casting non-white actors as any of the leads would no doubt have created its own problems, distracting the flow of the images while opening up Jackson's re-articulation of medieval fables to charges of over-political correctness (while being arguably more accurately historicized – no doubt there were non-whites in Europe's ancient armies). Yet Jackson hardly counter-measures this difficulty by "darkening" all of the antagonists save the malevolent wizard Saruman. The Nazgûl are a particularly blatant case of anti-Negritude (in Cesaireian terms), because we see them in the quoted prologue as white men. Their blackness signifies their centuries of corruption, just as Gandalf the Grey's transformation into Gandalf the White symbolizes his new purity. Frantz Fanon wrote at length about the role of color

symbols in maintaining blacks' belief that they are inferior.¹⁸ Were he alive today, he would have a field day with *Lord of the Rings*; why cannot black represent integrity and white represent debasement?

The Uruk-hai could have been white, but with a few pasty exceptions, they are not. Many Maoris, being of stronger build than the average white New Zealander, were cast as Uruk-Hai – never as members of the race of men. At one point during *The Return of the King*, a leading soldier appears on an oliphaunt, looking very much like a traditional Indian riding an elephant, presumably one of Tolkien's Haradrim. He is summarily dispatched without the chance to speak a line. Just as troubling are the film origins of the Uruk-hai. Jackson chose to present Tolkien's cross-breeding of orcs and men as a sort of genetic experiment by Saruman. This diminishes any reading of Saruman as a Nazi leader – the Nazis were nothing if not opposed to racial hybrids. As a white man dispatching a dark army (without getting his own hands bloody), Saruman resembles the worst sort of colonial oppressor.

The nonwhites appear mostly as pure evil – one Ring-wraith intones sinisterly, “the world of men will fall” (on the extended version of *The Return of the King*) – or as bloodthirsty barbarians, as when the Uruk-hai become excited about Saruman's promise of “man flesh.” They are assigned tragically little agency, but instead play the role of the dehumanized “other” whose deaths we are expected to cheer. The intentional coding of good as white and bad as black is hardly something that most post-colonial audiences, or in fact most audiences, should be happy about. It is here that the films most severely fail on humanistic terms.

Further, it is probably safe to say that if we seek “imagined communities” (in Benedict Anderson's term¹⁹) without binaries, as Partha Chatterjee suggests,²⁰ we are

¹⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

looking in the wrong place. Peter Jackson's shades of good and evil are rather over-drawn. Nor are the films formally disruptive – they're not “post-modern” in the sense of, say, the films of Alejandro Iñárritu or Fernando Meirelles..

Despite hiring two women (including his wife) as his co-screenwriters, Peter Jackson should not expect women in any country to applaud his film trilogy's attempts at female representation. It is not enough to say, as defenders sometimes suggest, that Tolkien ignored, not hated, women, or to say that Jackson is at least an improvement on Tolkien.²¹ In a film trilogy that always seems to be bursting with new and peripheral characters, only three females have lines – Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn – and two of them spend most of their screen time mooning after Aragorn. There *is* a subplot where Eowyn asks why she cannot fight for the ones she loves, dons warrior garb in secret, and faces off against the lead Nazgûl. It is a terrific moment when he says “No man can kill me,” and she removes her helmet, says “I am no man,” and kills him. But if Molly Haskell can aver that Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis remain feminist icons despite their characters' compromises by films' end because of how their characters *mostly* were, then by the same token, we mostly remember Jackson's Middle-earth as a place where women are clearly subordinate.²²

In many ways, *Lord of the Rings* is a meditation on time and power, each presented as both a boon and a burden. Arwen and Aragorn wrestle over her forsaking an immortal life for his sake. For a story in which so many people get wounded, we never see any true healers. Extending life is more than uncelebrated.

¹⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1983

²⁰ Chatterjee, Partha. “Nationalism as a Problem,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Triffin, eds. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 408. p. 164.

²¹ In *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land*, Giddings, Robert, ed. London: Vision Press, 1983, at least two contributors explain the problem of Tolkien's casual sexism – Nick Otty in “The Structuralist's Guide to Middle-earth,” p. 154-178, and Brenda Partridge's “No Sex Please – We're Hobbits: The Construction of Female Sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings*,” p. 179-198

²² Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Through the Nazgûl, and particularly through extended familiarity with the character Gollum, we are made to understand that some forms of immortality may well be worse than death. As Theoden dies, he tells Eowyn that he is happy to honorably join with his fathers.

I would expect a mixed reaction from a subaltern audience about the theme of time. On the one hand, longer life is one of the only virtues that European culture has to recommend, and to call it into question is a happy subversion. (I would also expect anti-colonialists to particularly savor the shot, during Elrond's vivid prognostication in the middle of *The Two Towers*, where the Europe-like towers of Rivendell fall into decay.) For a well-publicized sort of Fanonian radical, it is better to die in a blaze of glory and violence than to live in relative humiliation – “better to die on our feet than live on our knees.”²³ On the other hand, when the West shows that it can treat extra time the way that it treats extra food, as wretched excess, the West shouldn't expect the rest of the world's applause.

In the prologue we learn that men are the ones that desire power above all things, but our subalterns, the hobbits and Gollum, come to know their share of temptation. The Ring-wraiths' souls are forever tortured because of their lust for power. We are meant to recognize Aragorn as a good man because he resists undue trappings of power. Gandalf and Saruman are the only wizards we see, yet their power does not really come to much; these two cannot single-handedly turn the tides of great battles. In other words, the less endowed characters cannot hope for a *deus ex machina*; they must face up to the scope of their own powers. The Ring is the ultimate power, and stands metonymically for the ultimate evil.

²³ Often attributed to Emiliano Zapata, Mexican revolutionary of the 1910s.

Globalization's casualties can find much here on power that is resonant. They have seen, more than most Westerners, how power can corrupt men's souls. They know what it is for a leader like Pol Pot or Mobutu Sese Seko or Augusto Pinochet to empower them, ask for power, then turn around and use that power to treat them the same way (or worse) than the colonial powers did. To the extent that *Lord of the Rings* promotes a loving community over such injustices, the world's oppressed can be expected to cheer on the heroes. On the other hand, they may feel more betrayed in the end by the coronation of Aragorn – despite his gracious platitudes. While Westerners have known several (and may feel they remember many more) benevolent monarchies, the model is almost entirely unfamiliar in underdeveloped nations. The return of the king, as a Lacanian like Bhabha might note, is all too easily equated with the return of the repressed.

From what we know of Aragorn, he is unlikely to rule with an iron fist. (In the extended version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Elrond tells Aragorn his fate, he replies in apparent sincerity, “I do not want that power. I have never wanted it.”) Our subaltern hobbits return to the unmolested Shire, presumably with no new governmental burdens attached. It is perhaps too convenient that Frodo has lost any desire for power that the Ring may have imputed. It is not the hobbits' place to oppose the return of the king (to borrow the line that Gandalf says to the steward king Denethor in *The Return of the King*). The kingdom has bowed before them – after Aragorn's elegant line “You bow to no one” – and returned them to their place, in much the same way that Nelson Mandela is received by world leaders nowadays. Thank you for your service, now get back to your mudhole.

But perhaps that is too harsh. Jackson's hobbits at least have an undisturbed Shire, the chance to marry and bear children in peace, and even the chance to go on

mystic voyages (as the Bagginses do in the final scene). This is commensurate with the goals of many of the world's oppressed. Additionally, Legolas and Gimli have buried the hatchet of their cultural elf-dwarf feud, while Arwen has foretold the child she will bear with Aragorn, half elf and half man, the presumptive future leader and role model of Middle-earth. (Some) races are coming together. The message could be worse.

By way of conclusion, I wish to consider the positioning of New Zealand in the films – and the positioning of the films *by* New Zealand.

Unlike Peter Weir, who came to Hollywood after his success *Down Under* and never really returned, and unlike Philip Noyce and Gillian Armstrong, whose successes also brought them to Hollywood only to return to Australia to work outside the American system once again, Peter Jackson basically brought Hollywood to New Zealand. The *Lord of the Rings* films, especially considering their reliance on digital models, might have been filmed anywhere. He has positioned New Zealand as Middle-earth.

In Jackson's films, the presumption of familiarity with medieval Europe is counter-balanced, to a significant extent, by the presumption of unfamiliarity with New Zealand itself. The country is itself positioned as a place that most filmgoers will not know. The few that know can be expected to react with pride, not resentment, at the "Hollywood treatment."

I can support this with a personal anecdote. Petra, located in what is now Jordan, is one of the great wonders of the world, the remnants of a lost civilization that built their temples into picturesque rocks. The of-European-descent traveler there notes that the local hoteliers never seem to tire of a nightly video viewing of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Though the parts filmed in Petra are

only in the movie's last third, and though there are doubtless many other non-Hollywood, more authoritative, films of Petra, this is the one that gets repeatedly screened. It is as if to say, Look, Westerner, your most celebrated artist, Steven Spielberg, came here to end the adventures of his most famous character – to find his Grail. No Jordanian I met seems to regard this as defilement; it is instead confirmation of local richness.

If my experience in Jordan is any guide, then, the post-colonial audience can be expected to relate to and enjoy the *Lord of the Rings* films' presumption of unfamiliarity with New Zealand as background. (Naturally this elides the question of Maori claims to the land.) Had *Lord of the Rings* been filmed in England, or America, or with mostly digital backgrounds, the films would not have this quality. (Had they been made in a more oppressively colonized state, say, Mozambique, one could expect an entirely different flavor to their reception.)

New Zealand signed onto the Bandung conference of 1955, and declared itself part of the then-proud "Third World" alliance. However, New Zealand has a liminal status in post-colonial studies. It is that of a "settler" country, where the loyalty toward the mother country was stronger, the path to independence was less bloody, and a foreign language was less imposed than in most other former colonies of European powers. Having said that, it can also be argued that because New Zealand remains at the margins, with only occasional gestures toward the center, its experience is at least partly instructive for the post-colonial project.

In some ways, the Anglo-North American reception of the *Lord of the Rings* films might be compared to the Anglo-North American reception of the rock band U2 twenty years earlier. Here is a voice from a relatively unfamiliar land, saying humanistic things in words we understand. If the subaltern must speak, surely this

would be America's and the UK's favorite way for it to speak, in clear tones that confirm the sentiments of the young and artistic. It may be that U2 and *Lord of the Rings* fulfill a function not unlike a Bob Marley album or Salman Rushdie book on an otherwise lily-white shelf – a token gesture that assuages some bit of guilt, and complements (and compliments) taste. Perhaps it only harms the projects of other, more radical post-colonial authors, by setting a standard for them of whiteness and Englishness and Western sentimentalism that they can never be expected to echo.

Or perhaps this is, again, too harsh. There will be some post-colonial audiences that well understand New Zealand's relatively privileged status, but nonetheless see, in its unironic embrace by Hollywood, potential for similar representation and glorification for their own lands and peoples. Homi Bhabha rejects binarism in readings, preferring work that provides “articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements.”²⁴ Bhabha promotes hybridization and cultural heterogeneity, and the nuances of the rural hobbits, combined with the New Zealand setting, go a considerable way toward his ideals.

The films are now part of cinema history, and New Zealand has moved to incorporate their reflection. Advertisements in magazines and on billboards name New Zealand as Middle-earth. And why not? “Middle” suggests liminal, a third way, something between two extremes. I believe most Kiwis are proud not to be part of the world's “superpowers” or even a distinct continent. “Middle” works for them, and so does “Middle-earth.”

So, in the end, should they expect the world's less fortunate to agree, or even relate? It's a mixed bag. On the one hand, Tolkien and Jackson's “Middle-earth” is not from a dispossessed culture, so why not let New Zealand claim it? On the other

²⁴ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004 (reprint).

hand, New Zealand should not expect any particular valence with the Third World based on bearing the mantle of the *Lord of the Rings* films. The films provide some comforting images, characters, and situations for the subaltern class, but also contain many objectionable elements. The very fact that New Zealand can afford all these new advertisements, based on and because of the fact that people want to see the locations of Jackson's films, means that this modern "Middle-earth" must be a site of capitalist advantage. That has to be a long way from the Shire.

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