

## Interrogating an Anglo-American Context in Media Studies

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### RaceFail 2009: Media Fans' Confrontation of an Anglo-American Context

In recent years, those of us in fan studies have become more and more likely to interrogate an Anglo-American context in fandom precisely because fans themselves are doing so. Academic scholarship has actually lagged behind fan scholarship in this sense. (By which I mean, published academic work lags behind online, less formal, and generally pseudonymous critical work. Many fans are academics and vice versa). Fans especially took up these debate last year, when a set of discussions erupted over issues of racism, representation, and cultural appropriation, both within professional cultural texts—that is, published books, movies, television, etc—and in fanworks like fanfiction, videos, and art. This set of debates, if it could be said to have a beginning or end, happened mainly during 2008 and 2009, and was dubbed RaceFail 2009, although debates of this kind have occurred as long as there have been fans. RaceFail resulted in both particularly virulent dialogues and backlashes and in productive educational outreaches and new production venues. These new venues include the e-publishing company Verb Noire and new fan communities that celebrate writings by fans of color and writings about characters of color. In the process, Non-Anglo and non-American fans have had to argue repeatedly that issues of representation and identity in pleasure, fandom, and fiction *are* important sites for progressive action.

My anecdotal sense of these sprawling discussions is that issues of nation and the Western-centeredness of media fandom usually ended up secondary to issues of race representation within American and British contexts. (Online media fans in these communities are widely understood to be a majority female, Anglo, and American.) On the other hand, the pervasive American and British context of many science fiction and fantasy texts was one of the first problems to engender these debates. Deepa D.'s influential essay, "I Didn't Dream of Dragons," is an early<sup>1</sup> response to concerns about Western-centric fandoms and cultural appropriation. The arguments she makes there are representative, I think, of those made by many fans. For instance, Deepa argues that is insufficient to simply make every character well-rounded and three-dimensional as a prescription against stereotyping and appropriation: "I distrust universalising statements proclaiming our inherent mutual humanity because they are uni-directional—they do not make everyone more like me, they make everyone more like you."<sup>2</sup> Debates during this time often took this form: fans identified various patterns of repeated arguments and rebutted them.

I have approached these discussions from a rhetorical standpoint: what arguments do FOCs and their allies use? How do they talk about *how* fans argue about ethnocentricity in media (through the use of Bingo Cards, e.g. below, and other methods)? For instance, issues of tone became central: what constitutes inflammatory language in a textual response? To what extent do different participants have any obligation to be civil or patient or educative to those who challenge or demand or ask for information about racism and appropriation? Obviously, these

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<sup>1</sup> Early within the admittedly problematic frame of the RaceFail "2009" debates, which happened over late 2008 and through 2009. "I Didn't Dream of Dragons" was posted in January 2009. It is on the official short list for the BSFA 2009 Prize in Nonfiction.

<sup>2</sup> <http://deepad.dreamwidth.org/29371.html>

are questions that have been faced by those who have confronted racism and appropriation in the past, but online fans have had to adapt their experiences to the limitations and opportunities afforded by the online environment. Bingo boards (see below), for example, organize and label kinds of arguments that defend instances of racism in science fiction. The idea is that one can, while reading through a forum debate on this topic, try to get a “Bingo” by identifying as many of these arguments as they can. It can also be used as an educational tool: a fan might link another to the Bingo board if they believe they are constantly repeating these same kinds of arguments.

I give this background information in order to introduce the ways in which fans—perhaps better described here as unpaid media scholars—have gone about interrogating an Anglo-American context. Fan studies, then, gives us an interesting model from which to approach media, because it shows us that an increasingly multinational and multiethnic set of fans are interacting with each other, and that ideas of post-colonialism and imperialism are becoming commonplace to fan discussions of pleasure and fandom. Fans are giving each other a critical and rhetorical vocabulary with which to engage their media. My suspicion (my hope) is that, by making these conversations and resources commonplace in fandom, fans are coming to terms with the idea that the foundation of fandom—sharing media pleasures—is best served by inclusivity and diversity.

### **A Few Representative Links**

<http://www.delicious.com/starkeymonster/forcluelesswhitepeople> - a compiled list of anti-racism resources, written primarily by and for media fans. This particular list was one of the most often linked during RaceFail.

<http://deepad.dreamwidth.org/29371.html> –

Deepa D.’s influential essay “I Didn’t Dream of Dragons” describes the writer’s experience as an Indian growing up reading books from a Western and Anglo perspective and engages the cultural appropriation debates.

<http://deepad.dreamwidth.org/29598.html> - “White people, it’s not all about you, but for this post it is.” – Deepa D.’s rejoinder to some white fans who responded to “I Didn’t Dream of Dragons”

[http://community.livejournal.com/50books\\_poc/](http://community.livejournal.com/50books_poc/) - A community that resulted from RaceFail that challenges fans to read 50 books by authors of color over the course of a year and to write up their thoughts and reviews.

Fantasy and Science Fiction Bingo, No Racism in Fiction Edition

Stop being the PC police!	It's just fiction!	Why can't you just be reasonable?	What about stereotypes against whites?	My minority friend isn't offended.
Subtext? What's subtext?	If THAT offends you, you must be crazy.	Fantasy/ SF/ fairy tales are just like that.	Calm down! Relax! Take pills! Take a shit!	True art is no slave to politics.
Stop this crucifixion/ wilding/ lynching!	I liked it, so there can't be problems.	Fantasy can't be racist!	I've never heard that stereotype, so it doesn't exist.	Stop being so sensitive/ angry/ overreacting.
You must hate Huck Finn.	Can't you tell the difference between fiction and real life?	Authorial intent! Authorial intent!	if THAT offends you, you should see REAL racism.	What do you mean, cultural narratives?
I'm a minority and I'm not offended.	Stereotypes can be true / the author didn't make them up.	Why are you sooooo angry???	That group doesn't live here / racism isn't as bad as it used to be.	You must have a personal agenda.