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Reading Resistance into the Transformed Hero: An Excavation of Race and Gender Identity in The Aeneid and Its Adaptations

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Abstract

Mythology pervades numerous areas of our everyday lives whether we recognize it or not, providing material for the language of power that controls our society today. This calls for an interrogation into the racial and gender dynamics of a key classical Roman text, Vergil's *Aeneid,* and its utility for alt-right and white supremacist political agenda in the contemporary era. Regardless of how we view classical literature and history and their relevance to our modern day political and social sphere, it is undeniably a dominant figure in conversations about race and gender, especially for alt-right movements of America and Europe who cite classical authors as authorities in their disturbing ideology. Their obsession is not without basis, as the study of classics as well as the material itself has a longstanding association with white status and masculinity. We see the "traditional values" of Greco-Roman society referenced in our everyday lives, from politicians' tweets to discourse around border policies. Imagery of Greek heroes are used consistently by both left and right political movements—Vergil's Aeneas is evoked in support of closed border policy as well as a proponent for refugees everywhere—showing the widespread influence these stories have on democracy built over centuries. Retellings of these myths in novel form for more general audiences have risen in popularity, and books like Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* is an example of reanimation that enables conservative ideologies. Fighting unjust systems of power that find justification for their beliefs in antiquity requires critical reading skills, opposing shallow readings and seeking interpretations that promote collective activism out of literature.

The legendary figure of Aeneas lives on through the legacy of Rome and remains a powerful figure of Western history and mythology, blurring the lines between fact and fiction as it continues its influence over historical events. In order to trace Aeneas' transformation from defeated Trojan soldier to the great founder of Rome, we must examine Vergil's *Aeneid* through the lens of Orientalism and the way that these methods of Othering enable a reestablishment of Western masculinity, directly connected to the shifting concept of Whiteness itself. In the larger picture of nations seeking power through domination, classical war narratives like the *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad* show how the victors of war and conquest both racialize and feminize opposing groups and thus establish a White masculinity for themselves and their legacy. The tragic story of Dido and Aeneas is one that plays out these tropes in their relationship and as representations of their respective kingdoms, sets the stage for patterns of colonialism into our modern day. Political movements and adaptations of the story alike cling to these racial and gender roles. Mythology maintains its relevance through a constant process of writing and rewriting that requires conscious ethical considerations, considerations that must be made by both authors and readers as we participate in this tradition. By utilizing a critical reading of the *Aeneid* and its successors, we can interpret the deeper implications of these various changes to our conceptions of Otherness today and how to best defy them.

The complex nature of race and ethnicity in ancient Greek and Roman history is often swept aside as we imagine these ancient civilisations to be the epitome of "white skinned, European-derived, racial and cultural heritage" (Mac Sweeney). Because we simultaneously center whiteness in literature and deny its influence in order to further drive a binary between an orderly Whiteness and the deviant Other, classical mythology becomes a powerful tool for justification of this rhetoric. First introduced by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, the West's

insistence throughout time of an irreconcilable hierarchy between itself and the East is motivated by a search for power and domination. These ideas continue to be enforced by far right movements of both Europe and America that co-opt the language and imagery of classics in their rhetoric and strengthen the connection between antiquity and White dominance when this is not strictly the case. Roman acronym SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus, the senate and Roman people), eagles and wolves, and fasces (bundle of rods) are all ancient symbols of power and authority dating back to antiquity that have become common sights at alt right rallies and online neo-Nazi forums, while politicians often reference aspects of the Roman empire seeking authority and status from the public. In 2017, a white supremacist rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia, featured shields inscribed with fasces held up by participants—most notably James Alex Fields who was later charged with life in prison for his hate crimes during the rally (U.S. Department of Justice). Pictures from the January 6 riots of 2021 show protestors in similar gear: ancient Greek helmets with "Trump 2020" slogans, and countless neo-Nazi dog whistles reference the ancient world to some capacity (Pharos). French president Emmanuel Macron "encouraged comparisons with the god Jupiter," and other "prominent centre-right politicians such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have cultivated a public image of upper-class traditionalism using, amongst other things, displays of classical learning" (Mac Sweeney, 11).

The embedment of an imagined white, hegemonic Rome to look up to in popular Western culture and politics can lead to a passive acceptance of such ideals, when in reality the very poems and stories we use to justify continued colonial practices contain overlooked critiques of empire. Allowing the alt-right control over such narratives in our history is dangerous because it concedes to inaccurate readings when there is great potential for, instead, resistant reading practices. The result of this concession is that important contexts from these stories are taken

out, and with it, much of the texts' own critiques of war and power which can help inform our understanding of how race interacts with nation building both then and now. As father of Rome, Aeneas is painted as the Western ideal of masculinity in the *Aeneid,* but this is a marked change from both Trojan ruin at the hands of Greece and his own Turkish identity. It's clear that to reconcile his Eastern ethnicity with the narrative of a conquering power, Aeneas' story seeks to uplift his Western and masculine traits which allows him to assimilate to Whiteness and power. This is most effectively done through his colonization of Carthage and the contrast of his character to Dido, whose extreme femininity and Orientalist tropes draw out a hierarchy even in their shared Otherness. As representations of their empire as a whole, the imperialism of Rome finds justification through Aeneas gaining White, Western power which reasserts his lost masculinity. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* situates this intersection of race and gender within Britain's history of imperialism in South Africa, illustrating how in both colonial and postcolonial societies, race is defined through gender and vice versa, most prominently seen through the romantic and sexual relationships of women. This also exemplifies the continued colonial conquests of European nations into the "East" throughout time and the repeated patterns of justification that play out the gendered roles of colonizer and colonized. By understanding the details and ideology behind the myth of Aeneas and how we utilize his image today we can fully unpack the greater motives behind ancient constructions of race and how to best resist them.

1. **Rewriting the Past**

Aeneas begins his journey fleeing the destruction of his homeland—although many alt-right movements will deny his standing as a refugee of war— and the source text describes in great detail how he escapes with his son in one hand and his father on his back, simply one of the many who "had massed pathetically for exile" from Troy (Vergil, 2.798). The fated fall of the

Trojan empire is both a loss of identity and home and leaves Aeneas and his soldiers to embark on a seemingly directionless journey, beginning our hero's voyage into the Mediterranean. We as readers, however, know from the start of the *Aeneid* that these events set up his eventual founding of Rome, and this is the exact purpose of Vergil's story: to take Trojan loss and reimagine it as a stepping stone to their eventual might. Visually, this scene is also representative of the patriarchal legacy that Aeneas has a responsibility to uphold which is clearly threatened by the aftermath of war—"the vanishing feudal family, invested in its sanctioned rituals of rank and subordination," which must be "reinvented within the new order of the colonial administration" (McClintock, 239). Losing the war is a loss of masculinity on multiple levels, not only for Troy as a nation but also because his family is quite literally broken apart as a result and necessitates that he take action to rebuild this lost identity. They search and settle in different lands as a result of their displacement, continually fighting for a new home only to get uprooted once more. This narrative tension is intentional and keeps with the wandering romantic tradition of the *Odyssey* and the poem's later shift into epic form parallels the resolution of their search for a new nation. This time will be the last time, "this time they will be the winners," by whatever means necessary (Quint 50). Following Simone Weil's assertions that the world of Greek epic is ruled by might, the only means necessary for the Trojans to earn an empire strong enough to erase the struggles of the past is to become Greeks themselves and crush another nation beneath their feet. This means they are then required to reassert their might through a gender performance defined by violence. In these wars, the violence of battles are intrinsically tied to the formation and preservation of masculinity. Identity is masculinity, and to have masculinity, honor, and glory is to have an identity. No one embodies these ideals more than Hector, who resolves to "stand up bravely, always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers, winning [his] father great glory,

glory for [himself]" even while knowing that "the day will come when sacred Troy must die," along with his beloved wife and son (Homer, 6). Even at the cost of death it's essential that he maintains his legacy, meaning that nothing is more important than the empire he is a part of. The Trojans' knowledge of their inevitable failure doesn't protect them from its aftermath; instead it creates a desperate need to reestablish their nationhood and masculinity, both literally and ideologically. Trojan dominance is stripped away when the women of the city are taken as slaves which means that they no longer have an Othered group to assert themselves over and by the fact that they are the losers of the war.

One of the final failed Trojan settlements by Aeneas is in Carthage (modern day Tunisia) and is a pivotal encounter in overcoming his past through his domination of their queen, Dido. David Quint observes how the first six books of the *Aeneid* are correspondent to the Trojan war itself and lays the groundwork of the loss and search for home that results from their defeat. Their aimless wandering and attempts to recreate Troy in several lands shows the psychological damage they have been dealt, after all, if they have no empire and no group beneath them, who are they? Who is Aeneas? These are questions that might have been left unanswered in the *Iliad*, but the *Aeneid*'s purpose is to resolve this existential dread by continuing in its second epic half of the book where the conquered become conquerors.

Aeneas' stay at Carthage and his relationship with Dido is a tipping point for the Trojan narrative in that his faith and commitment to empire is tested, and provides an opportunity for Aeneas to displace his losses by colonizing her people and coming out on top. The Turkish prince finds a more deeply "Oriental" subject than himself and can use his own relative power to her to establish a new name for him and his people. The contrast of his character next to Dido forms an identity out of the ashes of Troy, one that is now distinct in its distance from

"Otherness" and his former "Asian empire." Dido is driven mad by her love for Aeneas and Vergil describes how she "burned, raved, wandered through the city, As when a deer, at peace in Cretan glades, Is pierced from far off by a hunting shepard" (*Aeneid*, 4.68). Her deep emotionality is portrayed as animalistic and follows classic Orientalist tropes of being "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike" (Said 48). Although Aeneas initially marries Dido and joins in her "sensuous and sordid passion," he's soon set back on his path to Italy by the gods (*Aeneid* 4.194). In this display of devotion to his homeland gods and nationhood, he pushes back his Eastern Otherness which becomes Dido's sole burden. This is made possible by the very construction of the Oriental that Edward Said explains as being enforced upon people rather than a natural observation, and Vergil takes advantage of the binary of East vs. West to elevate Aeneas' standing to that of Western greatness. Dido's femininity is essential to this process because her nation is one that can be conquered by Aeneas; "Her destruction as a sacrificial victim thus aims to exorcize the threats of irrationality and disorder against Jupiter's (and Aenas') rational, orderly, and masculine *fatum*" and finally allows the rebuilding of identity at the crux of this poem (Quint 67). An "Oriental" is a construct of race and gender defined by everything the West is not, and to have Dido as a queen of an Eastern kingdom that so clearly embodies traits unbecoming of Greek nationhood means that Aeneas' past losses pale in comparison. He is able to win by seizing Carthage, Rome's first act of colonization, and even refers to the future kingdom of Italy as his son's "western realm." We can see then that the concept of West and East are not fixed through the changing language of the poem, and that it is the actions rather than direct ancestry of the characters that determine their identification with classical notions of race. When Aeneas' army successfully participates in the rewriting of Trojan history by becoming a colonizing power, they are no longer Trojan and can ascend to White masculinity in likeness of

the Greeks. Dido's tragedy asserts for the first time with certainty that Rome will rise through the fall of Troy.

The *Aeneid*'s turn to Homer's Iliadic voice marks the poem's second half and sets Aeneas' own legacy firmly in stone as evidenced by his shield's depictions of Italian history to come, a reversal of Troy's tragic past made possible through violent conquest. Book eight revels in the new legacy and identity Aeneas has forged for Troy through a rejection of his own Otherness and simultaneous subjugation of Dido. The shield gifted by his mother pictures the descendents of Aeneas from Romulus to Augustus and their various triumphs as the Roman nation and empowers him in his own fight against Latium. The glory of the events that are inscribed in the shield make it no question that "Aeneas' translation of empire is worth the costs incurred," giving a confirmation of his rewritten past while affirming his present and future (Cook, 36). He's no longer a part of the Oriental Other and instead Rome fights off the "foreign wealth and motley troops" of "Egypt, and Eastern power, and furthest Bactra" (8.686-87). Despite his own origins, Aeneas' line is now a dominating Western power that we know will come out as victor against Latium, and we are made to forget their past roles as losers in the same positionality as Latium. The shield solidifies his new identity by extending the not yet existent Roman empire well into the future and the heightened Orientalism further proves his new Whiteness. Antony's army is everything the Trojans are not—again proving Said's argument that the Orient is always defined by its deviations from the Occident—and is at the same time a reflection of their past identity that can now be experienced from the other side as the winners. Antony and Cleopatra represent the excessive exoticism that is defeated under Octavian's unified Rome and cast uncanny parallels to Aeneas' own relationship with Dido. And like Dido, Cleopatra is doomed to her death: the East is crushed by Western imperialism over and over

throughout the course of these histories as if by inescapable design, and the only way Troy is able to reverse this fate is by going "from being besieged to being besiegers, Trojans to Greeks," changing their nationhood entirely (Quint 68). Success of this reversal is forged dramatically on the shield's prophecies that "Streets roared with celebration and applause. Offerings filled the temples, mothers danced, And slaughtered calves were sprawled before the altars," nothing short of a trumpet's fanfare at the victorious and newly imagined Rome (8.717-19). Italy's new king has clearly come out of his colonization of Dido's kingdom with a successful reversal of his Otherness by placing her into the losing side of the repeated "Trojan war" alongside the Latins.

Our key assumptions in these classical histories, of course, is that these past narratives are unchanging and untouchable, but the metamorphosis of Aeneas throughout the *Aeneid* is contradictory to these ideas. Even within antiquity Vergil speaks back to Homer and stories change from the conquered now conquering, and Aeneas changes from Oriental to Occident. Yes, the Eastern Other is constructed by the West, but the White masculinity that being Occidental entails is just as non-essential as its counterpart. Richard Dyer challenges our society's premise that "white people are just people … whereas other colors are something else," in which Whiteness is a default position of power that preserves its status by refusing to acknowledge its own existence (Dyer, 10). What gives Aeneas the freedom of movement in rebuilding his empire is the fact that race is not inherently fixed in us but rather operates as a set of ideologies that can be followed and absorbed–and he does precisely this, through Dido initially and later in Italy in his final settlement. While we can observe Aeneas moving across lines of race and ethnicity as he gains more wins for the Trojans, it is more difficult to see exactly why this needs to happen and why gaining power is to become White. The domination that defines Whiteness is described by Noel Ignatiev as a power that can be won or lost because it is

“learned behaviors, expectations, and falsehoods' ' that triumph because of the illusion upheld that Whiteness and power are synonymous. Aeneas takes part in this illusion and can “become” White because by acknowledging that it is a set of clearly stated values, he can conform to the ideals that it assigns of Western glory and masculinity. When we accept that even the titular hero of this myth did not always exist as the version of Westernness we envision him as today, we can also begin to question interpretations of the Greco-Roman past that are rigid in their readings.

2. Classical Appropriation

Aeneas and the ancient empires of Rome and Greece are now long dead and gone, but their legacy lives on, even a millenia later. Classical antiquity is evoked in political discourse and art at every turn, and has most troublingly gained popularity with far-right groups across Europe and America who champion Aeneas as a Western ideal of imperial greatness. Fascist obsession with the Roman empire traces back to a history of imperialism modeled after Aeneas’ conquests, most notably in Italy’s African colonies in the nineteenth century which found strong justification in Rome’s former colonization of the territory. Fascist thinkers like Corradini and Domenico Tumiati even visited the former sites of Carthage to “retrace” Dido and Aeneas’ story (Agmabu 272). Clearly the strategies of Orientalism employed by ancient Rome to rebrand their Trojan defeat were effective enough that only Aeneas’ new image of patriarchal Western conqueror remains the strongest story told through time, although there are still attempts to combat alt-right use of antiquity with more resistant readings of the classics. The Whiteness that Aeneas accesses is a concept built to contain power and the construction of its nature lets Roman rewriting occur, but when this construction itself is left unquestioned, we arrive in our present day acceptance of an Aeneas stripped of his Oriental identity. Textual ambiguity over his character has been utilized to support colonization in periods of time and oppose open border

policies at others, but humanitarian efforts like Project Aeneas prove that “antiquity of the Mediterranea can be deployed to promote a politics of openness and acceptance” instead of nationalistic ones (Agbamu, 271). The far right’s claim to classics cannot and should not be left uncontested; a failure to resist imperial ideas of Vergil’s text is in itself inaccurate to the complexities of the story. Aeneas’ conquering narrative shows the motives behind Orientalist structures of our world and the way might uses Whiteness as a vehicle for power, but simple acceptance of harmful constructs is letting the alt-right control the story. Taking a closer look at the nation building tactics that have led to the version of Aeneas as we know him today reveal the criticisms and failures that spring from goals of Western and White domination that the alt-right fails to read.

The structure of the poem itself is based on repetition as previously discussed, and we know this to be the mechanics running the central goal of letting Trojans revisit old wounds and undo them. It is however the same insistent voice urging Trojans and readers towards a new and revised history that tells on itself, the page by page parallels that are almost too self aware of its own storytelling that gives hints of disapproval throughout. After its brilliant descriptions of the Vulcan shield, Vergil ends book eight by turning back to its recipient: “Aeneas loved these scenes on Vulcan’s shield, His mother’s gift—but didn’t know the stories. He shouldered his descendents’ glorious fate” (8.729-31). His delight is childish in its ignorance of the legacy it is supposed to represent and deflates the previous grandeur of the battles fought against Eastern enemies. The father of Rome’s supposed great empire is unaware of the lineage that he will lead and provides a dry undercurrent of skepticism at the glorification of empire. There’s also historical evidence directly opposing the shield’s portrayal of Antony and Augustus’ fight as one of East against West when Antony himself was a Westerner, again showing the way that race and

Orientalism is a tool for seeking domination, changeable depending on circumstance. Augustus' efforts to depict himself as "the quintessential Roman who was declared emperor, brought peace to Rome, did not have an Egyptian mistress, and was working for the betterment of Rome" are reflected in Vergil's poem through Aeneas to a notable degree, and to a point that the myth begins to collapse in on itself when looked at for too long (Sifuentes).

Moving on from the shield's promises to the final confrontation between Turnus and Aeneas where events of his past are put on replay, Aeneas' triumph is on par with his shield's future triumphs. Quint explains the details of how this is achieved in the narrative and again exposes the manufacturing of his new status.

> The moment of the overcoming of Aeneas' Trojan past comes at dizzying speed, and the reader cannot locate just when it takes place: just when his opponent Turnus exchanges Iliadic identities—from that of Diomedes, the successful wonder of Aeneas, to that of Aeneas, the failed assailant of Achilles. And Aeneas himself becomes both the new Achilles and–as he casts his own weapon–the new Diomedes as well. His assumption of the role of Achilles, claimed earlier in the poem by Turnus, is, of course, confirmed by the duel's primary Homeric model, Achilles' killing of Hector in *Iliad* 22. (Quint 74),

Clearly the borders between winners and losers are swapped countlessly leaving readers unclear on what it really means to be one or the other, and Aeneas' merciless killing of Turnus in book twelve at the story's end is a horrific show of absolute might and the power of empire. Turnus' pleas for Aeneas to lay down his hatred goes ignored by his "brutal rage" and concludes the second *Iliad* with the true unforgiving nature of might in war (Vergil, 12.938, 946). With the context of Augustan history that the poem was written under, ending with Aeneas' loss of humanity in exchange for empire can possibly undermine entire events of his romanticized quest.

Instead of closing with a declaration of triumph, Aeneas' final victory leaves readers questioning whether Rome *was* worth the price paid by forgetting his original Eastern identity.

Through closer examination of Aeneas' journey and a consideration of the history that came before and after it, readers can find more layered conclusions of the story that aren't the embrace of nationalistic imperialism that a less critical audience might find in it. He has changed undeniably from an oppressed Eastern Other to a Western patriarch by inflicting the same means of oppression that he himself was subject to onto other nations, but Vergil's subtle moments of subversion doubt the benefits reaped from such actions. (Sforza, 101) Because of the ambivalence towards supposed might of Roman nationhood, we can only say with certainty that Aeneas succeeds in founding Rome in Italy and succeeds in erasing and reforming his racial identity and masculinity. The conclusions that we can draw from this are varied, and the alt-right's frequent use of Roman symbols and imagery (fasces, SPQR, shields) is a static reading of the classic that accepts Aeneas' final Western form as the ultimate truth of his identity, even going so far as to claim that he has always been Italian and White. These readings ignore the powerful implications about formations of race and Other that Vergil can offer, which is that the changing nature of the definition of Whiteness and Westerness also gives us a chance to deconstruct the same power structures based on domination that have survived till now. The author's own undercutting of nationalistic ideals is proof that we can speak back to the systems that we are participants in—rejecting these ideals without ignoring the very real consequences that it has on us all, and using history to inform our knowledge of how society shapes those in power through language and storytelling. We cannot allow readings that accept a surface level interpretation of Aeneas' story of change, and would be shutting down important models of resistance contained in the text as well. Instead, we should be looking at the intersections of

history and myth and the provoking narratives of the establishment of power that use methods of Othering that extend to modern history and today. Doing so equips us with the tools needed to continue the line of questioning that Vergil offers to readers in the *Aeneid* on the meaning of empire and can help us understand the lens we use to look at past and present systems of power. The classics urge us to contest the very ideas that they might seem to champion and it is our responsibility as participants in ongoing epic tradition to interrogate and seek new interpretations of stories. Just as there is "no single correct reading of Aeneas," there is no one way to resist systems of harm (Agbamu 271). We can look back at these stories and the frameworks for change they illustrate to newly form radical conclusions about our own world and combat the suffering that results from might, as well as reinform essentialist views of Otherness. Most importantly, reading texts of the past helps us better articulate the state of the present and teaches opposition to its wrongs.

3. Classics Reborn

Not only is the colonial narrative of the *Aeneid* echoed in the history of Rome and North Africa, it has also found a place in the rising popularity of Greek and Roman retellings in recent years. Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* is a prominent example of such rewriting that carries out the same Augustinian goals of the original *Aeneid* with none of Vergil's underlying resistance. Instead of utilizing Lavinia's point of view to highlight female presence in the original story as she claims to do, Le Guin romanticizes the unequal power dynamics between Aeneas and his love interests, all the while ignoring the matter of race and ethnicity entirely. By exploring characters that are so especially significant in their racial and gendered interactions, and of course taking into account the nearly inseparable nature of the two structures, publishing a version of Aeneas' story that evades race and feminist concerns is alarming to say the least. The

consequences of such careless literature should not be understated, as they continue the dominant narrative of Whiteness and patriarchy so prevalent in our culture while passing itself off as doing the opposite.

Lavinia was the only child of the king of Latium, the region that would soon become Rome, a central but silent character in the last books of the *Aeneid.* Her story is typical, in which she is coveted as a representation of her kingdom and virtually exists as an object to be possessed by either Aeneas or Turnus. Aeneas' marriage to Lavinia serves as a political move that cements his place as the new ruler of Latium as well as providing him with the ideal voiceless and passive wife, everything that Dido was not. Readers can easily compare the two women, whose single dimensional traits embody a Madonna-whore complex exacerbated by their ethnic differences. The portrayal of Dido and Carthage, whose hyper feminization and Otherness make them a victim of colonization that allows Aeneas to cast off his own Eastern identity, draws heavy contrast to Lavinia's passive presence in Latium. If Aeneas' relationship with Carthage and Dido was a stepping stone in his transition to Whiteness, marriage to Lavinia is undeniable proof of success. Their union effectively fulfills Aeneas' mission of rewriting his past failures and founding a great Western nation. Not only is Lavinia the Western ideal of a wife, she is also the key to founding his new empire; territory that he can stake claim to freely. She signifies victory against Turnus and a means for ensuring a continued legacy in Rome.

Of course, Aeneas' final fight with Turnus is one that doubts the validity of empire in the same breath that it creates it, and Vergil's treatment of female identities can be interpreted in the same way; the sheer exaggeration of their characters giving away their constructedness. Throughout the poem, we see the theatrics behind the scenes in Aeneas' journey to greatness, casting doubt on the greatness of Rome in Vergil's own time as well. As the *Aeneid* closes with

his “brutal rage,” we can look back to his marriage with Didio and towards his future relationship with Lavinia with a critical discomfort. Dido’s animalistic passion and volatility is an embodiment of the dangerous East that Aeneas distinguishes himself from while Lavinia’s lack of identity gives him room to settle in his reestablished masculinity. The women are nothing more than tools of empire and illustrate the complex intersection of gender roles and race through their shared oppression.

It’s no surprise then, that Lavinia’s character was taken as a project for restoration by Ursula K. Le Guin, writing the myth from Lavinia’s own point of view and exploring her untold past and future. From the physical lack of speech to her passive portrayal, Lavinia is an invisible woman within the pages of the *Aeneid*. The significance of this “invisibility,” however, is impossible to understand without applying the same theories of Whiteness and Orientalism that Aeneas himself is subject to in the original myth. Without seeing the racial connotations of Lavinia’s silence and the misogynistic undercurrents behind the fight for her hand, it becomes too easy to write what seems like a feminist intervention that tackles purely surface level problems, disconnected from the larger questionings of the original *Aeneid*. It’s clear from even the synopsis of Le Guin’s *Lavinia* describing the novel as “the story of her life, and of the love of her life” that the book is indeed only a shallow dive into the gender politics of ancient Rome. By distilling Lavinia’s life down to a choice between “handsome, ambitious Turnus” and Aeneas, the mysterious foreign suitor, the author effectively turns back on her goal of giving Lavinia her own story. Even in a retelling that aims to center a female character, she is almost entirely defined by the men around her, and worse, infatuated with the brutality that they bring into her life. The love of Aeneas that Le Guin writes for Lavinia makes us forget the sexist circumstances

of their relationship and undermines the violence of his colonial project, which shows us again the danger of irresponsible readings of such influential texts.

Readers of Vergil's *Aeneid* will however find Lavinia's character, who appears in the final chapters of Aeneas' journey from Troy to (future) Rome disappointingly passive, left in the margins of the poem with no lines to even engage with. Out of the 9,986 lines that make up the poem, Lavinia only appears in 18, with no physical descriptors or speaking parts. Although she is central to the resolution of the poem in terms of plot, Lavinia as an individual is largely unimportant and characterless. Beyond her political significance, Lavinia is an entirely two dimensional character who exemplifies the patriarchal ideal for women: silent and obedient. As the only princess of Latium, she is an extremely desirable marriage partner for Aeneas, who is determined to make Latium his new kingdom, and is virtually an object to be fought over and possessed by ambitious men. Vergil states in book seven of the *Aeneid* that "Fate grants them access to the Latin kingdom; / Lavinia must be Aeneas' wife," revealing that Aeneas and his soldiers view her as simply another step in their journey of founding a new kingdom (Vergil, 7.313-14). We see the fight to settle in Latium occur in the final chapters of the Aeneid in which Aeneas and Turnus–a rival warrior–go head to head in the battle for Lavinia, and Latium by extension. Throughout this conflict Lavinia of course takes up no speaking lines, meaning her identity is quite literally defined by the men around her and by the male author, Vergil. Ursula K. Le Guin sets out to remedy this by providing her the agency that she lacks in Virigil's original portrayal. She recalls in an interview "finding this character that has no voice … and could be a character, obviously, and could be a strong one," which prompted her to tell the story of the *Aeneid* from Lavinia's point of view (Grossman). This attempt to fill the gaps of a character who is near invisible in the original epic is regarded as a successful feminist work by the public, with

many reviews applauding its reclamation of Lavinia. This project is especially significant because Le Guin is rewriting a piece of canonical Western literary history, which "is overwhelmingly male—or more accurately, patriarchal" in most cases (Gilbert, 47). By using a first person narration with Lavinia directly recounting her life events to readers, the author creates the possibility of a new "matrilineal heritage of literary strength" directly opposing the patriarchal poetics of Vergil (Gilbert, 51).

Although *Lavinia* is written from a previously voiceless female character's point of view, the lack of agency or expansion of femininity in Lavinia's character amounts to a failure to create a truly empowering narrative for women. Gender binaries are strictly established between Lavinia and Aeneas and only reinforce negative stereotypes about women while moments of her opposition to the hegemony are quickly shut down by a romanticization of her relationship with Aeneas. When *Lavinia* is subjected to feminist literary criticism and interpreted through the works of Susan Bordo and Virginia Woolf, we see that the author does not take the necessary care to thoughtfully navigate feminist concerns when it comes to female representation and ends up muting her character instead. Lavinia's relationships with other women in her life fall short when it comes to portraying complex female characters; her identity is instead defined singularly by men, particularly Aeneas. Ultimately, Le Guin's goals of exploring and giving new depth to female characters in the male dominated spaces of the *Aeneid* is short sighted, showing us that representation must be both considerate and active in engaging with feminist aims in order to create more meaningful and diverse representation in the literary world.

While the effort to add a female perspective to an often male centered narrative can be admired, the novel itself is insufficient in representing a previously voiceless female character in a way that effectively speaks against patriarchal norms and writing practices. Even her core

personality traits of silent passivity, which are representative of Western Roman ideals for women, remain the same in Le Guin's adaptation, offering no new perspectives to readers on her personal identity. Because Lavinia's story is only centered around her feelings and relationship with Aeneas, all other potential explorations of her own character are cut off. Even in her synopsis, *Lavinia* is described by Le Guin as "the story of her life, and of the love of her life." While it is true that Lavinia's storyline in the original *Aeneid* fixates on her potential marriage to Aeneas, a reimagining of her story is inadequate if it does not extend past this interest and only expands on her romantic relationships with the men around her. Her story remains incomplete because of both authors' neglect of the story of Lavinia's own life defined by her own self. Throughout the novel, the promise of Lavinia's independent narrative is ignored in favor of developing a romance with Aeneas, which has the effect of promoting the same gender stereotypes of Vergil's poem.

This romanticization is exemplified in Lavinia's admiration of Aeneas' infamous shield as she thinks about "what a large, powerful man he is" to be able to hold such heavy armor (26). Her appreciation seems misplaced when considering the fact that it was his strength and masculinity that allowed him to conquer her home, but the idealization of his character continues on to the shield as well. Like Vergil, Le Guin describes the beauty and battles of the shining shield, and Lavinia confidently asserts that "There is in all the western world no work so beautiful as that shield" (27). Of course, what gives the original description of the shield its irony is Aeneas' own ignorance of its meaning apart from a simple joy at receiving a gift from his mother. Although both Vergil and Le Guin detail the gruesome battles of a future Roman empire, in Lavinia and Le Guin's version, Aeneas is aware of his future legacy and refers to the scenes inscribed in the shield as the realm of his son's sons. By changing Aeneas' understanding

of his shield, Le Guin overlooks one of the key lines to understanding the role of the shield in relation to empire and mythmaking, a mistake that is constantly mirrored in alt right spaces of the West. Vergil's subtle interrogation of the Roman empire in his narration of the shield's events is completely overlooked and replaced by Lavinia's endorsement of her husband and his armor, presenting a version of the shield that instead complies with the aims of Augustus.

This problem is only heightened by the omission of Cleopatra and Antony from Le Guin's version of the shield, figures that are crucial in comprehending the full scope of how an empire's narrative functions through shifting definitions of race and gender over time. The battle scenes that play out between Caesar and Cleopatra and Antony let us see how Aeneas was able to move from Eastern to Western status, but to ignore the presence of race in the *Aeneid* is to accept Aeneas' transformation without doubt. The obvious problem of choosing to erase characters of color from the shield not only normalizes LeGuin's envisioning of an *Aeneid* in which the concept of race is entirely ignored, but feeds into the myth of ancient Greek and Roman empires being entirely white. Such mistakes in literature, whether intentional or not, are what prime unsuspecting (and even cautious) readers to ideas of whiteness as normative. A refusal to acknowledge the ethnic and racial factors at work in the battles of the *Aeneid* removes nearly all critical context and leaves us with only a skeletal understanding of war and its causes. In this way, Le Guin's understanding of Vergil's poetry as an "anti-war story" that warns us of the cost of winning is massively undercut by her choice to ignore the impact of race on the characters she chose to resurrect in her novel.

As Woolf states, giving female relationships one or few defining characteristics simplifies our ideas of gender to an absurd degree. Having her mother's dislike of Lavinia stem from her similarities to her father and the fact that she wished for sons instead of a daughter again centers

men at the crux of Lavinia's interpersonal relationships. Creating competition between women instead of friendship or camaraderie characterizes Le Guin's imagining of Lavinia's connections to other women—not only does she lack female friendships in general, but even how she views the past wives of Aeneas is also ruled by jealousy, with no room for any narrative complexity. When she learns the story of Dido, who committed suicide after Aeneas left her behind in Carthage, she wonders: Isn't a master stronger than the slave he beats? Wasn't Aeneas cruel in leaving Dido? But she was the weak one" (Le Guin, 57). Instead of feeling sympathy or remorse for another woman used as a stepping stone to reaching Rome, whose kingdom was colonized by Aeneas, she justifies his actions by victim blaming Dido and assigning responsibility to her perceived weakness. Le Guin's choice to make readers see antagonistic differences between the two women instead of touching on shared experiences and compassion isolates Lavinia further and focuses our attention only on her romance with Aeneas and other men. This again falls in line with the dominant narrative that Aeneas is white and doesn't include Vergil's satirical tone, just accepts a racialized hierarchy between Dido and Aeneas without looking at its origins. Worse, this characterization functions purely to uplift the romance between Lavinia and Aeneas, the main love story. If Le Guin views and treats Aeneas as though he is raceless, we as the audience naturally assume that he is white by default. We are led to conclude that hegemonic ideologies of race are natural and unimportant.

Lavinia continually emphasizes Aeneas' supposedly gentle and loving nature throughout her reflections about their relationship, which contradicts the very basis of their marriage which was made possible through the misogynistic practices of using women as political pawns. Lavinia dismisses this notion by assuring readers that "although he knew me first only as an item in a treaty, he was disposed by nature and by practice to treat me as a wife, intimate to his own

being" (172). Reframing this relationship as a mutual romance instead of highlighting the extreme power imbalance present between them is a disappointing interpretation of Lavinia's silence that doesn't tell a new story and only encourages problematic gender roles by assuming Lavinia's enjoyment in her position of disempowerment. Le Guin centers much of what she claims to be the untold narrative of Lavinia around her love of Aeneas based solely on the fact that she "like[s] romance," reflecting a careless attitude towards creating female characters with motivations and interests outside of male romantic interests (Grossman). The failure to consider the implications of creating romance between Lavinia and Aeneas has more concerning consequences than surface level inaccuracies to an original text—it forgets that Vergil's characters were made with Caesar's imperial mission in mind. Aeneas and Lavinia don't exist simply as fictional characters made purely for entertainment but also as representations and ideals for the Roman empire as a whole. Without this context in mind, making new characterizations based on personal genre preference can inadvertently end up concealing moments of irony and glossing over textual misogyny.

Reframing this relationship as a mutual romance instead of highlighting the extreme power imbalance present between them is a disappointing interpretation of Lavinia's silence that doesn't tell a new story and only encourages problematic gender roles by assuming Lavinia's enjoyment in her position of disempowerment. Le Guin's representation of this relationship ends up leading no critique of the harmful patriarchal notions that set up Lavinia's marriage—though it's clear that Lavinia is virtually an object signifying the key to owning Latium. She is a complicit victim of the patriarchy and its objectification, but we as readers are left to conclude that this is both a voluntary and welcome position. This repeated insistence on traditional gender roles is created through an accentuation of the differences between Aeneas and Lavinia, with

Lavinia's descriptions of "what a large, powerful man he is" in comparison to her youth and ignorance, referring to herself as a "stupid virgin of seventeen" (Le Guin, 27 and 36). The contrast drawn by Lavinia herself of the physical and mental superiority of Aeneas (while still maintaining his "calm and gentle" demeanor) not only defines herself in terms of what she lacks compared to his masculinity, but also it reinforces the idea of this inferiority being inherent to womanhood. This supposedly romantic dynamic is a common theme seen throughout time, of "women hiding in the shadows of men, seeking solace in their arms, willingly contracting the space they occupy," which is true of Lavinia's position in both Vergil and Le Guin's versions of the myth (Bordo, 166). Le Guin takes this idealization of traditional gender relations further in her novel however, by using Lavinia's first person narration to make this subjugation appear self imposed and retains much of the same "voicelessness" as seen in the *Aeneid*.

As Lavinia characterizes herself as a "marriageable virgin, chaste, silent, obedient, ready to a man's will as a field in the spring is ready for the plow," she is both critically self aware of the image of femininity placed onto her and yet accepts this title as her identity instead of truly voicing resistance to it (Le Guin, 10). She embodies the "reigning ideology of femininity" required of women, someone who is "childlike, nonassertive, helpless without a man and 'content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home'" to an extreme degree, showing that simply gaining a narrative voice is not enough to break from patriarchal tradition (Bordo, 171). Although the feminine ideals criticized by Bordo of more immediate American culture cannot be conflated with those of ancient Rome, the themes of submission and subjugation are a common thread that tie together a narrative of silence. She acknowledges her silent nature several more times in the story, and remains "mute" in the story through actions and interactions with those around her. Although she is not physically muted as in Vergil's lines of

the *Aeneid*, Le Guin's Lavinia follows virtually the same script, and any subtle condemnations of her previous characterizations rely on carrying out these ideals of silence and obedience to an exaggerated degree. Her own recognition of the way people view her—"a shrinking silent maiden" offers a slight commentary on patriarchal standards for women, but Lavinia also never deviates from these standards. She is unable to protest her marriage, her mother's mistreatment, Of course, this form of opposition isn't fully effective because "Protesting the stifling of the female voice through one's own voicelessness—that is, employing the language of femininity to protest the conditions of the female world—will always involve ambiguities" (Bordo, 170). Susan Bordo's assertions accurately pinpoint the problem with Le Guin's interpretation of Lavinia and her actions within the novel; her resistance is too parallel to retreat to the point of counterproductiveness.

4. Where Are the Women?

In an excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf laments the fact that "all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but only seen in relation to the other sex" (Woolf, 63). This remains true even in a modern day adaptation of the fictional mother of Rome, whose greatness hinges entirely on her marriage. Instead of exploring Lavinia's life outside of her marriage, Le Guin chooses to confine her both emotionally and physically within her role as a mother and wife: "The three years of marriage … have filled my life, not only then but ever since," Lavinia tells readers (173). There is certainly room to find contentment in romance and motherhood even under oppressive patriarchal circumstances, but to claim that Lavinia's love of her husband was the sole source of happiness in her life diminishes her own personhood. This especially contrasts with Lavinia's earlier statements in the book where she complains: "I did not want to be courted. I did not want to

receive the game, the sausages, the kids, the piglets, the stiff compliments. I did not want to sit at the banquet, the silent modest maiden" (36). Her unhappiness at her limited independence as a young woman in ancient Roman society and transition into apparent contentment when she is married off mirrors Woolf's explanation of the limited roles women are allowed to take up in literature. When women are only "married against their will, kept in one room, and to one occupation, how could a dramatist give a full or interesting or truthful account of them? Love was the only possible interpreter," meaning that rather than giving complexity to the lives and thoughts of female characters, many authors choose to instead make love their only concern (Woolf, 60). Le Guin unfortunately chooses to take this route in her storytelling as well. Instead of delving deeper into Lavinia's initial discomfort with the gender roles she must occupy, she presents these same positions as the solution to her societal fulfillment. "The purest, completest happiness I know is that of a baby at the breast and the mother giving suck," Lavinia says, and again Le Guin simplifies Lavinia's struggle with reconciling her own desires with that of society's expectations for her down to pure satisfaction with the gendered role enforced onto her since childhood (Le Guin, 173). Even for those who enjoy motherhood and marriage, it's "evident that women, like men, have other interests besides the perennial interests of domesticity," however Lavinia is never allowed to explore such interests throughout the course of the novel, only staying within the firm bounds of gender expectations for women (Woolf, 60). Through the centering of Lavinia's self around her husband and son, she adheres to historic standards of femininity that require "women learn to feed others, not the self" (Bordo, 172). This metaphoric "starvation" and neglect of the self can be seen through Lavinia's extreme dedication to her role as a mother and her romantic devotion to her husband which Le Guin imposes throughout the entirety of the novel. We as readers are never given more than glimpses of what

this character's motivations may be outside of an obsession with Aeneas that carries over even after his death, with conversations between her and those around her rarely straying outside of who she might end up married to.

One of the most pressing concerns within the novel lies within the complete isolation that Lavinia faces in her experiences living through a deeply patriarchal society as a young woman, a wife, and later a mother. The author's intentions of a focused character study fail to make up for its bypassing of female relationships that don't relate back to men. "How interesting it would have been if the relationship between the two women had been more complicated. All these relationships with women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple" (Woolf, 59). Woolf's musings on the need for more complex female ties between women in literature are more applicable than ever to the cast of *Lavinia*, where Lavinia's thoughts and actions are entirely fixated on Aeneas and rarely touch on other women. Le Guin's retelling doesn't put effort in examining any positive or complex relationships that Lavinia might have had with the women around her and instead reduces them into negative side characters. By neglecting Lavinia's interactions with other women, Le Guin exacerbates the problem of limited female representation. Rare moments that turn to Lavinia's life outside of her marriage reveal only negative interactions when it comes to other women, with no female friendships in existence. Even Lavinia and her mother are shown from the beginning of the novel to be completely hostile, as she recounts how her mother "had no embrace" for her since childhood because she wanted sons instead of her (Le Guin 10). Their relationship is defined by her mother's hatred and jealousy of Lavinia, "chafed by the idea that [Lavinia] had some gift like [her] father's of conversation with the spirits. It gave [her] a kind of uncanny importance, which she despised" (Le Guin, 37).

Allowing female relationships one or two defining characteristics at most simplifies our ideas of gender to an absurd degree. Having her mother's dislike of Lavinia stem from her similarities to her father and the fact that she wished for sons instead of a daughter again centers men at the crux of Lavinia's interpersonal relationships. Creating competition between women instead of friendship or camaraderie characterizes Le Guin's imagining of Lavinia's connections to other women—not only does she lack female friendships in general, but even how she views the past wives of Aeneas is also ruled by jealousy, with no room for any narrative complexity. When she learns the story of Dido, who committed suicide after Aeneas left her behind in Carthage, she wonders: Isn't a master stronger than the slave he beats? Wasn't Aeneas cruel in leaving Dido? But she was the weak one" (Le Guin 57). Instead of feeling sympathy or remorse for another woman used as a stepping stone to reaching Rome, she justifies his actions by victim blaming Dido and assigning responsibility to her perceived weakness. Furthermore, Lavinia's careless reference to a master and slave dynamic between Dido and Aeneas recalls the fraught colonial history shared between South Africa and Europe without remorse. It must be noted that Dido never makes a direct speaking appearance in *Lavinia* and repeats Said's description of what Orientalizing looks like: "She never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her," where "He" represents the power of the West and the control that it exerts over the East even in singular interactions (Said, 14). Even in these instances of racialized interactions between the characters, race itself is never acknowledged. The patterns of domination affect Lavinia and Dido both, as even in a first person female narration their experiences aren't vocalized or represented, but these points of solidarity are passed up to elevate Aeneas further. Le Guin's choice to make readers see antagonistic differences between the two women instead of touching on shared experiences and compassion

isolates Lavinia further and focuses our attention only on her romance with Aeneas and other men.

This treatment also reduces any opportunities a reader might have for interrogating the gendered power dynamics between Aeneas and his wives by flattening complex relationships that are connected to larger notions of empire into love lines. By doing so, we are also discouraged from making thematic connections of race, which is almost never present in *Lavinia*, and gender, with historical events of our own past and present. The patterns of subjugation that are repeated with increasing scale by Aeneas and his army as they search for their own kingdom are directly reflected in individual level relationships as well, and analysis of such interactions reveal the Orientalist framework necessary for justifying colonialism. The physical transition from Carthage to Latium and Aeneas' marriages to Dido and Lavinia at each point in time are as we know popular sources of citation for alt right movements and colonial projects. The notoriety and power of these myths means there is a responsibility to authors who retell these stories to take an active part in not falling complicit to empire.

The overlooked intersections of gender and racial problems within a whitened imagination of Rome are best exemplified in Lavinia's wistful reflections on her marriage to Aeneas.

> Aeneas was about twice my age when we married. When I first saw his whole body, all muscle and sinew and bone and scar, I thought of the lean splendor of a wolf Almo and his brothers had caught and kept caged for a while before they killed it as a sacrifice to Mars. Aeneas' body had been made in a hard school … often as we made love I remembered what my poet told me, that this man was born of a goddess, the force that

> moves the stars and the waves of the sea and couples the animals in the fields in spring, the power of passion, the light of the evening star" (172).

It's clear to see, even to readers without prior knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology, the sheer degree of the romanticization of an extremely unbalanced power dynamic between the two characters. What problematizes this romance further is the painful history of its predecessor that goes entirely unacknowledged. Though the writing of *Lavinia* maintains the poetic language of Vergil, it contains none of its ironies and perpetuates a surface level interpretation of the cast that is colorblind and heteronormative. Even the choice to compare Aeneas to a wolf, which Le Guin is quick to take back with the assertion that "the man was no wolf, nor a hard man," is charged with unspoken violence that the author immediately distances him from—all while still allowing readers to draw the connection between Aeneas and the Roman empire he will soon found. He is then glorified through grandiose language that draws upon the natural world, as if to say that his harmful actions are just as justified and inevitable as the seasons. This connection to the wolf is especially alarming due to its popularity as a recurring motif in right wing fascist movements, from codenames in Nazi Germany to mascots for present day white supremacist groups such as the SheWolves on Facebook (Fraihi). Le Guin's invocations are certainly not as explicit or sinister in nature, but contain the same themes of masculine domination and "natural order" that are used to legitimize alt right ideals of white, male superiority. In this way, seemingly unassuming associations in literature can normalize these ideas to readers and even validate them, paving the way into passive acceptance. These adaptations end up bridging the gap between the original Roman empire and the empire that the alt-right seeks to establish again, ignoring the astute warnings of the *Aeneid*.

Le Guin stands firm in a defense of Vergil's original writing of Lavinia and her lack of development, insisting that "it just wouldn't fit in the structure of his poem" to give her speaking lines (Grossman). For much of history, the characterization of women in literature has been left to male authors who often simplify their identities down to gendered archetypes such as love interests and mothers. The work of creating accurate and empowering female characters is difficult in our patriarchal society, but retelling traditionally male centered stories by focusing on underdeveloped women's voices can provide a way of rejecting the normalization of exclusively male authorship. Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* seeks to do exactly this, taking a lineless and voiceless character and giving her her own story. Despite these clear feminist goals in mind, the novel's preoccupation with the marriage between Aeneas and Lavinia as well the lack of significant female relationships in the novel end up only exacerbating the problems of Vergil's *Aeneid* that she seeks to resolve. Lavinia's inability to exercise any form of agency within Le Guin's story renders her mute and helpless to the gendered expectations of femininity placed on her, with the heavy romanticization of her relationship with Aeneas convincing us that she is willingly subjecting herself to these ideals.

Lavinia is unimportant in the grand scheme of the epic poem to Le Guin, which explains why she only goes as far as making her relationship with Aeneas a romance and nothing more. She reads nothing more into Lavinia's silence as well which can provide such significance when comparing her Western identity versus Dido, and so she effectively shuts out racial and feminist readings of the *Aeneid* and of Vergil's potential resistance. She validates her own short sighted interpretation by making her own "Virgil" character within *Lavinia* that interacts closely with Lavinia herself. Is this a way of self canonizing? If so, it is in a way that prevents readers from

gaining any new questions or insights from the story of the Aeneid and is aligned with the project of empire.

Adaptations that fail to undertake the work required to critically engage with readers, such as Le Guin's *Lavinia,* have the unfortunate effect of normalizing the general public into accepting the more extreme views of the right when it comes to power, gender roles, and white power because both authors and readers are complicit in retelling superficial narratives. Old myths are able to live on, but at the painful cost of retaining their flaws and at the same time brushing over its most crucial cultural critiques that are applicable even centuries later. Reading texts outside of isolation and instead placing them in context with its history and literary forerunners lets us accurately identify the exact problems of Le Guin's female representation in *Lavinia* and shows the necessity of representation that goes beyond simply writing a story from a female point of view within the same problematic structures of societal ideas of gender. Representation in literature must engage with the multiple complexities of living as an individual who experiences the expectations of a patriarchy and actively choose to resist these harmful ideals. To confront traditional ideas of gender and femininity that silence marginalized voices, it is imperative that we understand the value of seeing complexity in characters that lie outside of hegemonic norms instead of further relegating them into preexisting archetypes that control how we view and treat differences. Whether we are gaining new perspectives from old epics or confronting contemporary stories, it's clear that texts throughout our literary history speak to each other across the wide expanse of culture and time. Facilitating these conversations requires a level of ethical responsibility from authors and readers alike to keep values of diversity and resistance to systems of oppression a priority as we engage with literature in the past and present.

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